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## Enhancing English Proficiency through Social Circle and Vocabulary among Malaysian Adult Learners

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### Abstract

*For second language learners, language proficiency is normally gained through formal instructions in the English as a second language classroom. However, besides the classroom, language can also be learned in a natural setting, for example, through social interactions. This study examines social interaction as an alternative approach to improving English language proficiency. A total of 93 students participated in the study. Sixty of the students were from the school of education, and 38 were from a private university. The participants took an Online English level and vocabulary test as part of data collection of this study. The data analysis was conducted using two multiple regression models in SPSS version 22. The multiple regressions yielded a correlational report between the social circle and English language proficiency among the students. Results demonstrated that the students' social circle was close*

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( $M=60$ ). These variables are not critical when accounting for social and close circles independently in a regression model. Only vocabulary was detected as a significant factor influencing the students' English proficiency. However, the interaction between the social circle and vocabulary positively contributes to English proficiency. This finding supports the social capital in which learning can be enhanced through social interactions within a social circle. Furthermore, this finding calls for teachers' and education practitioners' attention to facilitate vocabulary learning through social interactions.

**Keywords:** Adult learning, language learning, social context, social capital, social interaction.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Would interacting in English in daily life with friends contribute to language gain among ESL learners? Recent research in ELT reported that some ESL learners showed reluctance to communicate in L2, both inside and outside classrooms (Soo & Goh, 2021; Waluyo & Bakoko, 2022). As a solution to the arising issue, we believe social interactions in a natural environment can be an alternative approach in addition to the formal classroom instructions for ESL learners to boost learning of L2. Milroy's (1987) social network theory aligns with this claim. Milroy has established a connection on how ESL learners' social circles, namely family members, friends, and peers, could either catalyze or hinder their L2 learning. Language learning can be enhanced through interactions with the target language in numerous settings (Loewen & Sato, 2018), including the natural environment. Among the language gains learners can get from interacting with their peers are vocabulary and listening comprehension. Therefore, this study argues for social interaction as an alternative approach to formal classroom instruction among undergraduate ESL students.

Studies have shown strong evidence of the positive role of social interactions toward cognitive development in L1 (Lefebvre et al., 2016; Verga & Kotz, 2013). The influence of social interactions on the development of L2, however, lacks exploration and evidence. Additionally, research has mainly included social interaction factors in immersive settings, such as a study abroad program (Fraser, 2002; Whitworth, 2006) or the immigrant group (De Wilde et al., 2020). In such situations (i.e., study abroad or an immersive program), the degree of social participation in the second language is also optimized. On the other hand, second language proficiency has been optimally studied from the aspects of school or pedagogical influence and parental or family contribution. However, the out-of-school and out-of-home factors concerning language proficiency have not been well-explored and documented. This gap warrants a scientific investigation of the role of social relationships in developing English language proficiency.

A lot of L2 instructions have benefitted from the interactions with teachers and peers in classroom settings. Collaborative learning pedagogy, for example, was intended to enhance classroom interactions. There is no doubt about the rich, positive effect of a collaborative approach toward learning achievement among language learners, dating back to Vygotsky (1978), who promoted the sociocultural theory,

which claimed that learners are social beings, and social interactions should support language learning. In addition, Swain et al. (2002) found the effects of the second language (L2) proficiency differences in pairs and patterns of interaction on L2 learning. They found a significant, positive impact of pair interaction on performance in L2 tasks.

However, learning can also occur outside of class, especially in a society where English is a second language. Malaysian children are mostly bilinguals. In Asia's melting pot, students are exposed to English as early as preschool. Besides, children also learn Arabic and Mandarin as extra courses in school. Besides the formal instruction, children growing up in Malaysia can be exposed to many other languages as the country's main population comprises three ethnic groups: Malay—speaking Malaysian language, Chinese—speaking Cantonese, and Indian—mostly speaking Tamil. English is considered a second language due to the high exposure to the language in everyday life. Therefore, language learning in Malaysia can occur in formal and informal settings. Language learning can occur in various contexts: at school, at home, or community. The context usually characterizes whether the process of learning is formal or informal. This study refers to informal learning as learning that arises from everyday activities (De Wilde et al., 2020). Language can also be learned informally through daily interactions with people speaking in the target language, in this case, English. According to Dewey et al. (2013), language proficiency fosters and can be facilitated by interaction and social relationships with others. Anchoring on this statement, this study intends to analyze the linkages between L2 learners' social circle and language proficiency.

Language learning can occur in a natural environment where learners acquire a second language through interactions in the target language. Among the language gains a learner can get through target language interactions with their peers are vocabulary and listening comprehension. Language learners have relied on vocabulary to support proficiency because a large vocabulary bank can be linked to high proficiency. Research investigating ESL learners' proficiency has established the critical role of vocabulary (Oliver & Young, 2016). More specifically, an aural vocabulary of language learners can positively contribute to listening skills (Lange & Matthews, 2020) which is a factor of proficiency. In addition, vocabulary development is associated with many factors, such as reading books for leisure (Sullivan & Brown, 2015) and interactions (Verga & Kotz, 2013). This study is particularly interested in diving into the effect of social interactions on vocabulary development.

Based on the above rationales, this study argues for social interaction as an alternative approach to formal classroom instruction among undergraduate ESL students. Specifically, we inquired two questions:

- (1) What are the roles of learners' social circle and vocabulary size on their English language proficiency?
- (2) Do the learners' social circle and vocabulary link to their language proficiency?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To better understand the issues addressed in this study, we critically reviewed relevant literature and the social capital theory that embodies the discussion of social

interaction. In addition, the role of vocabulary and what shapes the vocabulary among language learners are also reviewed in relation to second language proficiency.

## **2.1 Social Circle**

Interactions take place in many different forms, verbally as well as non-verbally. Besides, they can be in the form of a discussion or just a simple chit-chat between friends. Therefore, a learner's social circle plays a vital role in the interaction using the target language. Many studies have investigated the effect of immersive interactions on language proficiency among EFL speakers who have undergone a study abroad program (Kinginger, 2011; Tseng et al., 2021). However, not much research, to our knowledge, has investigated social interaction within the context of English as a second language.

A social circle in language learning refers to a group of individuals with which a language learner usually interacts. In this case, the interaction involves a form of communicative intention; that is, a sender intends to convey a message to the receiver (Verga & Kotz, 2013). For a communicative act to be effective, both the sender and receiver must understand the message intended to be delivered (de Ruiter et al., 2010). Firth and Firth (2014) called this ability mentalizing and have traced the evidence of mentalizing among infants and adults. For example, Tomasello and Carpenter (2007) reported that the infants they observed could use the caregiver's gaze direction as a cue to orient their attention; this behavior displays infants' mentalizing ability to communicate. Similarly, Newman-Norlund et al. (2009) documented that adults process their mentalizing capability through cues such as the identity of the partner they communicate with. Furthermore, language aspects, such as speaking rate and words used, also can influence the communication effectiveness in a dyad (Shockley et al., 2007). These research records showed that social interaction influences communication, especially in making meaning of a message.

For the above rationales, a social circle, in which two or more individuals interact using verbal language, can influence the language proficiency of a member of the circle. However, Verga and Kotz (2013) cautioned that the influence might not be the same in L2 learners due to the nature that L2 is learned formally through explicit formal training. Interactions could happen verbally through a discussion or chit-chat among friends. Therefore, a learner's social circle plays an essential role in the interaction in the target language. Many studies investigated the effect of immersive interactions on language proficiency among EFL speakers who have undergone a study abroad program. Social interaction is also a pedagogy implemented in the classroom in which students are assigned to interact with peers using L2. To better understand the role of a social circle in L2 acquisition, we reviewed the relevant theories below.

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## **2.2 Social Capital Theory**

Language learning beyond the classroom may be informal but not unstructured; the structure lies within the context and cues of the social interactions, called the social

structure of a learning community (Palfreyman, 2011). Different social networks exist in a learning community, such as peer groups and neighborhoods. Social networks can be best explained by the social capital theory. According to Smith et al. (2011), social capital is embedded in relationships between individuals, their attributes, and their resources. They suggested that the social capital framework includes explicit and implicit relationships among individuals. An explicit connection links one individual to another based on some purposive action (e.g., sending an email, visiting) or a well-defined relationship (e.g., being a friend of, collaborating with). Individuals linked are aware of the explicit connections among them. On the other hand, an implicit affinity connects individuals based on loosely defined affinities or inherent similarities, such as similar hobbies or shared interests. Individuals may not be aware of the similarities in attitudes and behaviors among them.

As explained by the theory's founder, Coleman (1988), social capital is defined by its function. Therefore, in this study, we positioned social capital in the context of second language learning. For this specialization, we used the two domains from the language socialization capital framework: (1) the only explicit links are between participants and their listed friends, and (2) implicit links are determined only by the topics discussed with friends (Smith et al., 2011). This study specifically focused on investigating the second domain, the influence of social capital—measured by social circles—on L2 Proficiency.

### 2.3 Vocabulary Knowledge

The critical role of vocabulary knowledge in language learning has rich documentation in the literature. Hence, we can find numerous formal and informal vocabulary tests for learners of different backgrounds and age groups. In addition, attempts to examine the number of words necessary to perform a particular language skill has also been explored. For instance, Nation (2006) suggested that around 8000 to 9000 words are required for reading comprehension, and about 6000 to 7000 words are necessary for listening comprehension. Indeed, vocabulary size matters for a language learner's proficiency.

Vocabulary learning in L2 has been observed in formal settings as well as in informal settings. Formally, vocabulary instructions are provided in classrooms coupled with activities such as word attack, aural input (Zhang & Graham, 2020), and multimodal approach (McLean et al., 2020). Informally, two factors have been reported to contribute to vocabulary learning in L2 positively: home language usage and incidental learning. The effect of home language use on vocabulary learning has mostly been investigated among young children, while incidental learning is mainly observed among young and adult language learners. Incidental vocabulary learning takes place through a variety of approaches. Rodgers and Webb (2020) investigated the effects of viewing 7+ hours of television on incidental vocabulary learning among 87 Japanese college students learning English as a foreign language. They suggested that students achieved significant gains in vocabulary through television viewing and frequency of word occurrence played a substantial role in the relationship. Other studies have associated significant improvement in vocabulary through listening to songs (Pavia et al., 2019), reading newspapers (Shakibaei et al., 2019), and recreational reading (Malone, 2018).

In second language learning, vocabulary knowledge is predictive of a learner's success in performing language skills. It has the most vital role in children's reading and listening comprehension (Gyllstad et al., 2015; Nation, 2006; Nation & Beglar, 2007). The Componential Model of Reading has even highlighted that the ability to recognize and make meaning of words is the main element that comprises the cognitive domain of reading (Joshi, 2019). Among adult learners, the positive benefit of vocabulary is recorded in all skills. For example, Uchihara and Harada (2018) investigated the relationship between English vocabulary knowledge and self-perceived performance on four language skills (i.e., reading, listening, writing, speaking) among undergraduate students in Japan. They found that students with larger vocabulary sizes were more confident in speaking and writing. Additionally, Hacking and Tschirner (2017), who investigated Russian college students on English as a foreign language, found that there are statistically significant lexical minimums associated with different levels of reading proficiency.

Lee and Macaro (2013) described the impact of teachers' language use, first language Korean (L1) or second language English, on vocabulary acquisition and retention in two age groups: elementary school children after just a few years of English study (n=443) and adults at university with demonstrably higher levels of proficiency (n=286). It is placed in the sense of policymakers' regular suggestions that second language teachers should optimize the use of the target language from the start of instruction. They concentrated on the impact of language use on vocabulary learning because vocabulary instruction often requires first-language use, including in a communicative classroom where English is the primary language. Their research found that young and adult learners profit from making connections with the native language, but young learners learn more than adult learners. The variations in second language proficiency levels, which often follow age differences in the second language instructed learners, are a contributing but not a deciding factor.

#### **2.4 ESL Learning in Malaysia**

In Malaysia, English is a second language. The role of ESL is described by the introduction of English early on in schools, starting from primary to universities. In addition, most universities in Malaysia use English as a means of instruction. Overall, English Proficiency in Malaysia is rated high in the region, which is 28 out of 112 (Education First, 2021). However, there has been a significant decline in the past years (i.e., 12 out of 61 in 2018).

Despite its role as a second language, English is mostly learned formally in a classroom setting. However, English language learners in Malaysia are advantaged because exposure to English is relatively high. Malaysia was ranked with high English proficiency among countries where English is not a mother tongue (Lim, 2019). For this reason, fostering English learning through social interaction is possible, and the role of the social circle could be a contributing factor for language learners, especially adult learners. Despite Malaysian students' benefits in English language learning, many still struggle to achieve the expected proficiency.

Reviewing English learning in Malaysia, studies revealed that English language teaching heavily emphasizes reading, writing, and grammar, as these aspects are tested in schools and national exams (Musa et al., 2012; Rahman, 2005). They also found that teachers tend to use the national language (i.e., Bahasa Malaysia) to facilitate

English subjects: the rationale for using the first language could be due to the low proficiency of the students or the teacher.

However, language learning in universities is quite different from in schools. For example, Sarudin et al. (2008) documented that university graduates in Malaysia demonstrate apprehension of English, and their English command is good. In more recent research, Kho-Yar et al. (2018) examined ESL undergraduates in Malaysia about their ability to interact in English. It was measured by willingness to communicate by employing a structural equation model to evaluate the role of self-efficacy, attitude, efficiency, and motivation in the students' willingness to communicate in English. The findings indicated that learners' personalities directly affected motivation and willingness to interact in English, which concluded that students with high self-efficacy tend to communicate more in English.

Despite the high Proficiency of English among university students in Malaysia, code-switching is a common practice. However, Uglu et al. (2013), investigating code-switching used by Malaysian ESL students at the tertiary level, found that code-switching can facilitate positive English communication. Code-switching takes place when students interact. This study showed the importance of peer interactions for English language learners. The question is whether the learners' social circle role can positively influence their English language gain.

### 3. METHODS

This study was conducted on 98 undergraduate students from the Teaching English as a second language program in two higher learning institutions in Malaysia. The levels of students vary from first-year students to seniors to control for the effect of the study period on English proficiency. Their participation in this research was entirely voluntary, and the ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 23. Sixty students were from a college of teacher training on the East Coast of Malaysia, while the other 38 were from a private university in West Malaysia. The nature of the language teacher population shows that there are only a few male English teachers compared to their female counterparts; there were only 12 males compared to 86 female participants. This extreme imbalance in the data does not allow us to compare social circles based on gender and thus could not examine the effect of gender on L2 Proficiency.

This study employed a quantitative approach in which multiple numerical data were primarily collected. In addition, data in wording were also collected but later coded and converted into numerical data. The quantitative approach was deemed suitable for correlational study, so this study aimed to examine the relationships between social relationships with English language proficiency among the students.

#### 3.1 Data Collection

The participants were asked to follow a procedure to collect the data for the social circle and close the social circle. First, they were given one piece of A4 paper in which they were asked to list the names of their acquaintances with whom they communicate in English. This list was then counted, and the number was collected for the data of the social circle. After that, using the same list, they were asked to circle

the people they considered having a close relationship with. Then, the number of circled names was counted and collected for the data of close social circles.

To measure the students' L2 proficiency, we administered an online language test called *The Online English Level Test*, available on the British Council webpage, which takes approximately 40 minutes to complete (British Council, 2016). According to their webpage, the test measures an approximate indication of the learners' English proficiency. The content of the test covers reading, writing, speaking, and grammar.

To measure the vocabulary size of the participants, we utilized the free vocabulary test available on the internet called *testyourvocab.com* (<http://testyourvocab.com/blog/>). This website is a research-based product that allows anyone, especially language learners, to estimate how many English words they know. The test comprises three parts: the first part with a handful of words to determine the general vocabulary level, a second part with a more extensive but narrower selection of words to determine the vocabulary level with greater precision, and a final (optional) survey to collect statistical information. The tool uses an algorithm explained in detail on the website to calculate the size. The standard error for the test was reported at .0527 at a 95% confidence interval.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

Two multiple regression analyses were performed to analyze the data. The first regression model included all criterion factors together. The second model included all variables in the first model and quantified the effect of the interaction between social circle and vocabulary. For both models, the level of expected statistical probability was set at  $p < .05$ . Besides, the statistical significance was also analyzed based on the values of the  $F$  ratio and the confidence interval. These combinations of values are vital to check that the result yields a statistically significant finding. Moreover, we evaluated the  $R^2$  value as the effect size for this study. Using Cohen's convention of  $R^2$  as an effect size, we translate that the variance explained of 2% is small, 13% or larger is medium, and 26% or more is large (Chen et al., 2010).

## 4. RESULTS

The descriptive analysis results showed that, on average, the size of the student's social circle was 60, indicating that, on average, they socially know about 60 people. The close social circle size was much smaller, which was 30. This means that, on average, they have a close social relationship with 30 people. The mean score of the L2 Proficiency Test was relatively high ( $M=79.102$ ,  $SD=8.488$ , with a maximum score of 96.000). On the other hand, the mean score of the Vocabulary Test was much lower than the maximum score ( $M=13,224$ ,  $SD=5204$ , from the maximum score of 31.500), indicating a large variance for the test ( $V=27089046$ ).

Model 1 was computed to address Research Question 1, examining the role of social circle, close social circle, and vocabulary knowledge on the student's English proficiency. The multiple regression (Model 1) results showed a 12.9% variance explained overall. This  $R^2$  value indicated a model fit as it was supported by the significant results of other statistical test indicators ( $F=2.871$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, only vocabulary size effect was deemed significant on L2 proficiency ( $\beta=.341$ ,  $t=2.743$ ,



$p < .05$ ,  $CI = .000-.010$ ), leaving the social circle and close circle as non-significant factors on English proficiency among the students ( $t < 1.96$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

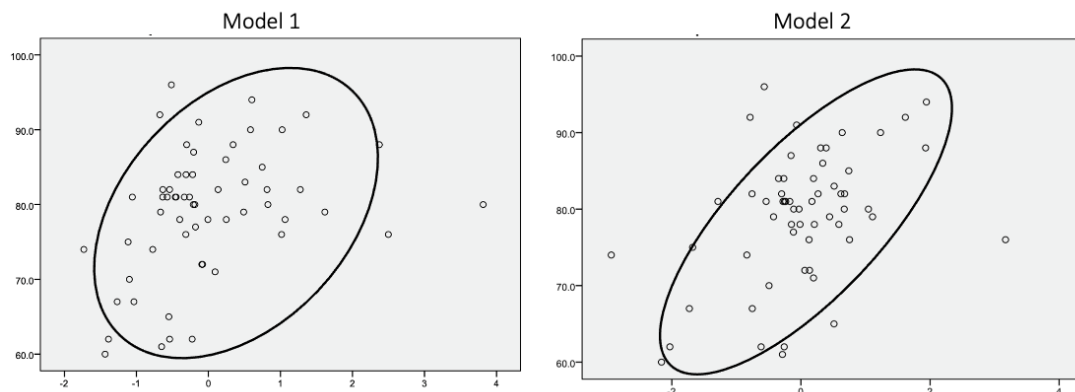
Model 2 was performed to address Research Question 2. We included the interaction effects of the social circle with vocabulary knowledge (SC\*Vocab) in the regression model (Model 2). The analysis result revealed that the  $R^2$  value increased to 18.2%, indicating a stronger model fit as supported by the significance of the statistical test indicators ( $F = 3.300$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In other words, this result can be translated as the interaction effect has a medium impact on the students' L2 proficiency. More importantly, the increase in  $R^2$  of Model 2 of more than 5% is worth pursuing the explanatory and detailed discussion. See Table 1 for the regression coefficients of the dependent factors.

**Table 1.** Multiple Regression Coefficients for the interaction model (Model 2).

Model	Beta	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> -value	95% CI	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Model 1					
Social Circle	-.130	-1.017	.314	-.081	.026
Close Social Circle	.001	.005	.996	-.079	.098
Vocabulary	.341	2.743	.011	.001	.021
Model 2					
Social Circle	-.784	-2.144	.030	-.819	-.008
Close Social Circle	-.009	-.071	.994	-.099	.092
Vocabulary	.030	.143	.887	-.001	.001
SC*Vocab	.793	2.224	.016	.000	.890

\*Dependent variable: L2 proficiency

The significant influence of the interaction between the social circle and vocabulary knowledge on English proficiency (Beta=.793,  $t = 2.224$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $CI = .000-.890$ ) indicated the important role of the social circle when combined with vocabulary knowledge. In other words, vocabulary knowledge is enhanced by the social circle's influence on English proficiency. Interestingly, the presence of interaction in the model overshadowed the vocabulary factor on its own. This result suggested that the effect of social circle is first detected in learners' vocabulary, which significantly impacted L2 Proficiency.



**Figure 1.** The scatterplots for Model 1 (no interaction) and Model 2 (with interaction).

Importantly, Model 2, in which the interaction between social circle and vocabulary was included in the analysis, showed a stronger model than Model 1 without the interaction effect, as seen in the scatterplots in Figure 1. Both graphs show a positive regression trend, but there is a difference in the dispersion of the data. The data captured by the Model 2 scatterplot are more clustered than the illustration in Model 1, in which the data are more spread out.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The present study has underscored the importance of understanding the role of the social circle in L2 Proficiency and vocabulary. Collectively, social circle and vocabulary accounted for 18.2% of the variance in L2 Proficiency, and, importantly, this study detected the interaction effect between social circle and vocabulary. These findings align with those from [Sundqvist and Wikström \(2015\)](#), who concluded that social interaction (in gameplay) paired with vocabulary could improve students' proficiency in writing.

In the initial model in which the interaction effect was accounted for, only vocabulary size was positively linked with L2 proficiency. However, previous research has detected a positive effect of vocabulary size on listening comprehension ([Alavi & Akbarian, 2012](#); [Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010](#)), reading comprehension ([McLean et al., 2020](#); [Şen & Kuleli, 2015](#); [Zhang & Zhang, 2020](#)), and speaking ([Uchihara & Clenton, 2020](#)). The social circle, however, did not contribute to L2 Proficiency as an independent variable.

Uniquely, the social circle was detected to influence L2 proficiency when treated as an interaction variable with vocabulary knowledge. This finding supports the concept of social capital in language learning. Learning beyond the classroom is a structured process in which learners use and internalize the language with a particular purpose, that is, to interact with their counterparts ([Palfreyman, 2011](#)). Importantly, this study extended the social capital theory by highlighting vocabulary's role in enhancing the social circle's effect on language proficiency.

The finding implies that language proficiency among learners through a combination of social capital and vocabulary knowledge. In other words, having a large social circle with which learners communicate in the target language does not guarantee to contribute to their English Proficiency. However, a large social circle complemented with a large vocabulary bank may benefit learners' English language proficiency. [Lefebvre et al. \(2016\)](#) support this finding, suggesting that social interaction and cognitive and social capital positively enhance learning.

Classroom teachers have applied the social capital theory to second language teaching and pedagogy in which peer or social interaction is used to improve students' vocabulary knowledge ([Tocaimaza-Hatch & Santo, 2020](#)). Based on the findings of this study, the practice and application can be extended by creating social circles among L2 students with different levels of vocabulary knowledge. This combination of different vocabulary levels aims to enhance the language learner network among L2 students.

Besides the social capital theory, the finding of this study is also relevant to natural pedagogy (NP). Only a few studies have examined the natural settings, i.e., the social interactions outside the classroom walls, as a natural pedagogy that can also

boost vocabulary learning of L2 learners. Atkinson and Shvidko (2019) introduced the concept of NP as a tool for enacting second language learning and teaching. NP is proposed through the belief that humans have been social beings since infancy as infants learn through eye contact, facial expressions, and verbal cues. This learning pattern continues through adulthood; language can also be acquired similarly. However, little research has investigated the application of NP in second language learning. The result of the present study, the positive interaction effect of the social circle and vocabulary size towards L2 proficiency, provides a shred of initial evidence for the potential of NP in L2 learning.

Another point of result that this study highlighted was the positive linkage between social circle vocabulary size and L2 Proficiency. This finding is in line with Kashiwa and Benson (2017). They adopted an ecological perspective on second language learning among Chinese students studying abroad in Australia. They found that out-of-class language learning experiences (interactions with language agents) can enhance gains from classroom instructions.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study is among the few that have included social circle as a factor in enhancing L2 proficiency. The interesting findings informed us that social interaction is important when combined with vocabulary to improve L2 proficiency. However, social interaction, on its own, does not play a significant role in improving English language proficiency among adult learners.

This study has some limitations. First, it only included the social circle and vocabulary factor and did not include interaction practices. This limitation was due to the minimal tasks we wanted to give to our participants. Voluntary participation can be maximized when participants do not have to be involved in completing multiple tasks for the research. In addition, we only included students from two institutions, one public and one private. There are many more teacher training programs in Malaysia; however, we managed to include only 98 undergraduate TESL students due to the cost and time. However, the participants' profiles justified that the data represents the population, as our participants included more female and male students and were from various levels of their study (from the first year to the final year).

For the acknowledged limitations above, we recommend future research to extend the inclusion of interaction practices factors such as the frequency of L2 exchange within the social circle. Furthermore, we highly recommend that future studies explore the nature of this research among younger learners. It will be interesting to trace the influence of social interaction among younger learners.

Finally, this finding may shed light for the practitioners and curriculum designers of English as a second language to give more attention and priority to vocabulary knowledge development among ESL students. This is because it could be a good contributor or catalyst to the language proficiency of second language learners. Social interaction plays a role in L2 development when paired with vocabulary knowledge. In other words, to enhance the effect of vocabulary on L2 development, ESL teachers need to exercise social interaction activities in teaching and learning.

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