

# Looking South: A Sociolinguistic Look at an English Learning Environment in Thailand

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## Abstract

This small instrumental case study (Stake, 2005) used a sociolinguistic framework with the goal of expanding current understanding of learning environments, particularly as they affect Thai learners' investment in learning and using English. Drawing on Gee's concept of "big D" Discourse (1996; 2001; 2005), the study examined how the communities in which a group of Muslim Thai undergraduate English learners were members, might have intersected in ways that led to the creation of an environment that encouraged and nurtured their investment in learning and using English. The study focused on the community (and its attendant Discourse) found on the campus of the Islamic university the students attended. Embedded within this community were core values and cultural practices that appeared to align with the learners' out-of-school communities. The findings suggest that the result of this alignment was a campus environment in which the students felt a great sense of comfort and belonging, and which was highly supportive of the learning and use of English. As universities across Thailand attempt to create campus environments that encourage and support students' use of and investment in English, the findings of this study might prove useful.

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## Introduction

In light of the decision of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) to use English as the lingua franca, reports that Thais' English proficiency levels are among the lowest in the AEC (Bangkok Post, 2016; Kamkhien, 2010; Noom-ura, 2013; Sinhaneti & Fu, 2015) have made English language teaching and learning the focus of much research in Thailand.

In an attempt to explain and address these low proficiency levels, researchers have focused on a multitude of discrete issues including, but not limited to, instructional approaches (Simpson, 2011; Choomthong, 2014); quality of teaching (Noom-Ura, 2013; Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2008; Radic-Bojanic, Topalov, & Sinwongsuwat, 2015); teacher preparation (Phompun, Thongthew, & Zeichner, 2013) and Thai students' attitudes (Thepsiri & Pojanapunya, 2013; Krasair & Nithivaraphakul, 2012). Absent from the literature is a focus on EFL university environments and particularly the constellation of factors that come together to form an environment conducive to language learning. Thus this study attempts to do that by considering the ecological affordances of a multilingual and faith-based university in Thailand.

The environment of the focal school, which is an Islamic Thai university, has a ubiquitous presence --both written and spoken--of several languages, including English. Additionally, and perhaps most strikingly, both the students and faculty seem at ease drawing upon a variety of linguistic repertoires. The multilingual nature of the campus is also indicative of the out-of-school

communities in which the students are members. With family and members of the local community (both at home and school), students use Thai, English, Malay or Malayu (a Southern Thai variety of Malay) depending on the language preference and/or proficiency of their interlocutors.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the linguistic and cultural practices and values of the communities in which students are embedded are central to their learning. Thus this study explored these practices and values and how they may have impacted students' investment in learning and using English.

While important, the impact of this environment on students' English proficiency levels is not addressed in this article; it will be the focus of a later study. Instead, this study focused on the complex and inter-related factors that form the linguistic and cultural fabric of students' lives, and how this may support students' investment in learning and using English. Specifically, the study aimed at answering the following questions:

1. How might we understand the complexities and interplay of the cultural and linguistic values and practices of the in-and out-of-school communities of university students?
2. What impact might the relationship between the environments have on Muslim Thai English learners' investment in learning and using English?

#### Communities of Practice and Discourses

For some time, in the United States, a number of American educators (e.g. Au & Jordan, 1981; Banks, 1994; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2010) have posited that differences in the linguistic, interactional and cognitive styles that undergird the home/community of culturally and linguistically

diverse students are often different than those found in school. It is these differences between home/community and school they assert account for many of the problems culturally and linguistically diverse students encounter at school. In response, many have posited that when school environments align with the values and practices of the students, students are likely to be more successful. A sociolinguistic lens provides a tool for unpacking why this may be true.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, learning occurs as a result of a person's active participation in what Lave and Wenger (1991) have termed communities of practice (CoPs). CoPs are formed when people come together to engage in specific tasks, be they cultural, social or familial. Within these communities, the construction and acquisition of knowledge and understanding are a result of the social and cultural interactions that take place. Operating within these CoPs are what Gee (2005) calls “big D” Discourses. According to Gee, “a Discourse is a sort of an ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (2005, p.526). When one is trying to enact an identity that is recognized within a particular CoP, one must learn to coordinate one’s actions and words in very well defined ways. Gee asserts that knowing how to be and do a specific kind of person results in recognition within the CoP; recognition plays an important role in who can participate and in what ways.

Embedded within our words and actions are a set of core values and beliefs. While there can be differences, there is a set of core values and beliefs related to the “work” that the CoP is involved in doing that is fundamental to

that community. Core values and beliefs are embedded in every Discourse, and they play a central role in informing what it means to be a certain *who* doing a certain *what* (Gee, 1996). The more congruent a member's actions and words are with these values and beliefs; the better-positioned one is to accrue power and status within the CoP. The more power and status a member accrues, the more influence the member has over what the CoP “does” and how others within it are recognized.

Gee's (2001) Discourse is useful in explaining how congruency between home and school can positively impact learning. Gee (2005) posits that Discourses are imbued with *Discourse models*, not unlike what anthropologists and sociologists call cultural models. Discourse models are “theories (storylines, images, explanatory frameworks) that people hold, often unconsciously, and use to make sense of the world and experiences in it” (p. 61). These theories provide people with explanations and rationale for what is acceptable and valuable; they offer an explanation of how the world works, as well as notions of how the world should work. According to Shore (1996, as cited in Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001), “Models develop gradually, from collectively transmitted information as well as unique and shared experiences” (p. 47).

Discourse models are of central importance within Discourses because they shape what anthropologists call patterns of behavior. Patterns of behavior are dictated by Discourse models, or what anthropologists call patterns *for* behavior, and influence all aspects of the Discourse such as, but not limited to, behavior, language, interactional patterns, and dress (Jacob & Jordan, 1993).

Gee (2001) explains that all of us start out with a primary Discourse and that this Discourse “constitutes our original and home-based sense of identity”

(p. 527). He argues that through our interactions with CoPs such as schools, we find ourselves needing to acquire what he calls dominant Discourses. Fluency in dominant Discourses is of great value because a person's mastery of them can lead to the acquisition of valuable goods, which in the case of learners would be a successful school experience, and all the subsequent gains this may help garner. Acquisition requires successful apprenticeship within that CoP and successful apprenticeship often hinges on the compatibility of a person's primary Discourse and the Discourse of the CoP for which one desires membership.

Not unlike Gee's notion of a primary Discourse is Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). One's habitus can be defined as a way of knowing, being and believing that is transmitted through one's family life. Like Gee's assertions about primary Discourses, Bourdieu argues that not all habitus are created equal. That is to say, like primary Discourses, institutions value and reward particular ways of knowing, being and believing more than others. Therefore, the more closely aligned the school CoP is to one's habitus, the more one is likely to find success within that CoP.

### Identity and Investment

Participation in CoPs is tied to identity construction for it is through participation that bids are made for certain identities. Moving away from a once static view of identity construction, researchers (Creese, Bhatt, Bhojani, & Martin, 2006; Hawkins, 2005; Miller, 2003; Peirce, 1995) theorize identity construction as fluid, ever changing, and context-specific.

Norton's (2000) and Peirce's (1995) work on identity and investment explores the connection among context, participation, and identity formation.

Norton has argued that although participation within a community is refereed by power differentials that exist among participants, a participant retains agency. Hence, although participatory decisions are made in response to contextual conditions, they are also made in response to the participant's investment in participating. In other words, what a learner (in Norton's work, the participant is an English learner) feels s/he will gain from participating impacts whether the learner participates and in what manner.

Drawing on the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Norton (2000) contends that a learner's decision to "invest" in a second language is tied to the kinds of capital or symbolic and material resources the learner believes s/he will acquire through her/his participation. Norton defines symbolic resources as "language, education, and friendship" and material resources to include "capital goods, real estate, and money" (p. 444).

### Study Site

Formerly known as Yala Islamic University, Fatoni University (FU) is the only Islamic university in Thailand. It is located in the city of Pattani, close to the bordering province and city of Yala. Once an important trading area, Pattani is home to people of varying ethnic and linguistic backgrounds that include speakers of dialects from China, India and other provinces in Thailand. However, the majority of Pattani residents speak Malay and/or Malayu (also known as Pattani Malay), a dialect of standard Malay, as their first language. Pattani, which is both a city and a province, has, for more than a decade, been affected by an

ongoing conflict between what appear to be small groups of Malay Muslim nationalists and the Thai government<sup>2</sup> (McCargo, 2012).

FU resides within this multi-cultural and multi-lingual community. It has a student population of approximately 4000, with students coming from over 40 of Thailand's 77 provinces and 200 coming from over 15 foreign countries. The university accepts students from all religions; however, the vast majority of the students are Sunni Muslims. Undergraduate programs are offered at the Faculties of Islamic Studies, Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, Science and Technology and graduate programs at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. Within the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, students can major in one of three languages: English, Malay or Arabic.

### Participants

The participants were four FU undergraduates majoring in English in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. Two participants, Asama and Marisa<sup>3</sup>, were female and two, Abdul and Abid, were male. All four participants were Muslim and all four spent six weeks studying English at an Islamic university in Brunei. The six-week program was the result of a partnership between FU and the university in Brunei.

### Asama

Asama was 21 years old. She considered Malayu her mother tongue, her second language to be Thai and her third language English. She also reported

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<sup>2</sup>The issues and views about this conflict are vast and extremely complex. Although an attempt was made to carefully choose neutral language to describe the conflict and those involved in it, some might disagree with the language chosen.

<sup>3</sup>Note that all participants were given pseudonyms.



being proficient in Malay. At home, she spoke Malayu with her family. Asama dreamed one day to be the Prime Minister of Thailand. Before accomplishing that goal, she wanted to have a civil service job in the Thai government. She also wanted to travel to a Western country to improve her English.

#### Marisa

Marisa was 21 years old. Like Asama, Marisa considered Malayu to be her mother tongue but was fluent in Thai and proficient in English. At home she spoke Malayu with her family. Marisa planned to be an English teacher.

#### Abdul

Abdul was 22 years old. He considered his mother tongue to be Thai but was also fluent in Malay. He claimed proficiency in English and could read and write some Arabic. Abdul had a goal to become fluent in Arabic. Thai was the language used most at home. Abdul went to secondary school in Penang, Malaysia for five years. While in school there, he spoke what he characterized as mixture of English and Malay. Abdul wanted to be an English teacher.

#### Abid

Abid was 20 years old. He considered his mother tongue to be Malayu. He reported being fluent in Thai and proficient in English. Like Abdul, Abid could read and write some in Arabic. Abid wanted to become a translator, translating books in English to Thai.

### Methods and Data Sources

Five two-day visits were made to Pattani and the FU campus over a course of nine months. During these visits, various data were collected.

First, two structured group interviews with the participants were held, as well as two semi-structured individual interviews. Two semi-structured interviews with a female FU lecturer in the English department were also conducted; however, the students, not the lecturer, are the focus of this article. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Second, the researcher observed the participants engaged in three different activities. The first was a two-hour planning session the participants and other English majors held in order to plan a week-long English camp for children in the community. The second session was a two-hour debriefing meeting held after the camp was over. The third observation was conducted in a classroom in which students were studying "Islamic Writing in English." For each of these observations, the researcher kept field notes.

Third, various artifacts were collected. These artifacts included photographs of the campus, particularly of the environmental print, and samples of English camp lesson plans designed by the participants.

An initial analysis was conducted with all the data. After this analysis, codes were generated and the data was manual coded. The coding process generated a number of themes, paramount among them, the themes of *atmosphere*, *multilingualism* and *comfort*. These themes were crosschecked and then kept, refined, combined or discarded. An interpretive analysis of the remaining themes was then conducted.

#### An Investment in Learning and Using English

All four participants viewed fluency in English as an important personal goal and essential to accomplishing their career and personal objectives. They were aware of and expressed concerned about the impact of ASEAN and AEC

on their futures and the economic future of Thai people in general. As Abid noted, those who knew English would be given "the high work" and those who do not, "the lower one" (Interview, May 11, 2015). With this concern for the future of Thais in mind, both Marisa and Abdul wanted to become English teachers. Based on their own experiences in elementary school, both felt Thai English teachers were not doing an adequate job. Marisa was particularly concerned about the issue of pronunciation. She remarked that Thai teachers "have wrong pronunciation when they teach the children and then the children have wrong pronunciation" (Interview, May 11, 2015).

In addition to viewing English as essential to their future careers, each felt that knowing English provided them with a connection to a wider world. Abdul was quite curious about this wider world. When asked, he explained, "I like communication with many people. I like to know their culture and I love the language" (English). He went on to add, "The two languages that I think are important for me are English and Arabic" (Interview, May 11, 2015). English, he explained, is the language spoken in the Western world and Arabic in the Middle East. Therefore in knowing these two languages, he would have access to both of these worlds. Asama, too, was interested in communicating with others outside of Thailand. She remarked that, "As I know, Indonesia, Malay Singapore and Brunei are the countries using English. And they are also developing countries. So for me, if we can speak English, we can communicate with them" (Interview, May 11, 2015).

Evidence that the participants were invested in learning English was not limited to the answers they gave in interviews. In addition to vocalizing this investment, the participants demonstrated it by trying to use English as much

as they could and taking a leadership role in organizing and running a six-day English camp for more than 60 local children.

### Using English

From the very first visit to FU, the researcher was struck by the eagerness the FU students, whom she had never met before, showed in speaking English. In contrast to students at the Thai university in which the researcher teaches, the FU students presented as quite willing and confident English speakers.

The participants' use of English was not limited to conversations with the researcher (who it should be noted is a native speaker of English and cannot speak any of the other languages of the participants); it extended to a variety of interactions with other students and faculty members.

All four participants reported using English, in varying degrees, with friends, in class, and when chatting on Facebook. A recent post on a participant's Facebook page provides a good example of how, sometimes, English was used in combination with other languages. The post contained a video clip of a Muslim cleric delivering a speech in English. The participant had added a comment in English and received several comments back in Thai. Posts such as this were not uncommon on the Facebook pages of other participants.

The participants' investment in learning and using English was most evident in the tremendous amount of time and effort the participants took in planning and facilitating the weeklong English camp for 66 local children. While the participants held leadership roles in the camp, it should be noted that a total of 38 FU students were involved in running this camp.

According to the participants, the group's objectives for the English camp were to 1) make strong relationships with the children 2) teach the children how to use English with confidence and 3) integrate Islam into the curriculum (Field Notes, May 12, 2015). To accomplish objective #2, the activities the participants planned for the children--both instructional and recreational--required the children to use English as often as possible. In one daylong activity, for example, the children, accompanied by the study participants, spent the day on a beach talking with tourists in English. The children, the participants told the researcher, were initially shy when speaking to the tourists. However, as the day went on, the children not only became more confident, but they also began to enjoy the activity. In the debriefing session that was held after the camp was over, there was a consensus among the participants that this particular activity was the one they were most proud of. This pride stemmed from the perception that the children used English and did so with growing confidence.

From the interviews, it was clear that all the participants arrived at FU with an interest in learning English. What became equally clear was that the FU CoP and the Discourse operating within that CoP, created a learning environment that nurtured and supported that interest. A learning environment, described by the participants as "comfortable."

The FU CoP and Discourse

For all four participants, the decision to come to FU, and/or their subsequent opinions about FU, centered on their perceived comfort level. Put another way, each appeared to be completely "fluent" in the FU Discourse, as they knew how to organise their speech, dress and actions so as to be recognized

within the community. Fluency in the FU Discourse, this researcher argues, was a result of the alignment between the participants' primary and FU Discourses.

### The Role of Islam

Islam and, more specifically, the teachings contained in the Qur'an, informs everything that happens on the FU campus. Physical manifestations can be seen in the noticeably distinguishable Islamic architectural style of the buildings and the dress of students and staff. As at all Thai universities, students are required to wear uniforms. For female students the uniform is the *hijab*, consisting of a white head covering and long green skirt. Some also choose to wear the *niqab*, an additional covering for the face. Male students are required to wear a white shirt and green trousers. Both male and female students wear a small silver FU pin, which features a book representing the Qur'an. Female staff and faculty dress in dark-colored *hijabs*, with some also wearing the *niqab*. Male staff and faculty do not appear to adhere to any special dress; however they can be seen donning various styles of a *takiyah*, a cap worn by men, as well as loose modest fitting clothing.

Qur'an inspired messages of peace and caring festooning the walls of hallways and classrooms are abundant. These messages are written in different languages including Thai, Arabic, Malay and English and by varying authors including students, faculty and others. These messages also appear on participants' Facebook pages and in text messages.

Unlike Thai students at other universities who greet others with *sawasdee* (translated from Sanskrit to mean well-being) accompanied by a *wai* (a positioning of the hands as if in prayer), students at FU do not *wai*, and they greet others with *As-Salam-u-Alaikum*, an Arabic phrase that translates into

English as *Peace be unto you*. Thus, all conversations begin with this verbal reminder that the teachings of Islam are honored.

But the presence of Islamic beliefs and values can be realized beyond simple greeting customs and written messages. These beliefs and values permeate the activities and conversations (both face-to-face and virtual) that take place on the FU campus. Of particular note was the value the participants placed on the caring, supportive and safe nature of the learning environment, a nature that was viewed as resulting from the central role of Islam.

In individual interviews, both female student participants talked about how happy they were attending FU.

Asama was, at first, reluctant to attend FU. Her father wanted her to enroll in FU, but instead Asama enrolled at the local public university, Prince of Songkla University (PSU). When asked why she was reluctant, Asama said, "Because I think they are too strict." But after one year at the public university, Asama transferred to FU.

Researcher: So you transferred from PSU and you said that at first you didn't like it (referring to FU); you didn't expect to like it; you didn't want to come here. And since you arrived here, you do like it. So what is the main difference between here and PSU? The difference that makes you like it here? What are the main differences?

Asama: The main difference for me is male and female because we can study together, right? Like co-education. But now, here, we separate men and female. We have separate seating.

Researcher: And that's a positive thing? You think that's a positive thing?

Asama: Yes. Later, Asama talked more about gender separation and wearing the hijab.

Researcher: What is it you like about the separate education? Why do you prefer to study only with women?

Asama: I think it's very safe for me.

Researcher: Safe?

Asama: Yes.

Researcher: Did you feel unsafe at PSU?

Asama: Yes, because, you know, male can touch female. Like we don't have the freedom like I think, and then female can wear any style of clothes. I don't like it. (Interview, May 11, 2015)

Marisa also credited the FU environment, what she called "atmosphere," with her decision to attend FU. Like Asama, an important reason for liking FU was the separation of males and females and the uniform.

Researcher: And why did you choose this university?

Marisa: The reason is because of atmosphere, you know, I love it. Before I came here, I know my sister study here and then she also advise me to study because the atmosphere is very good for me. But actually I also register at PSU but I cannot enter it because my



grade is not enough, because actually my heart wants to study here, so I don't participate in any other university.

Researcher: And when you say atmosphere, what do you mean?

Marisa: Actually, environment here, the society, the people living here. For example, we study, right? When we study, we don't sit behind men--we sit separately. Even though we are in the same class, but we have the seat for male here and female here. We separate. The uniform is also the reason I chose to study because before this I also wear like this and then I don't want. I fear myself that when I go to PSU or any other university it will make me my uniform not like this. (Interview, May 11, 2015)

When enrolment figures make it possible, male and female students attend different classes. When this is not possible, males and females are separated within the same classroom. Other signs of separation can be seen in common areas such as the library and extend to the designation of different staircases and elevators for the two genders. Faculty offices are also separated by gender. The separation of males and females is an important tenet for some sects of Muslims. It is believed to promote modesty and deter unhealthy relationships between the sexes. And for some females like Asama, public displays of physical contact between the sexes engender fear.

The uniform also contributed to Asama's and Marisa's comfort level at FU. Asama expressed dislike for PSU because her female classmates "can wear any style they like." It should be noted that Muslim students at public universities also have the option of wearing the hijab, and many do. Marisa, who

said she knew this, however she still attributed her comfort to her preference for the FU uniform (Interview, May 11, 2015).

While neither of the male participants talked about dress or gender segregation, they did talk about their comfort level at FU. Abid, a male participant, attributed his happiness at FU to the *halaqat*.

Researcher: How do you like it here? Are you happy you chose this university?

Abid: I am. I am really happy because here, I mean, the students, the teachers, the staff, it feel like comfortable, what we call, everyone has the same level. It seems teacher, we need to respect, but the teacher even come to student. Like we have something here. We have halaqat. Halaqat means we need to sit together and then, we have a teacher, we have a staff, we sharing experiences. If we have some problem we just turn to them, "Okay, how can we solve this problem?" We share everything every week on Monday from 10:00-12:00, two hours. Everybody.

Researcher: So when you say everybody, who is everybody?

Abid: I mean teachers. Teachers, they going to sit with the student.

Researcher: What do you mean? Like English majors all sit together or how are the groups?

Abid: Even they are mixed together, like for my group, there are some Arab students and the leader of our group is from the staff.

Researcher: So you are assigned to a group and that group meets. How many people in the group?

Abid: Ten.

Researcher: And you meet once a week for two hours?

Abid: Yes, once a week for two hours every week.

Researcher: Do you know what's the objective?

Abid: The objective is we need to meet together *every* (emphasis added by speaker) week. Not just. One of the objectives, as a Muslim, that's why we pray five times a day because we need to meet together. We can't live alone. If we have some problem, we can tell them, have something to share. We need to make strong relationship. (Interview, May 12, 2015)

Abid was not alone in his feelings about the *halaqat*. Asama mentioned it as well. For Asama, the existence of the *halaqat* was an important element missing from her PSU experience. The importance of the *halaqat* was also evidenced in the English camp the participants (and other students) created. Leaders in designing this weeklong English camp, the participants were careful to allocate ample time for both the females and males to facilitate *halaqats*. In addition to teaching English and teaching the children about Islam, the participants wanted the "students to be happy and want to go again" (Asama, Interview, May 11, 2015). The participants also wanted "to make strong relations

with the children" (Ibid, Interview, May 11, 2015). Participating in a *halaqat* was seen as one way to help ensure that these objectives were met.

Abdul, the other male participant, also cited "the environment" as his reason for choosing FU.

Researcher: Why did you choose to come to this university?

Abdul: The main reason is Islamic environment.

Researcher: What does that mean to you?

Abdul: If all students are Muslim, so we know how to handle that. Like we have a brotherhood. Almost all teachers here are from Islamic (indecipherable) so they more understand the student, how the student are. (Interview, May 12, 2015)

Adhering to Islamic practices around dress, the separation of genders and participating in a *halaqat* are clearly important ways of "being and doing" the FU Discourse, and because of the alignment with the participants' primary Discourses the students' felt "comfortable." They not only knew how to "do" the FU Discourse, they valued it. It's important to note, too, Abdul's comment above about the teachers. Perhaps this ability to "understand how the student are" is a result of the teachers' fluency in the FU Discourse and this fluency, at least for Abdul, appears to add to the level of comfort.

The Role of Multilingualism in the Participants' Communities of Practice

The ability to draw on an array of linguistic repertoires was central to the participants' navigation of both the FU and home communities.

Each of the four participants had a varied linguistic background and self-identified as being fluent or proficient in two or more languages. Abdul attested to being fluent in Malayu and Thai. He asserted that he is able to read and write “a bit” in Arabic and, although he claimed he couldn't understand every word, he could understand a good deal of Malay. Asama reported that she is fluent in Malayu and Thai, adding that she can understand and read Malay, but does not consider herself fluent in speaking Malay. Marisa reported that she is fluent in Malayu and Thai, and Abid in Malay, Malayu and Thai. He also reported that, like Abdul, he can read and write in Arabic but cannot speak it. He, does, however, have a goal of becoming fluent in Arabic.

The language of home varied between the participants, and, in the case of Abdul, even within his home. Asama reported that her parents “forced me to speak in Malay, only Malay, because he (her parents) didn't understand Thai” (Interview, May 12, 2015). Although not “forced” to do so, Marisa speaks Malayu at home as does Abid. Abdul's home language use is a bit more complex. Because of his parents' varied linguistic backgrounds, family members switched between Thai and Malay. His mother would sometimes speak, Abdul reported, “English--my mother, she study English program and Malayu. My father speak Malay and Thai, yeah” (Interview, May 12, 2015).

The languages the participants used outside the home and on campus varied. At the market, on the FU campus and on social media, the participants reported using different languages. For the females, the decision about which language to use and when, had much to do with the feelings of their interlocutors. Returning to the theme of “comfort,” and in talking about her use of Thai on the FU campus and in the market, Marisa explained that

"I use Thai because some of us, some students, they come from upper southern that cannot speak <sup>4</sup>Malay, so when I speak Malay, they, maybe, they will, 'why you speak Malay, I don't understand what are you talking about. Like that. So they may think that we are talking about her or him. So I prefer to use Thai to them to make them don't feel down." (Interview, May 11, 2015)

Asama, too, was concerned about including everyone, remarking that "If you have some students who don't speak or cannot speak Malay, so why I always use Thai because everyone can understand" (Interview, May 11, 2015).

In sum, for all the participants, communicating in multiple languages was "normal." It was part of their "identity kit" of both their home and FU Discourse. But, with the sole exception of Abdul, who would occasionally speak English with his mother, the other participants were adding English to their linguistic repertoires in large part because of their participation in the FU CoP. Here, among a community they trusted and felt a part of, English was valued. This value was evidenced by the pervasive presence of English on signage throughout the campus, the enthusiasm and dedication the participants had for the English camp, and the use of English by teachers and peers. English usage was also encouraged through a FU practice of having one language per month spotlighted. During this month, students were asked to speak one particular

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<sup>4</sup>Note that some participants, like Marisa, use the word "Malay" when they are, in fact, referring to Malayu. To ensure accuracy, the researcher sought clarification when the terms were used. However, it should be noted that they sometimes use the two words interchangeably.

language, with the goal of increasing their fluency. To assist them, for that month, games and informational bulletins were posted in the target language. English was one of the languages spotlighted.

Additionally, FU demonstrated its commitment to English learning by providing students with an opportunity to intensively study English in Brunei for six weeks. This opportunity was funded through FU's partnership with the university in Brunei. Their experiences, the participants all reported, were very positive, and they witnessed people drawing on varied linguistic repertoires that included English. This linguistic "normalcy" mapped on to what the participants were already experiencing in their primary Discourses and the FU Discourse.

### Conclusion

This study, albeit small, sheds light on the role that CoPs and their attendant Discourses can play in shaping an efficacious learning environment. The FU Discourse had at its core, values and beliefs that participants' embraced. This alignment of values and beliefs appeared to allow the participants to successfully and "comfortably" navigate the university/ FU Discourse.

Being a member of the FU Discourse meant using multiple languages. For these participants, linguistic diversity was normal and, as such, adding English to their linguistic repertoire was, perhaps, less challenging than it might be for those coming from monolingual CoPs. The participants were also highly invested in learning and using English. This investment, the author has argued, arose from the participants' belief that fluency in English would result in benefits for their country and/or themselves. This investment appeared then to be supported and nurtured by an English-rich learning environment that provided participants multiple opportunities to learn and use English. Because these

opportunities were embedded within a Discourse that aligned with the participants' primary Discourses, the participants appeared to avail themselves of these opportunities.

The challenges facing Thai English learners are, inarguably, formidable. Undoubtedly much has been and will continue to be learned from research that focuses on discrete aspects of the teaching and learning of English. However, perhaps by using the fine-grained lens of qualitative research, our current understanding of the complexities involved in the creation of effective learning environments might be better understood and accounted for.

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