



**ESL INSTRUCTORS' PRACTICES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE  
IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

By

**SITI NADHIRAH BINTI ABD RAHMAN**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**July 2022**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Second language learners often lack sociolinguistic competence, especially when it comes to understanding and using language appropriately according to the context and situation, commonly due to the lack to exposure to appropriate language use. This lack in communicative competence could be due to many factors, such as the absence or lack of communicatively competent speakers, lack of language input outside the classroom, or lack of sociolinguistically appropriate language use in the classroom. For second language learners, classroom interaction is where they mostly use the English language. Unfortunately, sociolinguistic competence is not given much emphasis in the classroom despite the language classroom being the most important and abundant form of language input for second language learners. This case study was conducted to explore how instructors create opportunities and use teaching resources to develop Malaysian university students' sociolinguistic competence for communicative competence in the language classroom. Three ESL instructors who fulfilled the predetermined selection criteria, indicating their expertise and professional practices, were chosen for this study. In-depth interviews and stimulated recalls were conducted to understand how these instructors create opportunities and utilise teaching resources in the classroom in developing their students' sociolinguistic competence. Aside from document analysis of the teaching resources, focus group discussions have also been conducted with nine first year university students to support the findings. The theories and concepts that are referred to in guiding this study and its findings are Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), Halliday's theory of context (1971) and Hymes' concept of communicative competence (1967). The findings reveal several themes in the instructors' creation of opportunities for the development of sociolinguistic competence, including considering students' context for meaningfulness and authenticity, explicitly teaching sociolinguistic variations, and developing students' sociolinguistic competence through classroom

interaction. Three themes have been reported for the instructors' use of teaching resources in developing students' sociolinguistic competence, namely using videos of native speakers, using other students' work as a teaching resource, and using resources in developing students' sociolinguistic competence through classroom interaction. A framework of the instructors' practices for developing sociolinguistic competence in the ESL classroom has also been developed based on the themes found in this study. It can be concluded that the Malaysian ESL instructors in this study created opportunities as well as utilised teaching resources to develop first year university students' sociolinguistic competence, and it is hoped that other instructors and curriculum designers can gain insights from this study.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**AMALAN PENGAJAR ESL DALAM MEMBANGUNKAN KOMPETENSI  
SOSIOLINGUISTIK PELAJAR UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA DALAM KELAS  
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Pelajar bahasa kedua selalunya kurang kompetensi sosiolinguistik, terutamanya dalam memahami dan menggunakan bahasa dengan betul mengikut konteks dan situasi, lazimnya disebabkan oleh kurangnya pendedahan kepada penggunaan bahasa yang sesuai. Kekurangan dalam kompetensi komunikatif ini mungkin disebabkan oleh banyak faktor, seperti ketiadaan atau kekurangan penutur yang cekap berkomunikasi, kekurangan input bahasa di luar kelas, atau kekurangan penggunaan bahasa yang sesuai dari segi sosiolinguistik di dalam kelas. Bagi pelajar bahasa kedua, interaksi dalam kelas merupakan tempat di mana mereka menggunakan bahasa Inggeris. Malangnya, kompetensi sosiolinguistik tidak banyak diberi penekanan di dalam kelas walaupun kelas bahasa menjadi bentuk input bahasa yang paling penting dan besar untuk pelajar bahasa kedua. Kajian kes ini dijalankan untuk meneroka bagaimana pengajar mencipta peluang dan menggunakan bahan pengajaran bagi membangunkan kompetensi sosiolinguistik pelajar universiti Malaysia untuk kecekapan komunikatif dalam kelas bahasa. Tiga pengajar ESL yang memenuhi kriteria pemilihan yang telah ditetapkan, menunjukkan kepakaran dan amalan profesional mereka, telah dipilih untuk kajian ini. Temu bual mendalam dan ingatan yang dirangsang telah dijalankan untuk memahami bagaimana pengajar ini mencipta peluang dan menggunakan bahan pengajaran di dalam kelas dalam membangunkan kecekapan sosiolinguistik pelajar mereka. Selain daripada analisis dokumen bahan pengajaran, perbincangan kumpulan fokus juga telah dijalankan dengan sembilan pelajar universiti tahun satu untuk menyokong dapatan. Teori dan konsep yang dirujuk dalam membimbing kajian ini dan penemuannya ialah teori sosiobudaya Vygotsky (1978), teori konteks Halliday (1971) dan konsep kompetensi komunikatif Hymes (1967). Dapatan kajian mendedahkan beberapa tema dalam merekabentuk peluang pengajar untuk pembangunan kompetensi sosiolinguistik, termasuk mempertimbangkan konteks pelajar untuk makna dan keaslian, secara eksplisit mengajar variasi

sosiolinguistik, dan membangunkan kompetensi sosiolinguistik pelajar melalui interaksi bilik darjah. Tiga tema telah dilaporkan untuk penggunaan bahan pengajaran dalam membangunkan kompetensi sosiolinguistik pelajar, iaitu menggunakan video penutur asli, menggunakan kerja pelajar lain sebagai bahan pengajaran, dan menggunakan bahan pengajaran dalam membangunkan kecekapan sosiolinguistik pelajar melalui interaksi bilik darjah. Rangka kerja amalan pengajar untuk membangunkan kompetensi sosiolinguistik dalam kelas ESL juga telah dibangunkan berdasarkan tema yang terdapat dalam kajian ini. Ia dapat disimpulkan bahawa tenaga pengajar ESL Malaysia dalam kajian ini mencipta peluang serta menggunakan bahan pengajaran bagi membangunkan kompetensi sosiolinguistik pelajar tahun satu di universiti, dan diharapkan tenaga pengajar dan pereka kurikulum yang lain dapat memperoleh kebaikan daripada kajian ini.



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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
ESL	English as a Second Language
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EOP	English for Occupational Purposes
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
MUET	Malaysian University English Test



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins by discussing the background of the study, inclusive of local policies on the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia, the concept of communicative and sociolinguistic competence, and how they are developed in the second language classroom, specifically in Malaysia. The gaps in the study are then examined, namely the practical gaps in the language classroom, the gaps in the body of knowledge, as well as methodological gaps which demonstrate the need for this study. The research questions and research objectives are presented, followed by the significance of the study. Then, the scope and limitations of the study are discussed, and the chapter ends with the definition of terms that are important in this study.

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 was proposed with the intention that Malaysian students be able to communicate effectively in order to exhibit good leadership and become holistic citizens (Ministry of Education, 2012). In emphasising the need for Malaysians to be communicatively competent, the Ministry of Education (2015) also presented findings in The Roadmap, showing that employers perceived that less than fifty percent of Malaysian graduates possess the communicative competence required at the workplace. Students need to understand that their communicative ability in the English language can facilitate success in their future career. The globalisation of education and other industries has led to the need for proficiency in the English language among graduates looking for employment. Moreover, with the internationalisation of education, becoming a communicatively competent user of the English language has become a necessity for Malaysian students (Nur Ashiquin, Abdul Halim, & Masdinah Alauyah, 2021).

Having communicative competence would allow a language learner to deliver and interpret messages and to make meaning in many varied contexts (Hymes, 1972). In terms of its pedagogical relevance, Savignon (2018) feels that having communicative competence would allow language learners to be able to express their proficiency through meaningful and authentic interaction outside the classroom. As one of the dimensions of communicative competence, sociolinguistic competence is a very important component in ensuring language learners would be communicatively competent in using the target language. Language learners with sociolinguistic competence would be able to identify the nuance and connotation that different expressions might have, in relation to the roles and backgrounds of different interlocutors (Halliday, 1971).

It is vital for language learners to have sociolinguistic competence in order for them to be able to communicate effectively with others. Deciding the appropriate

utterances to use in specific situations can be difficult for foreign language learners, as they are not often exposed to the language, hence facing issues with identifying the most sociolinguistically appropriate expressions (Liu, 2008). Having sociolinguistic competence proves to be vital for second and foreign language users of English. In fact, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) which is being used by several countries including Malaysia for teaching English, updated their descriptors (Council of Europe, 2018) to replace the term “native speaker” to avoid from idealising native speakers’ use of the language, rather for the successful development of learners’ communicative competence, inclusive of their sociolinguistic competence. Expressions of the language are not limited to verbal communication, but they also encompass any instances where sociolinguistic competence is needed, hence including written communication.

Sociolinguistic competence in the second language has become especially vital in light of the internationalisation of higher education. Internationalisation is an effort made by universities in order to cope with globalisation, opening the doors of education to learners from other countries (Altbach, 2004). Many countries, including Malaysia, are moving towards having all classes conducted in English in tertiary level institutions due to the rise in the number of foreign students who are furthering their studies, where they have to use English as the medium of communication, not only in spoken form as they have to engage in academic discourses, such as academic discussions, presentations and participate in many other activities that require them to speak in English throughout their studies, but also in written form through written assignments and letters. Having sociolinguistic competence would mean that the language learners are able to communicate appropriately with others, avoiding miscommunications and misunderstandings. Being unable to communicate appropriately with instructors and peers can hinder students from acquiring knowledge and improving their abilities (Amr Abdullatif, Norizan, Yousef, & Murad, 2020).

Unfortunately, due to differences in their backgrounds, local and international students face issues with the different standards and expectations that they hold when expressing their thoughts verbally (Ng & Nyland, 2017). This could be due to a lack of understanding when learning the English language. Many people view language as a medium for conveying meaning, but overlook how different expressions that exist for the same purpose may have diverse implications on the response of their interlocutors. This is where having sociolinguistic competence would help students in navigating their interactions with others through understanding and articulating the appropriate language variation depending on the social context. They would be able to communicate with confidence, clarity and politeness in a variety of social contexts, and socialise easily without causing misunderstandings or ambiguity (Martel & Ramirez, 2019).

Due to the dominant use of the English language in tertiary level education in most academic discourses, there is an important need for those learning English as second or foreign language (i.e., ESL/EFL learners) in university to have

sociolinguistic competence, starting from those who are in their first year of their undergraduate degree. They would need to adapt to the teaching and communicating style of that in university which is very different to what they would usually face prior to entering university. Moreover, it has been found that ESL and EFL students who envision themselves studying abroad have a positive attitude towards learning and using the English language (Bukve, 2018), which means that those who are planning on furthering their studies abroad after completing their degree might show more willingness to communicate using the English language.

### **1.1.1 Developing sociolinguistic competence in the English language classroom**

For many English as a second and foreign language learners, the classroom is the main source for target language input, and it may be the only opportunity for them to produce the target language. Thus, English language instructors play a vital role in teaching sociolinguistic competence to second and foreign language learners. Instructors are the driving force towards providing appropriate learning experiences for students to acquire a language (Savignon, 2018). Hall (2009), in a study on classroom interaction and language learning found that language learners gain most of their language abilities and knowledge from classroom interactions initiated by the instructor. In fact, the sociolinguistic approach to language learning places interaction and socialisation as having an important role in the acquisition of appropriate use of the language (Duff & Talmy, 2011; Lantolf, Thorne, & Poehner, 2015). Interactions between the instructor and students provide practice for the students to socialise in situations outside the classroom (Street, 2009). Koran (2016) stated that language instructors need to understand the concept of sociolinguistic competence and be able to expose their students to it. Teaching sociolinguistic competence would be a heavier task in ESL and EFL classrooms, as it would mean providing these learners with the knowledge and understanding of sociolinguistic varieties of the language, which might not be familiar to second or foreign language learners. Boonsuk and Ambele (2019) have highlighted that ESL and EFL students' sociolinguistic competence can be developed in the classroom through systematic planning of lessons and activities.

Sociolinguistic competence can be explicitly and implicitly taught in the language classroom, which means that instructors can include the topic in a lesson, and they can also embed it in classroom interaction (Mede & Dikilitas, 2015). Yu (2008) found that in order for language learners to become competent users, it is important for instructors to recognise and demonstrate the similarities and differences in the sociolinguistic norms of the native language and second or foreign language. Being able to identify this difference would not only allow ESL and EFL learners to use the appropriate language form or expression, but also lead to a deeper understanding of the second language, making their learning more meaningful. It is important to note however, that teaching sociolinguistic competence in the second language does not mean trying to have second language learners merely matching the performance of native speakers. Rather

it is a way for learners to become more aware of the reasons behind the sociolinguistic variations that exist within the language (van Compernelle & Williams, 2012a). Razianna (2005) implores instructors to make connections between society and culture with language teaching and learning in order to develop ESL language learners' proficiency.

A number of scholars have suggested the use of media such as films and songs, and internet-mediated communication in developing students' sociolinguistic competence (van Compernelle & Williams, 2012a; Mede & Dikilitas, 2015; Koran, 2016). Aside from the use of media and social networking, Koran (2016) also puts forth suggestions of communicative class activities such as discussions, roleplays and presentations which help students' in understanding and expressing sociolinguistic variations. Another way in which ESL and EFL students' sociolinguistic competence can be developed is through communication in the classroom. Therefore, in the language classroom, learners not only learn the content knowledge of sociolinguistic competence through explicit instruction, but also understand and express the sociolinguistic variations that exist through interaction with the instructor and other students.

Recently, the issue of incorporating sociolinguistic competence into pedagogy has been a topic of discussion among second and foreign language researchers and educators (Yang & Rehner, 2015). Less time is spent on the development of sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. This could have stemmed from the lack of attention given to this competence in second language curriculum compared to linguistic competence as pointed out by Omaggio (2001) and Foley (2019). The next section will elaborate more on the current language teaching and learning in Malaysia to provide a clearer view of the issue in context.

### **1.1.2 Developing sociolinguistic competence in Malaysian English language classrooms**

The importance of developing Malaysian students' English language communicative competence is highly stressed in Malaysian educational policy and curriculum. In the Malaysian English education context, it is vital to note that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was chosen as a guideline for the English language curriculum in the country in an effort to internationalise the education standard of the country (Hazita, 2016).

*In terms of the extension and diversification of communicative language competence and is then concerned with the linguistic component, or the pragmatic component or the sociolinguistic component, or all of these. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 136; Council of Europe, 2018)*

One of the major aspects of the CEFR is its emphasis on communicative competence, or more specifically sociolinguistic competence. The CEFR views language as a sociocultural phenomenon, therefore placing importance on areas



of language that are related to the society and culture, which has not been given much attention elsewhere. By adopting the CEFR, it can be said that greater attention needs to be given to sociolinguistic competence in Malaysian English language classrooms. The specific differences between CEFR descriptors will be further discussed in the literature review.

The Ministry of Education (2015) emphasises the need for sociolinguistic aspects in language teaching and learning, as learners make connections between what they learn in the classroom and real life interaction. Instructors should implement a communicative and interactive teaching approach so that learners become active and engaged participants in the classroom. The Council of Europe (2001) states that though language learners may acquire certain aspects of a language from sources other than the language instructor, but they gain a lot of the basic skills they need to acquire a language inside the classroom as it can provide them with the foundations for when they immerse themselves in real life situations that require higher level of communicative competence. Instructors need to be flexible and sensitive towards students' progress to facilitate the development of their communicative skills. It is imperative that instructors realise that their actions may reflect their attitudes and abilities, which can affect how students feel about the language and the language learning process. Instructors who discuss sociolinguistic variations and norms in the classroom can provide students with a better understanding and awareness, motivating them to learn and produce the language even outside the classroom (Council of Europe, 2001). The following section will discuss the issues surrounding the development of students' sociolinguistic competence in the second language classroom, specifically in Malaysia.

### **1.1.3 Issues related to the development of students' English language sociolinguistic competence**

Recently, researchers have raised several issues regarding the development of sociolinguistic competence in the second language classroom. Among the issues include the uncertainty that is faced by language learners with the appropriate sociolinguistic variations to be used in specific social situations, the lack of attention given to sociolinguistic competence in the curriculum as well as the classroom, the lack of pedagogical resource on how to approach the development of sociolinguistic competence, and the issues with obtaining and managing teaching resources that cater to second language learners specifically. This section will also discuss the issues specifically related to the development of sociolinguistic competence in Malaysian classrooms, as Malaysians commonly place too much emphasis on examinations which usually overlook aspects of sociolinguistic competence, and the need for a contextualised guideline for ESL instructors in Malaysia.

Competent language users can make connections and differentiate between the sociolinguistic norms of their first language and the target language (i.e., English language), in order to be sensitive towards the users of both languages and gain

a deeper understanding of the target language (Holmes & Brown, 1976; Yu, 2008; Sugar, 2015). Marlyna and Salmiza (2013) deduced that learners who are able to demonstrate their sociolinguistic awareness can manage face threatening acts and form a bond with the interlocutors. Unfortunately, many English as a second and foreign language learners face issues with sociolinguistic variations and norms. It was revealed that these language learners commonly understand the function and use of speech acts but have issues with expressing the appropriate language when in specific social contexts (Riddiford & Joe, 2010).

Some learners might express utterances that seem impolite because they are uncertain of face threatening acts such as requesting, disagreeing and apologising (Phanithira & Melor, 2017). They tend to avoid these speech acts so as to reduce the possibilities of losing face or threatening the face of their interlocutors. In managing their uncertainties, language learners tend to rely on their first language when navigating the second language without considering the social context. This may affect the communication because how they express themselves in the first language might not be appropriate in the second language within specific social contexts, such as with indirect requests, as discussed in the study by (Daskalovska, Ivanovska, Kusevska, and Ulanska (2016).

Studies have shown that instructors rarely provide opportunities for learners to be exposed to different situations or contexts of interaction (Freed, 1995; Mougeon, Nadasdi, & Rehner, 2010) and language classrooms do not provide sufficient opportunities for students to utilise their sociolinguistic knowledge (Yang & Rehner, 2015). In situations where instructors do attempt to use teaching resources that can help immerse students in the target language, the instructors simply provide the resources to the students rather than engage them in interactive and collaborative activities that utilise those resources (van Compernelle & Williams, 2012b). The issue with making teacher talk communicatively authentic in the classroom is that genuine conversations rarely have much pedagogical implication (Haydarova, 2018). Nonetheless, it is vital to assert that language learning is interdependent with interaction, hence instructors must be made aware of the significance and consequence of how they interact in the classroom (Walsh, 2006).

With regards to the teaching of sociolinguistic competence, studies (Mede & Dikilitas, 2015; Martel & Ramirez (2019) reported that instructors have confessed a lack of time in completing the curriculum, causing them to avoid teaching sociolinguistic competence in the classroom. In situations such as this, the curriculum itself does include sociolinguistic aspects, but instructors feel that there is a time constraint in doing so. Perhaps there is too much content on linguistic competence that the sociolinguistic aspect is overlooked in the language classroom. A number of scholars have found immersive experiences to be conducive for developing students' sociolinguistic competence, but it is not feasible for all second and foreign language learners to obtain the experience of studying abroad which alludes to the importance of instructors and the language

classroom experience in developing the competence (Yang, 2015; Martel & Ramirez, 2019).

In a study by Mede and Dikilitas (2015), some instructors of English as a second language confessed their lack of sociolinguistic competence and that it might have impacted their teaching. In an effort to make language classrooms more communicative, some instructors resort to designing lessons where students communicate using a given template or dialogue. However, this can also be counterproductive as it produces false communication in which the students act out a conversation whereby they already know what the interlocutor is going to say (Shu, 2019). This might assist learners in improving their awareness and competence in the form and function of language, but they would still lack the sociolinguistic competence needed for real life social situations. With the findings of the current study, instructors can develop their pedagogical approach to develop students' sociolinguistic competence in the English language classroom based on how the ESL instructors in this study chose to create opportunities and use teaching resources for the development of students' sociolinguistic competence.

Teaching materials and resources also play an important role in the development of students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. Shu (2019) found that students lack the competence to communicate appropriately in specific social contexts due to a majority of stilted and formal sentences in their textbooks. A study comparing locally written books as opposed to those by native speakers of the English language revealed that local writers provide comparisons to the local language and culture which can instil sociolinguistic awareness and understanding in students (Sugar, 2015). Other than textbooks, English language teaching resources such as aids and articles chosen by instructors to bring into the classroom can also have a significant influence on developing students' sociolinguistic competence. Škopíková (2018) revealed that some instructors are not aware of CEFR and the need for teaching sociolinguistic aspects in the language classroom, hence they did not choose teaching resources to develop the competence.

Moreover, the authors of CEFR have stated that it is not to be referred to as a standalone document (Moser, 2015), alluding to the need for contextualization by Malaysian English language instructors in managing and aligning their current curriculum to the CEFR. In relation to this, the study by Nur Ashiquin, Abdul Halim, & Masdinah Alauyah (2021) investigated Malaysian ESL instructors' readiness to accept the implementation of CEFR, and it was revealed that the instructors were ready but had some concerns with the lack of teaching materials and facilities, as well as time constraint. This indicates the need for a study to further explore how Malaysian ESL instructors are managing their classrooms with the implementation of CEFR. This study focuses specifically on the role instructors play in the development of sociolinguistic competence, seeing it is one of the aspects of language which is especially given emphasis with the implementation of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018)

Even before the CEFR was implemented in Malaysia, English language teaching had been geared towards communicative goals, however the real situation in school was quite contradictory as most teachers and students were still exam oriented (Lee, Hazita, & Koo, 2010). They noted that more classroom time has been dedicated towards skills that are geared to be used in examinations, such as writing academic essays and answering reading comprehension questions. Grammar is also given more emphasis in English language classrooms as it is also evaluated in examinations. Sociolinguistic competence ends up being overlooked in the curriculum despite being an important aspect of language that allows language learners to communicate effectively and appropriately with others (Foley, 2019). Even if sociolinguistic competence were to be assessed in examinations in an effort to make it more relevant in the classroom, it would not provide these language learners with the same opportunities and social contexts as real life interaction would.

Malaysia is working towards aligning the curriculum of local education institutions to CEFR, but there is currently no localised guideline for the teaching and learning of English in the country (Foley, 2019). This can pose to be a challenge for instructors as they are not able to model their teaching off any existing examples. Moreover, the Ministry of Education (2015) mentions the lack of standardised English language curriculum for Malaysian universities, which also means that the learning outcomes for the courses that students have to take might not necessarily reflect their communicative competence. Instructors from different higher education institutions in Malaysia might emphasise different aspects of language learning and not even realise it. In order to reduce uncertainties and disparities in the development of students' sociolinguistic competence in the Malaysian ESL classroom, there needs to be a source of reference for instructors. Therefore, this study intends to provide a form of contextualised framework for reference to demonstrate how Malaysian English instructors can develop students' sociolinguistic competence, especially in Malaysian universities.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

The development of English as a second or foreign language learners' sociolinguistic competence is vital as it allows them to understand and apply the social rules that come with English language and also use the language appropriately in specific social context (Canale, 1983). Studies have shown how learners of second and foreign language who lack sociolinguistic competence have issues in expressing language which is appropriate within certain social contexts (Riddiford & Joe, 2010; Daskalovska et al., 2016; Phanithira & Melor, 2017).

With the emphasis on sociolinguistic competence in second and foreign language learning, teachers play an integral role in ensuring effective execution of any changes made to the education system (Bantiwini, 2009; Wang, 2013; Freeman, 2017). Several studies on sociolinguistic competence (Mede &



Dikilitas, 2015; Farooq, 2015; Koran, 2016; Škopíková, 2018; Martel and Ramirez, 2019) have shown that sociolinguistic competence is often not addressed sufficiently in the language classroom due to a number of internal and external reasons such as instructors' familiarity and confidence in their knowledge on sociolinguistic competence, time constraint with managing the syllabus, and practical difficulty of introducing it in the classroom, making the teaching of sociolinguistic competence a secondary concern despite being seen as important in the acquisition of a language.

It is vital to explore how instructors develop students' sociolinguistic competence in the classroom to understand why there is a lack of it, as not much research has been done in this area (Riddiford & Joe, 2010; Martel & Ramirez, 2019). Findings from several of the studies (Yu, 2006, 2008; Ghobadi & Fahim, 2009; van Compernelle & Williams, 2012b; Koran, 2016; Alsuhaibani, 2020; El-Dakhs & Amroun, 2021) that have been conducted on the development of students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom put more emphasis on the students' performance in written tests and also in interaction. In fact, these written tasks are seen as limited in exposing students to actual interactions which require real-time and ongoing communication, and instructors are encouraged to design interactive activities to provide students with the opportunity to be exposed to and use the English language appropriately (Youn & Chaipupae, 2022). Few studies have been done on the pedagogical aspect of developing students' sociolinguistic competence in the classroom (Riddiford & Joe, 2010; van Compernelle & Williams, 2012b).

Being an abstract concept, introducing aspects of sociolinguistic competence in the classroom may not be as clear and easily conveyed as grammatical competence. Instructors need to find ways to creatively include these aspects in the language classroom with confidence and certainty, and thus it is important to explore how this is or can be done. Aside from the instructors' role in the language classroom, the teaching materials and resources also need to support the students' development of sociolinguistic competence (Sugar, 2015; Škopíková, 2018; Shu, 2019). More studies need to be done, highlighting the use of materials and resources in the language classroom. Therefore, this alludes to a need for research to be conducted on the role instructors play in creating opportunities and utilising teaching resources to develop students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom.

Quantitative methods have been used to grasp instructors' perception on the teaching of communicative competence and sociolinguistic competence, with conclusions alluding to the need for deeper investigation through qualitative methods. Several of the quantitative studies (Farooq, 2015; Yufriзал, 2017; Nhem, 2019; Tootkaboni, 2019) on how instructors perceive the teaching of communicative competence, only briefly and superficially discussed the aspect of sociolinguistic competence and concluded by recommending further analysis to provide a comprehensive description of teaching practices that can be useful for instructors and students in the development of students' sociolinguistic competence.

As for quantitative studies which focus on sociolinguistic competence (Yu, 2008; Mede & Dikilitas, 2015), it was found that they attempted to delve deeper by conducting semi-structured interviews or classroom observations after having analysed data from the questionnaires. In the study by Mede and Dikilitas (2015), the instructors focused on students acquiring sociolinguistic competence outside the classroom through social networking and films, with a few of them mentioning integration of these media into their lessons. Even so, these classroom practices are not sufficiently elaborated, suggesting a need for further exploration on how instructors develop students' sociolinguistic competence in the classroom.

Meanwhile, qualitative studies done on learners' beliefs of sociolinguistic competence (Yang & Rehner, 2015), and learners' reflection upon learning about the sociolinguistic aspects of the target language (Beaulieu, Woll, French, & Duchemin, 2018) have led to the implication that learners find sociolinguistic knowledge to be useful in making meaning of the target language, but the language classroom provides insufficient opportunities to learn and utilise sociolinguistic knowledge. This indicates a need for research to be done on how instructors work towards the development of students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom.

Several other studies have also been done on sociolinguistic components in teaching resources such as textbooks and teaching aids, revealing that only some of the teaching resources actually put emphasis on sociolinguistic aspects, and even so instructors overlook them as they are not tested in examinations (Sugar, 2015; Koran, 2016; Škopíková, 2018). Since the Malaysian curriculum has been aligned with the CEFR, British textbooks and teaching resources have been implemented in schools, causing concerns as they are not localised and do not cater to Malaysian learners' schemata and prior knowledge (Nurul Farehah & Mohd Salehudin, 2017). These books might have sociolinguistic components, but they might still cause misunderstandings as students would not be able to relate to certain sociolinguistic contexts and norms especially with the lack of comparison to their first language culture and lack of guidance from instructors in the classroom.

As for tertiary level institutions, there is no standardisation in the curriculum and the materials being used across these institutions (Ministry of Education, 2015). This lack of standardization can be beneficial for institutions as they can design their curriculum and teaching resources to suit their students' needs. However, it does raise many questions and uncertainties regarding the development of students' communicative abilities, especially sociolinguistic competence, due to the lack of available localised resources. It is vital to highlight that sociolinguistic competence is emphasised in the CEFR as an important competence to be acquired for learners to be communicatively competent, and instructors are expected to develop this competence in the classroom, planning lessons with the existing resources. Instructors need to play their role in choosing and using teaching resources appropriately to develop their students' sociolinguistic competence. Therefore, this study is intended to provide a rich description of

how Malaysian ESL instructors are choosing and using teaching resources for the development of students' sociolinguistic competence in order to provide other instructors with examples that they can employ in their language classrooms.

Many of the studies done on the development of Malaysian students' sociolinguistic competence focus on speech acts (Marlyna & Salmiza, 2013; Phanithira & Melor, 2017; Marlyna & Nurul Syafawani, 2018). This could be because they are more measurable and observable as compared to other dimensions of sociolinguistic competence. Some local studies focus on speech acts because they feel that it helps in understanding the influence of Malaysian students' different backgrounds on their use of the language, which can help raise awareness and foster an understanding of the culture of others (Marlyna & Nurul Syafawani, 2018). More studies could be done on other aspects of sociolinguistic competence in Malaysia, as mastery of speech acts is not the sole important aspect in making a language learner become sociolinguistically or communicatively competent. Other aspects of sociolinguistic competence such as mastery of norms of stylistic appropriateness and also the use of language for establishing and maintaining social relations should be given more emphasis in research done on Malaysian students.

In the planning and discussion of this study, several theories and concepts have been referred to, namely the concept of communicative competence and sociolinguistic competence, as well as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Halliday's (1971) theory of context of situation. Vygotsky's theory, despite not initially being formed specifically about language learning, has constantly been used for language research, including studies related to the field of sociolinguistics. Halliday's theory, which focuses on the influence of socialisation on a learner's acquisition on the language, has been heavily cited and discussed in the field of sociolinguistics. Halliday and Vygotsky's views on learning are essentially similar and overlapping with their description on the facilitating role of the instructor and the environment. The connection between the theories, concepts, and this study are further described in the literature review (Chapter 2) as well as the discussion (Chapter 4).

A case study approach has been chosen specifically for this study to provide a rich description of how Malaysian ESL instructors create opportunities and use teaching resources for the development of students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. At the end of the study, a framework was introduced to represent the practices of these instructors with regards to the development of second language learners' sociolinguistic competence. This framework is significant in addressing the lack of a localised and contextualised guide for Malaysian ESL instructors, as the CEFR was purposely developed to be context-free (Byrnes, 2007). The rich description and framework can provide other ESL instructors with a helpful guideline in how they can also implement similar approaches and strategies which might be beneficial in developing their students' sociolinguistic competence.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

The following are the research objectives to be achieved with this study:

**RO 1:** To investigate how Malaysian ESL instructors create opportunities for developing first year university students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom.

**RO 2:** To explore how the instructors use teaching resources in developing first year students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom.

**RO 3:** To conceptualise ESL instructors' practices for developing sociolinguistic competence in the ESL classroom in a framework

### 1.4 Research Questions

The current study is an attempt to answer the following questions:

**RQ 1:** How do Malaysian ESL instructors create opportunities for developing first year university students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom?

**RQ 2:** How do the instructors use teaching resources in developing first year students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom?

**RQ 3:** How can the ESL instructors' practices in developing students' sociolinguistic competence in the classroom be conceptualised in a framework?

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

The present study is significant for its contribution to the larger field of study, instructors, students and stakeholders, contribution of new knowledge, as well as contribution to the field of research in Malaysia.

This study is vital, as there is currently a lack of studies discussing instructors' practices in developing students' sociolinguistic competence (Riddiford & Joe, 2010; van Compernelle & Williams, 2012b). With this study, a gap in literature can be addressed, not only providing benefits to ESL instructors through appropriate examples of the development of sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom, but also igniting future studies which can provide more generalisable and applicable findings. This study also illustrates and amplifies the connections between the concept of communicative competence and sociolinguistic competence in relation to Vygotsky (1978) and Halliday's (1971) theories which discuss the influence of the instructor and environment on language learning. This contributes to the body of knowledge, providing other



researchers and scholars with some theoretical basis to link to the development of students' sociolinguistic competence.

Though Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Halliday's theory of context of situation have been used by other studies in the field of sociolinguistics, this study highlights the pedagogical aspect of it, focusing on the role that the ESL instructors play. Moreover, this study emphasises on the choices that the instructors made in relation to their reflexivity and malleability, which might not be overtly seen as part of developing students' sociolinguistic competence, but these characteristics have helped them in developing the competence. One of the important conclusions of this study that is not commonly discussed in literature is that in developing students' sociolinguistic competence, ESL instructors need to consider students' needs, whilst practicing willingness to adapt the lesson to cater to those needs.

Malaysian instructors tend to put more focus on the requirements of the examinations, such as reading, writing and grammar, rather than the communicative aspect of the language (Pandian, 2006; Normazidah, Koo, & Hazita, 2012). This can have dire consequences on their future as demonstrated in a study where local employers report that graduates have difficulties with communicating in the second language at the workplace (Siti Martini & Ros Aizan, 2013). Researchers and educators alike agree that second language teaching and learning should involve more than just grammatical competence, rather it should also encompass an awareness and understanding of using appropriate language in different contexts (Yang & Rehner, 2015). Developing students' sociolinguistic competence would allow them to better engage with the language, and it would make language learning more meaningful for them (Muniandy, Nair, Krishnan @ Shanmugam, Irma, & Norashikin, 2010). In light of the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia and as more emphasis is being put on sociolinguistic competence in the classroom, it is vital to see how instructors are addressing sociolinguistic competence.

The findings of this study provide a localised and contextualised guide for the development of Malaysian students' sociolinguistic competence. Liu (2008) mentioned that language learners have a high tendency of transferring the sociocultural patterns of their native language into English, rarely understanding what is expected of them in the target language. Utterances that might be appropriate in their native language or culture could cause misunderstandings and conflict when used in the English language or with people who are unfamiliar with the interlocutor's background and culture (Al-Sallal & Ahmed, 2022). Boonsuk and Ambele (2019) found that learners from different cultures and backgrounds have different ways of expressing the same speech acts, and hence it is important to teach sociolinguistic competence within that specific context. This alludes to the need for a guide that caters to the local culture of the native language in Malaysia. In the findings from this study, it was found that the ESL instructors provided localised and contextualised examples of sociolinguistically appropriate language that second language learners can relate to through class activities in order for the learners to understand the

differences between the cultures of their first and second language, and acquire sociolinguistic awareness in the second language.

The last research question in this study aims to come up with a framework to represent the practices of English language instructors in Malaysian universities in developing students' sociolinguistic competence. In order to identify these ESL instructors' practices, the current study refers to previous literature that discusses the development of sociolinguistic competence in the ESL or EFL classroom as well as Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Halliday's (1971) theory of context which put emphasis on the need for interaction, cultural awareness and scaffolding for the purpose of learning, specifically acquiring a second language. Currently, no localised framework has been developed for Malaysian instructors, especially in navigating the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for the development of students' sociolinguistic competence (Foley, 2019). This study might not be able to contribute a complete localised version of the CEFR, but it provides Malaysian instructors with a guide of ESL instructors' practices that can be implemented in the English language classroom when developing students' sociolinguistic competence. In fact, some instructors have expressed their concern at a personal and knowledge level where they face some uncertainties and issues with CEFR, especially in teaching the competencies due to the lack of an overall guideline (Komorowska, 2004; Lo, 2018). Providing a guide of the ESL instructors' practices for the development of students' sociolinguistic competence contributes pedagogical knowledge to the field of communicative language teaching.

Many researchers and educators focus on accuracy and fluency, but not much emphasis has been placed on appropriacy and communicative skills (Savignon, 2018). Limited studies have been done on second and foreign language learners' acquisition of sociolinguistic competence (Martel & Ramirez, 2019). Moreover, a number of the studies done in this area focus more on the second language learners' production of the language rather than the pedagogical aspect in the development of students' sociolinguistic competence (Riddiford & Joe, 2010; van Compernelle & Williams, 2012b). Therefore, this study investigated how instructors develop students' sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom, especially in the Malaysian context. This is vital, as only few previous studies have discussed the implication of teaching sociolinguistic competence in Malaysia, and most of them only address speech acts (Marlyna & Salmiza, 2013; Phanithira & Melor, 2017; Marlyna & Nurul Syafawani, 2018). It is imperative for explore not only how instructors approach the teaching of speech acts, but also other aspects of sociolinguistic competence in the Malaysian English language classroom, such as norms of stylistic appropriateness and use of language to maintain social relations.

Other than the ways in which instructors create opportunities for the development of sociolinguistic competence in the classroom, it is also vital that attention is given to the teaching materials and resources that are used in the lesson. The issue with many of the current textbooks is that they lack the

authenticity of real conversations as they prepare students for solely grammatical competence (Shu, 2019). Even when the teaching resources do consist of communicative elements, there is still a need to study the balance between teacher instruction and content from the resources (Škopíková, 2018). It is important to investigate how instructors utilise these communicative teaching resources in the classroom to develop students' sociolinguistic competence. More so, with the ongoing process of alignment of local curriculum to the CEFR, Malaysian instructors are required to use British textbooks and resources until more local materials can be produced (Ministry of Education, 2015). With the limited number of localised resources available, this study explored how Malaysian instructors are managing their classroom resources and using them in the English language classroom for the development of students' sociolinguistic competence.

### **1.6 Scope and Limitations of Study**

The study was conducted with English language instructors in a Malaysian university who are teaching first year students. The English language instructors are referred to as instructors in this study regardless of their official post as language instructor or lecturer to ease description of the study.

The study focuses on instructors who teach first year students, as these students are only beginning to experience university life. These students are usually from pre-university programmes such as Form 6, matriculation, foundation and diploma programmes. Other than diploma students, most of them would not have had complete exposure to campus environment. Students who are transitioning to university tend to face issues with adjusting to the physical and social climate, especially in terms of teaching and learning (Sheard, Lowe, Nicholson, & Ceddia, 2003). It is also important to note that most of these students have had at least 11 years of learning the English language in school and any other form of language learning prior to starting their degree, meaning that they would have the appropriate experience in learning the language and understanding what they would expect from learning a language. Therefore, this study did not involve students who are not in the first year, nor instructors who are not involved with first year undergraduate classes.

The university chosen for this study uses both English and Malay as the medium for communication, while English is used as the main medium for instruction to cater to the internationalisation of higher education institutions in the country. Generally, instructors and students are expected to use English inside the classroom for class interaction and also graded assessments. The English language instructors have several years of teaching experience and have at least a Bachelor's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) or any related English language major. As for the students, being first year university students, they are expected to have taken the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), or any equivalent test, such as International English

Language Testing System (IELTS). They are assigned the English language courses based on their results for this test. Further description of the students can be found in the Research Context section (Chapter 4).

The study employs a qualitative research design, but this could also be considered a limitation as it was a case study with a limited number of participants aimed towards providing a rich description. The choice of a qualitative study proved to be beneficial in illustrating not only the ESL instructors' classroom practices, but also in discussing the instructors' beliefs and intentions. Three ESL instructors were involved in this study, with the researcher focusing on only one of each instructors' classes. This provided the researcher with the opportunity to provide a thick description and understand the participants better, having watched three recordings of each instructor's classes and interviewed them five times in discussing their pedagogical choices. In future research, the study could be conducted in a bigger scale, perhaps quantitatively, in order to provide generalisability and establish patterns of practices that might exist across different settings and contexts, an angle that this study was not able to pursue, being a case study with a limited number of participants.

Besides that, the current study intends to provide insight to Malaysian ESL instructors in the form a framework which features the ESL instructors' practices in developing students' sociolinguistic competence as employed by English language instructors in the Malaysian classroom based on the existing curriculum. These practices encompass how instructors create opportunities in the language classroom and how they implement teaching resources for the development of students' sociolinguistic competence.

The inevitable limitation of this study is that the data collection was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, causing all classes to be conducted online via videoconferencing software. This was not a deterrent in the teaching and learning of communicative skills in the course involved in this study, as ESL instructors were still able to develop students' sociolinguistic competence. Some of the findings gained from this study could also be applied in traditional physical language classrooms, and also any online classes that might be conducted in the future for any purposes such as distance learning.

## **1.7 Definition of Terms**

The terms which are used and discussed extensively in this study include communicative competence and sociolinguistic competence. Therefore, the definition of these terms according to other scholars and the definition specifically for the purpose of this study will be provided in the sections below.



### **1.7.1 Communicative competence**

The idea of communicative competence began with Hymes (1972) who claimed that the functional aspect of language plays a role as important as the rules of language. This prompted the models of communicative competence, including the one by Canale and Swain (1980), later extended by Canale (1983), who named the four components of communicative competence as grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence can be defined as the knowledge to use the rules of language, discourse competence refers to the ability to make meaningful utterances to communicate with others, sociolinguistic competence meaning the ability to use language appropriately according to context, and strategic competence means being able to use the appropriate strategies to compensate for any problems during the interaction. Bachman (1990) proposed a framework for communicative language ability, comprising of three components, language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms. Language competence is divided into organisational competence and pragmatic competence. There are other prominent scholars on communicative competence (Savignon, 1983; Tarone & Yule, 1989; Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell, 1995), but these frameworks are mainly similar to the models by Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983) and Bachman (1990).

Brown (2007) states that Canale's framework is the reference for almost all discussions on second language learning. This could be due to the concise and comprehensive organisation of components under communicative competence. A number of scholars such as Tarone and Yule (1989) and Savignon (1983) further formed their conceptions on communicative competence in line with Canale's framework. Canale's framework provides a simple and clear understanding of communicative competence which can help in guiding the direction of this study. This study refers to Hymes' definition of communicative competence and Canale's conceptualisation of the framework.

### **1.7.2 Sociolinguistic competence**

Holmes and Brown (1976) define sociolinguistic competence as being aware of the interference of sociolinguistic norms of the first language, being able to make social and referential meaning of interactions and being proactive in developing an exchange. Sociolinguistic competence can also be defined as understanding sociocultural norms of a language and discourse (Muniandy, Nair, Krishnan @ Shanmugam, Irma, & Norashikin, 2010).

This study uses Tarone and Yule's (1989) definition of sociolinguistic competence, which is the mastery of "speech act conventions, norms of stylistic appropriateness, and the uses of language to establish and maintain social relationships" (p. 88). Though speech acts may have obvious functions, sociolinguistic competence would allow a language learner to be aware of and

express the appropriate utterances required based on the intention of the speech act (Brown, 2007). Norms of stylistic appropriateness covers the style and register that would be suitable in different social contexts depending on variables such as roles of the participants and purpose of the interaction (Brown, 2007; Wardhaugh, 2010). Language learners with sociolinguistic competence would also be able to use language to establish and maintain social relationships through initiating, maintaining and ending interactions appropriately without causing misunderstandings (Wardhaugh, 2010).

The features of sociolinguistic competence identified by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) coincide with those of which are discussed by Tarone and Yule (1989). The former (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983) identify appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of form to be dimensions of sociolinguistic competence. The appropriateness of meaning refers to the appropriateness of communicative functions, which can be matched to the mastery of speech act conventions as categorised by Tarone and Yule (1989). As for the appropriateness of form, it includes the verbal and nonverbal expressions to reflect the meaning to be conveyed, which is comparable to the mastery of norms of stylistic appropriateness and the uses of language to establish and maintain social relationships as described by Tarone and Yule (1989).

### **1.7.3 English as a Second Language (ESL)**

The Roadmap (2015) highlights English as a second language in Malaysia, in discussing the role of English in the country throughout the years, and further emphasising on the importance of learning English, especially with globalisation and internationalisation. English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools, and many higher education institutions in the country use English as the medium for instruction.

Seeing as the scope of the study only includes Malaysian instructors and students in the analysis of the findings of this study, the instructors and Malaysian students involved in this study are referred to as ESL instructors and ESL learners.

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