

# Developing Sociolinguistic Competence in the ESL Classroom: A Case Study of ESL Instructors in a Malaysian University

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**Abstract:** It is vital for language learners to know and express the appropriate language in different social contexts because the inability to do so could cause misunderstandings and miscommunication. The ability to perform such a task stems from an important concept in communicative competence, called sociolinguistic competence. However, being able to use the target language appropriately is especially difficult for ESL and EFL learners because they are not commonly exposed to the language and how it is being used by communicatively competent speakers. Therefore, this study reports on how ESL instructors in a Malaysian university developed students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. The methods of data collection for this study were in-depth interviews and stimulated recalls with three ESL instructors who were selected based on a list of criteria which would translate to their credibility and experience to be participants in this study. It was found that in developing their students' sociolinguistic competence, these ESL instructors co-constructed meaning with their students, provided a positive and comfortable learning environment, as well as developed students' sociolinguistic competence through explicit methods and classroom interaction. It is hoped that the findings of this study can guide other ESL instructors in developing their students' sociolinguistic competence, specifically through the examples of methods and approaches that could be applied in other classrooms.

**Keywords:** Communicative competence, Context, ESL instructors, Sociolinguistic competence

## 1. Introduction

Second language learners often lack sociolinguistic competence in the target language, facing issues in understanding and using language appropriately according to the context and situation. There are a number of reasons to these issues, and one of the main reasons is the lack to exposure to sociolinguistically appropriate language use. Having sociolinguistic competence would make these language learners aware of and understand the appropriate language to be used in specific contexts (Yang & Rehner, 2015), as well as better engage with the target language, making language learning more meaningful for them (Muniandy, Nair, Krishnan @ Shanmugam, Irma Ahmad, & Norashikin

Mohamed Noor, 2010). Developing ESL and EFL learners' sociolinguistic competence may not be an easy task, but instructors need to provide learners with opportunities for exposure and production of sociolinguistically appropriate language for them to communicate effectively with others. The need for sociolinguistic competence is further amplified by the internationalisation of higher education in the country, as local students would communicate with other students from all over the world with different values and cultures (Mustapha, et al., 2021). The difference in the students' backgrounds might have an influence on the way they interact with others, hence requiring students to have sociolinguistic competence in order to appropriately navigate the discourse.

Having been only recently emphasised in language teaching and learning in Malaysia by the Ministry of Education (2015), sociolinguistic competence is often given less attention in curriculums and classrooms. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was introduced in the country for the purpose of developing students' ability to communicate appropriately in a variety of social contexts, but currently there is no localised framework in guiding Malaysian ESL instructors in navigating the CEFR for the development of students' sociolinguistic competence (Foley, 2019). Therefore, Malaysian ESL instructors need to be innovative and flexible in using different ways to best develop their students' sociolinguistic competence. With the lack of any standardised guidance in developing sociolinguistic competence, especially in higher education institutions in Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 2015), it has become apparent that research needs to be conducted to understand how ESL instructors develop Malaysian university students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom, as intended by this study.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Communicative Competence and Sociolinguistic Competence**

Before discussing sociolinguistic competence, it is imperative to first discuss the notion of communicative competence, which sociolinguistic competence falls under. Hymes (1972) defines communicative competence as the ability of the language user to produce and understand the language to communicate appropriately within specific contexts and settings. According to Canale and Swain (1980), and later extended by Canale (1983), the dimensions of communicative competence include grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Language learners with grammatical competence have knowledge on the form and structure of the language, while those with sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence have knowledge and ability in using the language appropriately in a variety of contexts. Having communicative competence allows second and foreign language learners to communicate effectively with others, placing emphasis on not only accuracy but also appropriateness (Savignon, 2018).

Sociolinguistic competence, a concept discussed by prominent scholars, is one of the dimensions of communicative competence. It entails understanding and being able to apply social and cultural conventions when communicating with others (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983). Language learners with sociolinguistic competence would be able to navigate through interactions with a variety of interlocutors, for different purposes of communication, and in specific social contexts without facing issues. Canale and Swain (1980) and later elaborated by Canale (1983) define sociolinguistic competence as having the appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of form. Appropriateness of meaning refers to the degree to which communicative functions, also known as speech acts, are suitable. On the other hand, appropriateness of form can be defined as the degree to which verbal and nonverbal expressions reflect the meaning to be conveyed.

Communicative functions or speech acts, such as requesting, refusing or thanking, are classified based on their purpose (Searle, 1969). Language learners need to identify and choose the appropriate communicative function or speech act depending on the context. Not only is the purpose of the speech act important, but it is also vital for language learners to be able to identify the intended meaning behind the utterance (Brown, 2007). Wardhaugh (2010) states that the appropriateness of a particular expression can depend on a number of factors, such as the type of the occasion, the social characteristics of the interlocutors, the genre of the event and the emotional involvement among the interlocutors. Having sociolinguistic competence would mean that a language learner would be able to consider all these factors and manage the interaction to communicate effectively with others.

## **2.2 The Role of Instructors in Developing ESL Students' Sociolinguistic Competence**

Being an abstract and complex concept, which involves many factors such as culture and social context, the pedagogical aspects of sociolinguistic competence may not be as clear and easily conveyed as linguistic competence. Therefore, instructors need to find ways to creatively include these aspects in the language classroom with confidence and certainty. Sociolinguistic competence can be developed in the classroom through a variety of methods, such as through explicit methods of directly teaching the content of the lesson and implicit methods, such as interaction in the classroom (Mede & Dikilitas, 2015). Both explicit and implicit ways of developing sociolinguistic competence have been found to be beneficial towards the development of language learners' sociolinguistic competence (Hosseini & Safari, 2018). Mede and Dikilitas (2015) and Koran (2016) report that instructors may expose students to sociolinguistic variations through the use of media (e.g.: movies and songs) and online communication with communicatively competent speakers. This way, students become aware of sociolinguistically appropriate expressions used in authentic and meaningful contexts. Koran (2016) also mentioned several communicative activities conducted in the classroom such as roleplays, discussions and presentations where students can apply the knowledge that they have acquired and display their sociolinguistic abilities.

It is important to address how the different aspects of sociolinguistic competence, namely the appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of form, can be developed in the language classroom. Most studies conducted on the development of sociolinguistic competence discuss the teaching of speech acts in the second language classroom (Mizne, 1997; Ghobadi & Fahim, 2009; Salemi, Rabiee & Ketabi, 2012). In the first two studies, instructors explicitly developed the use of speech acts in the language classroom. In Mizne's (1997) study, an instructor introduces sociolinguistic variations to their students by discussing how Americans might express certain speech acts differently compared to the ESL learners due to differences in their background and culture. This provides students with an understanding of not only the different expressions that can be used in specific social contexts, but also how it reflects the background and culture of the interlocutors. Some second and foreign language learners experience difficulties when expressing certain speech acts. For example, foreign language learners were reported to have issues with thanking their interlocutors, and instead commonly responded with hesitation and awkwardness (Ghobadi & Fahim, 2009). Their response contrasted to those of communicatively competent users of the language, who would immediately express their gratitude by thanking the other person and following up with expressing pleasure and sometimes an additional speech act of complimenting the interlocutor. Ghobadi and Fahim's (2009) study included an instructor who was very explicit in their approach, teaching students thanking formulas that would prepare them for different social situations. As for the study by Salemi, Rabiee and Ketabi (2012), students in different groups were taught sociolinguistic competence either explicitly through the content of the lesson or implicitly through classroom examples and interaction. Though all these three studies showed a positive short-term outcome of the students being able to perform in evaluations of their sociolinguistic competence, questions of whether they are able to retain the competence that they acquired and whether they can use it in real life situations still remain unanswered.

Aside from speech acts, studies also show that some instructors prefer to focus either on managing discussions (Gorjian & Habibi, 2015; Syafrayani et al. (2022), or on the sociolinguistic variations in certain phrases or expressions (Yu, 2006; 2008; van Compernelle & Williams, 2012). Gorjian and Habibi (2015) found that instructors play their role in developing students' sociolinguistic competence by providing them with knowledge on how to manage interactions with others, from nominating a topic to concluding the conversation. As for the study by Syafrayani et al. (2022), the instructors focused on teaching students on presenting opinions and refuting others' opinions in a discussion. It was reported that students felt that they improved their speaking skills and were more motivated to use the English language. As for Yu's earlier study (2006) and follow-up research by Yu (2008), students were introduced to phrases to be used in specific social contexts. In these two studies though, it was found that despite the curriculum supporting the development of sociolinguistic competence in the EFL classroom, instructors were not actually inclined to create opportunities for students to acquire the competence. Rather, some of the instructors even missed certain instances where

the researcher felt sociolinguistic variations could be taught based on the mistakes that students made in the classroom. The researcher suggested instructors use less direct methods of developing students' sociolinguistic competence, such as through providing feedback on their mistakes by discussing appropriate variations of the language that could be used instead. Mougeon and Rehner (2019) conducted a study specifically addressing implicit methods of developing students' sociolinguistic competence in the target language, through the instructor-initiated classroom interaction. They analysed and discussed instructors' use of sociolinguistic variations in the classroom when interacting with students to see whether they provided students with a variety of input that would allow them to become aware of the variations that exist and how to use them appropriately. It was found that the sociolinguistic variations used by instructors depend on their own backgrounds, norms and values. Most of them mentioned that they were comfortable with using and introducing their students to these variations of the language.

One of the challenges for instructors when developing sociolinguistic competence in the EFL classroom includes how this competence is perceived by instructors and students alike (Yu, 2008). The teaching of sociolinguistic competence is encouraged, and in fact it has been emphasised by many, including the Council of Europe (2001) who introduced the CEFR. The CEFR is used as a guideline for the teaching of English as a second and foreign language in several countries in Asia, such as Thailand, Japan and Vietnam (Foley, 2019). It is hoped that the implementation of the CEFR can address the issue of imbalance in the focus on linguistic competence and sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. As highlighted by Hymes (1972), supporting the development of students' ability to communicate appropriately in specific social contexts does not mean overlooking the importance of grammatical competence, but is more about understanding how these competencies are interconnected with one another. Once instructors are able to make this connection and realise it in the classroom, EFL and ESL learners will not only achieve accuracy, but also appropriateness when using the language.

Developing students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom requires instructors to be flexible and prepared to discuss and use sociolinguistic variations with the students. This may prove to be an issue because most classroom interaction is often dominated by stilted and formal language which instructors use to maintain a formal environment in the classroom (Haydarova, 2018). The stilted and formal language used can cause students to face difficulties with using casual language in real life situations (van Compernelle & Williams, 2012). Some instructors choose to avoid introducing sociolinguistic variations in the classroom. Hence, the language classroom does not become a conducive environment for ESL and EFL learners to acquire sociolinguistic competence (Yang & Rehner, 2015). To address this question on the use of sociolinguistic variations in the language classroom, Mougeon and Rehner (2019) conducted a study on how language instructors interact with their students in the classroom. It was found that many instructors feel comfortable with using different expressions of sociolinguistic variations when communicating with their students. In turn, this use of variations allows learners to become more aware of the sociolinguistic aspect of language learning and acquire the competence. Yang and Rehner (2015) suggest that instructors provide more instances for the teaching and learning of sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. Instructors especially need to realise the implication of their interaction with the second and foreign language learners in the classroom on language acquisition (Walsh, 2006; Thoms, 2008; Skinner, 2016).

ESL instructors need to ensure that their chosen approach, be it explicit or implicit ways of developing students' sociolinguistic competence, is appropriate for the topic, for the students' needs as well as for the context. Not only are their pedagogical choices important, but ESL instructors need to ensure that they are guiding and motivating students to practice the skills in developing their sociolinguistic competence. In other words, ESL instructors need to ensure that students feel comfortable and motivated to communicate and practice the language inside and outside the classroom in order to further develop their competence.

It is important to highlight certain theories that are involved in making connections between the role that ESL instructors play and the development of students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. The development of sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom is commonly associated with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Though the theory was not initially developed focusing on language learning, it fits with research on language learning, and more specifically the development of sociolinguistic competence, because it highlights the important role of the instructor and the environment, or context, on language acquisition. This coincides with Hymes'

(1972) communicative competence, which he had based on the notion that language acquisition requires context. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which highlights the instructor's role in scaffolding students' learning also relates to Halliday's (1978) ideas on the role that instructors play in co-constructing meaning with students in the language classroom. The role of instructors is especially vital in second language classrooms because the classroom is more often than not the main source and avenue for the use of English among second language learners (Savignon, 2018). The same applies for the development of language learners' sociolinguistic competence. Though language learners may be able to acquire some aspects of the language outside the classroom, the instructor still plays a main role in their acquisition, especially in the fundamental stages of language learning (Hall, 2009). Less competent second and foreign language learners need an instructor or a more competent language user to guide them before they can acquire the language autonomously. In discussing the findings from this study, these theories are referred to, specifically to address the role that ESL instructors play in the development of students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. The ESL instructors' chosen methods and approaches to teaching the competence are relevant and significant as highlighted in previous studies, but it is also vital to explore how the instructors can play their role in scaffolding and guiding students towards the development of their sociolinguistic competence.

### **3. Research Method**

A qualitative approach was adopted, specifically a case study design, exploring how instructors develop Malaysian university students' sociolinguistic competence in the ESL classroom. Three instructors from the same institution were chosen for this study. The instructors were chosen based on the selection criteria and after a discussion with the gatekeepers of the institution. Among the criteria that were listed:

1. The ESL instructors were all teaching the same course that was chosen because it included aspects of sociolinguistic competence in the course content
2. The instructors should have at least five years of teaching experience
3. The instructors should have a Bachelor's degree and Masters in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) or any other English related major

The three instructors chosen for this study have at least 10 years of experience teaching in this institution and have taught most of the English language proficiency courses provided to the undergraduate students. It is important to note the number of years that they have taught as it would translate to their credibility and experience. In purposely choosing the instructors for the study, only instructors who have a Bachelor's degree and Masters in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) or any other English related major were included in the sample for this study. It is expected that having such qualifications would mean that they are well-equipped with the pedagogical and content knowledge needed in developing students' sociolinguistic competence.

In-depth interviews and stimulated recalls were conducted with the three English language instructors. Stimulated recalls were specifically chosen because the researcher intended to explore and understand the reasoning behind the instructors' actions and behaviour in the ESL classroom, and this can be achieved through a stimulated recall where participants can watch recordings of themselves and reflect on their choices (Sime, 2006). The instructors were interviewed several times, with the first interview being an in-depth interview to build rapport and explore the instructors' perceptions and practices in developing students' sociolinguistic competence. This in-depth interview was conducted at the beginning of the semester. After that, three stimulated recalls were conducted. The ESL instructors had recorded several of their lessons from one chosen class, and the researcher chose and watched three of the recordings based on their relevance to the scope of the study. As this study was conducted during the semester, the instructors would send the recordings one by one, and the researcher would conduct the stimulated recall a few days after each recording was received. During the stimulated recall, the instructors were shown specific parts from the recordings of their lessons to further discuss the instructors' choices and actions. At the end of the third stimulated recall, the instructors reflected on the semester and discussed their hopes and expectations for future semesters of teaching the course.

The interviews were transcribed, and the participants' responses were analysed through thematic analysis. Codes were derived from the data with reference to prior studies and the aforementioned theories. The codes went through a process of constant comparison, where the researchers identified the most appropriate way of classifying the data, as certain codes might fit into several different categories and themes. The themes that were formed based on the data were then discussed in relation to previous literature as well as the claims brought forth by Hymes (1972), Vygotsky (1978) and Halliday (1978).

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

Analysis of the findings reveals several prominent themes which discuss the role that instructors play in developing students' sociolinguistic competence in the ESL classroom. The following are the most prominent themes found based on the data analysis:

- a) Co-construction of meaning by instructor and students
- b) Providing a positive and comfortable learning environment
- c) Explicitly developing students' mastery of important skills in sociolinguistic competence
- d) Developing students' sociolinguistic competence through classroom interaction

Further elaboration and discussion on each of the themes are provided below.

##### **4.1 Co-Construction of Meaning by Instructor and Students**

The co-construction of meaning in the language classroom has been emphasised by prominent scholars, such as Halliday (1978), who places much emphasis on the role of the instructor in facilitating students in the language learning process and promoting student-centred learning. It is not only vital for language instructors to teach the lesson content, but also to guide and motivate their students in their language learning to develop their sociolinguistic competence. In order to do so, the ESL instructors in this study used their experiences, approached the language classroom with the idea of making the lesson meaningful for students, all while guiding, facilitating and motivating the students. This is especially vital for the development of sociolinguistic competence which requires language learners to be able to use the language appropriately within a variety of social contexts, most of which might not even occur in the language classroom. Hence, developing learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation of students through the co-construction of meaning is very important for these instructors.

Based on the in-depth interviews and stimulated recalls conducted with the instructors, it was revealed that all three instructors used their experiences in teaching English language as well as their experiences in learning the language as a second language learner to provide their students with a meaningful learning experience by relating to real situations. The instructors also referred to their personal experience as English language learners whenever discussing the lesson, relating their experiences to the situations that students are currently facing, especially in terms of learning and using the English language. In a study by Conteh, Copland, and Creese (2014), non-native teachers stated that they had discussed their personal and professional experiences when teaching English to provide a localised context for the language learning process. With reference to their experience teaching students from previous semesters, these instructors modified and improved their lessons for their current students. For example, Instructor 1 highlighted certain skills involved in the development of sociolinguistic competence, such as initiating discussions, seeing that their previous students commonly made mistakes in that area. These aspects are given extra attention so that students can avoid making the same mistakes, affecting the development of their sociolinguistic competence.

*“Usually, I'd tell them, okay... what you need to do in group discussion assessment. What I have faced, what are the several situations that students would do in a group discussion? For example, there would be a group discussion where these students would just um... initiate the discussion, okay, lead the discussion but forgot to mention his or her point of view.” (Instructor 1, 1<sup>st</sup> stimulated recall, 22 April 2021)*

The ESL instructors also placed emphasis on students developing their sociolinguistic competence to be used outside the classroom. These instructors felt that language learning would be much more authentic and meaningful for students once they realised that they could use the language for personal and practical purposes. For example, some instructors preferred to relate the lesson to situations which students might face outside the classroom, such as communicating with foreigners or in the workplace, where English needs to be used so that students see the relevance of learning certain aspects of sociolinguistic competence. Instructor 2 related his lessons to common uses of the English language outside the classroom with hopes that students retain the knowledge and ability to communicate appropriately in various social contexts. In one situation, Instructor 2 had discussed one of the skills related to the development of students' sociolinguistic competence, which is the ability to ask for clarification in an appropriate way with the intention of having the students use the skill outside the classroom as well.

*“Having that knowledge, hopefully they can apply it and then say, “excuse me I really don’t understand what you’re trying to say. Can you explain please?” That would be helpful if they have the competence to do that.” (Instructor 2, in-depth interview, 16 April 2021)*

It was found that some students who are taught formulaic expressions for speech acts may not retain the knowledge and ability to use language appropriately outside the language classroom despite being able to perform well in assessments (van Compernelle and Williams, 2012). In order to vary students' experiences in spoken communication, specifically in discussions, the instructors in the study by Syafrayani et al. (2022) allowed learners to communicate in English on several platforms, including communicating with foreigners, which improved their students' motivation to use the language. Therefore, ESL instructors need to play their role in making the lessons more meaningful and authentic for students, specifically by making the language learning process fun and also teaching English for use beyond the classroom.

These instructors also adapt to students' different needs in their effort to co-construct knowledge with students for the development of sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. Some students' language learning anxiety or different learning styles may have an influence in their language learning process. The ESL instructors in this study adapted the lesson to students' different needs by coming up with or modifying existing activities to suit their students. Instructor 3 notes that sometimes even active students can become passive in certain situations, for example when the students are preoccupied because they have a lot of tests during that particular week. In this situation, Instructor 3 would plan activities to improve class engagement.

*“They will be very quiet. So, I will try to adapt to that. I would make the activities; I mean like I would plan the activities.... Sometimes, it’s just like very spontaneous.” (Instructor 3, 3<sup>rd</sup> stimulated recall, 10 August 2021)*

When students are not engaged in the language classroom, they do not practice the skills that are needed in the development of their sociolinguistic competence. ESL instructors need to consider students' needs in order to improve engagement. In relation to this, Vygotsky (1987) also highlights students' needs and inclinations as having a significant influence on students' learning. ESL instructors need to be flexible and open to adapting their lessons depending on their students' needs at the time. Only when students feel their needs are met will they feel comfortable to participate in the language classroom and practice the skills they have learned to develop their sociolinguistic competence.

## **4.2 Providing a Positive and Comfortable Learning Environment**

Being an effective instructor involves providing students with a positive environment where they feel comfortable to use the target language (Dewaele, Witney, Saito, & Dewaele, 2017). The ESL instructors were also found to provide a positive and comfortable learning environment for their students. This is especially vital for the development of sociolinguistic competence, as it requires students to be able to communicate appropriately in a variety of social contexts, and this can only be achieved when students feel comfortable to use the language. Martel and Ramirez (2019) discussed the

lack of opportunities that language learners get to practice the skills needed in developing their sociolinguistic competence outside the classroom. Hence, it is important that ESL instructors provide the opportunity to the students, especially by providing them with a comfortable and positive learning environment so that they can practice the skills and develop the competence.

In providing a positive and comfortable learning environment, these ESL instructors made efforts to create a bond with their students, embracing mistakes in the language classroom, and considering students' self-esteem and anxiety. Though these classroom practices may not have a direct impact on developing students' sociolinguistic competence, they allow students to feel more comfortable to practice the skills that they had learned for the development of their sociolinguistic competence.

The ESL instructors in this study created a bond with their students by being approachable in the language classroom and building rapport with their students by starting each class with a short session asking their students about their personal lives, wellbeing, and other topics unrelated to the lesson. In relation to this, a study done on Indonesian students also found that lecturers would start their online classes by greeting the students and asking them about their wellbeing, which encouraged the students to be more open to communicate in the class (Anzari & Pratiwi, 2021). Similarly, Thuruvan and Md Yunus (2017) found that Malaysian students' language learning can be improved through having a good student-teacher relationship. When students have a positive relationship with their instructor, they are more inclined to engage in class interaction, and this would allow them opportunities to develop the skills for their sociolinguistic competence. The current study also found the Malaysian instructors had used humour when communicating with their students in creating a bond with them. Similarly, a study by Sufi Amin and Marina found that humour is effective in motivating second language learners to learn English (2019). These instructors wanted to create a bond with their students because they wanted students to feel comfortable to communicate freely in English in the classroom. They mentioned that this especially became vital after the Covid-19 pandemic because they do not get much opportunity to interact with students outside the lesson since all their classes were done online. Instructor 3 notes instances where they had responded positively to students in order to create a bond and have a positive relationship with their students. They felt that the use of positive language with the students such as thanking them for their responses had a positive impact on the students' engagement and development of the skills in sociolinguistic competence.

*"I would say, perhaps after they have responded, I'd say "thank you... Student Z." You know, um... I think that would make them speak more... perhaps not now, maybe in other classroom. Yeah. I think that approach work, actually... I feel that it works". (Instructor 1, 1<sup>st</sup> stimulated recall, 22 April 2021)*

Additionally, it was revealed that the ESL instructors attempted to embrace mistakes in the language classroom by constantly motivating them to contribute to the class interaction and reminding them that making mistakes is normal in the language learning process. Students who are too afraid to make mistakes may avoid communicating in English in the classroom, and this will hinder them from developing their sociolinguistic competence. The development of sociolinguistic competence requires students to be exposed to and practice the language in a variety of contexts. If the students are too afraid to communicate in the language classroom, they would be unable to practice the skills that they have learned to develop their sociolinguistic competence. ESL instructors not only need to play their role in providing students with opportunities to use the skills they have learned, but also in motivating students to communicate by embracing mistakes in the language classroom. Instructor 2 felt that students should just try to communicate, even if they might not be accurate or appropriate in their language use because the instructor will be there to guide them.

*"I say that, "this is just English. It's not gonna hurt you," you know. So, uh... ok come talk to me... I want you to try... ok broken English? Who cares? As long as I can understand you. But I'll help you throughout." (Instructor 2, in-depth interview, 16 April 2021)*



Referring to what Instructor 2 mentioned, ESL instructors also need to ensure that they provide feedback in a positive manner when students do make mistakes in the language classroom to improve classroom engagement and develop their sociolinguistic competence. This coincides with the findings from the review by Yen, Hien and Quyen (2019), who found that students communicate more positively and effectively when instructors provide them with meaningful and positive feedback. Similarly, a study by Liu and Deris (2022) found that students were more motivated to learn and participate in the English language classroom when their instructors provided feedback and guidance that allowed them to improve. How instructors respond to students' mistakes can have a significant impact on their engagement in the language classroom as well as the development of their sociolinguistic competence.

It was also found that the ESL instructors considered students' self-esteem and anxiety in the language classroom when developing their sociolinguistic competence. Some students may avoid from communicating in the English language classroom due to their low self-esteem and language learning anxiety. In their classrooms, these ESL instructors used positive encouragement and appropriate language to avoid embarrassing students and to encourage participation. They felt that it was important to be aware of students' self-esteem and anxiety, because it could hinder them practicing the skills related to the development of their sociolinguistic competence. Instructor 3 found that students were more willing to communicate and practice the skills in developing their sociolinguistic competence when they were assigned to small groups of 4-5 students as compared to whole class discussions.

*"I will not let them discuss in front of the whole class because I find that uh they will not feel comfortable, you know, if the whole class would be watching them. So I just go from group to group and listen to them" (Instructor 3, in-depth interview, 16 April 2021)*

ESL instructors need to consider students' self-esteem and anxiety and take appropriate actions in order to motivate students to practice the language, specifically the skills needed for the development of their sociolinguistic competence. In relation to this, Dewaele, Witney, Saito and Dewaele (2017) found that instructors who attempt to reduce students' language learning anxiety are able to make students more comfortable to communicate in the language classroom. As highlighted earlier, when students are more comfortable to use English in the classroom, they are able to practice the skills for the development of their sociolinguistic competence. In order to develop their sociolinguistic competence, students need to be able to identify and practice the appropriate language to be used in a variety of contexts (Martel & Ramirez, 2019). Some of these contexts would be introduced in the language classroom, and ESL instructors need to ensure that they are providing their students with a learning environment where the students feel comfortable and willing to practice the skills that they learned. This is vital for sociolinguistic competence specifically because language that may be appropriate in one context may very well be inappropriate in another, so language learners need to use the opportunities they get in the language classroom to practice the skills they learned to avoid misunderstandings and miscommunications that might occur due to the lack of sociolinguistic competence.

#### **4.3 Explicitly Developing Students' Mastery of Important Skills in Sociolinguistic Competence**

It was also found that the ESL instructors explicitly developed their students' mastery of important skills in sociolinguistic competence, such as communicating appropriately and effectively in a group discourse, identifying and interacting appropriately with interlocutors of different roles and backgrounds, and using the appropriate sociolinguistic variation for the specific social context. The instructors in this study taught these skills explicitly to students, explaining and discussing the purpose of the skills as well.

The ESL instructors discussed the communicative functions that students would be exposed to in a group discourse, such as initiating a discussion, asking for clarification, and encouraging participation. Instructor 1 also discussed the relevance of these communicative functions with their students, especially in turn-taking, one of the important skills needed in developing students' sociolinguistic competence. In one instance, Instructor 1 had taught their students about turn-taking by

explaining that they should not dominate a discourse to ensure that other interlocutors get the opportunity to express themselves as well.

*“...they need to also ensure that all the group members speak throughout the discussion by not dominating the discussion itself. So by giving chance, they need to ensure efficient turn-taking.” (Instructor 1, in-depth interview, 15 April 2021)*

The ESL instructors felt that it is important for the skills and purpose of these skills to be made clear and explicit to students in order for them to develop their sociolinguistic competence. Many studies have been conducted on the explicit teaching of the skills in sociolinguistic competence (see Lyster, 1994; Mizne, 1997; Ghobadi & Fahim, 2009; Salemi, Rabiee & Ketabi, 2012; Gorjian & Habibi, 2015; Syafrayani et al. (2022), and it has been found that explicitly discussing and explaining the skills in the classroom can be advantageous in the development of students' sociolinguistic competence. However, there are studies, such as Yu (2006; 2008), where the explicit approach did not provide positive results, but the researcher deduced that this could have been due to the lack opportunities for students to be exposed to and practice the skills. Hence, this highlights the need for instructors to focus on not only providing sufficient content on the subject matter, but also provide opportunities for students to communicate in the language classroom and use the skills in developing their sociolinguistic competence.

Moreover, it was found that the ESL instructors discussed the different roles and backgrounds of interlocutors with the students in the language classroom. Having sociolinguistic competence means that a language learner is able to communicate appropriately with people who have different roles and backgrounds to avoid any misunderstandings or miscommunications. The ESL instructors found ways to relate to the students' roles and backgrounds in discussing the differences that exist, and also allowed for the students to realise these differences when they did roleplays for the course. Instructor 2 highlighted the importance of choosing appropriate register and formality when communicating with different people.

*“...the importance of considering audience, I talked about kids, their level... and then go through adults, and then the level has to change. Same kind also if we talk to... uh to senior citizens. Also, maybe we need to do... like I said, reference... something that they can relate to.” (Instructor 2, 3<sup>rd</sup> stimulated recall, 18 June 2021)*

Identifying the different roles and backgrounds of interlocutors is definitely important, as expressed by Maros and Halim (2018) who investigated the different ways Malaysian students communicated due to their differences in background and cultures. Being an important aspect of sociolinguistic competence, language learners need to be able to identify the differences in how different people communicate and how to most appropriately convey meaning to them. This is especially vital for second language learners in a multicultural country such as Malaysia, and ESL instructors need to explicitly discuss the differences that students might encounter when communicating with Malaysians who come from a myriad of backgrounds and cultures.

The ESL instructors also explicitly taught students the sociolinguistic variations that might be used in specific contexts. Though the communicative functions of certain expressions might be the same, the use of these different expressions might be appropriate in certain contexts, but inappropriate in other contexts. Thus, it is vital that ESL instructors explain the differences to students so that they would use the appropriate sociolinguistic variations depending on the context. Instructor 1 used the approach of having several different students respond whenever she asks about how to express a certain communicative function.

*“...instead of asking one person to answer, maybe I can ask two to three students to answer. Just to give a variation of answers.” (Instructor 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> stimulated recall, 6 May 2021)*

This way, Instructor 1 allows students to come up with the different sociolinguistic variations, and these differences can be discussed in class. In relation to this, Salemi, Rabiee and Ketabi (2012) and Gorjian and Habibi (2015) investigated the effectiveness of teachers explaining the use of

sociolinguistic variations to their students, and both studies found that the teachers who explicitly taught the different expressions and why they would be suitable in certain situations effectively developed their students' sociolinguistic competence. It is vital for ESL instructors to highlight not only the communicative functions and different roles and backgrounds of interlocutors, but also how these can be differently applied in various contexts to communicate appropriately with others.

#### 4.4 Developing Students' Sociolinguistic Competence Through Classroom Interaction

In order to develop their students' sociolinguistic competence, the ESL instructors also attempted to do so through classroom interaction by being a model for appropriate language use, taking context into consideration, and providing feedback which requires reflection. Halliday (1971; 2004) and Vygotsky (1978) highlight the important role those surrounding interlocutors play in language learning, especially how the way they communicate can influence the language use of the language learner. Hence, instructors need to be aware of how they communicate and provide feedback in the language classroom, consider their own language use and incorporate context for language learning.

The ESL instructors were found to use appropriate language when communicating with the students. When asked about their language use, Instructor 3 mentioned that most of it was intentional, and they intended for students to model after them and communicate appropriately as well.

*"...that's how I want them to communicate with each other. Um, I think at the same time, when I do that, indirectly I believe that it will teach them or it will somehow influence them to communicate that way." (Instructor 3, 1<sup>st</sup> stimulated recall, 14 June 2021)*

ESL instructors play an especially vital role in second language learners' development of communicative skills because they are commonly the main input of English for their students (Yang & Rehner, 2015). With regards to this, ESL instructors need to be aware of their own language use, seeing as how they communicate may have an influence on how the students may interact with others in English. The development of sociolinguistic competence is related to context, and ESL instructors need to provide an appropriate context for language learning in the language classroom.

In relation to the previous point on context, ESL instructors need to incorporate context in the language classroom. The instructors ensured that the examples that they provided and activities that they conducted were contextualised without explicitly discussing the context in the language classroom. Instructor 1 describes their experience with the incorporation of context in class activities.

*"...we provided them with the dialogue which actually happening in real life. Okay but though we don't mention it directly to them: this is what you're going to see, okay, when you are discussing but we are giving them dialogue for them to uh insert the language expressions." (Instructor 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> stimulated recall, 6 May 2021)*

Context is vital in the development of sociolinguistic competence, and though it may not be overtly discussed in the language classroom, it can be incorporated so that students can be exposed to and practice appropriate language for a variety of contexts. In relation to this, van Compernelle and Williams (2012) found that students became more aware of the sociolinguistic variations to be used in different contexts when their instructor incorporated context into the lesson. Hence, the incorporation of context into activities and examples can be advantageous in developing students' sociolinguistic competence.

These ESL instructors also provided feedback to students in a way that students would need to reflect on their responses. For example, when Instructor 2 found that their student directly translated from their first language when communicating in the classroom, the instructor asked the student to try and think about it first before helping them.

*"I would just, "ok you just direct translate this, right?" I just go straight to it, I don't translate... "what are you trying to say?" ... I don't straight away give them example. I ask them to think first and then I will guide them." (Instructor 2, in-depth interview, 16 April 2021)*

ESL instructors need to inform students when they have made a mistake, but they need to use this opportunity to allow the students to reflect on their language use in order for them to practice and improve on their sociolinguistic competence. Cheung's (2021) study on English language instructors found that the method of not immediately providing the students with the appropriate language use to allow for reflection can be useful in certain situations. ESL instructors need to allow students some autonomy in their learning so that they will feel more motivated to learn the language and develop their sociolinguistic competence even outside the classroom.

## **5. Conclusion**

Second language learners need to strive towards communicating effectively, improving accuracy alongside expression of intended meaning without causing misunderstandings or offending others. To achieve this, educators and scholars have recently put more emphasis on the development of sociolinguistic competence, or the ability to understand and use the language appropriately according to the social context. The ESL instructors in this study have co-constructed meaning with students, provided a positive and comfortable learning environment, explicitly developed students' sociolinguistic competence and developed students' sociolinguistic competence through classroom interaction, all in their efforts towards developing students' sociolinguistic competence. Based on this study, it could be concluded that the development of sociolinguistic competence does not only entail teaching the skills needed, but also the role that instructors play in co-constructing meaning with students and also preparing a comfortable learning environment. Being a contextualised competence, in order for students to best develop their sociolinguistic competence, they need to be engaged in the lessons and practice the skills in a variety of contexts, including ones that are provided by the instructors in the language classroom and contexts that they will experience outside as well. This can only be achieved when ESL instructors discuss and explain the skills related to the development of sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom, provide appropriate examples of language use through their classroom interaction, as well as motivate their students to practice the skills by allowing them some autonomy in the classroom as well as providing a positive and comfortable environment.

Since the emphasis on sociolinguistic competence is quite recent, hopefully other ESL instructors will find these findings to be beneficial in providing them with some ideas on how they can develop their students' sociolinguistic competence. As mentioned earlier, higher education institutions in Malaysia are not bound by a standardised curriculum when it comes to teaching English. With regards to this, it is hoped that this study can provide Malaysian ESL instructors with examples and guidance on how sociolinguistic competence can be developed in the language classroom. Moreover, this study hopes to inspire more emphasis to be placed on the competence in the language classroom and curriculum, given that being able to communicate appropriately with others in a variety of contexts is an important skill which can avoid language users from miscommunications and misunderstandings. It is hoped that course developers can also gain insight from the findings of this study, especially in how to develop the curriculum to not only include aspects of sociolinguistic competence, but also specifically discuss the contexts of second language learners in Malaysia.

## **6. Suggestions for Future Research**

This study was focused on ESL instructors as participants in discussing how they developed sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. Perhaps future studies could have course developers as the respondents to discuss how they decide on which aspects of sociolinguistic competence to include in the course content and how they design the course assessments and activities to include sociolinguistic competence. This is an equally important angle to explore as the emphasis on sociolinguistic competence is quite recent in Malaysian curriculum, and it would be beneficial to see how course developers are managing this.

Alternatively, other qualitative studies could be conducted, focusing specifically on students. Besides interviewing students to understand their perceptions on the development of sociolinguistic competence, a discourse analysis could also be done on classroom interaction in order to investigate their interaction, especially their ability to communicate with others appropriately according to the context. Based on the findings, ESL instructors would be able to identify which aspects of

sociolinguistic competence they would need to emphasise more on, especially for the students as second language learners.

## 7. Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author1 was involved in the conception of the study, carried out the data collection and analysis, and wrote the article. Author2 was involved in the conception of the study and substantially revised the manuscript. Author3 and Author5 were also involved in the conception of the study and critically reviewed parts of the manuscript. Author4 critically reviewed and revised the manuscript.

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