

EXPANDING THE MICROSYSTEM IN THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT THEORY BASED ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Bronfenbrenner's (1977; 1986; 1994) Ecology of Human Development Theory has placed a few groups of people in the microsystem level (the innermost circle) to have influence on the development of a person. This paper puts forth a proposition of altering the groups of people in conjunction with globalisation. This is so due to the movement of people to other countries in the pursuance of knowledge. Through a qualitative paradigm, the data from a study on the international students' English language learning experiences show that for these students, the groups of people who have been helpful in their quest to learn the English language are their friends, teachers/lecturers, other international students and even anyone who is able to converse in the English language. The interviews and online postings of 9 international students studying in Malaysia reveal that the family members, who have been rated as playing the biggest role in the development of a person in Bronfenbrenner's theory, are considered as 'unhelpful' in the students' journey to learn the English language. Thus, globalisation is a phenomenon that can bring in various elements that might cause alteration – expansion to even a long withstanding theory. This brings only richness to the education world.

Keywords: Ecology of Human Development Theory, English language learning experiences, International Students, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

Much ink has been spilled in discussing the language learning process. There are theories and models which can either singularly or in conflation, explain the process. Long (2011) and Atkinson (2011) posit that in detailing a learning process, usually a single theory does not do justice to the deliberation. Many of these theories and models have also undergone changes, for example through expansion like language

socialisation which comes from language acquisition (Kulick & Schieffelin, 2005). This happens due to many reasons and one of them is globalisation. Thus, this paper discusses a theory that can be expanded based on the process of language learning that takes place due to globalisation. The evidence that supports the expansion comes from data collected for a study on international students learning English. This paper begins by discussing the existing theory, globalisation, the study, the findings and discussion, and the conclusion.

1.1 The theory

The theory that has become the focus of this paper is the Ecology of Human Development Theory. It is propounded and perfected by Urie Bronfenbrenner, an American psychologist. The cornerstone concept of the theory is the transaction between man and the environment in the man's developmental process. The theory was first published in 1970s (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) but has undergone expansion. Bronfenbrenner started with 4 types of the environments – micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems, and later added chronosystem. He posits that there are different types of environmental systems that influence human development and they are all related like 'Russian dolls' – where "the ecological environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls. Moving from the innermost level to the outside" (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 39). In other words, the microsystem is in the most inner circle, then it moves outwards with the mesosystem, followed by the exosystem and then the macrosystem. This is elucidated vividly by diagram 1 below.

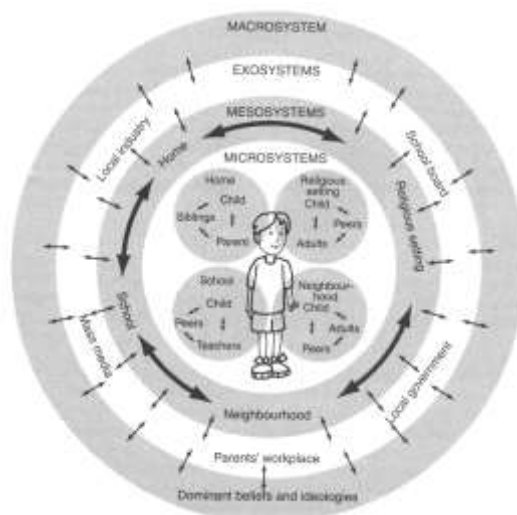


Diagram 1 : Ecology of Human Development Theory. Source: Penn (2005, p. 45)

Diagram 1 is the visualisation by Penn (2005) which is recommended by Harkonen (2007) as a clear representation of the Ecology of Human Development Theory. It shows the relationship of the 4 out of the 5 systems as proposed by Bronfenbrenner. The fifth system – Chronosystem, is usually symbolised as a sash across the systematic overlapping circles. The arrows show that there is reciprocity in the relationships between the systems. However, it is firstly important to describe the 5 systems although only succinctly.

(i) Microsystem – it is the developing person's immediate environment inclusive of the person's closest surroundings like home, the day care group, the neighbourhood, the religious setting and others

(ii) Mesosystem – consists of the connections between two or more settings involving the developing person like the relations between the home and school, and school and workplace. Thus, a person might be influenced by the events at home and this might have hampered or assisted his/her progress in school.

(iii) Exosystem – encompasses the connections between two or more settings, with one of them not directly involving the developing person, in fact, it can be a place which the person does not frequent. For example, if the person is a child; the other setting can include his/her parents' office or among parents' circle of friends.

(iv) Macrosystem – embraces all other systems – micro-, meso-, and exosystems. Thus, it is a broader social context which might also cover culture.

(v) Chronosystem – involves time and changes which are not only about the person, but also about the environment. A person goes through life course – family structure, employment, marriage and others.

It can be surmised that Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development Theory looks into development of a human being in general. A study by Tonttila (2006) has used this theory to study the development of a disabled child. In a similar vein, Kolb and Kolb (2005) have employed this theory together with two other theories to explain the Learning Space Theory, one part of their well-known Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). Similar to the Ecology of Human Development Theory, ELT also accentuates on the interactions between human and environment.

Among the 5 systems, the focus of this paper is on the first – the microsystem. As discussed, microsystem is made up of the person's immediate environment like his/her family, school, workplace and others. It involves "a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by developing person, a face to face setting with particular physical and material features...containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality and systems of belief" (Harkonen, 2007). They, in return, are affected by the developing person too (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

To encapsulate, the Ecology of Human Development Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1977) does not only explain the social system factors that influence the development of an individual, but also how the individual's socialization shapes the environment around him or her.

2. GLOBALISATION

With globalisation, people have travelled to other countries in their pursuance of education. Someone who is residing in a foreign country for tertiary study is a definition of an international student (Caroll, 2005). Their lifestyle, language, religion, and ideology can be different from those in the countries where they have become sojourners in. When the language used in own home country is different from the one in the new academic milieu, they need to learn the target language.

International students usually choose to go to traditional host countries namely the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Australia (Noor Saazai et al. , 2013). Seeing this as a good chance of gaining revenue and experiencing cultural exchanges (Andrade, 2006; Bell, 2008), many other countries emulate the practice of welcoming them in. Malaysia, just like China and Singapore, is termed as an emerging country in the business of international students (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). International Students have begun to be a part of the education landscape in Malaysia as Malaysia has started inviting international students in. These international students come from more than 150 countries all around the world (Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Statistics 2010). The 2010 statistics further indicate that there were 86 923 foreigners registered as international students in public and private higher institutions in Malaysia in 2010. Hence, MoHE hopes that Malaysia can be host for at least 200,000 international students in 2020. This will bring in revenue worth RM 600 billion (Chi, 2011).

Whether they are in the traditional host countries or in emerging countries, the language that they need to master in order for them to pursue their studies would be the English language. Therefore, they need to learn English as a second language. This is due to the importance of having the same language to communicate and also to exchange knowledge. Thus, the practice is the universities in the host countries set a language requirement for the international students' enrolment. The accepted testing systems are IELTS and TOEFL. The international students need to achieve a stipulated band in order to be accepted into the institution, usually it depends on the course that they are enrolled in. However, even without the right band for IELTS or TOEFL, they are accepted in. They need to sit for an English proficiency placement test. If they still do not get the band required, they need to go for an English language proficiency course. This is the phase of the study that has provided data for the proposed alteration of the microsystem in the Ecology of Human Development Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1977).

3. THE STUDY

A study looking into the English Language learning experiences of international students as done by the first author (Noor Saazai, 2014) utilises the tenets from five landmark theories and model. They are the Experiential Learning Theory by Kolb, Acculturation Theory by Berry, Sociocultural Theory by Vygotsky, Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura and Second Language Acquisition Model. The findings and the related discussion show how they concur with all of the theories and model except for the ELT (Kolb, 1984), more specifically, the Learning Space Theory. However, it is beyond the remit of this paper to deliberate the data that concur with the theories and model, in lieu this paper only delineates the data related to the Learning Space Theory. As discussed above, Learning Space Theory stems from the Ecology of Human Development

Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1977). Thus, it is the latter that is expanded.

The study followed the journey of 9 international students studying English in Malaysia. They were pursuing their master's and doctorate's degrees in a public institution in Malaysia. They did not meet the English language requirement as set by the institution, thus they had to undergo the English Language Proficiency Course (ELPC) for one whole semester and they had to pass in order to graduate. ELPC comprises all the skills – Reading, Listening, Writing and Oral Communication. Writing is for 6 hours whereas the other components are 3 hours each. Hence the ELPC students had only 15 hours of class contact hours in a week. The time spent in formal class is insufficient to really upgrade their English language. Due to that, they utilised their out-of-class language learning strategies to improve the command of their English language (Noor Saazai et al, 2015, Marlyna & Noor Saazai, 2016). For this paper, the research questions are:

1. How do international students involve 'people' in their English language learning?
2. How can the microsystem in the Ecology of Human Development Theory be expanded based on RQ1?

4. METHODOLOGY

The study is under the qualitative paradigm. The main data collection methods are interview and document analysis. The 9 participants were invited for interview twice during the duration of the study– at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. They also posted their thoughts online using the Google+ platform twice a week for 10 consecutive weeks. Their postings were on their English language experiences in the institution in particular, and in Malaysia in general. As a triangulation of the sources (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 2009), the lecturers and the administrators at the institution were also interviewed. They were three lecturers who were teaching the participants the skills in ELPC. Data analysis was done through the six-step thematic analysis process by Braun and Clarke (2006). The data were managed by ATLAS. ti version 7.

The 9 participants were Shamsulwahab, Imran, Nabil, Faizal, Basri, Mohsin, Fatinmalik, Faizah and Fairus. These are all pseudonyms. They self-rated themselves as having low level of proficiency. They are from the Middle East countries and all are Arabic speakers except for Mohsin who speaks Persian. Faizah is an Indonesian who has been living in the Middle East all her life. Shamsulwahab and Fatinmalik were on a study leave from their lecturer positions back in Iraq. 4 of them were doing PhD while the others were undergoing their master's degree. 6 of them would be writing their thesis in English whereas 3 would be producing their thesis in Arabic but all had to pass their ELPC as a ticket for graduation. All of them except for Basri were full time students. At the time of the study, Basri was a part-time Arabic teacher at an international school. The lecturers who participated were Dr Saleh, Dr Kaseh and Dr Farah. The administrators were Mr Cheok and Pn Aini. They are the administrators at the International Student Centre (ISC) at the institution.

Below is the deliberation of the two research questions. It elucidates the English language learning journey of the 9 participants. To make the elucidation vivid, extracts from the interviews and online postings are inserted. In interview exchanges, the participant's dialogues are in bold. Each extract is followed by information on the source, for example, (Basri, int_2) or (Mohsin, op_3A). The former means that the extract is from Basri's second interview which is at the end of the semester while the latter is from Mohsin's online posting in week 3 – and 'A' indicates that it is the first of the two postings.

5. RQ 1 - HOW DO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS INVOLVE 'PEOPLE' IN THEIR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING?

This question does not only answer the 'how' or the ways in which the people are involved in the participants' English language learning experience, but it also puts forth the type of people involved or 'who'. The discussion in this section first addresses the 'how', and this will be followed by the 'who'.

There are two ways in which 'people' are involved in the participants' English language learning endeavour. First is the people who have encouraged them to do well in their English language learning, and those who knowingly or unknowingly involved themselves in practising English with the participants. Data for this part come from the online postings by the participants as well as the interviews with three parties – the participants, the lecturers, and the administrators of the international centre at the institution. Data from the interviews with lecturers and administrators disclose more insights into how they (people) have encouraged the participants to do well in English.

5.1 Way 1 – People were involved in giving encouragement

All the three lecturers shared how they had motivated these participants to multiply their efforts in learning

English. Dr. Farah had the most to say and she beautifully summed it into “*make sure you don’t lose touch with the language*” (Dr. Farah_int) after she itemised all the activities students could do to become better at English. She advised them to “*speak to their friends, watch and listen to news, and read English newspapers*” (Dr. Farah_int). Besides that, she also appealed to the participants’ rationale by envisaging their future where when they go back to their home country, they would be labeled as educated because they have the ‘*extra language*’. This is what she shared:

And emm...I actually said to them that you would be much happier cause now you are better off compared when you enrolled for the course. I tie it with the language and when they go back to the country because they have this extra language, yes, they don’t speak English but now they are better than the people in their country. It means they are educated and people will look up to them. That kind of things, you know, things that I told them to more of encouraging them to use the language. (Dr. Farah_int)

As pointed out above, Dr. Farah painted a picture in the future to encourage the ELPC students including the nine participants to work on their English learning. Dr. Saleh, on the other hand, encouraged them by “*making short comments on their performance with encouraging words or phrases like ‘keep it up, good job’*” (Dr. Saleh_int). Whether the encouragement was done for a long-termed goal like what Dr. Farah did or short-termed as performed by Dr. Saleh, the information from the lecturers here shows how they (people) have encouraged the participants to do well in their English language learning.

As for Mr. Cheok, being the administrator at the international centre at the institution and in charge of international students’ activities, he wanted to encourage more ‘*joint programme*’ among students from different countries as this promotes English. However, students prefer activities conducted within their association and among their countrymen. At the time of the interview, the international centre was only 2 years old and thus, the administrators were still striving to be acknowledged as the bureau that can provide all types of assistance to the international students rather than just a centre for visa application. According to Mr. Cheok, in trying to encourage associations to conduct activities, he actually introduced himself to the associations, attended their meetings and has been keeping in contact with them through emails and phone calls. Furthermore, the centre could also offer a small sum of money to fund the activity and also assist them to liaise in logistic matters. They were also in the process of translating the forms and the templates for project paper from Bahasa Melayu to English. Although all these do not affect the participants directly, these are the steps taken to encourage university activities which can be as a platform for international students to practise their English language.

Besides the people who have directly encouraged English language learning among the participants, there were also people who have been directly involved in providing avenues for them to practise the English language. This can be further illuminated together with the discussion of ‘who’ these people are.

5.2 Way 2 – People who helped them and practised speaking with them

Besides giving encouragement, ‘people’ were also involved in two other ways; as someone to practice English with and to seek help from. This is deliberated by pointing out the sets of people or who are the people who have been assisting the participants to advance in their English language endeavour.

The first set of people that has played a big role in helping the participants to practise speaking in English is the friends. ‘**Friends**’ include classmates, seniors in the course, neighbours, office/roommates and team mates. The participants reported that they practised speaking in English with their friends. Shamsulwahab expressed this well by stating the types of friends that he could practise with: “*With my friends in my room and in the faculty and outside of my house, I have some friends in my condominium from Iranian people, from another country and sometimes speak English if we group together*” (Shamsulwahab, int_2). Most participants just mentioned that they “[*talked or practised speaking with their friends*]” (Imran, op_6B; Faizah, int_1; Basri, op_1A).

Among the participants, Nabil was the most excited about having the chance to befriend a group of Afghans who can converse well in English. He repeatedly relayed his excitement in his online postings and interviews. Two of the occurrences are given here. In the first interview, he reported meeting them: “*Yesterday when I get the ...the Afganistan come to me, hello how are you, because this is new...this is the first week in Malaysia...all of them speak very well English*” (Nabil, int_1) and then he recounted having a discussion with them: “*This week I had a special dialogue with my friend of Afghanistan, was the subject of solar energy*” (Nabil, op_8B). In fact, Nabil believed that having friends with whom one can practise speaking as one of the ways to learn English (Nabil, op_3A). His belief and enthusiasm about finding friends to practise English with might have been the influence of the advice that was given to him by a friend: “*and I’m interested in one thing my friend told me once that if you want to learn English quickly you should get a friend*

he speaking English and talk together a lot” (Nabil, op_4A).

Besides having friends as partners to speak English with, friends are also involved in helping them to solve language problems. Participants usually asked their friends to help in correcting their pronunciation and their assignment, and helping them with their work. Faizal, for example, showed his work to his senior in his engineering course for feedback (Faizal, int_2). Faizah shared how she sought help from her friend/s. Two of the examples are included here. When asked about what she would do when she found a word or a sentence which she did not understand, she answered “I just ask my friend” (Faizah, int_1). Another example is shown in the exchanges below:

Ok, since you know that you have a weakness but you still need to write the article, how do you amend the sentences, to make them better, without problems

I give for my friend who knows English or give for teacher (Faizah, int_2)

As seen above, Faizah relied on her friend ‘*who knows English*’. This brings the discussion to the next set of people. Her friend can also be categorised under the next set of people – **the good speakers of English**. In fact, when probed further about the friend that she referred to in ‘*I just ask my friend*’ in interview 1, she said that “*[the is] good in English*” (Faizah, int_1). In other instances, Faizah and Fairus suggested that to be good in English, people should go overseas to an English speaking country and make “*contact [with] a lot with people there [Canada] and acquire English from them which will gave me the chance to practice my English well*” (Fairus, op_8A). Moreover, Faizah suggested that people who want to improve their English should “*live with families... English families like that*” (Faizah, int_1).

The third group of people that has helped the participants to practise the target language is the **lecturers**. Earlier, it was discussed that lecturers gave them encouragement. Besides encouraging their students, they also became the source to seek help from. In preparing for a poster for a conference Shamsulwahab sought his supervisor’s help to check. So “*before printing, he modified poster two or three times. I do the poster and I gave him, read the poster and then to modify to give him three times*” (Shamsulwahab, int_1). Moreover, many participants like Mohsin, submitted the draft of his proposal to his writing lecturer where the lecturer “*checked it and he did show me how I can correct it*” (Mohsin, int_2). In addition, they also asked the lecturers for advice in their academic matter. Faizal sought advice on ‘speed reading’ from his reading lecturer (Faizal, int_2).

The evidence above shows how participants sought help from their lecturers or supervisors. Apart from that, they also felt that they could practise speaking English with them. Basri observed that students also get a good practice when they are able converse in English with their teachers (Basri, op_4A). Furthermore, when asked about the main differences between studying English in Malaysia and in home country, Fatinmalik said that it is “*better than [her] country. Why? Because here [she] can speak with teacher all English*” (Fatinmalik, int_1).

The following data extract highlights the next set of people – **foreigners/the international students** - that has helped these participants to practise English “*by mixing with foreign students at the university, and the daily practice of the English language, and dealing with foreigners in the areas of life, gained some communication skills in English*” (Imran, op_4A). Imran penned that communicating with the foreigners or other international students could help improve his speaking skills. In a similar vein, Shamsulwahab expressed that “*the courses which combine students from different countries are very important to increase the skills for these students in English language*” (Shamsulwahab, op_4A). This is also true about his Iranian friend as observed by Mohsin where “*one of [my] friends can speak English very well because his roommates are come from another country except Iran*” (Mohsin, int_1). On top of that, Faizah said that “*language can be progress fast if we often communication to all people that is not only same culture but multiple culture*”, so besides admitting that mixing with students from other countries is good for language advancement, she also added that “*communication [is] always interesting*” (Faizah, op_9A).

The participants were rather specific about indicating the set of people that had helped them either in practising English with or assisting them with work in any way to progress in their language learning – their friends, lecturers, good speakers of English, and other international students. However, the last group of people that they sought help mainly in having a practice of conversing in English is ‘**anyone**’. Fatinmalik relayed her experience asking for help from someone she did not know and ended up talking. This is as seen below:

When you see anyone like you didn’t know and you try to understand something or talk to know something that you didn’t know. I think it’s good exercise to learn. Because sometimes

I go to library, first time I didn't know how use computer

Switch on

Yeah. Yeah. I didn't know how to register. I ask someone, they are not Arabic. So they talking with me sometimes when I wait my friend, ... so I think good exercise.

(Fatinmalik, int_2)

Fatinmalik shared her experience talking to someone at the library. She also encountered the same experience on the bus:

So I now, I haven't car. So I come back by bus so I can see more more people, so I can...I try to understand and listen to all

So you ...have you tried speaking to somebody on the bus?

Yeah, yeah.

In English?

Yes. In Malaysia all learn know how speak English from different countries. So I try to speak English in order to

Practise?

Yeah. Yeah

(Fatinmalik, int_1)

Moreover, Faizal grabbed the chance to practise English when opportunity presented itself. He shared the two incidents when he went to the extent of asking questions even though he already knew the answer. He wrote:

Last week I go from [the institution] to KL sentra by KTM after that I take monorail trian go to Bokit Bentang and always ask people how I can go to this place or that place even the places I know it just for practicing after that I go to the airport by the train then return to my hostel" (Faizal, op_1B).

Then he did it another time on the way to the airport. He said, "*one time I take my friend to the airport. So I ask where is I can put my bag, I see where I can but I ask and I go to another person and ask*" (Faizal, int_1). In addition, he also talked to UKM guards. He penned in his reflections: "*last week I wait my friend to take me from university in the gate of UKM so I sat with the guards and we still talking maybe 30 min*" (Faizal, op_2B).

Similarly, Fairus (int_2), Faizal (op_1B, int_1) and Nabil (op_1B) "*[also talked to anyone on the bus, in the train or at the commuter station]*". Nabil also shared that the conversation he had with anyone would revolve around issues that "*include general topics about life, work and study*" (Nabil, op_3A) and that he had never encountered any adverse reaction from anyone whom he talked to. Fatinmalik also concurred with that. This is evident in the data extract below:

So is your experience in speaking to people here very positive?

Yeah yeah. Alhamdulillah.

(Fatinmalik, int_1)

To encapsulate, participants in this study involved the people around them in their quest to learn the English language. They roped in their friends, lecturers, and these people are usually good English speakers. Besides that they also befriended other international students or even approached anyone available to have a speaking practice in the English language. The people who have encouraged English language learning among the participants can be termed as 'helpful people'. However, there were also 'unhelpful people' reported by the participants who in a way hampered their English language learning journey. This is discussed in the next part.

5. 3 Unhelpful people

There were also people around the participants who did not play a role in making them to move forward in their language learning. In other words, they neither encourage the participants to advance in their English language learning nor practise to speak English with them but there were times when they created an uncomfortable situation for the participants to use English. People related to this are the participants' own countrymen and family members.

Many of the participants stayed off campus. Thus, their housemates and neighbours were usually their

countrymen. Faizah stayed in Kajang with her Indonesian friends (Faizah, int_1) while Fatinmalik lived with her four children in an apartment in Kajang where “on our floor there are 5 families Arab” (Fatinmalik, int_1). Mohsin “[stayed with his sister in Serdang]” (Mohsin, int_1) and “[some of Shamsulwahab’s neighbours were Arabs]” (Shamsulwahab, int_1). Hence, the interactions were mostly done in their mother-tongue. This is aptly expressed by Mohsin. When he was asked whether he talked to his sister in English or not, he laughingly said, “No. (laughs). We don’t need. Because we comfortable in Persian” (Mohsin, int_1). Furthermore, he admitted that he would rather travel alone in any English-speaking country instead of with a friend because they would tend to resort to their mother-tongue in their interactions. He penned this in his online posting; “Meanwhile I would travel alone. Because if I have a compatriot friend with myself, most of time I wouldn’t speak English” (Mohsin, op_8A).

The previous paragraph highlighted the countrymen to be the people who hindered the rigorous English practice among the participants. Moreover, Shamsulwahab complained of having no support from his wife in terms of upgrading his command of the language. He said, “In my house cannot speak English because my wife is [housewife], don’t complete her studying. About secondary school she stopped” (Shamsulwahab, int_1). It can be surmised that people who are close to them do not really play a role in helping them to improve the target language.

Although their experiences above are not detrimental, they, albeit are all experiences that impede their English language learning journey. This has become the impetus to the need for an expansion of the microsystem in the Ecology of Human Development Theory by Bronfenbrenner (1977) as the people close to them (family members and countrymen) have played a lesser role in developing their language. This is to be addressed in the next research question.

6. RQ 2 - HOW CAN THE MICROSYSTEM IN THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT THEORY BE ALTERED BASED ON RQ1?

In answering RQ2, there is a need to recall the visualisation and write up on the microsystem in the Ecology of Human Development Theory. Then, the link between the findings in RQ 1 and the microsystem is made to highlight its need for alteration.

As illustrated earlier, Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem is visualised with a child at its centre. On the picture of the child, 4 similar circles are arranged in 2 by 2 matrix. The circles represent home, school, religious setting and neighbourhood. Visually, the circles which are of the same size and set in the 2 by 2 matrix symbolise that all elements in the microsystem have the same weighting or influence on the child. Moreover, the explanation in the extant literature does not differentiate the level of influence each element has on the child, the concentration is more on the interactions instead (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1986).

The findings from RQ1 show that in learning a second language, a learner learns more from some people and less from the others. The participants in the study have listed friends to be the first group of people who helped them in making their target language better. Friends helped them in terms of giving them the opportunities to practise speaking the language and also in providing them with direct solution to any language problem that they had. The second set of people on the list is the good speakers of the English language. This is proven when given a chance, the participants actually opted to be in a country in which English language is the native language like Canada. Lecturers would be the next group of people that have helped the learners to be good at the language. They provided encouragement and opened up ways for the students to advance in their language learning. Besides that, the participants also learnt more from the foreigners or other international students. This is axiomatic because with different mother-tongues, the mutual language that they share is the English language. Thus, due to having no choice, they used English as the language of communication and this led them to practise using the language. The last group of people listed is ‘anyone’. This can be seen by the instances of how people on the bus and train, at the commuter station, library, and even the guard at the guard house have helped the participants to use the target language.

The focus on ‘people’ as playing an active role in helping to develop the participant’s English language proficiency concurs with the concept of microsystem which also highlights ‘people’ to be the agents of development. The people in the microsystem, as seen in Diagram 1, come from different sets – home, school, neighborhood and religious setting. However, based on the evidence in RQ1, there are more mentions of peers, lecturers and even ‘anyone’ as the agents of development for the international students. So, mapping it onto the sets of people in the microsystem, for these international students, the people from school (peers and lecturers) and neighbourhood (anyone) have assisted them in their English language learning. However, family members like sister and wife were not seen to be assisting them in this process, in

fact, they were considered as hampering the process as they would not converse in the target language. To recall, Mohsin did not talk to his sister in English because they were comfortable speaking in their mother-tongue and Shamsulwahab could not have a conversation in English with his wife due to the latter's low proficiency level. In addition, there is also no mention of people from the 'religious setting' set as helping to develop the international students' language. This might be because the target language and the language used in the religion of these participants are different.

With the deliberation above, it can be surmised that to describe the development of an international student's English language learning experience in Malaysia, the microsystem in the Ecology of the Development Theory needs to be expanded. The expansion is firstly, in terms of the weighting among the groups of people in the microsystem. Unlike Bronfenbrenner's theory where the groups of people seem to have similar influence on the development of an individual, the influence of the groups of people on the development of an international student studying English in Malaysia is not similar. Secondly, the data show that only peers, lecturers and 'anyone' assisted the participants in their English language learning endeavour which are equivalent to school and neighbourhood in the microsystem, but there was no mention of people from home and religious setting who were involved in the language learning process. To encapsulate, the expansion is in terms of the weighting and the addition of the set of people involved in the microsystem.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main finding that becomes the impetus for the need for expansion of the microsystem in the Ecology of the Development Theory by Bronfenbrenner is the inferior role family members played in developing the participants' command of the English language. More help was reported to have been received from peers, lecturers and even 'anyone'. This might be due to the situation that these international students are in. Most of them are here on their own – Imran, Nabil, Faizah, and Faizal. Those who were here with the family like Basri, Fatinmalik, Shamsulwahab, Fairus, and Mohsin either did not report anything on how the family members have assisted them in their endeavour or they reported unfavourably about them.

In the light of the discussion on RQ 1, there are proofs of people helping these international students to advance in their English language learning. These findings are clearly in line with the tenet of microsystem which is also highlighting the role of the people around the person as being the agents of development. However, taking off from the report of 'unhelpful people' and dissecting the discussion in RQ2, there is a need to expand on the elements in the microsystem in the Ecology of Human Development Theory. The microsystem has specified 4 sets of people – people from home, school, neighbourhood and religious setting, and based on the 4 similar-sized circles representing these 4 sets of people in Diagram 1, it suggests that each of the 4 sets of people has equal weighting in its role on a person's development. This is the part that needs to be expanded because of the different nature of the person at the centre of the microsystem. If the 'person' in the microsystem is an international student studying English in a country which uses English as a second language, the family members do not provide equal assistance as the peers from the institutions. In fact, due to the different language use in the student's religion, the people from the 'religious setting' set also had no role.

The findings from the study on the English language learning experiences of international students have shown evidence that calls for an expansion of the microsystem in the Ecology of Human Development Theory. However, it is beyond the remit of this paper to propose the the weighting of the role each set of people has on the development of a person. This is mainly because although this study has provided empirical data, it is only a singular study. However, the expansion by adding and omitting other sets of people in the microsystem has also been done as seen in Penn's (2005) and Tonttila (2006) studies as there is addition to the sets of people. Penn (2005), for example, has added the child care centre in the microsystem because the person at the centre of the circle is a disabled child.

The difference between the findings in this study and the existing theory does not mean the invalidation of the theory or that the theory has been misconstrued, instead, it only shows the richness and diversity in the types of learner that globalisation has brought about. Thus, it can be surmised that the expansion is needed due to the nature and the context of the person at the centre of the microsystem.

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