

Modern Language Olympiad: Unleashing Potentials for 21st Century Skills

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Abstract

The challenge of becoming employable 21st century graduates to meet current industry demands was the basis of this innovation. With the aim to equip a group of students with soft skills on one hand, and another with industry-specific communicative abilities on the other, the Modern Language Olympiad (MLO) was established under Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM Shah Alam, as the first multi-language competition held internationally that is fully student-led. Five categories of competitions were designed with close engagement with the industry, which were strategic storytelling, idea pitching, versatile presenting, and radio drama across three languages (English, Bahasa Melayu, and Arabic) from 29 October to 2 November 2019. Preparations to conduct this international competition commenced a year before that. In total, 330 participants from 11 public universities, 6 private universities and 4 foreign universities and 10 UiTM branch campuses participated in the event, which was run by 40 student committee and 100 student volunteers, guided by 30 academic advisors. A total of 40 judges from the industry were involved in the competitions. The event, which amassed a total profit of RM58,416.45, managed to develop the student committee's critical thinking, problem solving, time management, project management, and budgeting skills, while the participants gained immeasurable benefits in enhancing their communication skills through feedback from the industry and by observing others. This innovation is a step forward to improve students' soft skills and communication skills using the two-pronged approach through running a student-led, student-driven, wide-scale international event.

Keywords: *21st century skills; student development; soft skills development, communication; innovation*

INTRODUCTION

The challenge of becoming employable 21st century graduates became the basis of this innovation. Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (Academy of Language Studies) or APB, offers academic programmes in the field of applied language studies. It is imperative that APB

students exhibit language prowess through their productive skills i.e. speaking and writing. Hence, the journey began by formulating a workable student-centred activity framework that is able to unleash and enhance students' language skills. A language competition. It was not just any conventional language competition. It was a truly revolutionary language competition aptly called the Modern language Olympiad or MLO.

The Ministry of Higher Education emphasized the importance of higher education provider (HEP) to produce employable graduates. This cascaded into policies made by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) which were further translated into academic programmes that factored in the developing of linguistic prowess in both academic and non-academic activities. Many research pointed out that the industry needed employable graduates who were able to articulate ideas and products well and communicate effectively within and beyond the workplace (Zainuddin et al., 2019). However, most graduates lacked those language skills.

APB, being the academy that specialises in student language development initiated, planned and implemented a framework of a language competition that focused on five (5) communication skills, that were executed through three (3) languages. What started as a small, concerted effort to address the need of the industry bloomed into an international level language competition.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Over the past several years, numerous research have been conducted to uncover the most crucial 21st century skills (otherwise coined as soft skills, transferable skills or employability skills) needed by modern industries. For instance, a study conducted by Mohan et al. (2018) found that the top ten most reported 21st century skills, in the order of its importance, are teamwork, problem solving, communication, computer skills, analytical thinking, leadership, time management, creativity, interpersonal, and organisation. The need for such skills has been emphasised in a wide range of literature at both national and international contexts to address the ever-changing nature of the 21st century workforce. Nilsson and Ekberg (2013) described the current working environment as being characterised by “increased intensity, competition, a faster pace, shorter lead times, the expansion of different kinds of contract and part-time work, the rapid emergence and the development of new

knowledge and technologies, and the increasing decentralisation of responsibility” (p. 1). This was supported by Clokie and Fourie (2016), who posited that the current working landscape has made it a higher requirement for employees to work in project teams, cross-functional groups, and virtual teams in businesses.

Despite the continuous emphasis that has been placed by past research and literature on the need to improve students’ soft skills development (with a higher emphasis on communication skills), there has been a scarcity in new methods and approaches to address these issues among higher education institutions (HEIs). This problem, if left unaddressed, has been shown in literature to have potentially dire consequences. For instance, Qizi (2020) posited that due to changes in the current economic landscape, employers desired employees who have higher applied skills compared to cognitive skills, as paper qualifications are no longer deemed to truly reflect a student’s professional intelligence. He further asserted the crucial role of higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop students’ soft skills in order to increase their abilities to meet the demands of modern work labour.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In seeking to address the problems highlighted in the previous section, it became immediately clear in the context of higher education the challenge of integrating soft skills training into a structured curriculum, where learning outcomes have been standardised and where the classroom is controlled by lesson plans and objectives leading to a predetermined assessment where the students are graded on a set of rubrics based on their performance in the assessment. This has been highlighted, for instance, by Abelha et al. (2020), who highlighted the fact that the main challenge faced by HEIs is in terms of identifying the different ways certain competencies can be embedded into a particular curriculum design. Such an environment makes it challenging to hone students’ soft skills due to the absence of the VUCA elements (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) (Bennis & Nanus, 2007), which has been claimed in the corporate sector to enable people to learn to make decisions, plan forward, manage risks, foster change, and solve problems. Yet, there is no denying the expectations placed on higher education institutions to address the issue of developing students’ soft skills at the university (Oraison et al., 2019). Jackson (2010), for instance, claimed that HEIs worldwide have been accused of producing graduates who are not equipped with the necessary soft skills to function effectively in the workplace.

Addressing Soft Skills Development

Past studies have highlighted different methods adopted by universities to incorporate soft skills training into the curriculum. For instance, a study by Kornelakis and Petrakaki (2020) highlighted group presentations, role play, case studies, forums, debates and simulations as some of the examples of small-group teachings that can be employed to address employability skills. Similarly, Isa et al. (2020) identified the use of project-based learning (sometimes called problem-based learning) to include soft skills development in the learning process. To uncover the needs of the main stakeholders (students, universities and employers), Pereira et al. (2020) conducted a study through a 1,374 questionnaires distribute to key stakeholders in five European countries. The study found that all three stakeholders were of the popular opinion that universities should include practical tasks and assignments in courses to enhance graduates' soft skills and, by extension, their employability. The study concluded by recommending HEIs to establish close collaboration practices with companies as a way to offer internships for students. Additionally, it was also recommended for HEIs to invite professionals from the business sector to participate in pedagogical activities, whether curricular or extra-curricular (Pereira et al., 2020).

In the context of Malaysia, internships are generally compulsory for all students regardless of field of study under the commonly named program called "industrial training" or "practical training". Students are often attached to companies as interns for a period of three to six months, upon which they are often required to produce a written report highlighting the tasks they have completed, problems they have faced, and the general knowledge they have gained from the experience. Thus, for the first part of the recommendation given by Pereira et al. (2020), it could be argued that this has already been largely addressed by HEIs in Malaysia. However, there is room for further exploration in the second recommendation, which is to involve professionals in extra-curricular activities. This led to the initial idea of conducting something extra-curricular rather than curriculum-related for the development of students' soft skills development in the context of this innovation project.

Addressing Communication Development

One of the most often recurring themes for one of the most important soft skills needed for graduates is communication skills (Singh et al., 2013; Messum et al., 2016). This has been highlighted in the study of Succi and Magali (2019) that was conducted among students and HR managers found that communication skills was the most important soft skill required to improve graduate employability, alongside being committed to work and having teamwork skills. This coincides with past studies, as proven by the study by Mohan et al. (2018) who conducted a systematic literature review by examining 43 publications resulting in 158 unique skills from a total of 627 reported skills. The study found teamwork, problem-solving and communication as the top three most important skills for employability as reported in past studies.

In order to address this crucial need, numerous studies and initiatives have been developed to bridge the gap between universities and the industry to increase students' communicative abilities. From this, many suggestions and recommendations have been given by past researchers as a way to improve students' communication competence. Among these are devising a job-specific communicative syllabus (Fareen, 2018), constructing a globally benchmarked, industry-driven and standardised English competency certification test (Sarudin et al., 2013), obtaining structured feedback from the industry (Zainuddin et al., 2019), appointing adjunct and university fellows from the industry to track ongoing requirements (Salleh & Omar, 2013), and by introducing activities such as modelling, examples, case studies, and work placements and internships (Clokie & Fourie, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

As previously highlighted in the previous sections, the issues surrounding the abilities of students cover general soft skills development, such as teamwork, problem solving, communication, computer skills, analytical thinking, leadership, time management, creativity, interpersonal, and organisation (Mohan et al., 2018). Taking this into account, and the general recommendation to increase the involvement of industry practitioners into extra-curricular activities, the idea of establishing an innovative way of developing students' soft skills and communication skills was born.

The Modern Language Olympiad (MLO) by concept is an international level language competition that integrates 21st century communication skills and leadership to everyone involved. It is a student driven competition where the scheduling, the prompts, the rules,

internal communications, external communications, searching for sponsors, and various others functions when running the entirety of the international tournament was performed by students themselves under the guidance of 30 experienced academic advisors from APB, UiTM. A total of 40 student committee were elected, and an additional of 100 students volunteered for this programme. The program itself was run for five days (from 29 October 2019 to 2 November 2019), however, the planning and preparation work began more than six months before that.

In order to assist the new student committee to run the Olympiad, an event management workshop was run in April 2019 to increase the readiness of the student committee, student volunteers as well as the advisors to run the event. Among the areas addressed during the workshop was:

1. To give exposure to students and advisors regarding the most crucial aspects of event management.
2. To increase the knowledge of the student committee, volunteers and advisors regarding event management.
3. To allow students to prepare themselves with tools to address challenges that would later occur during the event.

For the workshop, a highly experienced UiTM staff with expertise in event management at the national and international level was called to conduct the workshop. A few crucial topics were covered during the workshop, which were Introduction to Event Management, Financial Management and Budgeting, Technical Planning, Marketing and Publicity, Arrival and Reception, Safety and Health, Sponsorships, Invitations, and Opening and Closing Ceremonies among many others.

The student committee was purposefully mixed between the four bachelor's degree and two postgraduate programmes in APB, UiTM. Doctorate, masters, and degree students were purposefully put together to foster collaboration and teamwork, where different functions comprised of students from different bachelor's degree programs. The student committee and volunteers were split into close to 20 smaller committees to perform functions related to the competition design and development, financial management, marketing and publicity, liaison, program, protocol, technical, performances, logistics, accommodation, food and beverages, and many more. This was designed to allow the students to attain first-hand knowledge of how to perform the necessary individual functions when running a full-scale event.

Among the functions carried out by the students were, among others:

- i. Setting up the competition rounds and rules
- ii. Identification of the competition date
- iii. Poster and banner designs
- iv. Promotional activities through social media, and official announcements to educational institutions
- v. Searching for sponsors & budgeting
- vi. Planning out the programme tentative
- vii. Reaching out to judges
- viii. Creating the prompts
- ix. Organising logistics

A Gantt chart was designed as a guideline to ensure the planning and implementation of different functions during the event went as smoothly as possible. Every weekend, the committee would revise the Gantt chart and take the necessary actions to mitigate any issues that may arise. In general, the Gantt chart was used as a visual aid to help the student committee to plan and take the necessary action. Before the commencement of the actual event, many changes were made to the scheduling of different functions as some action items did not meet the expected deadlines. In the early promotion period of MLO, for instance, the response from universities locally and internationally was initially unpromising. This has led to changes made in the Gantt chart and based on that knowledge, the committee had to work harder to increase the promotion of the event using multiple methods to ensure MLO can reach its intended target. Two months before the competitions, there was a marked increase in the responses of the respective universities, and all this was reflected visually in the Gantt chart.

The running of MLO was a two-pronged approach that develops communicative abilities of the participants and also leadership skills of the student organisers. The five competition types of speech, strategic storytelling, idea pitching, versatile presenting and radio drama functioned to assess and improve the participants' communicative abilities with relation to the 21st century and the industries, held in three languages (English, Bahasa Melayu, and Arabic) as depicted in the image below:

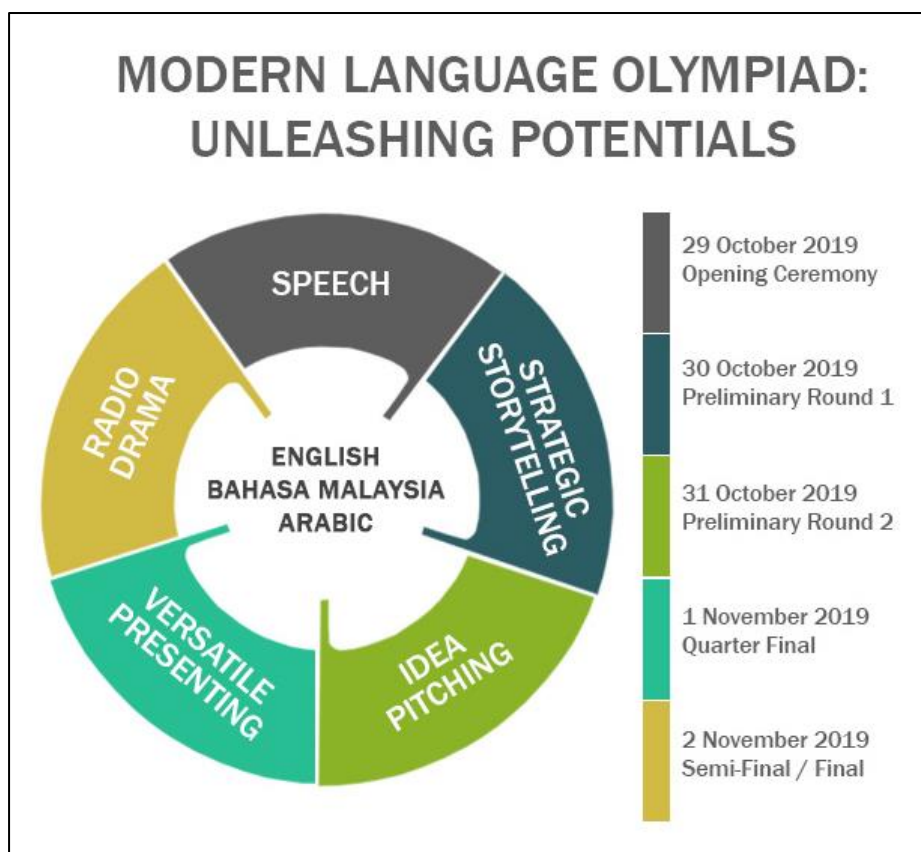


Figure 1. The Modern Language Olympiad (MLO) Framework

The speech competition sought to assess the participants' presentation skills together with their abilities in brainstorming ideas based on the topics assigned to them by the judges. The idea pitching competition, similar with speech, sought to assess the participants' presentation skills as well but with the inclusion on their creativity in promoting products and ideas to a panel of judges. These skills are essential where businesses are concerned and are deemed to be needed by the Malaysian industries. The third competition, strategic storytelling, was designed to assess the participants' abilities in storytelling which becomes a prelude in charting a strategic brand initiative. This skill is also highly sought by various top industries. Versatile presenting, as the name suggests, was meant to highlight the participants' versatility in showcasing their communicative skills to the audience such as emceeing, reading the news and hosting a talk show. Finally, radio drama sought to highlight the creativity of the competitors in creating a short story using only audio communication.

In designing the competitions, several industry practitioners were consulted for their opinions of the most attractive and relevant communication skills and abilities that are highly

valued in the industries, and changes were made based on the feedback received. For instance, initially, the storytelling competition was designed as a standard fictional storytelling competition. However, upon consulting several industry practitioners in the corporate sector, the committee was informed of the idea of business or corporate storytelling which would be more useful for students. Hence, the strategic storytelling competition was formed.

Likewise, for the idea pitching competition, numerous formats were introduced and debated amongst the student committee members, such as whether it should be conducted for individual participation, or group participation. The length of each pitch was also debated between the student committee. Through consultation with industry practitioners and by examining other platforms that require pitches to be delivered, the committee decided on a group pitch between two to three minutes for each team. This was one area that was piloted and may be further improved in the future.

Additionally, for versatile presenting, industry representatives from the corporate communication and mass communication sectors valued the ability of improvisation. Hence, the competitions were designed to include various forms of presentations, including news reading and interviewing. After the competition, the industry judges also gave their feedback and ideas of how to challenge the students further for the design of the competition. In total, 40 judges were selected from the industries and other educational institutions to judge the five categories across the three languages. The criteria of the selected judges were

- i. Language experts, or those whose core jobs involve communication to some degree, and
- ii. Experienced industrial representatives from reputable companies.

The organisation of this grand event was meant to improve the leadership skills of the student committee members of APB. The APB students were given full reign in the planning, scheduling, and the running of MLO. They had to communicate with various parties specifically institutional representatives, university management, MLO participants, sponsors, industrial representatives and the judges. Furthermore, the APB students had to work in different committees, assigned to specific tasks such as budgeting, logistics, competition rules, protocols, opening and closing ceremony performances, and assembling student volunteers from various UiTM faculties.

RESULTS

The inaugural MLO 2019 aptly themed “Celebrating Youth, Language and Culture” concluded in many firsts. Firstly, it managed to garner a big group of 330 participants from 11 public universities, 6 private universities, 4 foreign universities, and 10 UiTM branch campuses competing in five (5) categories which were conducted in three (3) languages i.e., English, Bahasa Melayu, and Arabic. Secondly, it managed to generate a net profit of RM58,416.45. Thirdly, it was dominantly run by a working committee of 40 APB students, supported by 100 student volunteers from various other faculties across UiTM. Fourthly, it is an activity that harnessed the management and organizing skills of the students as well as the language prowess of the competitors. Finally, it had commercial potential that can be extended to primary, secondary and university foundation levels, locally and abroad.

To further improve upon the working framework of MLO, the competitions in the future can be developed into a module that can be marketed to universities, colleges and schools, especially for industry-specific talents like strategic storytelling, idea pitching and versatile presenting. Not only that, the overall system with how the competition is run can also be commercialised as a way to hone the leadership and project management skills among students in colleges and universities. This includes how to coach and motivate the students, and the basics that can be taught to them such as time management, budgeting, and crisis management among others.

In short, MLO unleashed the potentials of the students that matched the needs of the industry. Interestingly, next year in 2021, it will introduce Mandarin as the language of competition and MLO will be carried out through online mode which can attract and allow more participants from all over the world to compete in this unique and revolutionary language competition.

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