



**ENGLISH LANGUAGE USE AMONG MALAYSIAN
TERTIARY LEVEL STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF
TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE**

BY

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ABSTRACT

With the global spread of English, it is undeniable that competency in English has become a crucial aspect of human capital development, especially in the areas of science, engineering and technology. While English is widely spoken in Malaysia, there have been concerns about its declining standards, with educationists and employers observing that even graduates are unable to use the language proficiently. The inability to use English or the lack of the necessary language skills has even been said to be the reason for the high level of unemployment among graduates. In view of this, this study set out to explore the language use of Tunku Abdul Rahman University College (TAR UC) students in all the four areas of English language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing in six domains: education, family, friendship, transactions, mass media and entertainment by adopting the concept of literacy as a social practice and the concept of domains by Fishman. The objectives of this study were to investigate to what extent English is used in TAR UC and outside the campus as well as the relationship between the use of English in the six domains and students' proficiency. This study adopted the concurrent embedded strategy of mixed methods design. In this approach, quantitative data from questionnaires of 435 respondents and qualitative data from interviews, home observations, classroom observations and document study were collected. The secondary qualitative data were embedded within the predominant quantitative data to provide a supporting role in explaining and expanding the findings of the questionnaires. The study found that students achieve higher language proficiency when they have adequate exposure and practice of using English inside and outside the classroom setting which include the home environment, and when they have access to more parental involvement. Results show that English language learning or English literacy learning is placed on the integration of the four language modes (listening, speaking, reading and writing) as it is used in real-life situations. Students learn by interacting socially and engaging in cooperative learning. Students do not learn complete language systems in learning environments where teachers use direct instruction to develop their vocabulary and language structures. To develop language fully, it must also be learned within the social contexts found at school, home, community, and society. In the context of TAR UC, the study has also revealed that there is a lack of cooperation from non-English lecturers and other college staff as well as the parents. It is suggested that when the institution and parents work together, students make the greatest gains in language development.

ملخص البحث

مع انتشار اللغة الإنجليزية حول العالم صار من الصعب إنكار أهميتها، حيث أضحى التمكن منها أمرا أساسيا لتطوير القوى العاملة، خصوصا في مجالات العلوم والهندسة والتقنية. ورغم انتشار اللغة الإنجليزية في ماليزيا، إلا هناك قلقا بخصوص انخفاض مستوى المتحدثين بها، حيث يلحظ الترييون وأرباب العمل عدم قدرة الكثيرين حتى من الخريجين على استخدامها استخداما فعالا محكما، وهو في رأي الكثيرين السبب الرئيسي في ارتفاع معدلات البطالة بين الخريجين. ولذلك فقد استهدفت هذه الدراسة التعرف على استخدام اللغة الإنجليزية بين طلاب جامعة تنكو عبد الرحمن من ناحية المهارات الأربعة وهي القراءة والكتابة والتحدث والاستماع، وذلك في مجالات ستة وهي في التعليم ومع الأهل والأصدقاء وفي التعاملات ووسائل الإعلام والترفيه. وقد ركزت الدراسة على مفهوم اكتساب المعرفة بالتفاعل الاجتماعي ومفهوم مجالات اللغة كما عرفه فثمان، وذلك لمعرفة مدى استخدام الطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية داخل الجامعة وخارجها، ولمعرفة العلاقة بين مستواهم اللغوي واستخدامهم اللغة في المجالات الستة المذكورة أعلاه. ولجمع البيانات اعتمدت الدراسة منهجية مختلطة بين البحث الكمي والبحث النوعي، حيث وزعت استبانة على ٤٣٥ طالبا وأجريت مقابلات ومعاينات للرصد في بعض المنازل والفصول الدراسية بالإضافة إلى التحليل بعض الوثائق، وذلك حتى تساعد البيانات النوعية في تفسير البيانات الكمية التي جمعت عن طريق الاستبانة. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن مستوى اللغة الإنجليزية يرتفع لدى الطلاب الذين يخاطونها ويمارسونها داخل الفصل وخارجه مثل المنزل، وعندما يكون هناك دعم من قبل الآباء. كما أظهرت النتائج أن تطوير مستوى اللغة لدى الطلاب يلزمه استعمال مهاراتها الأربعة في الحياة اليومية، فالطلاب يتعلمون بالتفاعل مع المجتمع والتعاون مع بعضهم، ويصعب عليهم استيعاب قواعد اللغة وتعلم مفرداتها بالاعتماد على التلقين المباشر فقط من قبل معلمهم داخل الفصل، فمن أراد إتقان اللغة وجب عليه تعلمها في سياقها الاجتماعي من بيئته في المدرسة والمنزل ومحيطه والمجتمع عموما. ولأن نتائج الدراسة أظهرت أنه ليس هناك تعاون كاف بين طلاب جامعة تنكو عبد الرحمن من جهة، ومدرسي المواد الأخرى غير مادة الإنجليزية والعاملين في الجامعة والآباء من جهة أخرى، فقد أوصت بدعم التعاون بين الآباء والجامعة حتى يتمكن الطلاب من تطوير مستوى لغتهم الإنجليزية تطورا فعالا.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigation, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Psalm 121

I humbly dedicate this piece of work at the feet of my Heavenly Father who has done so much for me. Thank you Lord for the joys and trials in completing my thesis. You are the source of my help and I am grateful that I never walk alone. Thank You for answered prayers and for the miracle of Your grace.

This piece of work is also dedicated to the memory of my mom and dad who had never failed me and I am where I am today because of both of you. Love you Ma and Pa.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

We live in a multicultural world in which the English language has become international. The cause of English becoming an international language is not the number of native English speakers but the increasing number of people who believe in the benefits of acquiring English as an additional language (McKay, 2003). The growing interest in English language learning, especially in the Asian and European regions has promoted English as the most studied foreign language (Bolton, 2005; Braine, 2005). McKay (2002) points out that the widespread use of English in a variety of political and intellectual areas makes it imperative for any country wishing to access the global community for economic development to have access to it. Likewise, for Malaysia to remain globally competitive, English language has a functional role by virtue of its use as an international language of communication in the economy of the nation. We therefore must encourage the use of English and it must be promoted as a means of advancement in life. In '*The Star*, p.4', 9 April 2011, Tan Sri Datuk Seri Lee Lam Thye said that mastering the English language is about rejuvenating the nation and preparing the people individually and collectively as a nation in finding their place in the global economy. Moreover, according to Michael (2012) it is essential that Malaysians have English proficiency since it is the medium whereby the information on the advancement and breakthrough in the fields of science and mathematics are presented.

However, in Malaysia, there exists a continuing debate on the status and use of English. According to Ee (2010), it is clear then public figures, teachers, parents and

even students themselves recognise the importance of English but at the same time almost everyone is aware of the rapidly declining standard of English in schools. The news of the falling standards in the use of the English language is reported in the newspapers. It was stated in the 'New Straits Times Online', 19 September 2011, that the English language curriculum used in schools be reviewed as students' mastery of the language was deemed unsatisfactory even after learning it for 13 years. 'The Star, p. 6', 7 Nov. 2011, said that although students in the local schools were not entirely English illiterate, they lacked confidence in speaking the language due to lack of use or practice as a medium of academic discourse as well as in their daily life or routine. Moreover, the 'Malay Mail Online', 12 August 2011 commented "It is sad that Malaysia which, just a few generations ago, produced a host of English-language proficient and articulate workers, technocrats, professionals, diplomats and leaders, should now be struggling with a generation unable to communicate their thoughts, ideas and feelings coherently, clearly and competently in that very language". Furthermore, an article in 'The Star Online' dated 4 October 2012 stated that the poor command of English among the younger generation puts them at a disadvantage in the competitive, global arena of today.

The deteriorating standard of competence in English among school children and the younger citizens in general, has undoubtedly disheartened and worried many quarters. The government realised the importance of English for Malaysia to move forward towards globalisation and feared that Malaysians would be left behind if they were not proficient in English. Hence, the government of Malaysia felt it necessary to give new emphasis on the learning of English which is increasingly seen as crucial in the advancement of trade and commerce as well as giving the country a competitive edge. There have been open declarations for the support of the teaching and learning

of English. This new tone of reference to the role of English in society was noted recently in the Tenth Malaysian Plan (2011-2015). Our current Prime Minister declared the move to promote the use of English language in the country's education system and to raise fluency in the language to international levels. In a recent article dated 7 September 2013 (retrieved from <http://www.todayonline.com/>), the Education Minister said that while the ministry would continue to strengthen the role of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, equal emphasis would be given to English so as to 'produce a global generation'. He emphasised that there will be more time allocated for English as a subject in schools to increase students' proficiency in the language. The move is to prepare students for 2016, the year from which it is compulsory to pass English for "Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia" (SPM), the Malaysian equivalent of the British 'O'-levels examinations.

Although the government is trying to arrest this downward spiral of the English proficiency, the declining standard of English is yet to be halted. Mustafa (2009) stated that the efforts and projects undertaken by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to improve the teaching and learning of English are neither correlative with the intensity of use of the language nor with the level of proficiency attained. This problem of the declining standard of English particularly affects student performance in tertiary institutions as they need English to be able to understand their core subjects better since most of the textbooks and reference books are in English. According to Juliana Othman (2005) although English may not be the medium of instruction in public universities, accessing key information in a great variety of fields is often dependent on having reading ability in English. Majority of the textbooks, reference materials, journal articles and learning cases are written in English and undergraduate students at the tertiary level in Malaysia are expected to read quite a number of books

and references that are mainly in written English. This creates problems to students who are not proficient in the language. Reading could be a struggle, which delays or sometimes impedes them from obtaining sufficient information as they have to spend a great deal of time reading them (Wahiza Wagi, 2013).

Inability to use English has even been said to be the reason of the high level of unemployment among graduates. The low communicative competence of a majority of college students has resulted in their not being able to secure a job particularly in the private companies merely because of their limited language proficiency. It was noted in '*The Sun*, p.15', 23 Nov. 2011, that college students struggle to communicate in English, which is a sad sight since not being able to master this language means not only a lack of job opportunities but also being held back socially, and most importantly, they will not be able to learn new things quickly enough. Hence, it was crucial for graduates to have a good command of English to ensure they would be able to compete effectively in the global job market ('*The Star*, p. 7', 7 Nov. 2011). Besides, this group of people are considered an important source of human capital that provides the engine of national growth and development.

As argued by Hafriza (2006) that in this age of industrialisation and internationalisation, we cannot deny future generations the ability to access new frontiers in science and technology simply because of their poor English. Realising this, it is highly important for language educators and policy makers to carefully examine how language learning is theorised in our educational context and make necessary changes in order to advocate better English language learning among our learners (Normazidah Che Musa et al., 2012).

Having looked at the background of this study, it may be relevant to next focus on the context of this study, Tunku Abdul Rahman College which is now known as Tunku Abdul Rahman University College.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN COLLEGE / TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

Tunku Abdul Rahman College (TARC) was established on 24 February 1969 under the leadership of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a component party in the ruling coalition. The College was named after the late YTM Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia and the Father of Independence. This institution of higher learning has six campuses in six states across Malaysia. The college operates with a 50% subsidy from the Government for all its recurrent and capital expenditure; the other 50% funding comes from the fees collected and College trustees. TARC was set up by MCA with the intention to help young Malaysians who have been deprived of the opportunity to seek education, as well as to fulfil the rising demand from the private sector for trained professional, sub-professional and technical personnel in the task of nation building (TARC Prospectus 2013/2014).

The college started with the commencement of classes in the School of Pre-University Studies in 1969 and followed by the School of Business Studies in 1971. In 1972, the School of Technology and School of Arts and Science were established. The School of Social Science and Humanities was established in 1999 (TARC Prospectus 2013/2014).

The earlier classes were conducted in the Technical Institute, Cheras and Day Training College, Jalan Kuantan. Due to its rapid expansion, new centres were set up in six secondary schools and Catholic High School, Petaling Jaya. On 19 July 1976,

with the completion of the first phase of the College Campus in Kuala Lumpur, classes were moved to its own premises in Jalan Genting Kelang, Setapak (TARC Prospectus 2013/2014).

From an initial intake of 764 students with classes conducted in various centres in the Klang Valley in 1969, the College today is the largest college in Malaysia with a student population of 24,000 students in all its campuses, Kuala Lumpur Main Campus and five Branch Campuses in Penang, Perak, Johor, Pahang and Sabah. Students can select from a wide range of quality and affordable programmes at Certificate, Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels offered by the five Schools: Arts and Science (SAS), Business Studies (SBS), Social Science and Humanities (SSH), Technology (SOT) and Pre-University Studies (SPUS) (TARC Prospectus 2013/2014).

Under the Seventh Malaysia Plan, the College has established the Centre for Continuing & Professional Education (CPE). This Centre is registered as a Training Provider under the PROLUS Scheme, Human Resource Development Berhad, Ministry of Human Resources, and play an important role in helping members of the public, especially mature students and alumni to upgrade, update their knowledge and to obtain new skills to keep up with technology and development in their respective professions (TARC Prospectus 2013/2014).

The College Main Campus and five Branch Campuses in Penang, Perak, Johor, Pahang and Sabah are well-equipped with various facilities and comprehensive resources to support learning and teaching such as technical computing software, library, tutorial rooms, lecture theatres, laboratories, student centre and sports complex. The latest physical icon in the Main Campus is the 6-storey administrative building which has been fully operational since the end of 2011. It operates not only

as the administrative nerve centre but also houses an auditorium and the College Gallery. This new building and the old administrative block are named as “Bangunan Tun Tan Siew Sin” and “Bangunan Tan Sri Khaw Kai Boh” as a tribute to the College’s founding leaders (TARC Prospectus 2013/2014).

Tunku Abdul Rahman College was officially upgraded to a University College on 2 May 2013, thereby allowing the institution to offer undergraduate degree programmes leading to the awarding of Bachelor's degrees (‘New Straits Times’, 3 May 2013). The School of Arts and Science (SAS), School of Business Studies (SBS), School of Social Science and Humanities (SSH) and School of Technology (SOT) are now named as Faculty of Applied Sciences and Computing, Faculty of Accountancy, Finance and Business, Faculty of Social Science, Arts and Humanities and Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment respectively. The University College has two other faculties: Faculty of Commerce, Communications and Hospitality in Pahang and Faculty of Business, Information Technology and Hospitality in Sabah. Furthermore, there are two new Centres set up namely Centre for Postgraduate Studies and Research; and Centre for Nation Building and Languages. The School of Pre-University Studies is now known as the Centre for Pre-University Studies.

The Language courses which are run by the Division of Languages is now housed in the Centre for Nation Building and Languages.

We next move on to the teaching of English in Tunku Abdul Rahman University College.

1.3 TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

In TAR UC, as English is used as the main medium of instruction for both teaching and learning, students who wish to join the School of Arts and Science/ Faculty of Applied Sciences and Computing; School of Social Science and Humanities/ Faculty of Social Science, Arts and Humanities; and School of Technology/ Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment must have a minimum of a pass in English whereas the School of Business/ Faculty of Accountancy, Finance and Business requires students to have at least a credit in English (TARC Prospectus 2013/2014).

The Division of Languages in the Centre for Nation Building and Languages offers year-round intensive courses in English language at different levels to help students develop and improve their English language skills and communication techniques across the Schools/ Faculties in the Main Campus and Branch Campuses. The intensive English courses are offered at four levels: Foundation programmes, Pre-Intermediate programmes, Intermediate programmes and Advanced programmes. All four levels emphasise the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – which are introduced through component teaching (oral and written) and a variety of coursework. These programmes are designed to equip students with the language skills needed to cope with their other academic programmes at the university college. Students are not exempted from these English language courses except for special cases and upon passing them, students will be able to graduate.

To enhance the students' English language proficiency and communication skills, students are required to earn the respective number of credits in English language. The English language requirements for College/University College awards are specified as follows: (TARC Prospectus 2013/2014)