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Some Linguistic and Cultural Constraints affecting Adult ESL Distance Learning in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT :

Distance learning is a necessary programme for any thriving and expanding university the world over. Aside from being a vital gateway to higher education for students whose locations are far from the intended university, it is also a business industry for the university concerned which markets its programmes via distance learning to the clients i.e. students. Therefore, it is imperative that the clients of such programmes, be they full-time or part-time students, receive the utmost value for their investment. This investment could be in terms of finance, time, and personal sacrifices. This paper hypothesised that there exist several linguistic and cultural constraints affecting ESL learning of adult non-native learners in a Universiti Malaysia Sabah distance learning programme. The sample for this preliminary study is 35 adult students in their third year who had already taken all the four semesters of ESL classes during their first and second year. This is a significant sample because the students are the pioneers of the university's distance learning programme. Due to this pioneer status, it is felt that the students' response to what linguistic and cultural constraints affected their learning of the English language is most important to be analysed and documented. This study found that among the linguistic constraints were the length of exposure as well as familiarity to the English language prior to entering the programme, first language interference, and language of instruction in the ESL classroom. Meanwhile, amongst the cultural constraints found were students' difficulties to differentiate between studies and other family commitment (classes were held on weekends as the students are full time teachers), students' low level of confidence in their own ability with regard to the English language, and the level of relationship between students and lecturers when the latter are often much younger in age and teaching experience than the former. This paper aims to highlight these constraints so as to 1) better improve the current ESL classes within the distance learning programme for the benefit of present and future students of the programme, and 2) to minimise any existing gaps in ESL learning in an on-campus or a distance learning programme of a university.

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