

Investing in Learning English: A Case of Three Saudi Students in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the learning journey of three Saudi Arabian students, two boys and a girl, who were selected to be part of the King Abdullah Scholarships Programme (KASP) which was launched in 2005 in Saudi Arabia. They arrived in Singapore from Saudi Arabia in the middle of 2008 to learn English so that they could take either the TOEFL iBT or the IELTS examinations and obtain the requisite grades for admission into an undergraduate or postgraduate degree programme at one of the publicly-funded universities in Singapore. For most of the students, it was their first visit to Singapore. As such the climate, environment, multi-ethnic, cultural and religious setting, and other facets of life were completely new to them. Set in this context, the study reported in this paper aimed to investigate the strategies employed by the three students in managing their fears and apprehensions in learning and using English. More importantly, the study examined the ways in which the three students, who were well aware of the high stakes involved in achieving their goal in Singapore, consciously re-examined their “social identities” in this new context and adapted them in order to “invest” in the learning of the target language.

KEYWORDS: *Learner investment; Social identity; Learner strategies*

The King Abdullah Scholarships Programme (KASP) which was launched in 2005 in Saudi Arabia, aims to develop Saudi Arabia’s human resource needs in a wide range of areas including engineering, accounting, finance, medicine, nursing, and marketing (Ministry of Higher Education, Saudi Arabia, 1996). To this end, students from Saudi Arabia are selected to study in Saudi Arabian or foreign universities and those who wish to study overseas, particularly in countries where the official language is English, like Singapore, are required to achieve a pre-determined level of proficiency in English before they are admitted to a local university. Depending on the courses and whether students are attending Singapore universities at undergraduate or graduate level, the English language pre-requisite for foreign students varies, either an IELTS score of 6 to 7.5 or a TOEFL iBT score of 70 to 85. The Saudi students in this study arrived in Singapore with a clear understanding of these English language requirements for gaining entry into undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes at one of the three publicly-funded universities in Singapore.

This paper reports on the learning paths of three Saudi Arabian students, two boys and a girl who arrived in Singapore on the KASP in the middle of 2008 to learn English over a period of 15 weeks. Their objective was to learn English, take either the TOEFL iBT or the IELTS examinations and obtain the requisite grades for admission into either an undergraduate or a postgraduate degree programme at one of these universities. The study reported in this paper aimed to investigate the strategies employed by these three students in managing their fears and apprehensions in a totally alien society and “investing” in learning English (Peirce, 1995) driven by the high stakes of their main objective in Singapore.

Key concepts

Peirce (1995) and Norton (2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2006) introduced the term *investment* in language learning to better capture and express the complex experiences of learners of target languages as they make meaning of their “changing social world” through the new languages (Peirce, p. 17). Her main argument was that second language acquisition theorists had thus far only provided simplistic explanations of learners’ motivation and not given adequate attention to the multifaceted contexts within which learners operated that, in turn influenced their levels of motivation and confidence in learning the target language. Peirce’s concept of *investment* departs, as such, from the previously established concepts of *instrumental* and *integrative* motivation by Gardner and Lambert (1972) and Gardner (1985) by shifting the focus from observing learners as they learn a target language either for practical reasons that would enable them to progress in life or assimilate into the culture of that language, to scrutinizing the learners’ myriad reasons for learning the target language and the attendant apprehensions that either motivate or hinder their progress. McKay and Wong (1996), drawing on the concept of learner investment, argued that learners’ expectations and expressed aspirations must be considered as the “fabric” of their lives and as being key in “determining their investment in learning the target language” (p. 603). Their study was based on four Mandarin-speaking Grade 7 and 8 students in an English language programme in a California school. Potowski (2004), investigating a group of students in a Spanish/English immersion programme in the United States, argues that regardless of how well a language programme is structured and implemented, there is no certainty of proficiency development without a match between the learners’ personal investment in the language and the programme goals.

Peirce (1995) and Norton (2001) assert that while learning the target language, learners are continually assessing, reassessing, and changing their perceptions of who they are and how they fit in, or connect with the “social world” (Peirce, p. 17). The interactions between an immigrant worker who was learning English in the 1990s in Canada and an English-speaking Canadian threw light on what goes on within the language learner apart from the influence of the language learning context. The study exposed a deeper and more realistic understanding of a learner’s willingness or reluctance to interact in English with other English language speakers. Peirce attributed this willingness or reluctance of the learner

to communicate in the target language to the latter's "social identity" and suggests that this identity must be viewed with respect to the unequal power vested in people in different roles in a society (p. 13). Additionally, Peirce purports that when a learner "invests" in the target language, she is also "investing" in her own "social identity" which is continually changing during the period of learning the target language (p. 18). Other proponents of learner investment in ESL/EFL contexts like Skilton-Sylvester (2002), who draws on her study of four Cambodian women in ESL classes in the United States, suggest that a learner's identities both at home and at work have to be examined closely to accurately comment on his or her investment in his or her English language programmes.

One of the more comprehensive definitions of social identity by Tajfel (1981) explains it as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 255). Tajfel's definition throws light on possible explanations as to why learners of a new language may not, in some circumstances, be *socially distant*—a term popularised by Schumann (1976), from a target language community but yet feel unmotivated to learn or speak it. Schumann's (1976) theory of "social distance", claims that the dominance of the target language culture over the learner's culture, politically, culturally and economically, affects the learner's level of motivation positively or negatively depending on the similarities or dissimilarities between the two cultures and whether one is dominant compared to the other. Yet this only examines learner motivation levels in terms of external factors and leaves one wondering why in some cases even when the "social distance" is low between the learner's and the target language culture, the learner is still unmotivated, diffident or simply hesitant to communicate in the target language. In Peirce's seminal article on "investment" in learning a target language, although her subject clearly did not feel she was accepted as part of the adoptive North American society, she argues that the concept of social distance did not adequately explain the relationship between "her subject" and a fellow Canadian English-speaking worker, because it did not capture the internal struggle that the former experienced particularly in relation to the inequities in power vested in immigrant workers like herself and other local workers in her place of work (Peirce, p. 16).

Bourdieu (1977) attributes *symbolic power* to a person's role or identity in society which in turn gives him the right to speak or make certain utterances in particular contexts. This means that an individual's symbolic power is, in fact, a manifestation of one's social identity in a given context. Furthermore since this symbolic power gives the speaker the privilege to mould and develop ideas and world views in others, the true worth of that speech or the content of it is closely tied to the value of that person's social identity (p. 652). On the other hand, Turner's (1982) suggestion that "social identity may on occasion function nearly to the exclusion of personal identity, i.e., that at times our salient self-images may be based solely or primarily on our group memberships" (p. 19), implies that in some situations learners may feel the need to behave in a way that creates opportunities for them to fit in with the more dominant social group. In such instances, learners would be conscious of the fact that they are assuming a slightly

different identity that serves a specific need.

Angélic-Carter (1997), expands upon Peirce's findings and argues that the right to speak in individual learners of the target language or in her words, the acquisition of the "skeptron" to speak shifts not only from subject to subject but also "within one encounter" (p. 268). Carter (1997) also purports that the social identity of the individual learner changes based on the "power relations of the wider social context" (p. 268). It is possible, then, that in some situations, this change arises from a desire to accumulate "cultural capital (i.e., knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications)" and "symbolic capital (i.e., prestige or honour)." Bourdieu (1991) further suggests that these various "capitals" may lead to the accumulation of other "capitals", for example, "certain educational qualifications can be cashed in for lucrative jobs" (p. 14).

Background

The original group in this study comprised one male student, Mohamet, who had a conditional offer for an Accountancy degree programme from one of the three publicly funded universities in Singapore, and three other female students, Firdaus, Reme, and Ula, all of whom aspired to embark on postgraduate degree programmes in Business or Science at the National University of Singapore. The second male student, Ahmet, who joined the class mid way through the course was from another institution in Singapore where he had been studying English for a year. Like Mohamet, Ahmet had a conditional offer from the Faculty of Engineering of a publicly-funded local university. All participants were given pseudonyms.

The five students were from different cities in Saudi Arabia, ranging from Riyadh, the capital and largest city in Saudi Arabia to smaller towns in the suburbs of Jeddah and Mecca. Their previous exposure to the English language was also varied from having studied the language two to three times a week as a single subject in school for approximately an hour each time for three to six years for the majority, while Mohamet went beyond the exposure in school and attended a further intensive English course at a private American language school. Ahmet was a little more confident in speaking the language because as stated earlier, he had already spent a year learning English in another institution in Singapore before he joined this group. Nonetheless, the students' expectations of what they should achieve at the end of the 15-week intensive English course in Singapore were the same—to obtain either a TOEFL iBT score of 80–85 or an IELTS score of 6.5. Four of the five students chose to take the TOEFL iBT examination while Ahmet, who had already taken the IELTS twice and scored 5.5 and 6 on those attempts, decided to continue on that path.

It is important to state here that none of the original four students who were on the course from the beginning spoke a single sentence in English until three weeks into the course. At the end of the second week they began to utter single words and by the end of the third week they spoke in fragmented sentences. They could all understand basic instructions from the teacher and they nodded

in response to signal their comprehension. Even Mohamet, the student who had completed an additional English proficiency course at a private American college in his hometown would only utter single words which were often inaudible or incoherent, or nod to show that he understood. The other three, Firdaus, Reme and Ula, however, were more inhibited and did not utter a single word until after three weeks. Much later, when interviewed, Firdaus explained that she had actually learnt English for six years from the time she was 13 beginning with the English alphabet. However, although the lessons had been conducted three times a week for 45 minutes per session, there had been "no speaking in English". Furthermore, the only exposure she had had to real language use "in Saudi" was when she watched "TV movies, without translation". From what Firdaus said, there appeared to have been minimal classroom interaction in English with the teacher and classmates and none at all outside of the classroom.

With the exception of Ula, who had previously visited Singapore with her family on shopping trips, this was the students' first visit to Singapore. Clearly, they were experiencing a sense of disorientation not just from being in a country where Arabic speakers were few and far between but also from having to adjust to unfamiliar people, sights, attire, food as well as social and cultural practices. As the Saudi students' social and cultural practices were influenced to a large extent by their religion, they were uncomfortable with any kind of physical contact, including shaking hands to greet others. Such contact was especially unacceptable for the girls if the other person was male. Furthermore, the girls, all of whom wore scarves to cover their hair, were accustomed to being accompanied by a male family member wherever they went in Saudi Arabia. In Singapore, however, although a male family member had accompanied each one of them so that they could continue with the same practice here, all three girls found that the practice was inconvenient to continue with. The reason was that the male family member would have to wait for them outside the classroom while they attended lessons for five to six hours every day. Thus after the first few weeks, the girls decided to commute, unaccompanied, by public transport, and this meant that they had to ask for directions or fare details from fellow commuters or bus drivers who could be male. For the female students, this was a totally new experience. Additionally, for all except Ahmet who had spent some weeks learning English in another institution in Singapore, this was not only their first experience in a classroom context outside of Saudi Arabia, it was also the first time they were learning English from a teacher who spoke only English at all times and no Arabic at all. Needless to say, all of these demands on the students for making both small and more significant adjustments certainly imposed multiple "stresses" on them. They had to adapt and even re-orientate their thinking on their social and cultural practices while struggling to learn a new language where high stakes were involved.

The study

The study reported in this paper involved three of the five students, namely, Mohamet, Firdaus and Ahmet. The choice of the three students was based largely on the fact that Reme and Ula dropped out of the course in weeks eight and ten.

Reme discovered that she was pregnant soon after she arrived in Singapore and by week six she was too ill with morning sickness to continue with the course. Ula, on the other hand, returned to Saudi for the Eid celebrations, and did not return to Singapore for personal reasons. This left the class with just three students. Although Ahmet had started his English course earlier than Mohamet and Firdaus, the decision was made to include him in the study because the aim was to investigate the extent to which the students were willing to “invest” in their own learning to become effective communicators in the language and not to examine their success in achieving their objectives of coming to Singapore to learn English although to some extent these may be related.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was thus, firstly, to examine the students’ investment in the learning of the target language in spite of the “inequitable relations of power” that may have constrained or restricted their “opportunities ... to practise the target language outside the classroom” and secondly, to explore the ways in which this willingness or drive was executed through a variety of strategies they employed in order to overcome the “power relations” in their social interactions with Singaporean and other English language speakers (Peirce, 1995, p. 12).

In keeping with this purpose, narratives from the students of their interactional experiences when using the target language in natural contexts were used as a basis for the investigation. These included the students’ experiences in using the target language to ask for directions, request information, introduce themselves and make small talk, in places such as the bus stop, library, restaurants, university, taxi stand, shopping centres, entertainment, and tourist spots. The study focused on investigating learners’ willingness and drive to “invest” in learning the target language in an effort to establish their own social identities in a larger global community of English language speakers. Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of the relationship between language and identity that “... at the level of interactions between individuals, speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it” underpins this focus. Although all three students were scholarship recipients and potential university students in a foreign country, the fact that they were as yet unable to communicate freely with other students and the general English-speaking community in Singapore definitely undermined their confidence and their own social identities in Singapore. This study examined the extent to which the students pushed themselves to overcome this lack of confidence and negative social identity to employ various strategies that helped them manage their communication needs in English in their everyday lives in Singapore.

The subjects

The first of the three subjects was Firdaus, a 28-year-old female physics teacher from Jeddah, whose purpose of learning English was to be accepted as a postgraduate student in the science faculty of one of the local universities. To do

this she had to achieve a TOEFL iBT score of 85.

The second was Mohamet, an 18-year-old male student from Yanbu in Western Saudi who came to Singapore with a conditional offer from the faculty of accountancy of one of the local universities. His purpose for learning English was to secure his place in the undergraduate programme for which he needed to achieve a TOEFL iBT score of 80.

The third subject was Ahmet, a 22-year-old science student from Riyadh who also had a conditional offer from the faculty of engineering of one of the local universities. As stated earlier, Ahmet had already been attending IELTS preparatory classes when he joined the original group of four. He needed an IELTS score of 6.5 to secure the university offer.

The English course

The course designed for the five students was theme-based with focused practice in the four skills to prepare them for the TOEFL iBT and IELTS examinations. As it was an intensive course, students were given 5.5 hours of English language lessons for five days every week for 15 weeks totaling 412.5 hours before they attempted the TOEFL iBT examination. The first six weeks were spent on building basic proficiency in reading, speaking, listening, and writing.

An integrated, theme-based approach was employed so as to engage students actively in all the four skills and to maintain their interest levels. A significant challenge was to explore themes that were more in keeping with the students' age and experience with very little language, at least at the beginning. As could be expected, students appeared to comprehend the general idea more than the specific vocabulary in the first six weeks. As such, classroom time was dominated by teacher talk in the first six weeks. However, after that point in the course, there was incrementally more discussion in class as students became more confident at speaking, presenting their ideas and sharing them with their classmates and the teacher. Pair and group work also became more effective beyond this juncture.

As all of them could read from the beginning, a silent reading hour was incorporated into the course. Every day students spent the first hour of the day reading their choice of a graded Penguin Reader or other reading material that they were encouraged to bring to class. A copy of the daily newspaper was also brought to class every day. Students were provided with dictionaries to help them with new vocabulary. After the third week, students were treated to an English movie every other week which was accompanied by a task sheet with questions on the main characters, the events, and other story features.

To optimise their exposure to the English language and to provide them with more opportunity to use the language, students were taken on "learning journeys" to various places of historical and cultural interest, museums, art galleries and even shopping malls in Singapore so that they could listen to live as well as recorded commentaries, take notes that they would then use to write short reports on what they had experienced, and ask questions for further information. The students were given activity sheets to help them ask questions and complete the post activity task. Additionally, they visited the three publicly funded universities in

Singapore and listened to presentations by staff from the admissions departments for a clearer idea of the language and content requirements of their intended degree programmes. Finally, students were encouraged to reflect on their own learning by writing in their journals every day. They were asked to write about their successes, no matter how small, and the challenges they faced each day in learning English. The students' entries in their reflective journals were a significant source of information for this study.

The tutor made a concerted effort to keep the classroom environment friendly, open, and warm by engaging students in general conversation in between and outside of class time. Students were encouraged to write email to the tutor to share their observations on their way home or views about a television programme they had seen. They were asked to listen to the English news on the radio or television every day. At the start of every day in class, 10 to 15 minutes was spent on just "talking shop" as a warm-up activity. In the first few weeks, the teacher did most of the talking but after the fourth week, the students managed to report on their observations on the way home or to school or even on news from home in Saudi, albeit in faltering English.

Research methods

The research methods used in this study were a questionnaire survey, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individual students and an analysis of their reflective journals.

The survey was conducted at the end of the 15-week course to obtain feedback from the students on whether they found the course beneficial and what they felt were its shortcomings. The questionnaire was not only a necessity at the end of the course but also served to provide initial insights into the students' perspectives of their learning experience. The students' responses to the survey questions were used to "springboard" the development of the aide mémoire that helped elicit more detailed narratives of the students' learning experiences.

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews, guided by an aide mémoire, that followed were designed to glean rich data about students' learning and coping strategies in relation to their commitment to "invest" in their learning and they were conducted with each of the three subjects separately about a month after the 15-week English course had ended. This was done to minimise the feelings of constraint that the students may have experienced as a result of the teacher-student power dynamics if they had been conducted during the course. Each session lasted about an hour and was recorded with the students' permission. The interviews were then transcribed and coded for analysis.

By this time, Mohamet and Firdaus had attempted the TOEFL iBT once and obtained scores of 72 and 57, respectively. They had also registered for a test retake, which was a month away, and were preparing for it independently with occasional consultation sessions with me. As stated earlier, Mohamet needed a TOEFL iBT score of 80; Firdaus, 85.

Additionally, a third source of data, the students' reflective journals were analysed for purposes of cross-referencing information. As students had been

writing in their reflective journals every day of their 15-week English course, the comments and descriptions provided rich details on the difficulties they encountered while learning English. As the journal entries were immediate reflections of their feelings at the time of encountering the challenges, they provided the students' spontaneous and unedited perceptions.

Findings and discussion

This section draws from all three sources of data and discusses significant aspects of the learning journeys of the three subjects and their perspectives of why it was important for them to learn the target language, what encouraged them to persevere when they felt disillusioned, and how they overcame hurdles to their progress.

Firdaus

Firdaus expressed that she needed to learn English so that she could further her science education at the postgraduate level at a local university in Singapore. Her aim was to progress from teaching physics at a secondary school in Saudi, currently, to teaching the subject at university level back in Saudi. She knew that in order to achieve this she had to obtain her postgraduate degrees in physics. She was also aware of the primacy of English as much of the content required to pursue higher degrees was only available in English textbooks and journals. Also, to be considered for admission in a university in Singapore, she needed to score 85 in her TOEFL iBT examination. Thus she expressed that her need to learn English was urgent as it would decide her career.

In one of her journal entries, Firdaus expressed that her biggest obstacle was her limited vocabulary. She was unable to carry on a conversation in English with any new person that she met because of this limitation. "I want to talk but don't have enough vocabulary." She added that it was difficult for her to go beyond, "How are you? How are your studies?" Firdaus added that although she was an introvert and that she generally preferred to speak to girls, while in Singapore she did not mind engaging in a general discussion with boys just to improve her English.

"Back in Saudi, I would prefer to speak to girls—it's cultural—people will view it as strange to talk to boys. But here it's okay. I want to learn."

This shows Firdaus's decision to come to Singapore with the sole aim of learning English to further her studies had imposed some changes on her own social identity which in a sense expedited her desire to fit in and connect with this new society. Her journal entries showed that Firdaus was conscious of this altered identity that she had chosen to assume in order to achieve her goal. Although in her journal Firdaus conceded that her brother who was learning English at another institution in Singapore at the same time was not constrained by his lack of vocabulary and was willing to speak to everyone, it was clear that she too was willing to set aside some of her inhibitions resulting from her religious and

cultural background and communicate with the local people.

“I prefer to talk to girls but speaking in general to boys, teenagers or even men is no problem because I want to learn.”

However, the interview with Firdaus revealed that she encountered her fair share of problems when trying to communicate with English-speaking Singaporeans. She recounted that in the first few weeks of her stay in Singapore, she experienced some degree of embarrassment resulting from such encounters as the following,

“In the early months, at the MRT station, a man asked me, ‘are you a man or a woman?’ and he laughed. It made me feel I didn’t want to speak to anyone any more. Now I would reply to him, ‘are you educated? Can you not see?’ Even now they stare at me (Firdaus wore an ‘abaya’ a full black gown that only exposed her eyes) but I don’t feel as bad. They don’t know why I wear it. They are seeing it for the first time.”

Nevertheless, by her own admission, Firdaus was also selective about the people she chose to interact with. For example, she commented that she would not volunteer to explain to anyone why she wore an “abaya”. This selectivity arose from her personal world view which was influenced partly by her religion and culture but also, by her own admission, what she saw of the world and people outside of her own country and community on television back home.

“I’m scared to speak to a person with ear piercings or tatoos—this is not normal back home. In movies they always show such people in prison—they bring knives or something with them. But here in Singapore, we see them in MRT station. People look at them even here. If there is an empty seat next to such a person, I won’t sit next to him.”

Nonetheless, she admitted that “it probably limits opportunities to speak ... may be.” Thus it can be observed that although Firdaus did make an effort to connect with the local people and environment just to practise her English, her opportunities to interact and speak English with Singaporeans were limited. This was not as much a consequence of her limited vocabulary, which she did try her best to improve, but rather her own perceptions of people and environments and her response to them carried over from her previous exposure to television and her culture. It is possible that as a result of this, Firdaus was the slowest of the three to gain confidence in speaking English although by the end of 15 weeks, one could observe her greater willingness to speak English.

Mohamet

Mohamet was no different from Firdaus in that he too expressed that his main impetus to learn English arose from his aspiration to further his studies in an English medium university,

“... as you know English is an international language and it is very important to me to continue my study in Saudi or overseas and to get a good job. Actually now any job require English. Also to extend my ability to access information

and to get better understanding because always you get from translation what the translator understand and he not always get it right or express it to you right and the text lose its beauty.”

Similarly, although Mohamet’s fear of making mistakes in a completely strange and new environment held him back from speaking English to people in the new environment initially, he explained that it was sheer necessity that forced him to begin speaking.

“Although I know I am making not some but a lot of mistakes, but they understand me, so no problem. Also no choice—I have to speak in English or nobody will talk to me or understand me.”

Mohamet lived alone in a rented room and soon realised that if he did not make an effort to communicate, his loneliness could be overwhelming. Comparatively, Firdaus lived with her brother and as such did not feel as great a sense of alienation. Further, Mohamet’s only contact with family members was through phone calls which as a student on a scholarship stipend, he tried to keep to a minimum of once or twice a week. This meant that at all other times, outside of the classroom, he had little choice but to try to speak to others and in Singapore this meant having to speak English. In the interview, Mohamet explained that the only time he spoke Arabic in Singapore was when he met Ahmet, the other male student in this study outside the classroom or when he went to the mosque on Fridays and met other Saudi students who were studying English in other institutions in Singapore.

Although one of the main inhibitors that prevented the three students from speaking English was the fear of making mistakes in vocabulary and pronunciation resulting in them being judged and feeling humiliated in a new and strange environment, a significant point raised by Mohamet was that the Singaporeans he approached casually at the bus stop or train stations to ask for directions or other information did not speak the standard form of English that he was learning in class. In a journal entry, Mohamet expressed that they generally spoke *Singlish*, which is a non-standard, colloquial form of English spoken by Singaporeans. This, he felt complicated matters a little because just as much as they had difficulty understanding him, he too had trouble understanding them when they spoke to him. This situation is similar to what Genesee (1981, p. 127) expresses in his discussion of Swain’s (1981) “target language use in a wider environment as a factor in its acquisition”, about students in the French immersion programme in Canada. However, in Mohamet’s case, he persevered in his efforts to speak English, driven by the knowledge that he had to get a TOEFL iBT score that would entitle him to a place in a local university: “I think any activity or exercise is useful for learning a language simply because you will practise the language and you will apply what you have learned.” Thus, he claimed in the interview that he continued to reply to them in the standard form of English he learned in class even when he was spoken to in Singlish.

Mohamet revealed in the interview and his journal that to improve his proficiency he even spoke aloud to himself, “I know it’s strange but I do sometimes talk to myself in English.” Thus Mohamet’s determination to succeed in his

academic aspirations coupled with his need to overcome a feeling of alienation goaded him to persevere in speaking English and make connections with the new environment and the people.

Ahmet

As stated earlier in this paper, Ahmet joined the existing four students midway through the course and he had already taken the IELTS examination twice before without success in obtaining a score of 6.5, which was required for the course that he wanted to pursue. As in the case of Firdaus and Mohamet, Ahmet's key reason for learning English, as recorded in his journal, was to "study in an international university", advance himself academically, get a job overseas and work for some years before going back to Saudi. Clearly, Ahmet too had definite goals for his future and viewed the mastery of the English language as a passport to their realization.

Ahmet too expressed his feeling of inadequacy where vocabulary was concerned but countered that this did not hinder his efforts to speak English with Singaporeans and even foreigners, some of whom he met at night spots on weekends. Ahmet expressed that he preferred to speak to "native speakers rather than Singaporeans" as he did not want to acquire Singlish. He claimed, however, that this was challenging in the beginning because sometimes he only understood two words of what they were saying. Nevertheless, he claims that did not deter him because he learned to glean meaning by observing people's "facial expressions and body language" where their words failed him. In a journal entry, Ahmet explained that he, "organize(d)" his ideas before speaking. Ahmet, like Mohamet claimed that apart from utilising every opportunity to speak English with "anyone surrounding me [him]", he spoke to himself and tried to correct his mistakes.

Of the three students in this study, Ahmet was the the most outgoing and the least self-conscious. He made friends easily and was not afraid to start a conversation, even with strangers, just to practise his English. "You have to be brave to learn," said Ahmet in the interview. Ahmet claimed that he deliberately sought out both foreigners who spoke English at entertainment spots and other places that he frequented just to "practise his English". He had joined a local dance group whose members were Singaporeans and other foreigners so he had to speak English as no one there knew Arabic. Hence, twice or thrice a week for two to three hours, of his own accord, Ahmet situated himself in a context outside of the classroom where he was forced to speak only English. Ahmet felt that his conscious efforts to lose his fear of speaking in English through engaging in a recreational activity paid off. He explained that he had not only changed somewhat since coming to Singapore through his interactions with different people but he had come to "know more about the world through speaking English".

Conclusion

Although all three students clearly recognized the advantages they stood to gain by achieving proficiency in English language, their individual learning journeys were essentially different. Despite Mohamet's explanation that English being an international language, he needed it to further his studies, access information, and secure a good job; Ahmet's rationale that he needed the language to study in an international university and Firdaus's justification of needing English to further her studies, their investments in learning English differed because of who they were back in Saudi, the contexts within which they lived and operated there and the extent to which they, as individuals allowed their previous social identities to come to bear upon their social location in Singapore. In short, their paths to success in language learning were varied, largely social, and not merely motivational because one could be motivated to learn a language but may be hampered by his or her social location. These differences in their investment in learning English were evident in spite of their competing for the same "symbolic capital" as Singaporeans and others on a global platform (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 14),

In conclusion, I argue in this paper that while learners' investment in learning a target language is driven, to some extent, by the significance of the stakes involved in learning that language, the differences in learners' investments in a target language, which are based largely on the individual's social identity, must be acknowledged. In fact, one could go so far as to say that learners' investment in their learning is at the core of their individual social investments and social identities which are deemed anchored in these stakes. Hence, while all three students appreciated the stakes and persevered to address and overcome barriers that hindered their efforts to achieve their goals, the social placements of these individual learners largely defined who they were and determined their levels of success in accumulating symbolic power.

Permission to use the interview transcripts and information therein, which relates to students' learning experiences, was obtained from all student participants prior to writing this paper.

THE AUTHOR

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What motivated you to learn English?
2. Describe your personal experience in learning English.
 - a. What did you find interesting? Why?
 - b. What did you find difficult? Why?
 - c. What did you find uninteresting? Why?
 - d. What did you find was not so useful? Why?
 - e. What else do you think could have been taught in your course that wasn't covered?
 - f. Why do you think that would be useful?
 - g. Did you find the reading programme (story books) useful? Why?
 - h. Do you feel confident about speaking English with other English speakers now? Give reasons.
 - i. Do you feel confident about writing in English now? Why? Why not?
 - j. What are you doing to keep learning English and improving?
 - k. What are the areas in which you think you need to improve?

Appendix B

Sample Transcriptions of Interviews with Learners

Ahmet

Ali says that he watched movies, listened to music and read the newspapers to improve. It was difficult to understand the news or even the movies at first because everyone was speaking so fast. So I translate it to Arabic to understand—read a part, translate it into Arabic and then try to put it back into English. For speaking, I try to know many people and speak to them. You must be brave to talk to anyone—not just to talk about something that you need but to talk about anything. Most of the time if you understand 2 words, you can understand the message. And you don't have to be shy. For me I like to go to night spots where you find many native speakers, British, American. I found that helpful to improve my English. "But you have to be brave to learn." Even if I'm using the wrong word—it's okay. "I see their face and I know if I used the wrong word". I don't ask them. In the beginning I was scared... It's not a good idea to have students of many levels in one class.

I come from Riyadh, the capital. It's a big city; there are many people and cultures. So it was not a problem for me to speak to people from different countries or cultures. So I'm not conservative. Some of my friends from smaller cities or towns in Saudi have more difficulty talking to different people. But they change after they come here. Their clothes, the way they speak and everything changes. They become more open-minded. It will make you "brave to study. That's the most important thing. I just want to learn."

The girls change to a greater extent. In Singapore, girls are accompanied only in the beginning by a male family member. After one week, they find it secure, so they can go out alone.

What has been your biggest hurdle? For me being *brave* has been the greatest help. I have developed friendships with many people in Singapore. I like to make friends with educated people because they can speak English. I had a problem here in the hostel because all the students speak their own language or dialect; they don't speak English. That was mainly why I had to make friends outside.

Firdaus

Although I learnt English in school in Saudi for 6 years, I didn't speak the language. I watched movies without translation. When I went overseas, I used English to ask for directions, etc. In Singapore I stay at home and don't go out a lot. I know I should make more friends but ... I tried to talk to a girl in the university, 'how are you? how are your studies? It's very basic because I don't have enough vocabulary. I'm also quiet by nature. But I don't have a much fear now compared to when I first started asking for directions. Vocabulary is my biggest problem. I prefer to talk to girls; I can speak to boys in a discussion—age is not a concern. I choose whom I want to speak to—not young children or old people but young adults or teenagers. Back in Saudi I would prefer to speak to

girls—it's cultural—people view it as strange if you speak to men but here it's okay- there's no problem because I want to learn. But I'm still scared to talk to a man with ear piercings or tattoos because the perception back home is that that's not normal. In movies they always show such people in prison, carrying a knife or something. But here in Singapore we see them at the MRT station—but people look at them even here. If there's an empty seat next to such a person, I won't sit next to him. In Singapore nobody asks me why I dress like this in my 'abaya'. In the first few weeks that I came to Singapore, at the MRT station, a man asked me, "Are you a man or a woman?" and he laughed—that made me feel I didn't want to speak to anyone. Now I will reply to him, "are you educated—can you not see?" They don't know why I wear this; they are seeing it for the first time. If they ask me why I wear it I would explain why but I wouldn't volunteer to explain. It probably limits my opportunities to speak. My brother is not shy; he speaks to many people even though he does not speak as well as I do.