

EXPLORING ESL LECTURERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE ENGLISH PREPARATORY COURSE UNDER THE MDAB PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

The Mengubah Destini Anak Bangsa (MDAB) pre-diploma English preparatory course is a course offered in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) which caters for under privileged Malay and Bumiputera students. The main aim of the course is to upgrade the English proficiency levels of these students to help them further their studies at diploma level. Having good English language skills is important in the 21st century. Hence, tertiary students should have good English skills to be successful in the 21st century. This paper investigates the ESL lecturers' perceptions of the MDAB English Preparatory course. The study involved a total of 18 lecturers from three zones in UiTM Malaysia, namely the Central zone (Negeri Sembilan), the South zone (Malacca) and the North zone (Kelantan). Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that the lecturers felt that the current six contact hours is not sufficient to cover the English language components in the syllabus. Moreover, they felt that there were far too many assessments in the course which needed to be carried out during this six hour course. This further compounded their problems with regard to time constraints. Besides that, they felt that there was too much emphasis on the listening and speaking skills. These findings suggest that there is a need for an increase in the contact hours for the MDAB English Preparatory Course.

Keywords: *English Preparatory course, MDAB, English proficiency, ESL Lecturers' perspectives*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has grown by leaps and bounds to become one of the leading third world countries in the field of education, due to high budget allocation for education. In Malaysia, the government views education as a means to develop the nation's human capital which includes entrepreneurs, scholars and leaders. In order to ensure Malaysia cultivates the necessary human capital to meet industry requirements, a soft skills module that included communication skills has been introduced by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) to public universities in 2007 (Sulaiman Yassin et al., 2008). In fact, skills training has also been given special emphasis in the Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011-2015 under Malaysia's New Economic Model (NEM) (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia [MOHE], 2011). Moreover, developing more holistic and integrated curricula as well as improving the ecosystem for students' development have been the main focus of the MOE and higher learning institutions in the current Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 2015). Among the steps that will be taken is through increasing the use of experiential and service learning to develop 21st century skills as well as improving the students' language proficiency in English. These steps were taken to ensure the MOE aspirations to increase the current 75% employability rate among graduates to more than 80% in 2025 (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2015) becomes reality. Amidst such a noble aspiration, Malaysia has not forgotten underprivileged learners who are at risk of educational failure. These groups of learners need to be helped so that they can improve their own personal well-being and by extension contribute to the nation at large. Thus, numerous programmes have been laid down by various institutions to help these underprivileged at risk learners. One such initiative has been conducted by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), the largest public university in Malaysia. A specially funded programme referred to as Mengubah Destini Anak Bangsa (hereafter referred to as MDAB) was launched in 2010. This programme was initiated by the Vice-Chancellor of UiTM. It specifically caters for the underprivileged *Bumiputera* (indigenous) students who failed to gain entry into tertiary institutions in Malaysia. The MDAB programme is seen as a 'second' chance for these students to gain entry into institutions of higher learning. After a six-month preparatory course, the MDAB students would be offered opportunities to continue their education in the university or enroll for other skill-related courses depending on their results.

Nevertheless, in order to enroll themselves for further education, they need to be proficient in the English language to help them cope with the amount of academic reading required in institutions of higher learning. To prepare these students for this, the medium of instruction for the MDAB programme is in English. Moreover, the use of English plays a crucial role in employment for the twenty-first century workforce (Erling et al., 2012). It is supported by Dumanig, David and Symaco (2012) who added that the demand for the English language is expected by various stakeholders given that its acquisition would mean better opportunities for securing a job, both locally and overseas. They further elucidated that Malaysian graduates were found to be unable to procure jobs because of their limited English language skills. In other words, equipping students with appropriate English skills is indeed necessary to keep up with the demands of the working environment. Henceforth, it should be wise for students in all higher learning institutions to be well equipped with competent language skills, so that they not only can survive in today's keen competitive world, but also to stand out among those who have great working skills. In line with this, Chang (2010) stressed that the establishment of supplementary English courses/programs and/or the selection of students qualified for English-medium instruction should be necessary to help improve students' English language proficiency. This kind of English courses would provide students with more opportunities to learn English through receiving and producing authentic English language in real communicative contexts (Swales, 1990; Brandl, 2007 & Chang, 2010).

Therefore, in addressing the issue, an English preparatory course has been implemented to upgrade the English proficiency level of the MDAB students. The course is a six credit unit course that consisted of six contact hours per week. The primary focus of the course is on reading and listening. Besides that, appropriate consideration is also given to speaking and writing. In addition, it also incorporates lessons on grammar which is taught incidentally through listening, reading, speaking and writing tasks. At the end of the course, students are expected to be able to identify and extract specific information from a variety of texts, recognize word sounds and recall information from oral texts, and use correct pronunciation, stress and intonation when speaking. They should also be able to use appropriate vocabulary when speaking and writing as well as use grammatically correct structures when speaking and writing. This is because by having good English language skills, via the implemented course, students should be

able to communicate better, hence giving them a competitive edge in the job market (Dumanig, David and Symaco, 2012). Nevertheless, no study has been carried out to investigate how the preparatory course has helped to improve the MDAB students' English language proficiency to the extent that they are ready to further their studies in institutions of higher learning. Based on the highlighted factors above, it is appropriate to ask, with the support system provided, "What are the lecturers' perspectives on the English Language course in elevating the students' language proficiency?"

METHOD

This study was conducted in the largest public university in Malaysia with branch campuses all over Malaysia. In this university, English is used as a medium of instruction. Moreover, a mandatory pass in their English papers is a requirement for students to graduate. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study because more valuable information can be obtained through focused yet conversational two-way communication with the participants (Pathak & Intratat, 2012). Thus, it gave freedom for the researchers to explore issues and gain more detailed information than what is available through other collection methods, such as surveys (Woods, 2011). Through this way, the researchers were able to gain more understanding about the lecturers' perceptions about the English Preparatory course under MDAB program. The target population comprised 18 lecturers who have been teaching the English preparatory course under the MDAB (Mengubah Destini Anak Bangsa) programme. The lecturers selected for this study were from three randomly selected branch campuses of the university, representing three zones in Peninsular Malaysia – the Central Zone, the South Zone and North Zone. For this study, these lecturers will be referred to as LC1 to LC6 (Central), LS1 to LS6 (South) and LN1 to LN6 (North). LC1 refers to Lecturer 1 from the Central Zone, LS1 refers to Lecturer 1 from the South Zone and LN1 refers to Lecturer 1 from the North Zone respectively. The interview questions focused on getting the lecturers' perspectives related to the English Preparatory course under the MDAB program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Course Duration

All lecturers from the three zones agreed that they did not have enough time to complete the syllabus. They felt that six hours was not enough to cover all language components in the syllabus of the English preparatory course. Respondents from the South Zone, LS1, LS2, LS3 and LS4 stated that they did not have enough time to make sure the students learned properly as there were only six contact hours for this course per week. The Preparatory English course is a 14 week course. The lecturers met the students only three times a week and each session lasted two hours. The lecturers felt that the duration was too short as it included both teaching and assessing the students. Besides that, they also had to teach many components which included reading, writing, listening and speaking as well as grammar. The assessments included listening quiz, script writing and role-play, dictations, and mid-semester test. They were required to complete the syllabus in 14 weeks before the semester ended. This was what LS1 had to say:

'It is very difficult to finish our syllabus in teaching the students when we see them for only six hours per week, in three classes and two hours per session. During that period, we were not only required to teach but we also had to give tests and quizzes.'

Her statement was corroborated by another lecturer from the South Zone, LS2 who stated that:

'Lecturers are required to teach many things but it is difficult to keep up with the syllabus when we are only given six hours per week. Due to the time constraint, we had no choice but to touch and go most of the topics.'

Their statements were further supported by a lecturer from the North Zone, LN1 who stated that the limited contact hours did not enable her to determine whether her students understood the lessons or not. She felt pressed for time to complete the syllabus.

'The current contact hours are very limited. Thus, we can't really know if students understand what we teach. We have no choice but to continue since we have a tight syllabus to finish.'

All of the lecturers teaching this course pointed out that the current six hours per week for this course was not enough. They claimed that the six hours was inadequate to teach the students all the components which included listening, speaking, reading writing and grammar as well as carrying out many assessments during that period. For instance, all lecturers from the Central Zone agreed that,

'Time allocated for this course is six hours. During that period, we are required not only to teach, but we need to assess them as well. Thus, it is very difficult for us to teach when we have to divide our limited time.'

Lecturer LC4 further stated that there was not enough time for the lecturers to teach when they had to assess their students through tests and quizzes during the class. Due to this concern, Lecturer LC5 claimed that the students' behaviors also changed. They used to behave better and were more cooperative when the contact hour was 12 hours per week. Previously when it was 12 contact hours per week, there were less problems with the use of Malay language in class and there was better student-lecturer communication. However, when the course duration was reduced to six hours from 12, the students began to behave negatively.

'When the contact hours were changed from 12 hours to 6 hours, the students' behaviors also changed. They became more sluggish and always used Malay language in the class. They also didn't interact much with us like previously. With 12 contact hours before, we didn't have this problem. Although, the students were weak in English but they were well behaved and always asked questions. They also completed the homework and got involved with activities.'

Therefore, lecturers from all campuses highlighted the need to increase the contact hours, so that they will have more time to teach and focus on the students' progress in learning English. For instance, two lecturers from the Central Zone, LC3 and LC6 highlighted that the duration should

be increased from six to 12 hours. The previous BEL (English language) course mentioned below refers to the previous course code of the same preparatory English course.

'The contact hours need to be increased like the previous BEL course, which is 12 hours per week. Through the additional hours, the lecturers can complete the syllabus and really teach the students.'

In addition, the lecturers also believed that there were too many assessments and assignments in the course. For example, lecturer respondents from the Central and South zones pointed out that the course contained so many assessments. For this reason, the teaching and learning processes in the course were disrupted, given that their contact with their students was only six hours per week. The assessments started from week 6 to week 14. There were two dictation quizzes, two reading tasks based on the two Readers, group presentation for role-play which was based on the Readers, script writing for the role-play, a listening quiz, mid-semester test, and final examination. All these assessments take up a lot of time especially role-play as well as group and individual presentations.

B. Course Components

Another area of contention the lecturers had with regard to the course was the components covered in the syllabus. Given that the current English Preparatory course has only 6 contact hours, they felt that it was impossible to cover all the components listed in the course. The course covers reading, writing, speaking, listening and grammar. The reading component requires the students to acquire various reading skills and students are required to join a 'Readers' program to help them improve their reading skills. The writing component is geared towards preparing students for paragraph writing. Both the listening and speaking components aim to prepare students to communicate well. Grammar is to be integrated into the teaching of the four skills.

According to the scheme of work of the course, lecturers are expected to cover all these components every week. Even though the syllabus covers

all four skills of reading, writing, and listening and speaking, the lecturers stated in the interviews that listening and speaking were the main focus of the course. A lecturer from the Central Zone, LC2 claimed the course focused too much on listening and speaking at the expense of other components such as writing and grammar were neglected. He highlighted that this course should focus more on the writing as the students will be required to write a lot when they proceed to do their Diploma.

'This course should emphasize more on writing, instead of listening and speaking as the students need to do a lot of writing when they do Diploma.'

He was further supported by Lecturer LN4 who added that it was crucial for the students to be taught more grammar and writing as these two aspects will be helpful when they continue their study at Diploma level. Hence, she stressed that there should more room for writing and grammar in the English Preparatory course for the MDAB students.

'The students need to be taught grammar and writing to enable them to learn better in Diploma. However, these two aspects were not given enough emphasis in the current syllabus. I wish they would be emphasized more.'

Some lecturers also felt that grammar was neglected due to the fact that there was too much focus on the listening and speaking components. A lecturer from the Central Zone, LC1, highlighted that there was a lack of focus on grammar in the content of the course. Some students even requested him to teach more grammar in the class. He further added grammar should be taught separately to the students. This is because many students were weak in grammar. Lecturer LS6 from the South Zone also added that the English preparatory course should focus more on the grammar and it should be a tested component in the course. He claimed that teaching grammar indirectly without any specific test was not enough to help students to be more proficient in English.

'We emphasize on teaching all four components in English in this course; listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, grammar is taught indirectly, with no test. I find it hard for the

students to improve their English when they are not properly taught and tested on their grammar.'

One of the reasons why the lecturers felt that listening and speaking were the focus of the course was due to the amount of time spent preparing for script writing and role-play for the course. For the role play, the students were given freedom to write their own scripts, besides acting. Although role-play was seen as an interesting activity by both students and lecturers, all lecturers from the Central Zone claimed that the role-play did not really help the students in communicating with people since it was scripted beforehand. Therefore, it did not give students much exposure to the real world English communication. For instance, lecturer LC5 pointed out that;

'Students need to write their own scripts for the role play. They also need to show the scripts to the lecturers for further corrections. To me, it's a not useful way to help them communicate in English since the role play's not natural and did not represent the real world.'

Moreover, lecturer LC6 added that the role play was not an effective way to expose students to communicating using English in the real world. Thus, the students still felt nervous when they had to use English outside of the classroom, despite being exposed to the role-play in the classroom. In addition, lecturers from the North Zone claimed that dictation was not useful to the students and it should be out of the syllabus. They further added that the students did not need dictation. Instead, the focus should be more on writing. For example, lecturer LC6 stated that,

'Dictation does not help much in Diploma. In Diploma, the students need to do lots of writing. Thus, the focus of the English course in the Pre-Diploma should be on writing compared to dictation.'

The lecturers explained that for the reading component, a specific program entitled 'Reader' was included. Most of the lecturers from the Central Zone mentioned that the 'Reader' program did not help much in improving the students' English proficiency. For instance, lecturer LC4 claimed that it limited the students' creativity since they only had to copy the materials provided. For this reason, another lecturer LC5 pointed out that the students should be given freedom to choose their own reading logs.

C. Medium of Instruction

The findings from the interviews conducted with lecturers reveal that majority of them typically communicate using Malay and English with their students. The usage of mixed languages was considered a norm as it can help the students understand the lesson better. The lecturers stated that they tolerated their students who used mixed-languages because through that way, the students would respond to them and consequently, understand the lesson better. A lecturer from the Central Zone, LC1 stated that,

'Most of my students are weak in English. They had problems to understand if I only communicate using English. So, I had no choice but to use both Malay and English languages in my class, especially for the difficult tasks.'

Lecturer LN6 from the North Zone further added that although she knew that teaching students solely in English would be better, she still opted to also use Malay language as it helped her students to have better understanding of her lessons.

D. Classroom Management

Another issue of concern raised by lecturers was classroom management. Interview sessions further revealed that lecturers found it difficult to conduct effective language lessons when classroom enrolment was large, for instance LC4 pointed that having too many students inhibited certain group activities because effective facilitation and monitoring cannot be carried out. Nonetheless, the lecturers highlighted that they do take the initiative to conduct various activities for effective learning. Respondent LN5 highlighted that most lecturers assign both individual and group tasks to students for listening as it is very challenging for them. Interviews conducted with the lecturers revealed that group work had been utilized as a method to bring together students with different levels of English language competencies. It was to enable weak students to get help from the more proficient students. For example, lecturer LC2 from the Central Zone stated that,

'Whenever I give group work, I normally put students with different competency levels in one group. It is to allow more proficient students to help the weaker ones.'

CONCLUSION

Having an effective English course is of importance especially when it is tailored to help underprivileged students at risk of failure. This is particularly true of the MDAB program. It is therefore necessary to look into the stakeholders' perspectives of the English course, particularly the lecturers since they are directly involved in teaching the course. The lecturers generally agreed that the current six hours a week course is insufficient to cover the syllabus. In addition, they felt that most of the students entered the course with very limited proficiency. As a result of their weak command of the language, the lecturers felt that the number of contact hours should be increased to 12 hours. This is important as the increase in the contact hours will also increase students' exposure to the English language.

Another concern that the lecturers' had was the fact that much time was taken up by assessments. This, to them diverted much time from teaching and learning. They were particularly worried as most of the students were very weak in English. Their concern is justified particularly if not much time is left for these weak students to learn the English language. Another worry of the lecturers was that the course was focusing on the listening and speaking components. This is reflected in the assessment for the course which shows that Listening and speaking constitute 45% of the overall assessment with reading 40% and writing 10%. The other 5% was for online grammar quiz. The lecturers felt that reading and writing should be given greater emphasis as students were weak in these areas. Moreover, students are expected to read and write a lot when they do their diploma studies. Sun et al. (2010) posit that a solid foundation in literacy is a key factor for academic success. This suggests that in order for these students to achieve academic success, they need to have good reading and writing skills. However, Lea and Street (1998) reported that literacy standards in schools and higher education institutions are very low; thus, academicians often complain that students cannot write properly. Munro (2003) confirmed this view and claimed that dealing effectively with students' literacy difficulties and poor academic

writing skills has become a challenge that universities around the globe have to deal with. This problem needs to be taken seriously as underprepared students find it difficult to cope with the expectation of writing tasks that awaits them in higher education teaching and learning contexts (Cliff & Hanslo, 2009). Besides that, lecturers also felt that dictation should be removed from the course. They felt that students did not need dictation but they did not explain why students did not need dictation. Nevertheless, researchers like Grabe (1999) and Alderson (2000) suggest that vocabulary knowledge is important in reading. In fact, Alderson (2000) postulates that the measures of a reader's vocabulary knowledge correlates highly with measures of reading comprehension, and are often the single best predictor of text comprehension. What this means is that dictation which requires students to learn new words is a means to improve students' vocabulary hence indirectly improving their reading comprehension. This is important because the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension is reciprocal as reading provides an opportunity to learn new word meanings (Beck, Perfetti & McKeown, 1982), despite whether oral vocabulary skills play an important role in developing word recognition and reading skills is still debatable (Ricketts, Nation & Bishop, 2007). Another concern of the lecturers was that the 'Reader' books did not help improve students' English proficiency. This seems to be contrary to literature which shows that reading helps students in improving their language proficiency whether in terms of vocabulary or command of the language. Ratnawati Mohd Asraf and Ismail Sheikh Ahmad (2003) stated that one of the best ways to help students increase their language proficiency is to encourage them to read extensively. A study conducted by Hayashi (1999) on the effects of extensive reading among Japanese university students' proficiency in English revealed that students who read more English books experienced significantly greater improvement in terms of their ability to read and had more vocabulary knowledge than those who read less. This is so because "reading is a powerful source for the acquisition of vocabulary in a second language context, but more than that, it is hypothesized that reading, with no explicit vocabulary learning, can result in incidental vocabulary development" (Ponniah, 2011, p.135). However, despite numerous studies which testify to useful extensive reading can be in enhancing the students' English proficiency, lecturers in this study felt that the 'Reader' program was not that helpful. One reason that led the lecturers to feel that way could be the fact that they felt constrained by the six contact hours. It could explain

why they may not have enough time to dwell and exploit the benefits of reading the books. This is unfortunate since the Reader could be a helpful program to improve the students' reading ability, a crucial skill needed if they wanted to be successful in their pursuit of higher education, particularly when they further their studies at Diploma level.

On the other hand, the use of both English and Bahasa Malaysia in the classroom for teaching English seems acceptable for the lecturers in this course. Perhaps this is due to the fact that students are too weak to understand English. Several researchers highlighted that there is a need to use bilingual instruction to enable productive learning of the target language (TL). For instance, Atkinson (1993) highlighted that first language (L1) should be included in language instruction if teachers and learners share the same mother tongue as using the target language may seem artificial. Using L1 may improve students' motivation as their attention is sustained more keenly. Moreover, the rapport between teachers and learners may be further enhanced. Using L1 may be more efficient when there is something complicated to communicate. Besides that, using L1 provides instructors to conduct language awareness activities (comparing mother tongue and the TL) can usually take place in L1. The problem of using bilingual instruction in this course could be compounded by time constraints i.e. given more contact hours, lecturers could have more time to explain in English what students did not understand which is not possible, given the six contact hours. Hence, all these point to the need for increasing the contact hours to 12 for the lecturers to cover everything in the English syllabus.

To sum up, the study found that the lecturers have provided valuable insights into the MDAB English preparatory course. They made some positive observations about the course and at the same time voiced their concerns. Such insights can only help improve the MDAB preparatory course so that students can greatly benefit from it.

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