

English Language Proficiency and Initiatives of Malaysian Universities

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Abstract: The issue of employability of graduates of Malaysian universities has invited intense discussions in print and electronic media, particularly concerning graduate's English language proficiency. This study presents the findings of a study investigating the initiatives of Malaysian universities in improving student's English language proficiency. Data were collected based on a seminar participated by representatives from seventeen universities in Malaysia. Findings from the study revealed eight major initiatives to improve the English language proficiency of the students. English Language Enhancement Program (ELEP) was the most popular initiatives implemented by Malaysian universities. The study also discusses relevant challenges in implementing the initiatives. A systematic evaluation of the initiatives was recommended to ascertain that there is accountability and the initiatives are successful in meeting the intended objectives.

Key words: English language proficiency, employability skills, Malaysian university students, meeting, seminar

INTRODUCTION

Employability of university graduates has been a highly debated topic in Malaysia since a report by a government agency appeared in 2005 stating 60,000 graduates were unemployed (Jasin, 2005; Pandian and Ghani, 2005). In 2016, the Malaysian Employers Federation reported 200,000 graduates were unemployed (Rebecca, 2016) and the top three reasons continued to be poor command in English (64%), poor communication skills (60%) and poor attitude and characters (59%) (Lee *et al.*, 2008).

Overall, Malaysian employers have expressed concern with the general level of preparedness of graduates to enter the job market as prospective entry-level employees, particularly, their English language proficiency (Sarudin and Noor, 2014). The employers have indicated that most jobs call not only for knowledge and specific technical competencies but also the ability to communicate in English (Omar and Rajoo, 2016). This is particularly true because English is the language of communication in the corporate world.

In a national study, >58% of final year undergraduate students from 6 universities in Malaysia were considered limited users of English in writing while 77% were considered limited users in speaking. Sarudin and Zubairi (2008), Furthermore, only 20% of graduates were considered by employers to be well prepared to use English at work. Generally, students with limited

proficiency in the productive skills will struggle to communicate in English in formal situations such as to present or argue ideas in discussions or meetings, reports, project study or proposals.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Representatives from 17 Malaysian universities presented their initiatives in enhancing student's English language proficiency in a one-day seminar. The presentations were video-taped and transcription of contents was carried out after the seminar. The transcription was analysed along with the comments and summary made by the participants and moderator at the end of the presentations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the analysis revealed nine common initiatives undertaken by the universities to improve the English language proficiency of their students. The most popular initiative (Table 1) reported by 14 (82.4%) of the 17 Malaysian universities was English Language Enhancement Program (ELEP). Other initiatives were University ISO 9000 2001 Certification Program (35.3%) Finishing School Program (FSP) (29.4%), MUET Preparation Program (23.5%), Compulsory English Course (23.5%), upgrading of learning and teaching facilities, (23.5%) and faculty courses in English (17.6%).

Table 1: Initiatives of Malaysian Universities

Initiatives	No. of university (%)
English Language Enhancement Program (ELEP)	14 (82.4)
University ISO 9000 2001 Certification	6 (35.3)
Finishing School Program (FSP)	5 (29.4)
MUET Preparation Program (MPP)	4 (23.5)
English for Academic Staff Program (EASP)	4 (23.5)
Compulsory English Course	4 (23.5)
Upgrading of learning and teaching facilities	4 (23.5)
Faculty courses in English	3 (17.6)

English Language Enhancement Program (ELEP): ELEP is an informal and optional English support program conducted throughout the year with the aim of motivating students to practice English through fun and enjoyable activities with a dose of healthy competition. Three popular ELEP activities conducted by most of the universities were English language camp, English language campaign and English language day. Other activities of ELEP included language drama, poetry recital, storytelling, spelling bee, friends of English and English language month. The activities of ELEP were designed for students of different levels of English language proficiency. Based on the seminar presentation, 7-2000 students participated in ELEP activities. As an example, at one university about 100 students participated in an English language camp while at another university about 2000 students participated in an English language campaign. The language activities of ELEP were organized to provide opportunities for students to enhance their communication skills and self confidence in English in an informal environment. The duration of the activities of ELEP ranged from 1 day to one semester (14 weeks). Based on the transcript analysis, ELEP was considered a successful programme in enhancing student's motivation and self confidence in using English.

University ISO 9000 2001 certification: A university ISO 9000 2001 certification exercise of the English Language Centre, Department or Division was conducted by 6 of the 17 universities (35%). Even though ISO 9000 2001 Certification exercise is an important initiative, it focuses more on systematic documentation rather than quality of program. Thus, a certified program does not necessitate an effective or successful program. The respondents also indicated that a systematic programme evaluation was needed to measure the effectiveness of the English language program.

Finishing School Program (FSP): The FSP was implemented by 5 (29%) of the 17 universities. The FSP aims at providing the necessary communication skills in English for the workplace to graduating students in order to increase their employment opportunities. Four main components of the FSP were resume writing, presentation,

interview and interpersonal communication and thinking skills. Other FSP modules include personal grooming, entrepreneurship, building confidence through drama, managing time, emotional quotient and conducting meetings.

Almost all FSP modules were facilitated by lecturers or teachers from the English language department. The duration of the FSPs ranged from two to ten days while student's participation ranged from 50 to about 2000 students per module. According to the respondents, FSP was very popular among final year students at intermediate and advanced levels of English proficiency because the modules exposed them to English at the workplace. However, most of the students were at the elementary level and they found it very demanding and stressful because they could not understand tasks conducted in English.

MUET Preparation Program (MPP): The third initiative reported by 4 (24%) of the universities was Malaysia University English Test or MUET Preparation Program (MPP) for final year students who did not meet the minimum English language graduation requirement stipulated by the respective universities. MPP, conducted during weekends or inter-semester breaks for a total of 24-28 h was normally attended by 120-800 students. The total number of English language trainers involved ranged from 6-37 part-time and full-time trainers. At one university, for example, 88 final year students who had completed all graduation requirements except for English were required to enrol in MPP until they fulfil the English language graduation requirement of MUET Bands 2 or 3. The main motivation for students of MPP was the desire to graduate on time; however, there were students who were very discontented because they did not fulfil the English language graduation requirement even after multiple attempts.

English for Academic Staff Program (EASP): English for Academic Staff Program (EASP), reported by 4 (24%) of the universities was aimed to enhance academic staff English language proficiency. The initiative was introduced because the university felt that some academic staff were not proficient in English, in particular those who were required to teach faculty courses in English. Time-tabling and indifferent attitude among academic staff were two drawbacks stated by the respondents.

Compulsory English courses: The fourth initiative undertaken by 4 (24%) universities was compulsory English language courses for students who were considered very limited and limited users of English. The

focus was on grammar or communicative English. The courses were conducted for 3-4 h a week for 14 weeks and distributed over three semesters, 90 h spread over 3 inter-semester breaks, or 36 h a week for one month during the inter-semester break. These courses were well received by students because the courses were distributed over three semesters with low contact hours per week.

Upgrading of language learning and teaching facilities:

Upgrading of language learning and teaching facilities such as language lab and self-access centre was the seventh initiative reported by 4 (24%) universities. Language labs and self-access centres were established or upgraded with relevant technology to provide more opportunities for students to practice and acquire English. The universities had introduced online materials, extended open lab hours and new language software in the core curriculum. Self-access centres, were specifically designed to provide students with a one stop language centre with individual web and digital-based software, satellite television, internet facilities, group viewing and discussion rooms and language library with printed and electronic learning materials in a comfortable, relaxing and inviting atmosphere surrounded by appealing and welcoming setting. Two universities reported that their online resources received an average of 150-2000 “hits” a day. The respondents stated that self-access centres have been embraced by current students who are technology savvy. It was also reported that due to the cost of running and upgrading of self-access centres, the universities have embarked on Learning Management System (LMS) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC).

Faculty courses in English: The eighth initiative undertaken by 3 (18%) universities was to increase the number of faculty courses taught in English. It was reported that these courses involved law, accounting business, science and other technical-based courses. In addition, it was also found that some faculties such as engineering and business management made it compulsory for their students to use English in written tasks and in examinations, even though the courses were generally taught in Bahasa Melayu.

The key finding of the study is the fact that ELEP was found to be the programme that students and facilitators enjoyed the most because the activities were fun as well as relaxing. The students felt particularly secured when communicating in English even with their limited English language proficiency. The second key finding is that students who are at the intermediate level of proficiency were very motivated to participate in FSP. They found activities in FSP which focused on real world tasks to be very rewarding.

Challenges: Based on the seminar, five common challenges were identified; namely, limited proficiency in English, poor attendance and insufficient budget, facilities and facilitators. The biggest challenge was student’s poor proficiency in English, particularly in the productive skills of speaking and writing. Students who attended FSP with modules such as public speaking, debate, essay writing, business presentation and resume writing which require at least an intermediate level of proficiency could not maximise their participation because they could not comprehend the tasks conducted fully in English. Subsequently, attendance was low because students were demotivated to continue with the programmes.

Since programmes such as ELEP and FSP did not require compulsory attendance, final year students who were involved with internship or practical work such as studio, laboratory and final year projects avoided these programmes. Programmes conducted during weekends or semester breaks saw poor attendance because students had weekend plans or were on holidays. The universities also did not have adequate budget, facilities and facilitators to sustain the programmes. It is quite ironic that student’s poor English language proficiency which was the main reason for introducing the initiatives was also the main reason which hindered the success of the initiatives.

Malaysian universities have been proactive in their effort to enhance student’s English language proficiency. However, the universities are facing an uphill battle due to inadequate facilities, insufficient budget and lack of trained facilitators to manage these initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Even though, Malaysian university initiatives had incurred substantial effort, time and money, none has conducted a systematic assessment to ascertain that there is accountability and the program is successful in meeting the intended objectives. In view of the budget cut of about 23% across all universities in 2017, these initiatives will be severely affected (Mokhtar, 2016). Taking into account of this situation, the ministry of higher education has introduced integrated cumulative point average or iCGPA which highlights the incorporation of soft skills in calculating the CGPA (Abbas, 2015). This would ensure that Malaysian universities provide compulsory stand-alone or embedded soft skills modules including communication skills in English. Another major reform is aligning Malaysia’s English language education system with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Aziz, 2016). These two measures are expected to raise the standards of English in Malaysia.

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