DISTANCE LEARNERS' EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR SITUATIONAL BARRIERS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Students face various barriers in learning English via distance education. The purpose of this explanatory mixed methods study was to collect quantitative and qualitative data regarding students' emotional intelligence (EI) and the situational barriers (SB) they faced in learning English via distance education. In phase one, 238 students voluntarily submitted their questionnaires containing Schutte's Self-Report Inventory Emotional Intelligence scale. The mean EI score of the distance learners was 130. Based on the EI scores, three subgroups of respondents; HighEI, MidEI, and LowEI were identified. In phase two, 18 participants chosen based on their EI scores were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis. The qualitative data revealed eight major situational barriers. Out of these, SB1 Job, SB2 Family and Home, and SB4 Time were most frequently cited. The study also found that distance learners' EI was significantly related to their perceptions of the situational barriers to learning English through distance education. Studies affirmed higher EI students are better at moderating the negative effects of challenging circumstances and achieving their goals. Thus, it is crucial to fortify students' EI through training, mentoring, and counselling programs to empower them to moderate their barriers, persevere, communicate with others, and make informed decisions to achieve academic success.

Keywords: Distance learning, English, emotional intelligence, situational barriers.

INTRODUCTION

Studies show that students often face difficulties learning English through distance education (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006; Hazaymeh, 2021; Homayouni et al., 2020; Kulusakli, 2022; Oxford, 2015; Rivaldo, Noldy & Tirya, 2022). Unlike students who learn English in traditional (or face-to-face) language classroom settings, distance learners' learning experiences may not be as organized. The remoteness of the distance learning environment may result in the students' difficulties to communicate with their lecturers which might lead to isolation among the language students (White, 2003). Additionally, Kulusakli (2021) reiterated that learning a language from a distance is more problematic than other subjects because of the lack of opportunity for interaction. These barriers to adult learning can be tough and can result in emotional distress (Cross, 1992). Oxford, 2015 stated that English language learners have encountered nervousness, humiliation, fury, vulnerability, gloom, and perplexity which may affect accomplishment. It is important to address these problems so that the distance learners' progress in English language learning is not impeded.

Correspondingly, in Malaysia, distance learners at the School of Distance Education (SDE), Universti Sains Malaysia (USM), also encounter "a variety of academic-related challenges, as well as personal, professional, and social duties that come from the complexities of their adult life circumstances" (Dass, 2001, p.17). Dass highlighted that the participants in her study had difficulties with their English language classes. The purpose of this explanatory mixed methods case study was to collect both quantitative and qualitative data regarding students' EI and the situational barriers they faced in learning English via distance education at the School of Distance Education (SDE), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). It has been fifty years since SDE pioneered distance education by offering working adults in Malaysia a chance to pursue higher education through distance learning. The programs aim to provide adults in the workforce with a degree qualification to benefit the country. SDE now uses a hybrid distance education mode to deliver SDE's courses, it includes print, multi-media materials, and ICT. SDE offers four undergraduate courses: Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Social Science, and Bachelor of Management. Students must devote at least four years to their studies. Most of the classes are taught in Malay. However, the distance learners at the SDE, USM must obtain the required four English credit units to graduate. Based on their English results prior to entering SDE, many students enroll in the English Level II and English Level III courses. The courses emphasize the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing to provide the students with better communication abilities. These courses are worth two units of credit each. To pass the course, students must obtain a 'C' grade and above. The students are provided e-learning modules, references, recorded lectures via the e-learning portal, and synchronous lectures during an intensive course spanning two weeks during the semester break for the full-time students at USM. The students get the opportunity to meet their specific course teachers, course mates, and complete certain coursework assignments and continuous evaluations during the intensive course. Course evaluation includes coursework, continuous assessment, and the final examination. At times, students who have completed all their major and minor courses were unable to graduate because they have not successfully obtained a passing grade for their English course/s. This made learning English a painful process.

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN ADULTS' SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Knowles (1973,1984) stressed that to teach adults effectively, educators must grasp the characteristics of adult learners and adult learning principles. In andragogy, instructors must understand that adult learners demand practical, relevant content, materials, and activities that are tailored to their needs and interests. Based on this, it can be said that students' attitudes and views regarding learning English may become exacerbated because they are learning English as a requirement and not due to their own desire to learn. The challenges to learn English can become heightened as the students are working adults who are returning to formal education on a part-time basis. When these working individuals participate in distance education, they might face multiple challenges as they deal with the numerous responsibilities that they bring on board (Saw et al., 1999). Meanwhile, Azli et al. (2000) highlighted gender differences and found that due to female adult students' responsibilities as wives and mothers they had less social interaction. Bok (2021) shared that:

> *"Adult learners spent the most hours in the day on their work, estimated to be eight to nine hours. Following this, they spent six to seven hours on family-related tasks and another six to seven hours for rest and sleep. This left about three to four hours of studying time for adult learners" (pp. 24-25).*

Invariably, distance learners face a variety of barriers that cause emotional turmoil, affecting their participation and achievement (Cross, 1992; Hurd, 2000). Situational barriers (SB) refer to hurdles such as occupation, family, monetary, communication, location, English language challenges, and insufficient social aid. Sugilar (2021, p. 177) identified the "lack of support services for students, lack of student motivation, lack of information regarding online tutorials, and technological problems linked to online tutorials" as obstacles to learning for distance learners. Addressing these barriers to student learning that can cause emotional distress is vital to ensure that distance learners succeed in their language learning effort and distance education goal.

Researchers generally agreed that learning a second language is challenging and emotionally draining (Arnold, 1999, as cited in Oxford, 2015). Language learners are confronted with a deeply uncomfortable psychological notion (Guiora, 1983), which is emotionally draining, stressful, and hard, particularly for

distance learners. Anxiety, embarrassment, wrath, uncertainty, despair, and perplexity have all been observed in language learners (Oxford, 2015). Such impaired concentration and attention in the target language can lower the student's learning ability, thus reducing the learner's potential to attain academic performance and success (Horowitz, Horowitz & Koop, 1986, as cited in Homayouni et al., 2020, p. 143).

According to Ellis (1994), second language learning and acquisition is a complex process involving many connected components. Affective criteria for acquisition, according to Ellis, include a good attitude toward language speakers. McGroarty (1996) explains that attitude involves three components: cognitive, affective, and conative. The cognitive component focuses on cognition and thinking, the affective component on emotions, and the conative component on how an individual acts on those thoughts and feelings. Krashen's (1994) Monitor theory's Affective Filter Hypothesis clarifies why some people can learn a second language while others cannot. Due to attitude, worry, a lack of self-confidence, and motivation, some learners may not acquire adequate input. If a learner is frightened, lacks motivation, or has low self-esteem, the affective filter will be high, preventing language acquisition. If the situation is reversed, the affective filter will be low, and this facilitates language acquisition. Hurd (2007) and Oxford (2015) equally underscored that emotions play an important part in English language learning.

Scholars have long recognized the importance of emotions in shaping people's reasoning, decision-making, and behaviour (Hewstone & Stroebe, 2001; Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000). The inability to relate to one's emotions has an impact on the individual's ability to formulate appropriate judgments as emotional cues are essential for making decisions. Having too little emotion has profoundly negative consequences for decision-making and may be just as harmful as excessive emotion has long been thought to be (Bechara et al., 2000). LeBlanc et al. (2015) asserted that "It is now recognized that emotion and cognition processing are integrated in the brain and therefore jointly contribute to behavior, particularly memory, attention and decision-making" (cited in Hutchinson et al., 2018, p. 607). Hutchinson et al. (2018) opined, "Given the improvements that have happened in understanding the function of emotion in neuropsychology and cognition, we suggest that those researchers devote more emphasis to examining in greater depth the role and relevance of emotion" (p. 608).

Hence, there is a need to study the role of EI in the distance language learning environment. Proponents of EI argue that the EI construct is "a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Mayer & Salovey, 1993, p. 433) that is essential for success in various areas of life (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Schutte et al., 1998). EI was popularized by Goleman in 1995. Mayer and Salovey (1997) further defined EI as "abilities to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (p. 10).

Research has demonstrated that EI is related to successful educational outcomes of students (Bar-On & Parker, 2000; Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Schutte et al., 1998). Researching EI and students' motivation, resilience, and intention to engage in physical activities, Trigueros et al. (2019) discovered that "emotional intelligence is favorably related to happy emotions and negatively related to negative emotions" (p. 7)". Maguire et al. (2017), documented that EI is reliable in predicting cognitive and affective engagement in higher education. A study of medical students found that EI was associated with exam and clinical success (Chew et al., 2013). Similarly, MacCann et al. (2020) discovered favorable associations between EI and academic performance. Zeidner and Matthews (2018) asserted that EI can effectively regulate negative emotions such as fear, envy, and unhappiness that might affect students' ability and motivation to focus on their schoolwork. Overall, high EI students are more adept at regulating both their own and others' emotions to foster positive interactions with their classmates, which results in better academic performance.

Several studies have investigated the impact of EI on distance and online learning. Berenson et al. (2008) looked at resilience, which is considered a feature of EI that is subsumed under the larger construct of effective self-awareness as a predictor of performance in online learning environments. It was found that successful students demonstrated high resilience in and have "the persistence to work through difficult situations with self-confidence" (Kemp, 2002, as cited in Berenson et al., 2008, p. 3). Zahed-Babelan and Moenikiab (2010) explored the role of EI in predicting students' academic achievement in distance

education. Their findings backed up previous research showing remote learners relied on independent learning and intrapersonal qualities to maintain self-control in a distance learning program. They controlled negative emotions such as fear, worry, and annoyance to promote positive emotions such as enthusiasm and a sense of success to succeed in distance learning. Engin's (2017) study revealed that students with higher EI showed more online learning readiness. Furthermore, the self-control dimension of EI predicted students' readiness for online learning more accurately than the other EI aspects. Students with high EI social skills demonstrated successful self-directed learning behaviors such as implementing own study plans, seeking help when learning challenges emerge, good time management, choosing their own learning targets, and having high learning expectations. Valizadeh (2016) reported that distance learners' autonomy, defined as "the ability to manage one's own social surroundings and activities" (p. 22), was associated with their EI. There was a strong link between learner autonomy and the EI component of independence that is linked to their language learning experience, in which they demonstrated devoted effort, activity, and active involvement in distance learning. Buzdar et al. (2016) found that the distance learners' readiness and success with online learning were significantly connected to their EI abilities such as self-emotions assessment, others-emotions appraisal, emotion usage, and emotion regulation.

Numerous studies have investigated the effect of EI on English language learning. Pishghadam (2009) concluded that acquiring a second language was highly linked to numerous aspects of EI. Emotional regulation and stress management improved reading skills; a high level of EI and intrapersonal talents improved listening skills; while interpersonal and intrapersonal competence improved speaking skills, and good adaptability improved writing skills. These findings corresponded with Zarezadeh's (2013) results showing that EI had a good influence on Iranian students' English language development. Intrapersonal intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and overall mood were discovered to influence speaking skills because the mutual performance characteristics required for speaking rely on these facilities. Students' EI in terms of stress management, maintaining a positive mood, and adapting to the context of a text aided them in reading skills. Students with higher levels of emotional awareness, self-esteem, and self-confidence were found to be better listeners. In Guven's (2016) study, university students who were able to understand their own and others' emotions were more inclined to use ICT and media resources to learn English. Guven clarified that learning a language is a social process that requires intrapersonal and interpersonal communication, as well as collaborative engagement, all of which are components of EI that lead to the use of ICT to improve English language acquisition.

Ebrahimi, et al. (2018) study found that the learners in the treatment group who received EI reinforcement improved their speaking significantly. The control group's speaking skills improved, but not as much as the treatment group's speaking abilities. These findings corroborated those of Soodmand Afshar and Rahimi's (2014) study, which found that learners with a high EI score had strong speaking ability. They concluded that learners who are better able to control their own and others' emotions may be deemed better English communicators than those who think critically. Soodmand Afshar et al. (2016) discovered that strategy use and EI were major predictors of second language accomplishment. They found that EI and language learning practices were substantially connected to second language achievement where higher EI students are better at regulating negative emotions. Correspondingly, "less emotionally intelligent learners are likely to succumb in the face of intricate and ill-defined situations and are unable to control destructive emotions" (p. 647). Aliasin & Abbasi (2020) stated that "the EI scales of general mood and interpersonal skills significantly contributed to the prediction of the use of metacognitive reading strategies by EFL learners" (p. 31). The results revealed a moderate and positive correlation between a) emotional intelligence and the use of metacognitive reading strategies; b) intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability, and general mood and global metacognitive strategies; c) intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, and general mood and problem-solving metacognitive strategies; and d) intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, and general mood that support metacognitive strategies. Hamdzah's (2020) study showed that Malaysian students' EI showed a substantial relationship with their Malaysian Institution English Test performance and even predict their performance. A study by Homayouni et al. (2020), indicated that EI had an impact on English language acquisition both directly and indirectly through the respondents' English language anxiety.

Overall, studies have investigated the impact of EI on distance learning and English language learning (Aliasin & Abbasi, 2020; Hamdzah, 2020; Homayouni et al., 2020; Valizadeh, 2016) but their data have

largely been quantitative in nature, with little qualitative data reported. The quantitative findings were insightful but did not include qualitative information about the distance English language learners. The purpose of this study was to fill the gap in the literature, by collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to address the following research question.

What do distance learners with various EI scores perceive as the major situational barriers in undertaking the English Level III course at the SDE, USM?

METHOD

In this study, an explanatory sequential mixed methods study was used. Firstly, a quantitative approach using a questionnaire survey was employed in phase one to obtain quantitative data from the participants. Next, a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was used in phase two to obtain a fuller picture of the issue being studied (Creswell, 2012). Students in the English Level III course were told about the project after receiving consent from SDE USM. A ten-minute briefing explained the study, emphasized the importance of the students' feedback for the improvement of the teaching and learning environment as well as reminded them to respond as honestly as possible. Students who volunteered to participate were informed of their rights and that their information would be anonymized to protect their privacy. They were informed that their participation would not earn them any extra points. The students were debriefed to avoid any negative consequences.

Participants

In phase one, 238 distance learners submitted their composite questionnaire, which had been piloted on 10% of the students who were omitted from the main study. The participants took between 50 minutes to 65 minutes to complete the questionnaire and informed consent. There were 118 males and 120 females among the participants. Their ages ranged from 28 to 52 years. A total of 182 participants (76.5%) out of the 238 participants reported they had never failed in their English courses at SDE, USM. However, 23.5% of the participants in the study had previously failed.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants' EI scores were obtained using Schutte's Self-Report Inventory (SSRI, Schutte et al., 1998) (please refer to Appendix A). It is an instrument widely used in the largest number of studies (Bru-luna et al, 2021). According to Schutte et al. (1998), the SSRI consists of "appraisal and expression of emotion in the self and others, regulation of emotion in the self and others, and usage of emotions in addressing issues" (p. 175) and has been established to produce reliable EI scores for adolescents and adults. The SSRI has high reliability, with an internal consistency of .82 (Schutte et al., 1998). In addition, confirmatory factor analysis for the four-factor EI construct of perceiving emotions, understanding emotions, facilitating emotions, and managing emotions indicated a good fit for measuring EI in Malaysia (Hussein et al., 2019). Thus, it was deemed suitable for this study. Also, it was easy to obtain free of charge provided due recognition is given during dissemination. 238 distance learners took part in the survey for phase one of the study. In phase two, six high, six medium, and six low EI students were purposively chosen based on their EI scores in phase one for the one-to-one interview. The semi-structured interviews were conducted informally. The interviews that lasted 60 to 80 minutes were conducted in a non-intimidating manner so as not to induce undue tension and anxiety for the respondents using the protocol as shown in Appendix B. SPSS Statistics for Windows (Version 26) was used to analyze the study's quantitative data from the survey questionnaire. The SSRI presented a Cronbach's alpha of .90 in this investigation, indicating a good level of internal consistency (Pallant, 2011). The mean of the EI scores was 130. The mode was 124 and the standard deviation was 12.96. Figure 1 shows the participants' EI categories and frequencies. Three subgroups of students were categorised based on calculations using the mean EI score and the standard deviation (12.96 was rounded to 13) of the sample. There were 43 students (17.9%) in the High EI group. This refers to students with EI scores of 143 and above (i.e., 1 SD above the mean EI score of the sample. There were 157 students (66.3%)

categorized as the Mid EI group, referring to students who scored more than 117 and below 143. Finally, 38 students (15.8%) were grouped into the Low EI group, which refers to students who obtained EI scores of 117 and below (i.e., 1 SD below the mean EI score of the sample.)
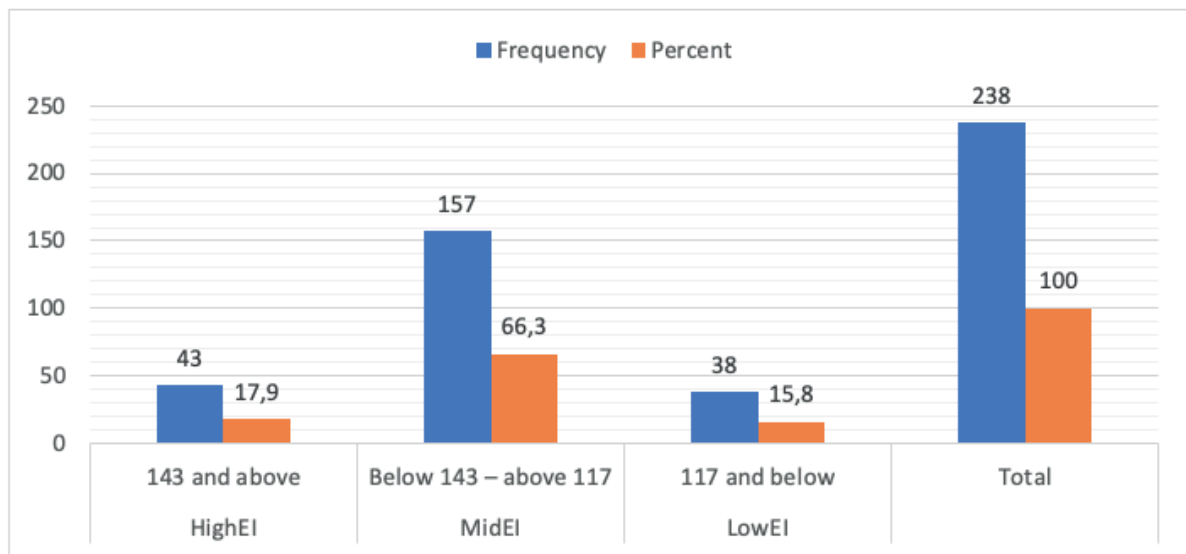

Figure 1. Participants' EI categories and frequencies

The audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed and analysed using content analysis. The codes The audio recordings from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using content analysis. The codes for each study topic were obtained by close reading, leading to the initial open coding of relevant words to address the research question. It entailed reading and rereading the interview transcripts until familiarity was achieved. These codes were then subjected to refinement, and they were compared, contrasted, and categorized into major themes according to their saliency in relation to the study (Bryman, 2004). For instance, in the first level of 'open' coding for 'Situational Barriers', some initial codes such as, 'work responsibilities', 'collegial relationships', 'training at work', 'work environment' and 'additional work activities' were derived. These codes then underwent a second level of 'axial' coding and were grouped under a more general conceptual heading namely, 'SB Job'. The codes were verified for reliability and refined till saturation in an iterative process. The secondary researcher acted as the co-rater. Inter-rater discussion and validation confirmed the consistency and reliability of the codes and themes. The inter-rater reliability for the 'Situational Barriers' codes was determined to be Kappa = 0.9, indicating that there was a good coding agreement based on the coding done on 10% of the transcripts (McHugh, 2012). To avoid confusion with other codes, all the situational barriers codes were given the letters SB and numbered. This coding process resulted in the classification of eight major Situational Barriers (SB1 – SB 8). The frequencies of the codes were counted and tabulated accordingly, and some statistical tests were conducted on the data obtained. Next, appropriate statistical tests were conducted to check for the significance of the frequencies. Non-parametric statistical tests were used at this stage because the "sample size for each group was small and the assumption of normality could not be verified" (Elliott and Woodward, 2007, p. 204). The differences between all the 18 distance learners' perceived situational barriers were tested using Friedman's test. As there might be differences in these opinions among the students based on their level of emotional intelligence, the Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted for comparison between the EI groups. Results are shown below.

FINDINGS

The major situational barriers reported by the 18 distance learners of various EI groups, and their frequencies are shown in Figure 2.
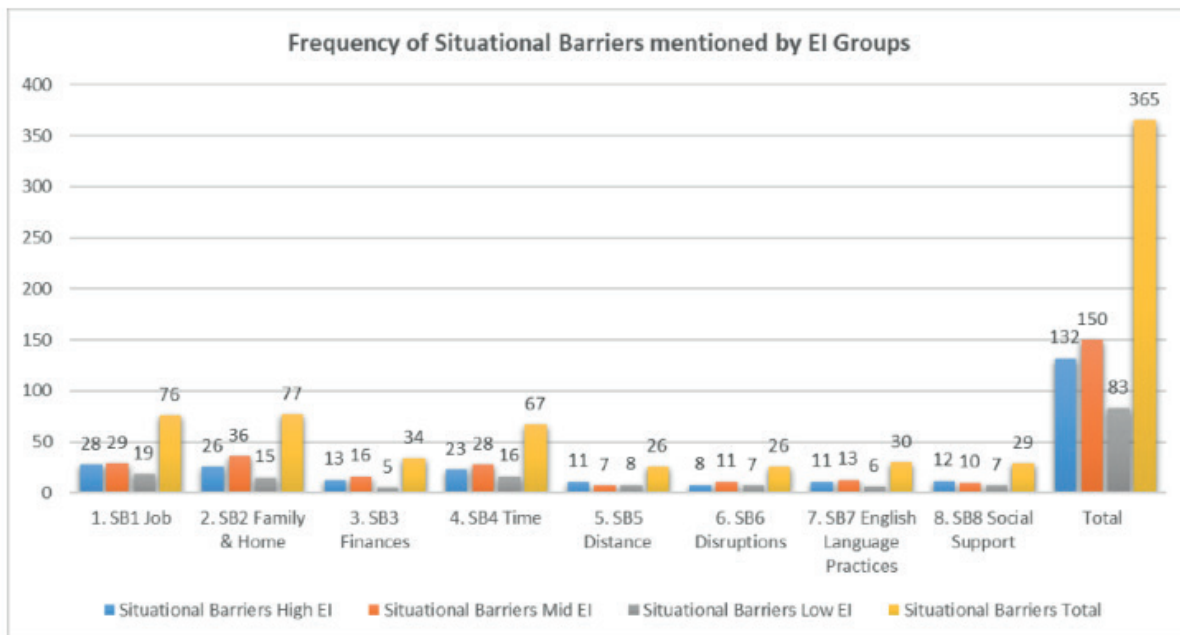
Figure 2. Frequency of situational barriers reported by students of various EI groups

SB2 Family and Home

The most frequently mentioned situational barrier was SB2 Family and Home (77 statements, 21.1%). The following are some of the respondents' statements.

> "I have to care for my five children – eleven, ten, nine, eight years old and a seven-month-old baby."

Similarly, another respondent also shared that, *"Everyone is healthy, but my special child needs more attention. I have got to feed him otherwise he will not eat. Sometimes he goes to sleep without his food. I feel guilty. He could only walk at the age of 3. He's better now. He had some problems with his heart. I had to bring him to the hospital."*

Moreover, another respondent mentioned, *"I need to give care to my aged parents who have diabetes. I bring them to see the doctor. My mother also suffers from knee injuries. My siblings live far away so I have to take responsibility."*

SB1 Job

SB1 Job (76 statements, 20.8%) proved to be the second most significant obstacle mentioned by the 18 respondents. Some comments included:

> "As a part-time distance learner, I felt most pressure from my job."

Furthermore, another student commented, *"Very busy, sometimes busy with official work, and doing part-time computer sale. Sometimes very tensed with work and studies. Of course, packed schedule."*

Likewise, another respondent disclosed, *"I have heard that my colleagues complained about my absence from work due to my studies, like when I attended the intensive course at USM or during exams. They had to cover for me and had to handle more tasks. I just kept quiet."*

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SB4 Time

The next obstacle was SB4 Time (67 times, 18.4%). These are some comments from the students:

> *"I can't find time for my studies."*

> *In addition, a student explained, "I concentrated on my major and minor subjects more."*

> *Besides that, another distance learner shared, "Throughout the year I was pressured with my work and also with my assignments for my major and minor courses, so I had little time for my English course."*

SB3 Finances

There were altogether 34 statements (9.3%) of SB3 Finances mentioned by the students. Here are some excerpts.

> *"My wife is not working, so I have to take an extra job to supplement the family income."*

> Interestingly, a student revealed, *"Actually, let me be honest. My income with the government is only about RM 500 per month. I need to pay the instalments of the car RM 800 and house RM 900. My wife has her own savings, I don't trouble her, her savings is for her own use. In addition, USM fees and I need to travel for classes, travelling expenses here and there."*

> Also, a respondent divulged, *"If I were to make an account, it'll be negative. In addition, there's the credit card, RM 300-400 a month. On top of that, moving into this new house. It costs a lot of money - credit card again."*

SB8 Social Support

The lack of SB8 Social Support (29 statements, 8.0%) was also reported by the respondents as difficulties to concentrate on their studies. These are some of the students' statements.

> *"I don't have many friends and peers doing the same course because I am repeating the English course."*
>
> Relatedly, one student lamented, *"I don't have any friends left. They have all graduated. I am all alone. I am very disappointed that I have invested so much time here."*

> Another respondent reflected, *"Sometimes my wife sees other families going for outings, but we can't. I explained that I need her to support me, not to do my assignments, just to be around me."*

SB7 English Language Practices

The students also conveyed that SB7 English Language Practices (30 statements, 8.2%) affected their studies. Some examples are indicated below.

> "It is difficult for a Malay to talk to another Malay in English. It feels funny, and people will say that you are showing off."

> In the same way, another respondent clarified that *"I don't get much exposure to English in my daily interactions."*

> Additionally, a student explicated, *"At college level, the English language is not given any emphasis, we only need to pass, and the lecturers do not emphasise the importance of English."*

SB5 Distance

There were 26 statements (7.1%) where students highlighted SB5 Distance as a situational barrier. Some instances are depicted below.

> "The regional centre for the teleconferences is far from my home."

> Another respondent illuminated, "I live in a remote area in East Malaysia which is isolated. It is difficult for me to get resources."

> Also, another student complained, "It is difficult for me because I live up in the highlands far away from most people."

SB6 Disruptions

The respondents recounted 26 statements (7.1%) of SB Disruptions as a situational barrier. The following are some examples.

> "A few of us formed a study group but one by one dropped out. The plan was disrupted."

> Another respondent recalled, "I was planning to have a baby. I did my laparoscopy. The doctor operated on my womb. The doctor carried out ARH Artificial insemination with my husband's sperm, 3 times. But failed. I feel down. The disruption to my plans affected my studies."

> Likewise, another distance learner shared, "I had an unplanned pregnancy. Although I was happy, it was difficult during the intensive course, I was left behind when others have gone on with their tasks and studies."

These statements exemplify the various situational barriers (SB1 – SB8) that distance learners encountered in learning English.

Comparison of Perceived Situational Barriers for All 18 Students

Table 1 shows Friedman's test results regarding the differences among the 18 respondents' perceived situational barriers.

Table 1. Comparison of perceived situational barriers across all 18 students using the Friedman's test

Situational Barriers	Frequencies	Mean Rank	χ^2	df	p
SB1 Job	76	7.08	79.487	7	0.000***
SB2 Family and Home	77	6.72			
SB3 Finances	34	3.56			
SB4 Time	67	6.28			
SB5 Distance	26	3.11			
SB6 Disruptions	26	2.83			
SB7 English Language Practices	30	3.11			
SB8 Social Support	29	3.31			

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

The situational barriers reported most significantly were 'SB1 Job' (mean rank 7.06), 'SB2 Family and Home' (mean rank 6.72) and 'SB4 Time' (mean rank 6.28) respectively. The least reported situational barrier was 'SB6 Disruptions' (mean rank 2.83).

Comparison of Situational Barriers among Students in Various EI Groups

Table 2 shows the Kruskal-Wallis test results comparing the perceived situational barriers across the High EI, Mid EI, and Low EI groups of students.

Table 2. Comparison of situational barriers between EI groups using the Kruskal-Wallis test

Situational Barriers	EI Grouping	N	Frequencies	Mean Rank	χ^2	df	p
SB1 Job	High EI	6	28	11.17	6.184	2	0.045*
	Mid EI	6	29	11.85			
	Low EI	6	19	5.50			
	Total	**18**	**76**				
SB2 Family and	High EI	6	26	10.83	6.813	2	0.033*
Home	Mid EI	6	36	12.58			
	Low EI	6	15	5.08			
	Total	**18**	**77**				
SB3 Finances	High EI	6	13	11.75	6.183	2	0.045*
	Mid EI	6	16	11.50			
	Low EI	6	5	5.25			
	Total	**18**	**34**				
SB4 Time	High EI	6	23	10.75	6.554	2	0.038*
	Mid EI	6	28	12.50			
	Low EI	6	16	5.25			
	Total	**18**	**67**				
SB5 Distance	High EI	6	11	11.67	1.652	2	0.438
	Mid EI	6	7	8.17			
	Low EI	6	8	8.67			
	Total	**18**	**26**				
SB6 Disruptions	High EI	6	8	9.08	0.655	2	0.721
	Mid EI	6	11	10.83			
	Low EI	6	7	8.58			
	Total	**18**	**26**				
SB7 English	High EI	6	11	10.92	2.846	2	0.241
Language	Mid EI	6	13	11.00			
Practices	Low EI	6	6	6.58			
	Total	**18**	**30**				
SB8 Social Support	High EI	6	12	11.67	2.970	2	0.226
	Mid EI	6	10	10.00			
	Low EI	6	7	6.83			
	Total	**18**	**29**				

*Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.*

The MidEI (mean rank 11.85) and HighEI (mean rank 11.17) groups significantly viewed 'SB1 Job' (p = 0.045*) more of a barrier than the LowEI group (mean rank 5.50). The MidEI (mean rank 12.58) and HighEI (mean rank 10.83) groups also significantly perceived 'SB2 Family and Home' (p = 0.033*) as a greater situational barrier as compared to the LowEI group (mean rank 5.08). The HighEI (mean rank 11.75) and MidEI (mean rank 11.50) groups again significantly perceived 'SB3 Finances' (p = 0.045*) as a greater situational barrier compared to the LowEI group (mean rank 5.25). The MidEI (mean rank 12.50) and HighEI (mean rank 10.75) groups again viewed 'SB4 Time' (p = 0.038*) as a greater situational barrier compared to the LowEI group (mean rank 5.25).

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study revealed eight major situational barriers reported by distance learners of when undertaking their English course at SDE USM. Some of the barriers mentioned in this study were like the barriers cited in Cross's (1992) survey of returning students. Cross documented that situational barriers were the most pressing worry, with up to 50% of her participants reporting insufficient time or money and roughly 10% indicating a lack of childcare or transportation due to the distance. The SB reported most significantly by the 18 respondents were SB1 Job, SB2 Family and Home, and SB4 Time respectively. The findings supported Rind's (2021) assertion that "learning a second language is a complex process in which several individuals and social factors play vital roles in shaping students' ESL learning experiences" (p. 219). The most frequently reported situational barrier was SB2 Family and Home which included childbirth, childcare, children's welfare, administering to spouse, parents'-in-law, and relatives, and household chores. This is possibly due to the socio-cultural milieu of these Malaysian students that still emphasizes obligations to the spouse and family. Interestingly, Azli et al. (2000) also reported significant gender differences denoting female students at SDE, USM had less social interaction because of their responsibilities as wives and mothers. Kulusakli (2021) equally noted that this lack of interaction makes learning a language from a distance more challenging than other subjects.

The second most common situational barrier was SB1 Job as the students were working adults pursuing their tertiary education part-time while still holding jobs with various responsibilities. Other studies have also documented the challenges that distance learners faced with the numerous responsibilities that they have taken on and the social responsibilities arising from the complexities of the adult learners' lives (Bok 2021; Dass, 2001; Hazaymeh, 2021; Saw et al., 1999). In comparison, Arifin's study at the Indonesian Open University highlighted barriers such as workloads (42.9%), lack of university support (20.4%), financial problems (14.3%), delivering or caring for infants (8.2%), family problems (4.1%), time management (4.1%), health challenges (2%), and other factors (2%). Likewise, most of the participants found it difficult to set aside time for their studies and relied on the support of their employers to study. Next, students cited SB4 Time as a stumbling block to learning English. Time is a limited resource, and it is difficult for working adults who have multiple responsibilities which demanded their time and priority hindering them from spending enough time on their English course. Bok (2021) also noted that students' limited time was divided into preparing for lessons, revisions, research, and assessments for six or seven courses. Likewise, Kulusakli, (2021) highlighted that distance learners could not manage their time efficiently in online English courses due to other activities. The students' situational barriers in terms of SB3 Finances were evidenced in statements regarding the cost of fees, additional expenditure due to the distance education program, and taking on the extra job due to supplement the family income. The students also cited SB8 Social Support with reference to insufficient support from spouses, peers, colleagues, and employers.

The respondents also mentioned SB7 English Language Practices referring to inadequate exposure to English, little emphasis on learning English, and being accustomed to using the Malay language which hampered their learning of English. In Dass's (2001) study, she explained that this is because the Malay language is used as the medium of instruction in the Malaysian public education system. The students also pointed out SB5 Distance, referring to the distance required to reach the regional centers for teleconferences or the main campus at USM for activities and the distance to access resources such as tuition or peer group assistance. It is important that instructors reduce the separation by maintaining a good online transactional presence so that the distance learners can easily communicate with them if they faced any difficulties. Students must also

be guided to fully utilize the PPPJJ online learning management system so that they can keep abreast with the courses, self-instructional media, and posts, and keep in touch with their coursemates via online forums. Instructors must adopt andragogical principles when teaching adult learners and facilitate collaborative work to enhance student engagement. Accordingly, Kulusakli (2021) asserted that distance learners need to have the ability to do environmental structuring of their learning to achieve better focus and attainment.

Finally, the respondents highlighted SB Disruptions; citing unforeseen circumstances like unplanned pregnancy, miscarriage, illness, failed study group, the demise of immediate family members, group members withdrawing from the program, and attending social obligations like weddings as well as religious activities that disrupted the students' planned schedules. Bok (2021) emphasized this disruption, "It is pertinent to note that adult learners' daily routine does not stay invariable, as it is highly changeable depending on their multiple roles and this is particularly true for those that are involved in essential services" (p. 31). Equally, Hazaymeh (2021) reported that disruptions caused by technological problems and internet connections troubled students from going online to attend classes; causing them to have difficulties in learning English language skills. Similarly, Rivaldo, Noldy, & Tirya (2022) found that bad internet coverage, unequal access to the internet, inadequate equipment like smartphones, laptops, and computers to fully participate in online learning as well as the lack of positive interaction between students and teachers as barriers in learning English via distance learning system. These barriers that students face in learning their English courses can disrupt their emotions, learning experience, and achievement. According to Homayouni et al. (2020), a student's capacity to acquire a second language is harmed when his or her concentration and pervasive attention are impaired. The negative emotions from having to deal with the obstacles can potentially distract the students from their efforts to learn by obstructing their capacity to focus on the work at hand. This affects the student's potential to accomplish scholastic achievement, thus enhancing students' EI "can reduce language anxiety, and consequently, increase language learning" (p. 137).

Additionally, the outcome of this study discovered that the distance learners' EI was linked to their perceptions of the barriers to learning English. The Mid EI and High EI groups significantly perceived SB1 Job, SB2 Family and Home, SB3 Finances, and SB4 Time as greater situational barriers than the Low EI group. In contrast, the Low EI students did not perceive these as major situational barriers. They were generally more reticent and reluctant to express their thoughts. These findings corroborated with Thomas et al.'s (2017) conclusion that a student's EI impacts the way the student reacts, understands, and cognizes his/her encounters, coping strategies, and academic achievement. The accounts of the students in this study can be viewed as evidence of EI expression that influenced the emotions and thoughts of the High EI and Mid EI groups more than the Low EI groups in terms of perception of their learning barriers. These findings corresponded with other studies documenting that students with higher EI were better at moderating the negative effects of challenging circumstances and achieving academic success (MacCann et al., 2020; Trigueros et al., 2019; Zeidner & Matthews, 2018).

To ensure that distance learners succeed in their learning, continuous effort should be taken to remove the barriers to learning (Sugilar, 2021). Additionally, affective support should be improved as it plays a vital role in providing a supportive environment in improving students' motivation, self-commitment, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in remote learning and can contribute to better retention of students in distance education (Arifin, 2018). Inculcating students' EI is important to reduce student attrition, as Parker et al. (2004) highlighted "The rate of dropout or continuing education in students is significantly related to the level of emotional and social competence of students and emotional intelligence can lead to positive changes in learners" (as cited in Homayouni et al., 2020, p. 139). Norboevich (2020, p. 103) concurred affirming that "People with a high level of development of emotional intelligence have expressed abilities to understand their own emotions and the emotions of other people, they can control their emotional sphere, which determines their higher adaptability." At the School of Distance Education, USM, Malaysia, the enhancement of students' EI can help them manage the emotional challenges resulting from the barriers they face so that their progress in their English language learning is not impeded. This would be beneficial as many studies have shown that students who are emotionally intelligent are more adept at integrating socially and academically in the distance learning environment and can persevere through the challenges to achieve better academic outcomes (Aliasin & Abbasi, 2020; Buzdar et al., 2016; Engin, 2017; Hamdzah, 2020).

This study found that distance learners' EI was significantly related to their perceptions of the situational barriers to learning English through distance education. EI can help distance learners identify, assess, express, and manage emotions effectively to moderate their barriers, communicate with others, and make better decisions to achieve success in English and distance learning. Thus, this study implicates that is crucial to improve students' EI through training, mentoring, and counselling programs to empower them to persevere through the challenges and emotional upheavals of learning English via distance learning. It is equally vital to instill EI in distance education providers so that they can empathetically address the needs, concerns, and emotions of the distance learners to ensure effective and successful distance learning.

Although this study offers interesting information, it has limited generalizability and may not be completely applicable to other cohorts. The study only comprised selected distance learners at the SDE, USM in Malaysia and hence may not be generalizable to other distance learning programs. There is the possibility of social desirability bias as the respondents' EI scores were collected by a self-report instrument. Additionally, the students came from various states all over Malaysia with varying urban versus rural environments; this could alter the students' barriers. Future research can utilize other EI instruments to obtain the EI scores of the respondents and investigate the effect of EI training on students' engagement and achievement in the unprecedented remote teaching and learning scenarios caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. It would also be interesting to conduct this research on distance learners from other universities in Malaysia and elsewhere. Also, research can be carried out to explore the coping strategies employed by distance learners to succeed.

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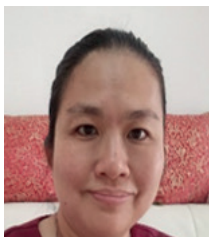
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Composite Questionnaire

Exploring the Role of Distance Learners' Emotional Intelligence in Learning English

Participant's Written Consent

I, _____, hereby grant George Boon Sai Teoh to record/audio-record/ video-record and use the data from the survey/interview/records for research purposes; for the purposes of written publication, public talks and lectures relating to that research, providing that confidentiality is respected in all cases.

Signed …………………………………..   Date ………………………

Section 1: Perception of your English Course

Directions: Each of the following items asks you about your perceptions concerning your English Course. After deciding whether a statement is generally true for you, use the 5-point scale to respond to the statement. Please circle1 if this is totally true, 2 if this is partly true, 3 if this is neither true nor untrue, 4 if this is partly untrue, and 5 if this is totally untrue. There are no right or wrong answers.

Please give the response that best describes you and your perceptions.

For example,

0. I would like to pass the English course.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

****

1. I always have positive emotions regarding the English Course.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

2. The English Course does not bring about any benefit towards my progress in learning the language.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

3. The English modules are suitable for my learning level.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

4. The information provided by the English Language Course Planner is very useful.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

5. The teleconference for the English Course is effective in reducing my learning problems.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

6. The English Course lectures during the Intensive Course are effective in preparing me to achieve the learning objectives.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

7. I support the evaluation structure of the English Course of the course that I am undertaking.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

8. I experience similar challenges for my other courses as I do for my English Course.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

9. Please state the barriers/difficulties you experienced concerning your English Course.

_____
_____
_____

10. Please provide other comments concerning your English Course which could contribute tot the improvement of this research.

_____
_____
_____

Section 2: Schutte's Self-Report Inventory (SSRI) (Schutte et al., 1998)

Directions: Each of the following items asks you about your emotions or reactions associated with emotions. After deciding whether a statement is generally true for you, use the 5-point scale to respond to the statement. Please circle the 1 if this is totally true, the 2 if this is partly true, the 3 if this is neither true or untrue, the 4 if this is partly untrue, and the 5 if this is totally untrue. There are no right or wrong answers. Please give the response that best describes you.

For example,

0. I know what I like.

(1)	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

****

1. I know when to speak about my personal problems to others.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

2. When I am faced with problems, I remember times I faced similar problems and overcame them.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

3. I expect that I will do well on most things I try.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

4. Other people find it easy to talk to me about their problems.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

5. I find it hard to understand the non-verbal messages (e.g. facial expressions) of other people.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

6. Some of the major events of my life have led me to re-evaluate what is important and not important.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

7. When my mood changes, I see new possibilities.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

8. Emotions are one of the things that make my life worth living.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

9. I am aware of my emotions as I experience them.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

10. I expect good things to happen.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

11. I like to share my emotions with others.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

12. When I experience a positive emotion, I know how to make it last.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

13. I arrange events others enjoy.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

14. I seek out activities that make me happy.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

15. I am aware of the non-verbal messages I send to others.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

16. I present myself in a way that makes a good impression on others.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

17. When I am in a positive mood, solving problems is easy for me.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

18. By looking at their facial expressions, I recognize the emotions people are experiencing.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

19. I know why my emotions change.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

20. When I am in a positive mood, I am able to come up with new ideas.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

21. I have control over my emotions.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

22. I easily recognize my emotions as I experience them.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

23. I motivate myself by imagining a good outcome to the tasks I take on.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

24. I compliment others when they have done something well.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

25. I am aware of the non-verbal messages other people send.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

26. When another person tells me about an important event in his or her life, I almost feel as though I have experienced this event myself.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

27. When I feel a change in emotions, I tend to come up with new ideas.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

28. When I am faced with a challenge, I give up because I believe I will fail.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

29. I know what other people are feeling just by looking at them.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

30. I help other people feel better when they are down.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

31. I use good moods to help myself keep trying in the face of obstacles.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

32. I can tell how people are feeling by listening to the tone of their voice.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly untrue	Totally untrue

33. It is difficult for me to understand why people feel the way they do.

1	2	3	4	5
Totally true	Partly true	Neither true nor untrue	Partly true	Totally untrue

Section 3: **Demographic Information**

Directions: For the following items, please indicate your answer with a tick (/) in the appropriate spaces provided or write in the spaces provided.

Matric Number: _____   Regional Centre: _____

Gender: [   ] Male   [   ]   Female   Age: _____years old

Ethnicity: [   ] Malay   [   ] Chinese   [   ] Indian [   ] Others: _____

State of origin: _____

Marital Status: [   ] Single   [   ] Married   [   ] Divorced   [   ] Others

How many children do you have? (if applicable) _____

What are their ages? First child: _____   Second child: _____

                                        Third child: _____   Fourth child: _____

                                        Fifth child: _____   Sixth child: _____

What is your occupation? (if applicable): _____

What is your spouse's occupation? (if applicable)_____

Range of family income: [   ] More than RM 10,000 per month

                                  [   ] RM 6,000 to RM 9,999.99 per month

                                  [   ] RM 3,000 to RM 5,999.99 per month

                                  [   ] RM 1,000 to RM 2,999.99 per month

                                  [   ] Below RM 999.99 per month

Do you have any long-term illnesses or disabilities? [   ] No   [   ] Yes

If yes, please explain. _____
_____

_____
_____

Does anyone in your family have long-term illnesses or disabilities? Please explain

_____
_____
_____

What is the your father's highest academic qualification?_____

What is your father's present occupation? (If retired or not employed, please state his previous occupation, if applicable.) _____

Is your father dependent on you? No [   ] Yes [   ]   If yes, how? _____
_____
_____

What is your mother's highest academic qualification? _____

What is your mother's present occupation? (If retired or not employed, please state her previous occupation, if applicable.) _____

Is your mother dependent on you? [   ] No   [   ] Yes   If yes, how? _____
_____

Degree Programme: [   ] Social Sciences

        [   ] Sciences:-

                        [   ] Management
                [   ] Humanities

Major: _____   Minor: _____

Which of the following best describes your status?

[   ] full time student   [   ] unemployed

[   ] in full time employment   [   ] in part-time employment

Please provide me details about your academic achievements in the previous academic year.
Course:_____ Grade: _____   Course: _____ Grade: _____

Course:_____ Grade: _____   Course: _____ Grade: _____

Course:_____ Grade: _____   Course: _____ Grade: _____

Did you fail any of your English Courses in your Distance Education Programme?

Please state the course/s: _____

Did you defer your studies?   No [   ] Yes [   ]

If Yes, please explain the cause. _____
_____

_____

(Please be reassured that your participation in this survey will be kept confidential and will not have any consequence on your grades.)

Thank you very much for your kind cooperation and contribution!

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Section 1: Preliminaries

1. Welcome, create rapport, and thank the participant for consenting to participate.
2. Assure confidentiality and explain that participation will not have any consequence on the student's results.
3. Explain the purpose of the interview with regard to the study.
4. Answer any queries participants may have about the interview.

Section 2:

What have you been doing for your English Course?

How is your progress?

What are your perceptions about your English Course? How do you feel?

What are the major situational challenges that you face in your English Course?