

A Conceptual Model of English Language Learning Engagement among Orang Asli Students

^{*1,2}Zuriani Yaacob, ¹Abdul Mutalib Embong, ³Abd Hakim Mohad

¹Centre for Fundamental and Continuing Education (PPAL), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, 21030 Kuala Nerus, Terengganu,

²Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (APB), Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pahang Kampus Raub, 27600 Raub, Pahang,

³Pusat Pengajian Teras (PPT), Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a conceptual model of English language learning engagement among Orang Asli students in Pahang, Malaysia. Grounded in Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory, the proposed model explains the relationships among parental involvement, teacher support, motivation, attitude and English language learning engagement. Drawing on relevant literature and existing empirical findings, the model explains how socio-educational factors influence learners' psychological orientation and engagement in learning English. Motivation and attitude are conceptualised as the main psychological mechanisms through which parental involvement and teacher support influence learners' engagement in English language learning. The proposed model suggests that parental encouragement and teacher support are important socio-educational factors that foster learners' motivation and positive attitudes and hence increase their behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement in English language learning. The proposed model contributes to a better understanding of the language learning processes of marginalised indigenous learners and highlights the need for culturally responsive pedagogical practices. The paper concludes by discussing the theoretical and pedagogical implications of the proposed model and identifying directions for future empirical research on English language learning among Orang Asli students.

Keywords: culturally responsive; English language learning; Orang Asli; psychological orientation; Socio-Educational Theory

INTRODUCTION

In this globalised world, speaking English has become an essential skill, providing a bridge for communication, education, employment and interaction between cultures. English is one of the core subjects in Malaysia and is taught at all levels of education to prepare students for global participation. Also, the language has become more prevalent and is used extensively in formal and informal context. However, the gap in English language proficiency is still visible, especially among the Orang Asli students who are confronted with serious difficulties in learning the language. Many Orang Asli students demonstrate lower levels of English proficiency and reduced engagement in that second language learning compared to their mainstream peers which highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence their English learning engagement (Zhao et al., 2024).

Although English is formally included in the national curriculum, many Orang Asli students continue to experience difficulties engaging with the language due to sociocultural, educational, and motivational barriers. Despite approximately RM50 billions being allocated to schools, these marginalized learners continue to show less encouraging academic progress and achievement compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia (Mohd Adnan et al., 2021). This concern is further worsened by serious scenario of secondary school dropout trend among Orang Asli students. In 2018, only 2,840 pupils from a total of 3,771 pupils continued their secondary education,

representing 25% dropout rate. Although in 2019, the secondary school dropout rate reduced to 23%, previous research has reported that only about 2% of Orang Asli students pursued their education to tertiary level (Malaysia Open Data Portal, 2021; Othman, 2022).

Previous research has demonstrated that reduced learning engagement of these students is due to limited exposure to English, lack of proper academic support systems and disconnection with the culture. Affective factors such as motivation and attitude, have a significant effect on language learning (Liyana, 2022; Abdullah & Primus, 2021; Idrus et al., 2023; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). In this marginalised context, external factors such as parental involvement and teacher support are also crucial in affecting learners' psychological readiness to engage with English. These external influences interact with internal learner variables particularly motivation and attitude, forming a complex ecosystem that influence learners' engagement and language learning outcomes (Wei, 2022; Dong & Chow, 2022). There is an increasing body of evidence on these individual factors but there is limited research that has conceptualised parental involvement, teacher support, motivation, attitude and engagement into a coherent framework, particularly in relation to indigenous learners.

Conceptual papers play an important role in advancing theory by developing, refining or extending conceptual relationships and providing a foundation for future empirical research (Jaakkola, 2020). Accordingly, this paper proposes a conceptual model based on Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory to explain the relationships among parental involvement, teacher support, motivation, attitude and English language learning engagement among Orang Asli students. Therefore, the proposed framework is intended to provide a theoretical foundation for future empirical validation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Orang Asli and English Language Learning Context

The Orang Asli are the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, consisting of several sub-ethnic groups with unique cultural, linguistic and socio-economic traits. Despite continued efforts by the Malaysian government to improve access and equity through educational initiatives, Orang Asli students continue to underperform academically in learning English when compared to mainstream student populations. Several interconnected factors including socioeconomic constraints, limited resources, insufficient exposure to English, and cultural differences have been identified as barriers that influence effective participation and engagement in English language learning among Orang Asli students (Idrus et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2024). Furthermore, the study by Fazil et al. (2023) supports the idea that the Orang Asli students tend to perceive English as a second or third language, which adds to the difficulty in the process of language acquisition due to the lack of opportunities to practise the language outside the classroom setting. The challenges indicate more attention should be paid to the learning environment and the psychological factors that affect learners' engagement in order to improve the English learning outcomes of Orang Asli students.

Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory

One of the most notable theoretical frameworks in second language acquisition is Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory (1985, 2010). The theory posits that successful language learning is shaped not only by learners' cognitive abilities but also by social and educational factors that increase their positive attitudes and motivation toward the target language. Gardner identifies two motivational orientations which are, (i) integrative motivation which motivates language learners to adapt and engage with the target language group or its native speakers, and (ii) instrumental motivation which is a type of engagement that encourages language learners towards practical goals such as academic or professional advancement.

According to Gardner's socio-educational model, learners' motivation is influenced by attitudes toward the learning situation, integrativeness and instrumentality. Among these, attitudes toward the learning situation include learners' perceptions of teachers, classroom experiences, instructional practices and the educational environment. The model suggests that supportive learning environments foster positive attitudes and increased motivation which contribute to successful language learning. Although learning engagement is not explicitly incorporated into Gardner's original model, recent educational research has demonstrated that learners with

higher motivation and more positive attitudes are more likely to display behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement in classroom learning (Wei, 2022). Therefore, Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory provides an appropriate foundation for explaining how environmental influences may indirectly enhance English language learning engagement through learners' motivation and attitudes. Drawing on Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory, the present study conceptualizes teacher support and parental involvement as external environmental factors that influence learners' motivation and attitudes, which subsequently promote English language learning engagement among Orang Asli students.

External and Internal Factors Influencing English Language Learning

Numerous studies have consistently proved that the success of learning a second language is influenced by internal and external factors of learners. Teacher support and parental involvement are external factors that have significant effects on the motivation and attitudes of the learners. Teacher support, through effective instructional practices, constructive feedback, encouragement and positive teacher-student relationships, promotes learners' confidence and willingness to participate actively in English language learning. Likewise, parental involvement provides emotional, academic and motivational support that reinforces positive learning behaviours and encourages learners to value English as an important subject (Yang et al., 2022; Alias et al., 2024).

In addition to these environmental influences, learners' motivation and attitudes have consistently been recognised as important affective determinants of second language acquisition. Motivated learners are more likely to invest sustained effort, persist when encountering learning difficulties and actively participate in classroom activities. Similarly, positive attitudes toward English encourage greater interest, confidence and willingness to communicate, resulting in more meaningful learning experiences. Together, these affective factors contribute to higher levels of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement which collectively represent learners' active involvement in the language learning process and are widely recognised as key dimensions of learning engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Bond et al., 2020). Behavioural engagement refers to learners' participation and effort in learning activities, emotional engagement reflects learners' affective reactions and sense of belonging toward learning, whereas cognitive engagement involves learners' investment in deep learning and self-regulated learning strategies (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Despite increasing evidence supporting the importance of teacher support, parental involvement, motivation, attitude and learning engagement, previous studies have largely examined these variables independently or within different educational contexts. Limited attention has been given to understanding how these constructs interact within a single theoretical framework particularly among Orang Asli students. Therefore, there remains a need for a conceptual model that integrates these external and internal factors to provide a more comprehensive explanation of English language learning engagement among Orang Asli students.

Proposed Conceptual Model

This paper proposes a conceptual model based on Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory. Teacher support and parental involvement are external socio-educational factors that influence the motivation and attitude of the Orang Asli students to learn the English language. Motivation and attitude are considered to be the primary psychological mechanisms by which external support systems enhance learners' engagement in English language learning. In the present conceptual model, English language learning engagement is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. Although learning engagement is not explicitly included in Gardner's original socio-educational model, the proposed conceptual model extends the theory by incorporating engagement as the ultimate learning outcome. This extension reflects contemporary perspectives that emphasize learners' active participation in the learning process as an important indicator of successful second language acquisition.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual model of the study. The model suggests that teacher support and parental involvement positively influence learners' motivation and attitudes, which subsequently promote English language learning engagement among Orang Asli students. By integrating these external and internal factors within a single theoretical framework, the model offers a comprehensive explanation of how socio-educational influences contribute to learners' engagement in English language learning. Rather than empirically

validating the proposed relationships, the model provides a theoretical basis for future hypothesis development and empirical testing within Orang Asli educational contexts.

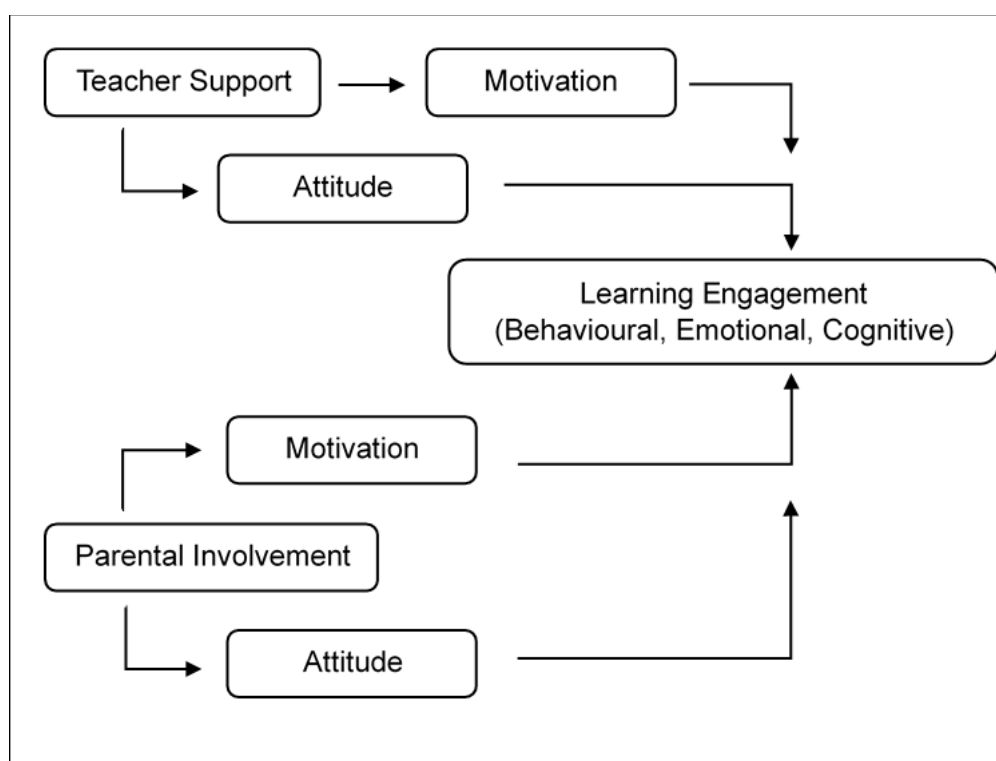


Figure 1 Proposed conceptual model of English language learning engagement among Orang Asli students

DISCUSSION

The Proposed Conceptual Model and Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory

As a conceptual contribution, the proposed conceptual model provides existing theoretical and empirical literature as a comprehensive explanation of how external socio-educational factors contribute to English language learning engagement among Orang Asli students. The model, grounded in Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory, emphasises that learners' motivation and attitudes are not isolated but are influenced by their social and academic backgrounds. In the present model, teacher support and parental involvement are conceptualized as two key external influences that foster learners' motivation and positive attitudes toward English language learning. These psychological factors subsequently promote learners' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement in learning English. This proposition is consistent with Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory, which emphasizes that social and educational environments shape learners' motivation and attitudes toward second language learning (Gardner, 1985, 2010). Furthermore, recent studies have similarly suggested that supportive learning environments promote learners' engagement through positive psychological characteristics, including motivation and attitudes (Wei, 2022; Dong & Chow, 2022).

Teacher Support as a Socio-Educational Factor in English Language Learning

Teacher support is proposed as a significant socio-educational factor because teachers play a central role in creating supportive classroom environments that encourage active participation and language use. Through effective instructional practices, constructive feedback, encouragement, and positive teacher-student relationships, teachers can strengthen learners' confidence, sustain their motivation, and cultivate favourable attitudes toward English. The findings are consistent with previous studies that have found that positive instructional interactions, which are facilitated by teacher support, promote learners' motivation, academic confidence and classroom engagement (Yang et al., 2022; Khajavy et al., 2021). This role is particularly important for Orang Asli learners who often have limited opportunities to practise English outside the classroom and therefore depend heavily on classroom experiences as their main source of exposure to the language.

Therefore, the application of supportive teaching practices is expected to improve learners' willingness to participate actively in the acquisition of the English language.

Parental Involvement as a Socio-Educational Factor in English Language Learning

Parental involvement represents another important socio-educational factor in the proposed framework. Parents who provide emotional support, monitor their children's educational development and value education can positively influence learners' motivation and attitudes toward learning English. Previous research has suggested positively influence learners' motivation and attitudes toward learning, and educational engagement, especially when parents offer emotional support and communicate positive educational expectations (Alias et al., 2024; Fan & Chen, 2001). While many Orang Asli families face socio-economic constraints that may prevent them from providing direct academic assistance, positive parental involvement is an important psychological support to encourage the learners to continue their studies. Hence, enhancement of home-school collaborations and encouragement for meaningful parental involvement might contribute to better participation of Orang Asli students in the English language learning process.

Motivation and Attitude as Psychological Mechanisms for Learning Engagement

The proposed model identifies motivation and attitude as the main psychological mechanisms that effectively transform external support into effective learning engagement. Motivated learners are more willing to put in effort, persist through difficulties and participate in classroom activities, whereas positive attitudes towards English encourage learners to appreciate the worth of the language and improve communicative confidence. The results are consistent with past research indicating that motivation and attitudes are among the most important predictors of successful second language acquisition and continued engagement in the classroom (Gardner, 2010; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Similarly, positive attitudes towards English promote learners' acknowledgement of the value of the language, foster their self-confidence in communication and stimulate emotional involvement in the learning process. Together, these affective factors should foster behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement, the three commonly accepted dimensions of student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Bond et al., 2020).

Extending Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory Through Learning Engagement

The current conceptual model is also theoretically based on Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory. Learner engagement has recently been highlighted as a vital educational outcome in addition to the traditional measures of language achievement, indicating the active involvement of learners in the learning process (Bond et al., 2020; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Although Gardner's original model considers the effects of social and educational contexts on learners' motivation and attitudes, it does not directly include learning engagement as one of the learning outcomes. The proposed model includes engagement, a contemporary version of Gardner's theory that aligns with contemporary concepts of active learning and student involvement. The model successfully fills a significant research gap by combining teacher support, parental involvement, motivation, attitude and engagement in one framework for the Orang Asli context.

Educational and Pedagogical Implications

The proposed model has important implications for English language education for Orang Asli students. The model indicates that an increase in the engagement of the learners needs collaboration from school systems and families. Educators should embrace the culturally responsive teaching strategies to encourage participation, build students' confidence and recognise the cultural background of Orang Asli students. These pedagogical practices promote teachers' culturally responsive instructional approaches, students' sense of belonging, and classroom engagement, particularly among culturally diverse students (Comstock et al., 2023; Capper, 2022). At the same time, schools need to build better partnerships with parents, encouraging them to be more involved in their children's education, and providing opportunities for meaningful home-school collaboration. Such initiatives can enhance learning experiences and eventually lead to improved English language outcomes for Orang Asli students.

Finally, the proposed conceptual model provides a foundation for future empirical research. Future studies may validate the proposed relationships using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) or Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with Orang Asli students from different sub-ethnic groups and geographical locations. In addition, future studies may incorporate other contextual variables such as digital access, indigenous language use, community participation and school support systems to provide a more comprehensive understanding of English language learning engagement among Orang Asli students. Empirical validation of the model would contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which environmental and psychological factors influence English language learning engagement among indigenous learners in Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

This paper proposed a conceptual model of English language learning engagement among Orang Asli students in Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory that comprises teacher support, parental involvement, motivation, attitude and learning engagement. The proposed model addresses a significant gap in the literature by providing a detailed account of how external socio-educational factors impact the psychological characteristics of learners and, consequently, their engagement in the learning of the English language. The model offers a contemporary view of second language learning for indigenous learners by extending the original theory of Gardner to include learning engagement as the ultimate educational outcome.

The conceptual model that is proposed makes a practical and theoretical contribution. It theoretically extends the application of Gardner's Socio-Educational Theory by emphasising the complementary roles of teacher support and parental involvement in shaping learners' motivation and attitudes and by including learning engagement as an important outcome. Practically, the model offers useful insights for educators, schools, and policymakers in developing culturally responsive strategies to improve classroom support and home-school collaboration to enhance English language learning among Orang Asli students.

As this paper is conceptual in nature, the proposed model has not yet been empirically validated. Rather than testing hypotheses, the study aims to establish a theoretically grounded framework that may guide future empirical research. Future studies are encouraged to validate the proposed relationships using quantitative or mixed-method approaches including Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) or Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Additionally, the findings of this research are anticipated to contribute to the development of more effective educational interventions for indigenous learners in Malaysia and would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that promote engagement in English language learning.

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