



Enhancing the Quality of
Higher Education through
Research:
Shaping Future Policy



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The English Language Proficiency of Malaysian Public University Students

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Introduction

The Malaysian government, especially the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), has been entrusted to undertake the responsibility of improving the English language proficiency of Malaysian university students in the effort "to enhance their ability to access knowledge and undertake research" (Ninth Malaysia Plan, p.257). Daily discussions in the print and electronic media indicate a doubtful picture of the English language proficiency of the general public, and particularly the English language proficiency of graduates from Malaysian universities. The Malaysian government, especially the Ministry of Higher Education, is aware of this concern and has addressed the issue accordingly. It was of the opinion that in order for Malaysia to reach developed country status by the year 2020, it must have quality graduates. The government could not afford to gamble with the future of Malaysia over language issues. The argument is no longer about whether or not English language plays an important role in the development of the nation, and the assumption now is that English is the main determinant of the development of the country.

In order to achieve this goal, it is imperative for MoHE to provide empirical evidence of the status of the English language proficiency of Malaysian university students. The main objective of this study was to investigate the English language proficiency of Malaysian Public University (MPU) students based on the scores in the English Proficiency Test (EPT) of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and the perceptions of academic staff, university officials, government officials and business executives.

Research questions

The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. What is the overall English language proficiency of Malaysian public university students?
2. What is the performance of Malaysian public university students in writing, reading, grammar, listening and speaking?
3. How is the English language proficiency of MPU students perceived by academic staff?
4. How is the English language proficiency of MPU students perceived in the public and private sectors?

Review of the literature

In January 2007, the issue of the English language proficiency of Malaysian university students hit the headlines in a number of newspapers when the Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Mustapha Mohamed, said that according to the preliminary findings of the Malaysian University English Test or MUET, 29 percent of 132,000 students of community colleges, polytechnics and public universities who had gained entrance into university came into Band 1 (extremely limited user) or Band 2 (limited user) (Hamidah Atan, 2007). The standards of English in education have been the concern of many academics and educational planners for the past decade. Nik Abdul Rashid (1981), a law professor at the University of Malaya made the following remark during an international conference on the national language as the medium of instruction:

The standard of English among Malay medium students who have gained entrance into the university is appalling. They have not been sufficiently exposed to speaking or writing during their secondary school days. It is not an exaggeration to say that during the past five years, the standard of English has deteriorated. If the situation is left unchecked, there is a danger that the quality of education will go down as well, as the years go by, because most of the literature for the purposes of university education is still in English language (p.297).

A brief review of the issue of the English language proficiency of Malaysian students seems to underscore the concern articulated by academics. Several newspaper articles have highlighted the declining standards of English in Malaysia and other Asian countries. In 1994, Chan wrote about the low pass rate - especially among rural students - in the English paper in public examinations. In an article written by Ling (2000), it was mentioned that a total of 156,530 or 40.2% of the 389,741 students who sat the PMR in 1999 did not achieve the minimum proficiency level. It was concluded that the standard of English among many Malaysian students was appalling and that they did not have a sufficient grasp of the English language. He also observed that there were university graduates who could not string together a proper sentence in English. Martin (2000), taking into account the arguments and opinions voiced in news reports, and letters to the editor from educationists, stated that proficiency in the English language is alarmingly low and cuts across race, and that students from primary to tertiary level lack a knowledge of the rudiments of the English language.

There was a real concern about the detrimental effect on standards of English among students in Singapore resulting from the overwhelming popularity of the short message service or SMS. It was claimed that such usage had caused the standard of written English to get sloppier (*New Straits Times*, 2002, November). In Tokyo, researchers who cannot use proper English in their theses or in discussions at international conferences are not recognized as intellectuals and their findings may be undervalued. This sparked off moves by some of Japan's universities to improve the English language skills of science students (*The Daily Yomiuri*, 2003, January).

A survey conducted on banks in Hong Kong reported that almost half of the employees have a poor or very poor standard of English, generally due to spelling mistakes, poor expression and grammatical errors (Moy, 2003). It was also found that 75% of the bank employees surveyed cannot write English well. The survey concluded that based on the assumption that Hong Kong is supposed to be the leading financial centre in Asia,

Potential investors will look at their reports, publications and websites. If they can sense these companies are not able to do the simple things right, then from an investment manager's perspective that is something really unappealing (p.4).

In a newspaper article published in 2002, two strategic plans were proposed by the Japanese government: (1) to send 1,000 senior high school students abroad in 2003 to participate in an immersion programme to help them learn to speak English; and (2) to undergo special training during the summer holidays over the next five years for Japan's 6,000 odd English teachers working in public schools to boost their command of the English language. Universities in Japan like Keio, Waseda and Seijo Universities have made their respective efforts to arrest the decline and improve their English language in order to enhance the marketability of their graduates.

Keio University, for example, offered a new scientific technology course in September, 2003 in which all lectures were conducted in English. Waseda University's Science and Engineering department has introduced a course to teach engineering terms in English that was jointly developed with the University of Michigan. In 1990, Seijo University introduced a student exchange programme with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee as a measure to improve English language studies.

In Korea, a large number of steps ranging from drastic reform in the current English education system to the creation of environments conducive to practise the use of English for learners have been suggested and more will be made in the continuing debate. Carmen Ip (2004) writing on behalf of the South China Morning Post cites the views of Mr. Martin Alexander, an English teacher at Island School, who suggested that students should watch English language movies or keep an online diary like English Xanga or web log page to help improve their English effortlessly. The author wanted to spell out the importance and usefulness of websites for educational purposes.

The nationwide English evaluation exam (Hsu, 2001) for people with a junior high school educational background was part of the Taiwanese government's drive to urge people to improve their English language ability in order to compete better in a rapidly globalising economy. In Thailand, the Thai army approved a 3 million baht annual budget to send army cadets on overseas study trips to widen their experience and improve their English language proficiency.

The Malaysian government has also embarked on several initiatives, one of which is to improve the English language proficiency of Malaysian students through the teaching of mathematics and science in English. Although such an initiative triggered initial negative reactions from some parents, educators and other concerned groups

and organisations in Malaysia, the government finds it of paramount importance in preparing the country for global competitiveness.

The Ministry of Education would review the academic curriculum to include teaching methods which were more attractive and effective to enable students to master the English language (Ling, 2000). Several suggestions have also been forwarded such as (1) the General Paper in Form Six should be replaced by English; (2) a satisfactory grade in the Malaysian University English Test should be a prerequisite for entering university; and (3) re-evaluate present Malaysian educational policies and demolish the two myths that (3.1) emphasis on the English language demotes the national language; and that (3.2) Malay students would not do well in a "tough" environment (Ling, 2000 and Martin, 2000).

Others suggested that (1) English should be made a compulsory subject for a pass in both the PMR and SPM examinations in future; (2) there was a need to find ways to solve the shortage of English teachers; and (3) it was important to attract teachers to teach in rural areas and to have more time allocated for the teaching of English and to ensure that English is taught at kindergarten level and in standard one (Balan, 2000). Additionally, more subjects in school, particularly the sciences, should be taught in English; English literature should be re-introduced; and that students should be encouraged to take it up for the PMR exam.

Malaysia and other Asian countries such as Singapore, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Thailand have taken appropriate and timely action to tackle the problems their countries are facing with respect to declining standards of English. It is without doubt that there is a need for a political will and a concerted effort involving everyone from all walks of life to ensure the success of this effort.

Methodology

The first part of the study involved the evaluation of Malaysian public university students' English language proficiency according to the scores in the EPT, and the second part involved the analysis of Malaysian university students' English language proficiency according to the perceptions of academic staff, and government officials and business leaders from the public and private sectors.

The test instrument (English Proficiency Test)

The institutionalised English Proficiency Test or EPT has been conducted by the Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development (CELPAD) at the International Islamic University Malaysia since 1989. The EPT was developed to assess the language proficiency of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) students who intend to pursue their tertiary education at the International Islamic University where English is used as the medium of instruction and communication.

The EPT comprises five skills: Grammar, Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. The test is divided into 3 parts. The first paper (Part 1) includes test for three sub-

skills: Reading, Grammar and Writing. Part 2 is the Listening test, while Part 3 is the Speaking Test. A summary of the test structure is as follows:

Table 1: EPT descriptions

Part	Paper	Skill
Part 1	Paper 1	Grammar
		Reading
	Paper 2	Writing
Part 2	Paper 3	Listening
Part 3	Paper 4	Speaking

The results of the EPT are grouped into nine bands, Band one to Band nine (1-9). Band 1 describes a candidate as a non-user, that is, a candidate who does not have the ability to use the language, while the highest band (Band 9) describes a candidate as an expert user of the English language (Appendix 1). In addition to grammar, the EPT results are reported separately for the four main skills: Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking.

Implementation of the EPT

The EPT was conducted over a period of two months at the six universities. The marking process of the EPT sub-sets followed the normal standards of the EPT marking procedures whereby the scripts were collected and sent to the Testing and Measurement Unit (TEMU) of CELPAD. The Speaking EPT conducted at the different campuses was conducted by experienced examiners from CELPAD who were appointed by TEMU.

Reliability and validity of the EPT

The reliability coefficients for the multiple-choice sub-tests of the EPT items over a few parallel versions were found to be within the acceptable range (Ainol Zubairi and Noor Lide Abu Kassim, 2004) with well-established standardised tests of 0.8 and above (Hughes, 2003). Rater reliability of the subjective EPT paper was also within the acceptable range (Isarji Sarudin and Noor Lide Abu Kassim, 2001). The EPT has been subjected to a construct validation study with the MUET (Ainol Zubairi and Noor Lide Abu Kassim, 2003) and significant correlations are found among the subtests. In a more recent study (Isarji and Ainol, 2007), significant correlations were found between the sub-sets of the two tests with listening being the highest ($r=0.936$, $n=30$, $p<0.01$) and reading the lowest ($r=0.549$, $n=37$, $p<0.01$).

Sample of EPT Test Takers

The samples for this part of study were selected from students who were studying at six public universities: IIUM, UUM, UNIMAS, UiTM, UPM, and UKM (Table 2). With the cooperation of the university authorities (via the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor and Dean) the students were randomly selected based on convenient selection. The students were considered *unprepared test takers* because they had not taken any preparatory English courses prior to sitting for the EPT.

Table 2: Breakdown of EPT test takers according to university

University	Grammar	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
UNIMAS	71	71	71	NIL	NIL
UPM	32	32	32	32	32
UKM	57	57	57	47	46
UITM	59	59	59	59	57
UUM	102	102	102	NIL	NIL
IIUM	84	84	84	73	73

Background of EPT test takers

The background of the EPT test takers include age, gender, place of birth, faculty, CGPA and academic status. The mean age of the test takers is 22.90 years. Of the 405 test takers, 37% (n= 150) were males while 63% (n=255) were females. Table 3 summarises the characteristics of the test takers according to academic status, CGPA and university.

Table 3: Background of the EPT test takers

Background	Percentage (%)	No.
Academic status		
1 st Year	2.4	12
2 nd year	6.1	24
3 rd year	48.0	194
4 th year	41.9	170
5 th year	1.6	5
CGPA		
1.51-2.0	1.4	6
2.01-2.5	10.7	45
2.51-3.0	32.8	133
3.01-3.5	39.7	161
3.51-4.0	15.4	60
University		
UNIMAS	17.5	71
UPM	7.9	32
UKM	14.1	57
UITM	14.6	59
UUM	25.2	102
IIUM	20.7	84

Breakdown of EPT test takers by university

Of the 405 students who took the EPT, UUM students made up the highest number of participants (102 students). The age range of the EPT test takers was between 19 to 26 years old, with a mean of 22.90 and standard deviation of 1.32. Female students made up 63 percent of the total students who took the EPT, while 37 percent were male students. The majority of the students' CGPA were between 2.51 to 3.5. More than 90 percent of the students were in the third and fourth year of their undergraduate studies.

The EPT test-takers were students from different faculties. They include students from the Faculty of Computer Sciences and Information Technology (13.6 percent), the Faculty of Law (8.0 percent), the Faculty of Accountancy (7.7 percent), the Faculty of Economics and Business (7.3 percent) and the Faculty of Engineering (7.27 percent).

Perceptions of academic staff, public and private sectors

A triangular approach consisting of interviews, focus group discussions and seminar presentations were conducted to gather information concerning the perceptions of academic staff, senior university officials, senior government officials, and business leaders of the standards of English of Malaysian university students and graduates. Overall, of 117 respondents who took part in the study 96 were academic staff and senior university officials of Malaysian universities, 8 were senior government officials and 13 were business leaders. The distribution of participants is shown in Table 4.

Data from interviews, focus group discussions and seminar presentations were analysed based on the categorisation of issues within the broad spectrum of responses and comments in rapid succession of verbal interactions between the researchers and 4 to 10 respondents. Since data were not gathered according to responses and comments of individual respondents, the tabulation of data was not carried out according to percentages.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents according to university, public, and private sectors

	Participants	Total
1.	Academic staff and senior university officials	96
2.	Senior government officials	8
3.	Business leaders	13
	Total	117

Participants of focus group discussions and interviews with academic staff

Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 66 academic staff, whereas 33 senior university officials from 17 universities in Malaysia participated in seminar presentations. The 17 universities are as follows:

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 1. UM | University Malaya |
| 2. UKM | Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia |
| 3. UPM | Universiti Putra Malaysia |
| 4. UTM | Universiti Teknologi Malaysia |
| 5. IIUM | International Islamic University Malaysia |
| 6. UUM | Universiti Utara Malaysia |
| 7. UNIMAS | Universiti Malaysia Sarawak |
| 8. UMS | Universiti Malaysia Sabah |
| 9. UPSI | Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris |
| 10. UiTM | Universiti Teknologi MARA |
| 11. UDM | Universiti Darul Iman Malaysia |
| 12. USIM | Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia |
| 13. UMT | Universiti Malaysia Trengganu |

- | | |
|------------|--------------------------------------|
| 14. UTHM | Universiti Teknologi Tun Hussein Onn |
| 15. UTeM | Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka |
| 16. UMP | Universiti Malaysia Pahang |
| 17. UNIMAP | Universiti Sains Perlis |

Participants of interviews with public and private sectors

The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 8 respondents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Finance, while 13 respondents were from the legal, banking, property and ICT industries. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by research assistants and content analysis was performed by trained analysts.

Limitation of the study

The limitation of this study pertains to the results of the MPU students' performance. The number of students from the participating universities was noticeably small to make a definitive conclusion. Each university, with the cooperation of the Deans and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor's office, had identified at least 100 final year students randomly to typically represent the population of students from the different faculties of the participating universities. This anticipated sample number to represent the universities was decided on according to the costing limitation. The actual number of the sample, however, was further reduced due to the low response rate. Therefore, the findings based on the EPT have to be treated with caution.

Findings

The Performance of Malaysian public university students in the EPT

This section reports the students' performance in the EPT. Table 5 presents the summary of the EPT performance by skills. A description of the EPT band is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 5: Distribution of Language Skills, Mean Band, and Band Description

Skills	Mean Band	Description
Writing	4	Limited
Reading	5	Modest
Grammar	6	Competent
Listening	6	Competent
Speaking	4	Limited

Overall performance of Malaysian public university students

The distribution of the mean band of the students' performance in the four skills is reported in table 6. The results indicated that, on the average, 10.8 % of the students obtained Band 3 (Very Limited User), 43.8% obtained Band 4 (Limited User) 34.8% obtained Band 5 (Modest User), 10.9% obtained Band 6 (Competent User), and 1.4% obtained Band 7 (Good User). On the average, more than 54 percent of the students were considered limited and very limited users of English.

Table 6: Distribution of the overall students' performance in the EPT (Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking)

Band	Percentage	No	Description
3.0	10.8	22	Very Limited
4.0	43.8	92	Limited
5.0	34.8	73	Modest
6.0	9.5	20	Competent
7.0	1.4	3	Good

Malaysian university students' performance in writing

The results in Table 7 indicate that, on average, 43.8 percent of the students obtained Band 3 and below (Very Limited User), 30.4 percent obtained Band 4 (Limited User), 15.1 percent were at Band 5 (Modest User), more than 6 percent were at Band 6 (Competent User) and only 1.2 percent were at Bands 7 and 8 (Good and Very Good User). The mean band for writing was Band 4.0 (Limited User).

Table 7: Distribution of students' writing performance in the EPT

BAND	Percentage	No	Description
1.0	4.5	n=18	Very Limited
2.0	9.4	n=38	Very Limited
3.0	32.9	n=133	Very Limited
4.0	30.4	n=123	Limited
5.0	15.1	n=61	Modest
6.0	6.4	n=26	Competent
7.0	1.0	n=4	Good
8.0	0.2	n=1	Very Good

Malaysian university students' performance in reading

Table 8 presents the results of the performance of students in reading. The results indicated that, on average, 2.7 percent of the students were at Band 3 and below (Very Limited User), 13.3 percent were at Band 4 (Limited User), 31.4 percent were

at Band 5 (Modest User), 31.1 percent were at Band 6 (Competent user) and 21.2 percent were at Bands 7 and 8 (Good and Very Good Users). The mean band for reading was Band 5.0 (Limited User).

Table 8: Distribution of students' reading performance in the EPT

BAND	Percentage	No	Description
1.0	0.2	n=1	Very Limited
2.0	0.5	n=2	Very Limited
3.0	2.0	n=8	Very Limited
4.0	13.3	n=54	Limited
5.0	31.4	n=127	Modest
6.0	31.1	n=126	Competent
7.0	19.0	n=77	Good
8.0	2.2	n=9	Very Good
9.0	0.2	n=1	Excellent

Malaysian university students' performance in grammar

The results of the performance of students in reading are presented in Table 9. The results indicated that, on average, 2.2 percent of the students were at Band 3 and below (Very Limited User), 5.9 percent were at Band 4 (Limited User), 12.8 percent were at Band 5 (Modest User), 24.9 percent were at Band 6 (Competent user) and 25.7 percent were at Bands 7 (Good User), 21 percent were at Band 8 (Very Good User), and 7.4 percent were at Band 9 (Excellent User). The mean band for reading was Band 6.0 (Competent User).

Table 9: Distribution of students' grammar performance in the EPT

BAND	Percentage	No	Description
3.0	2.2	n=9	Very Limited
4.0	5.9	n=24	Limited
5.0	12.8	n=52	Modest
6.0	24.9	n=101	Competent
7.0	25.7	n=104	Good
8.0	21.0	n=85	Very Good
9.0	7.4	n=30	Excellent

Malaysian university students' performance in listening

The results of the performance of students in listening are presented in Table 10. The results indicated that, on average, 3.2 percent of the students were at Band 3 (Very Limited User), 8.1 percent were at Band 4 (Limited User), 24.8 percent were at Band 5 (Modest User), 34.7 percent were at Band 6 (Competent user) and 16.2 percent

were at Bands 7 (Good User), 6.7 percent were at Band 8 (Very Good User), and 6.3 percent were at Band 9 (Excellent User). The mean band for listening was Band 6.0 (Competent User).

Table 10: Distribution of students' listening performance in the EPT

BAND	Percentage	No	Description
3.0	3.2	n=7	Very Limited
4.0	8.1	n=15	Limited
5.0	24.8	n=55	Modest
6.0	34.7	n=77	Competent
7.0	16.2	n=36	Good
8.0	6.7	n=15	Very Good
9.0	6.3	n=14	Excellent

Malaysian university students' speaking performance in the EPT

The results of the performance of students in speaking are presented in Table 11 below. The results indicated that about 30 percent of the students were at Band 3 and lower (Very Limited User), 28.6 percent were at Band 4 (Limited User), 23.8 percent were at Band 5 (Modest User), 11.9 percent were at Band 6 (Competent user) and 3.8 percent were at Bands 7 (Good User), and 1 percent was at Band 8 (Very Good User). The mean band for speaking was Band 4.0 (Limited User).

Table 11: Distribution of students' performance in speaking

BAND	Percentage	No	Description
2.0	2.9	n=6	Very Limited
3.0	26.7	n=56	Very Limited
4.0	28.6	n=60	Limited
5.0	23.8	n=50	Modest
6.0	11.9	n=25	Competent
7.0	3.8	n=8	Good
8.0	0.9	n=2	Very Good
9.0	1.4	n=3	Excellent

Perceptions of academic staff of the English language proficiency of Malaysian public university students

Overall, 96 academic staff participated in the interviews, focus group discussions, and seminars. Eleven questions based on five categories were prepared to examine the perceptions of academic staff of the English Language Proficiency of Malaysian public university students. The categories were abilities, problems, causes, effects, and solutions. The first question asked was "How satisfied are you with the English

language proficiency of Malaysian university students?" Almost all respondents reported that they were not satisfied with the English language proficiency of Malaysian university students

The second question asked was "How do you rate the English language proficiency of Malaysian university students?" Most of the respondents reported that Malaysian university students were limited users of English in writing and speaking and modest users in listening and reading.

Question three asked "Are Malaysian university students proficient in English to undertake English medium programmes?" Most of the respondents reported that Malaysian university students were not sufficiently proficient in English to undertake English medium programmes.

Question four asked "What are specific English language problems faced by Malaysian university students?" The majority the respondents reported that students had poor reading comprehension skills, insufficient writing skills to complete academic writing tasks, limited ability to express ideas orally, and insufficient speaking skills to conduct presentations and to participate in group discussions.

Question five focused specifically on the main reasons asking "What are the main causes for students' poor English language proficiency?" The respondents highlighted that the medium of instruction (Bahasa Melayu), poor English language proficiency prior to undergraduate studies and students' apprehension of being laughed at by peers as three main reasons for their students' poor English language proficiency.

In response to the sixth question, "Is proficiency in English necessary in order to perform effectively as university students?" Almost all respondents reported that proficiency in English is necessary to perform effectively as university students.

Question seven asked "How do your students feel about English?" Most of the respondents reported that the students were aware of the importance of English but they (the students) would rather focus on their faculty subjects than learning English. Question eight asked "Should English be reintroduced as the medium of instruction at university level? Most the respondents reported that English should be used as the medium of instruction for science and technology based programmes and programmes with strategic importance.

Question nine asked "Should a minimum English language requirement be introduced before students are allowed to enter faculty?" The majority of the respondents reported that students should be required gradually to fulfil a minimum English language requirement (at least MUET band 2) in order to enter the faculty.

Question ten asked "What are the effects due to the English language proficiency of Malaysian university students?" The respondents identified several effects due to the English language proficiency of Malaysian university students: namely, it limits access to knowledge, opportunity to express opinions and ideas, opportunity for internationalisation, marketability of graduates (locally and internationally) and affects motivation and attitude to acquire English.

The final question specifically focused on possible solutions asking "What can be done to improve the English language proficiency of university students?" A list of suggestions was given to the respondents. The responses given by academic staff are listed below. They are arranged according to the most commonly selected suggestions to the least selected:

1. to allocate more time or courses for the teaching of English at tertiary level especially English for Academic Purposes or EAP and English for Occupational Purposes or EOP,
2. to conduct English Language Enhancement Programmes or ELEP,
3. to provide adequate facilities such as language labs, self-access centres, and resource materials
4. to improve the scheme of service of English language teachers and lecturers at university level,
5. to revise the existing English language curriculum
6. to conduct intensive English language courses (IELP),
7. to increase the number of content courses taught in English
8. to reinforce positive attitudes among students and teachers towards the English language,
9. to conduct more retraining programmes to produce effective language teachers,
10. to provide strong fundamentals in the study of English at kindergarten, primary and secondary levels,
11. to put more emphasis on spoken and written English at tertiary level,
12. to ensure that academic and administrative staff acquire a certain level of English proficiency to perform effectively,
13. to make English a compulsory subject for a pass in both PMR and SPM examinations,
14. to ensure that more subjects in school are taught in English,
15. to make industrial training compulsory to all university students, and

The academic staff were asked to rate the English language proficiency of the MPU students according to skills. The overall rating is summarised as follows (Table 12).

Table 12: The English language proficiency of Malaysian university students according to the perceptions of academic staff

Language skills	English language proficiency
Speaking	Limited
Writing	Limited
Listening	Modest
Reading	Modest

The English language proficiency of Malaysian public university graduates according to the perceptions of government officials and business leaders

Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted involving 20 senior government officials and business leaders from the public and private sectors. Nine questions belonging to five categories were prepared to test the perception of academic staff of the English Language Proficiency of Malaysian public university students. The categories were abilities, problems, causes, effects, and solutions.

The first question asked was "How satisfied are you with the English language proficiency of Malaysian university graduates?" All respondents reported that they were not satisfied with the English language proficiency of Malaysian university graduates.

The second question asked "How do you rate the English language proficiency of Malaysian university graduates?" Almost all respondents reported that Malaysian university graduates were limited users of English in writing and speaking and modest users in listening and reading.

Question three asked "Are Malaysian university graduates prepared for employment?" All respondents from the private sector and most respondents from the public sector reported that Malaysian university graduates were ill-prepared for employment.

Question four asked "What are the specific English language problems faced by Malaysian university graduates?" Most of the respondents reported that the specific English language problems faced by Malaysian university graduates were the inability to express their thoughts and ideas, prepare written reports, write minutes of meetings and present reports orally.

Question five focused specifically on the main reasons asking "What are the main causes for the problems?" The majority of the respondents reported Malaysian university graduates were unable to express their thoughts and ideas, prepare written reports, write minutes of meetings and present reports orally because of the incompatibility of the language of communication in the private sector and to a certain extent in the public sector and the language of communication in the Malaysian education system (the language of communication in the private sector is English while the language of communication in the Malaysian education system is Bahasa Melayu).

In response to the sixth question, "Is proficiency in English necessary in order to perform effectively at the workplace?", all respondents stated that proficiency in English is necessary in order to perform effectively at the workplace.

Question seven asked "How do Malaysian universities graduates feel about English?" The majority respondents reported that Malaysian university graduates were aware of the importance of English but they (graduates) were not proactive in improving their English language proficiency.

Question eight asked "Should English be reintroduced as the medium of instruction at university level? All respondents reported that English should be reintroduced as the medium of instruction at university level for science and technology based programmes and programmes with strategic importance.

The final question specifically focused on possible solutions asking "What can be done to improve the English language proficiency of Malaysian university graduates?" The respondents provided the following suggestions:

1. to emphasise skills in technical language, creative and critical thinking; speaking, and writing in the syllabus for English for Occupational Purposes (EOP);
2. to ensure existing syllabi (EOP) are compatible with the needs at the workplace;
3. to promote and develop a reading culture through the Extensive Reading Programme);
4. to introduce English medium universities to meet the needs of the private sector. (Students who wish to work in the private sector may study at English medium universities);
5. to improve English language programmes at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels for the reason that students have not shown any substantial improvement in their overall proficiency even after going through 15 to 16 years of education; and
6. to provide additional contact hours for language courses and continuous formal and informal language support throughout students' undergraduate studies.

The government officials and business leaders from the public and private sectors were asked to rate the English language proficiency of the Malaysian public university graduates according to skills. The overall rating is summarised as follows (Table 13).

Table 13: The English language proficiency of Malaysian university graduates based on the perceptions of government officials and business leaders

Language skills	English language proficiency
Speaking	Limited
Writing	Limited
Listening	Modest
Reading	Modest

Discussion

Five categories have been identified as the focus of the discussion. These categories which relate to the standard of English of Malaysian university students and graduates are the abilities, problems, causes, effects, and solutions.

Reading ability

The results of the English Proficiency Test indicated that Malaysian public university students, especially third and fourth year students, were generally modest users of English. The results are supported by academic staff, government officials and business leaders who participated in the perception study. However, there were concerns among the respondents that even though the students had general reading skills, they lacked reading sub-skills especially the reading comprehension skills needed to select relevant texts to incorporate into academic writing projects. For example, a deputy dean commented, "My students cut and paste indiscriminately when they are required to analyse or synthesise and transfer information from reading articles in order to complete their report. Sometimes the report is incomprehensible because the ideas are all mixed up. They don't even know how to copy!"

Employers also commented that Malaysian university graduates had the general reading skills to perform effectively at the workplace; however, they were consistently concerned about the lack of a reading culture. Industry executives involved in human resource development complained that graduates lacked good reading habits. One employer commented, "I asked my junior staff to name a book written in English that he has read lately. He couldn't name the title. He doesn't read. I gave him seven books to choose from. They have to read a lot because we have to make sure we are well prepared to represent our clients. You also acquire new vocabulary when you read. That will help you to improve your English. My staff must have the reading habit."

It is safe to conclude that in view of the concern raised by academic staff and business leaders, there is a need to promote a good reading culture among Malaysian university students.

Listening ability

According to their performance in the listening part of the English Proficiency Test, on average, Malaysian university students were competent users of English in listening. This finding is not surprising in view of the fact that Malaysian university students are exposed to listening to English in their daily tasks such as listening to the radio, watching TV programmes, and attending lectures and talks in English. On the other hand, academic staff, government officials and business leaders reported that Malaysian university students and graduates were modest users of English in listening and this level of ability is perceived as sufficient for comprehension in English in non-academic settings, particularly listening for entertainment purposes such as listening to radio programmes or watching television programmes in English. It has to be noted, however, they felt that the level is inadequate for the effective comprehension of information delivered in lectures conducted totally in English. One member of academic staff said, "I tried to conduct my lecture in English but my students did not understand what I was saying. They said '*tak fahamlah Dr*'. I have to conduct my lecture in Bahasa Melayu."

It can be concluded that even though the students were competent users of English in listening according to the EPT, academic staff still felt that this is not sufficient in order to perform in an English medium programme.

Writing ability

The results of the English Proficiency Test indicated that as far as writing is concerned Malaysian university students were limited users of English. The results were supported by academic staff, government officials and business leaders who reported that Malaysian university students and graduates were limited users of English in writing. They consistently expressed their concern about the limited ability of Malaysian university students and graduates to complete academic writing tasks effectively, prepare written reports, and write minutes of meetings. For example, academic staff and business leaders commented that time and again they had to spend a lot of time editing and proofreading the written work of university students and graduates.

"My students submitted class reports in English for the class project and I spent my whole weekend editing the language. I wish I could just look at the content but I can't," said one academic staff member. "I asked my new staff to write a letter to my client and I ended up rewriting the whole thing. I don't want to lose my client just because my junior staff cannot write a letter in English! And I can't forever edit his work!" said a practising lawyer.

Academic staff, government officials and business leaders were of the opinion that the demands of industry make it essential for graduates to perform well in writing in order to function effectively in the academic and working environments.

Speaking ability

The results of the English proficiency Test showed that Malaysian public university students were limited users of English in speaking. The results were consistent with the perception of academic staff, government officials and business leaders.

The most consistent problem mentioned by government officials and business leaders was the problem concerning graduates who were unable to express themselves. For instance, the banking industry mentioned that when faced with international clients, many employed graduates had problems when they had to entertain clients and present papers to English speaking audiences. Respondents from the banking and legal fraternity felt that due to the proficiency of local graduates, many failed to participate in meetings and discussions effectively as they lacked the language to effectively present their views and opinions in English. Academic staff members were of the same opinion that the students had problems to conduct oral presentations in English.

One employer mentioned that "I have a problem with my junior staff. He has a good knowledge of the work but he is not socially inclined because he is not confident with his English. I need him to meet and socialise with our clients and most of our clients communicate in English" remarked one banker. One senior government officer

mentioned that "It is quite difficult for us to send our officers to be trained overseas because they have limited ability to write and speak in English". "Whenever I asked my students to present their work orally in English they would struggle throughout the presentation. They would even request to present in Malay. I would always say no!" said one member of academic staff. In general they were of the opinion that Malaysian university graduates lacked the spoken skills needed to express ideas, conduct presentations, and participate in discussions, tutorial sessions and meetings.

Another persistent problem expressed by business leaders was the inability of graduates to impress the panel of interviewers during job interviews. The human resource personnel in the banking and legal sectors involved in the focus group discussions repeatedly mentioned that generally local graduates lack the ability to converse with ease at interviews due to the fact that they had difficulty in expressing themselves with confidence in English. Additionally, some interviews and on-the-job tasks require candidates to sit for an English language test or to perform tasks such as to participating in a debate or forum.

"Those who had to participate in a debate or forum would commonly fail to impress our interviewers due to their low level of proficiency in English. We also asked them to take the English language test. Most of them would not do well though," commented an employer.

The results of the English Proficiency Test and the perceptions of academic staff, government officials, and business leaders seemed to indicate that Malaysian university students and graduates were limited users of English in the productive skills (writing and speaking) and modest users in the receptive skills (listening and reading). In view of the importance of productive skills in industry, the concerns reported by business leaders were well founded.

The English language proficiency of Malaysian university students and graduates: Causes

The majority of the respondents reported that Malaysian university students and graduates were not proficient in English for several reasons. Some of the recurring reasons given were the incompatibility of the language of communication at Malaysian universities and in the private sector, low self confidence in using the language, and poor English language proficiency prior to undertaking university education.

With the exception of Universiti Teknologi MARA and the International Islamic University Malaysia, all other public universities use Bahasa Melayu as the language of instruction. English, on the other hand, is the language of communication in the private sector, and to a certain extent, is widely used in certain government departments. Since there is a mismatch between the language of communication used by universities and industry, it is only natural for the products to be incompatible.

"Our primary, secondary, and tertiary education is in Bahasa Melayu. You cannot expect our students to be proficient in English if they don't use the language," said one member of academic staff. "Chinese and Indian students are good at Bahasa

Malayu because secondary and tertiary education use Bahasa Melayu as the language of instruction. But I don't see that they are more proficient in English than Malay students," added one academic staff member.

One employer commented, "You cannot blame the students. It is unrealistic that after studying for so many years in Malay medium universities, graduates are expected to perform in English in the banking environment where English is the main language of communication. Graduates from Malay medium universities are trained to think, communicate and perform in Bahasa Melayu not in English. Unless university graduates 'wish' to work in government departments, they are ill-prepared for employment in the private sector."

The second reason for the poor performance was attributed to the low self-confidence of students and graduates in using English. "I observed that my students are reluctant to use English because they don't have the confidence. They are afraid of being laughed at by their peers". One employer stated that, "Local graduates usually prefer not to use English. They said that they just deal with computers. Actually they have low self-confidence. When I asked them to make a presentation in English they requested to speak in Malay. The ICT graduates must understand that just because they are in computer science it doesn't mean they don't mix with humans."

Even though students are aware that proficiency in English is necessary to perform effectively not only as university students but also as employees, it is most unfortunate that they focused more on faculty courses and neglected English language courses.

The English language proficiency of Malaysian university students and graduates: Effects

Academic staff, government officials and business leaders identified several effects of the English language proficiency of Malaysian university students and graduates such as their inability to produce quality work, lack of confidence in using English, inability to express ideas, views and opinions, inability to demonstrate acceptable levels of confidence during job interviews due to low English language proficiency, inability to pass an English language test for the overseas posting or recruitment process, and the inability to meet the expectation of stakeholders in IT and science & technology.

"When students don't understand what they hear in lectures and read in academic materials in English, they will not acquire all the necessary and important knowledge imparted through lectures and reading materials in their academic disciplines" noted one member of academic staff. A senior university official remarked that, "Law, engineering, science, or other core subjects are far more important to students than English. They can still pass the course even if they don't know English. The sad thing is that they know English is important but nothing is done."

One employer commented, "I conduct weekly meetings with my staff. I observe that local graduates do not participate actively and effectively in discussions because we use English all the time. I need their input but I don't get it. At the same time I cannot

ask them to write technical reports, concept papers or present papers to international audiences." One employer stated that "When I conduct interviews, many candidates fail to demonstrate confidence due to low English language proficiency. It is quite difficult to hire these candidates unless they are extremely exceptional." Another employer said, "I know many of my staff avoid socialising with colleagues who speak in English. They also avoid replying in English. I think they lack initiative to improve their English."

The low level of proficiency in the English language among Malaysian university students was also found to affect the effort for internationalisation. It was found that lecturers who had international students in their class noted that even though they had to use English all the time as the medium of instruction and communication, it was difficult to do so as many Malaysian students were not fully able to understand them. Lecturers complained that it was difficult to get the Malaysian students to participate effectively in discussions when there were international students present. This, therefore, led many lecturers in a similar situation to use Bahasa Melayu. This will inevitably have a negative effect on the effort to attract international students to study in Malaysia.

The English language proficiency of Malaysian university students and graduates: Solutions

Respondents provided many suggestions to enhance the English language proficiency of Malaysian university students, e.g. to review and improve the teaching and learning of English at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in terms of formal and informal syllabi, facilities, and teaching staff; to promote a reading culture; and to enhance a positive attitude towards English among students and lecturers. "In some universities language labs are insufficient and English is only taught for two hours a week for two semesters. They also need to conduct English language enhancement activities for students," said one of the lecturers interviewed. An English language lecturer exclaimed that "the worst part is that English language lecturers are second-class citizens. We graduated from the same university, work as hard as others, teach more hours per week and yet we are DG staff while my colleagues in the faculty are on the DS scheme of service. It is not only that we are not appreciated, we are always to be blamed when students cannot write or speak good English. One senior university official lamented, "Because of the DG scheme of service I cannot hire effective English lecturers and I cannot retain experienced lecturers. If you give peanuts you get monkeys."

The respondents also suggested the establishment of English medium universities and English medium programmes. One employer commented, "The decline of the standards of English started when Bahasa Melayu replaced English as the medium of instruction. Please don't say I am not patriotic. I am just stating the facts. There is no short cut to this. If you want university students and graduates to be proficient in English, the least you can do is to identify certain universities to use English as the medium of instruction. Our university (the International Islamic University Malaysia) is a good example. Even with that you cannot guarantee the product."

Recommendations

In general the main language problem among Malaysian university students concerns the productive skills, namely writing and speaking. Even though academic staff, government officials and business leaders were satisfied with the reading and listening skills of Malaysian university students and graduates, they were very concerned with the writing and speaking skills which are considered extremely important skills in the academic and work environments.

In the light of the results of the investigation, the following recommendations are proposed.

1. To adopt MUET Band 2 (Limited User) or its equivalent as the minimum English language requirement prior to admission into faculties. The language requirement will motivate students to redouble their efforts to improve their English language proficiency;
2. To introduce the Intensive English Language Programme (IELP) for students with MUET Band 1 (Very Limited User) to ensure they fulfil the minimum English language requirement of MUET Band 2 prior to admission into faculties. The IELP should be introduced both at matriculation colleges for "O Level" students and public universities for "A Level" students;
3. To integrate the General English Language Programme (GELP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) in the university English language curriculum (Appendix 2). The IELP, GELP, EAP, and EOP are necessary due to the fact that Bahasa Malaysia is the language of instruction in primary and secondary schools. If Malaysian universities were to introduce more programmes in English, we could not afford to promote the 'sink or swim' philosophy because the majority of Malaysian students do not have the English language proficiency to undertake demanding credit bearing university courses in English;
4. To conduct an on-going curriculum review of the university's English language programmes as part of the Quality Assurance (QA) exercise. A curriculum review based on the Quality Assurance exercise will ensure that the English language programme undergoes a systematic evaluation exercise similar to the QA exercise conducted by professional programmes instead of relying on an *ad hoc* assessment. As this study has highlighted the discrepancy between the English language proficiency of Malaysian public university students and the proficiency expected by industry, there is an urgent need for a curriculum review exercise to identify systematically the discrepancies between EAP/EOP syllabi offered at Malaysian public universities and the specific needs of industry;
5. To introduce the Extensive Reading Programme or ERP in order to help students develop good reading habits;

6. To integrate grammar in the teaching of writing (grammar in context) to ensure that students are able to transfer the knowledge of grammar in their writing tasks;
7. To focus on note-taking skills in view of the fact that more university courses will be conducted in English;
8. To increase the number of contact hours in English language courses to ensure that students receive sufficient English language support throughout their undergraduate studies;
9. To adopt university initiatives:
 - a. using English as the medium of instruction for postgraduate programmes and academic programmes with strategic importance, in examinations, and for writing and speaking assignments,
 - b. providing university lecturers with the necessary English language training,
 - c. introducing industrial attachment to all programmes for students to be exposed to real language demands at the workplace (this would increase awareness, improve attitude and enhance motivation of students to use and acquire English),
 - d. providing a better scheme of service for English language teaching staff;
 - e. using English as the language of communication for extra-curricular activities in order to provide the platform for students to use English.
 - f. employing English Language Enhancement Programme (ELEP). ELEP is an informal but structured programme with the aim of enhancing students' English language proficiency. ELEP consists of activities such as English language camp, English language month, debates etc.
 - g. introducing English for Pre-Employment Programme (EPeP). EPeP is an intensive programme designed to enhance students' English language skills for the workplace. The syllabus of EPeP is based on industry related language tasks and skills in order that the contents are meaningful and relevant to industry. Some of the components of EPeP are resume writing, multimedia presentation, interviewing, creative thinking and problem solving skills;
10. To establish a National Board of English Language Teaching (NoBEL). Among others, NoBEL will function as a consultative board to strategically foster the development of English language programmes and activities at institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, formulate the framework for the accreditation of English language programmes, and promote good practices and expertise in English language education.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that there is an urgent need to improve Malaysian public university students' productive skills; namely, writing and speaking in view of the concern of academic staff, government officials and business executives in the

public and private sectors. Even though Malaysian public universities have implemented many commendable initiatives in the effort to improve the overall English language proficiency of the students, it is hoped that with the implementation of the recommendations of this study, Malaysian public university graduates will be able to compete at the global economic level. Accordingly, this will enable Malaysia to mature as a developed country by the year 2020.

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Appendix

EPT Band description

- 9 Expert User**
Has fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding.
- 8 Very Good User**
Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex detailed argumentation well.
- 7 Good User**
Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.
- 6 Competent User**
Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
- 5 Modest User**
Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.
- 4 Limited User**
Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.
- 3 Extremely Limited User**
Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.
- 2 Intermittent User**
No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.
- 1 Non User**
Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.
- 0 Did not attempt the test**
No assessable information provided.

Appendix

Integrated English language programme structure

