

ALUMNI FEEDBACK: AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH FOR OCCUPATIONAL PURPOSES

Nurairhan Mat Daud¹, Nurul Syafieqah Jaafar² and Nor Shidrah Mat Daud³

¹ Kulliyyah of Languages and Management, International Islamic University Malaysia
nurairhan@iiu.edu.my

² Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Pulau Pinang
nsyafieqahj@gmail.com

³ Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Shah Alam
norshidrah@uitm.edu.my

Abstract

Alumni feedback is an important means of determining whether a course is of relevance to the students' needs. One of the courses that would benefit from their feedback is English for Occupational Purposes. Based on the practice at the workplace, graduates can provide information whether what was taught could be applied to their working environment. This study seeks to ascertain whether an EOP course is relevant to the needs of the graduates. A questionnaire survey was conducted, and a total of thirty alumni of an Arts Faculty of a public university in Malaysia responded to the survey. The findings indicate that the students benefited from the course, but a number of improvements could be made to make the course more effective. The study also highlighted the varieties of language used at work.

Keywords: *EOP, alumni feedback, curriculum review*

Introduction

English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) course is offered to pre-prepare students for the workplace (Filiz & Anda, 2015). In designing the course, instructors normally depend on available textbooks. In the Malaysian context, unfortunately most of the textbooks are not produced locally. In cases where the curriculum relies heavily on these resources, there may be elements of the course which are not relevant or may not be enough for local graduates. Input from the graduates themselves would be important to determine if the contents of the course are relevant to their needs (Younis, 2002). According to Trinklein & Wells (1989, p. 21), alumni input is invaluable as, "They are able to identify both strengths and weaknesses in curricular composition based upon career experiences".

In Malaysia, though English is widely used, it is often lamented that Malaysian graduates are not proficient enough in the language (Yusof, 2018; Lim, Teck, Ching & Chui, 2016). In their study, Ting et al. (2017) revealed that proficiency in the language is important especially in jobs involving customer service, frontline service and marketing, and in globally-oriented companies. In addition, they also mentioned that the language is important for career advancement.

Being proficient means the speaker is able to communicate effectively in the standard language. Yet, there are actually many varieties of English spoken in Malaysia. According to Nair-Venugopal (2000) the local-

ized version of the language is used in businesses. This is supported by a study by Noriah Ismail et al., (2007) who indicated that the local variety was preferred when communicating, and that many of the respondents in their study would switch to Standard English in a formal situation. The main issue seems to be more on getting the message across, and the variety used would depend on the context of utterance. A study by Ting (2017) showed that employers differentiated between proficiency in the language and the ability to communicate. Albury (2017, p. 567) mentioned the use of ‘bahasa rojak’ in languaging when “communicating across ethnolinguistic divides and fostering interethnic inclusiveness”. In an EOP class, though Standard English is the variety taught, it is also interesting to know when this variety is actually used to perform the various tasks at the workplace.

Literature Review

In order to determine the extent to which English is required by employers, Cambridge English and QS conducted a study involving different industries in various countries. “In countries and territories where English is not an official language, 69% of employers said that English is significant for their organisation. In countries and territories where English is an official or de facto official language, this increased to 97% of all employers” (Cambridge English Language Assessment in collaboration with QS, 2016, p. 10). Where Malaysia was concerned, 99% of the employers claimed that English was important for their organisation. This reflects that there is a real need for more emphasis to be given to English in the Malaysian education system.

The issue, then, is what kind of English is needed? The types of duties assigned to a worker, the instruments that an employer is using and the texts that an employer reads or writes may vary from one vocation to another (Edwards, 2000). The need for English also varies from one industry to another. For example, the need for English was found to be more significant in aerospace/defence than in retail (Cambridge English Language Assessment in collaboration with QS, 2016, p. 14). A similar finding was made by Al-Khatib (2005) who found that in Jordan, travel agency workers used more English than bank executives, but when interacting at the office both used Arabic much more often than English. To meet the needs of the learners (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987), more universities are offering English for Specific Purposes courses (Al-Khatib, 2005).

In order to communicate effectively in an occupational context, Gatehouse (2001) stressed the need to focus on three aspects. These are: “the ability to use the particular jargon characteristic of that specific occupational context”, “the ability to use a more generalized set of academic skills, such as conducting research and responding to memoranda” and “the ability to use the language of everyday informal talk to communicate ef-

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fectively, regardless of occupational context”. Thus, the issue is not just knowledge of a particular genre but the ability to communicate effectively in general English. With materials in English, students who are following the course are expected to have a good command of the language. Rautenbach et al. (2018) stress the importance of students’ proficiency in the language in ensuring that the teaching of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) is successful.

An EOP course would expose students to the spoken and written forms of the language use at work (Filiz & Anda, 2015). Spoken communication includes interviews and presentations whereas written communication includes business documents, memos, emails, reports, and business letters (Sampath & Zalipour, 2009). Both speaking and writing skills are equally important in responding to communicative needs at the workplace (Vaghari & Shuib, 2013). However, the communication demands for the language would depend on the nature of work that one does.

In order to make the EOP course relevant, materials used for the course are expected to resemble those used in the workplace. The use of authentic materials would help the learners to apply the skills in the actual working environment (Ellis and Johnson, 1996; Isarji et al., 2013). However, for businesses there are many potential future occupational settings, and within the timeframe it is impossible to include all possible settings.

Changes in the working environment requires a dynamic EOP curriculum. A learner-centred EOP course can cater to changes in a learners’ needs. However, this can be difficult to address since language teachers do not necessarily have the knowledge of business working environment (Isarji et al., 2013). Hence, established textbooks are normally used in teaching these kind of courses.

With the advent of technology, there is a need to include materials that would help them prepare for the changing working environment. Eatone (2010) stressed on the importance of using not only language but cultural knowledge to communicate across geographical boundaries. Apart from that, the adoption of blended learning approach has been reported to be beneficial in enhancing students’ language skills (Banditvilai, 2016). The traditional classroom language teaching methods may not prepare them for the 21st century working environment. A needs analysis is imperative in designing and revising an EOP curriculum. Feedback from the stakeholders is important in such processes (Rautenbach et al., 2018; Gatehouse, 2001), and this includes feedback from the alumni who have gone through the course and are working in the area of their specialization.

Problem Statement

In Malaysia, having adequate proficiency in English can make a graduate more employable (Ting et al, 2017). Jobstreet.com, an online employment marketplace, conducted a study on employers' evaluation of the standards of fresh graduates and found that poor command of the English language was one of the top five reasons for unemployment among fresh graduates in the year 2018 ("Fact Sheet", 2018).

One way of addressing the problem is by offering English for Occupational Purpose course (EOP). An EOP course is normally driven by a needs analysis. It is designed to enable students to function at the workplace. However, when a program is developed often courses are designed based on the academic expertise and existing literature in the area. To improve the quality of its content, there is a need to obtain stakeholders' feedback, and where EOP is concerned feedback from those who have graduated would be invaluable since they would be able to provide input based on their experience at the workplace. With changes in the working environment, changes may need to be made to the courses.

The objectives of this study are to:

1. determine the skills the graduates feel they developed after taking the EOP course;
2. investigate whether the graduates are satisfied with the contents of the course; and
3. find out the variety of language used at work.

Methodology

The English for Occupational Purposes course that was chosen for this study was offered by one of the public universities in Malaysia. The language of instruction at the university is English, and the minimum language requirement to join the Arts Faculty is Band 6 of IELTS or its equivalent. The EOP course was made compulsory for the final year students of the Faculty. It aimed to equip the graduating students with business communication skills. It is a three-hour per week course, and students would need to spend one semester to complete the course. Several sections of the same course were offered by the Faculty every semester. The content of the course includes preparing a business proposal, writing business letters, memos, reports, minutes of meetings, resumes, job interviews, presentation strategy, and negotiation skills. Reading materials, videos and slides presentations are among the materials used in teaching this course.

ALUMNI FEEDBACK: AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH FOR OCCUPATIONAL PURPOSES*Participants*

Participants of this study were 30 alumni of the Arts Faculty who took the EOP course during their undergraduate years. The participants were drawn among graduates who were working in businesses. They were chosen as the participants of this study through a convenience sampling technique. They were chosen because of their accessibility and availability during the period of the study (Ilker Etikan, 2016). Table 1 shows the year the participants graduated.

Table 1: Participants' Graduation Year

Graduation	No. of Graduates
Semester 2 2010/2011	1
Semester 1 2016/2017	3
Semester 2 2016/2017	12
Semester 3 2016/2017	1
Semester 1 2017/2018	6
Semester 2 2017/2018	7
Total	30

Questionnaire Survey

A questionnaire survey was designed to determine whether the EOP course was relevant to the workplace, and to investigate the language used for business communication. The survey was used as the instrument in data collection as "... participants who are widely dispersed can be accessed and included in the sample" (Mathers et al., 2007, p. 6). Since the samples were alumni who resided in different parts of the country, the survey method was chosen because it was easier to administer. The views of two experts in language teaching and language research were sought to ascertain the relevance of the content of the items in the questionnaire.

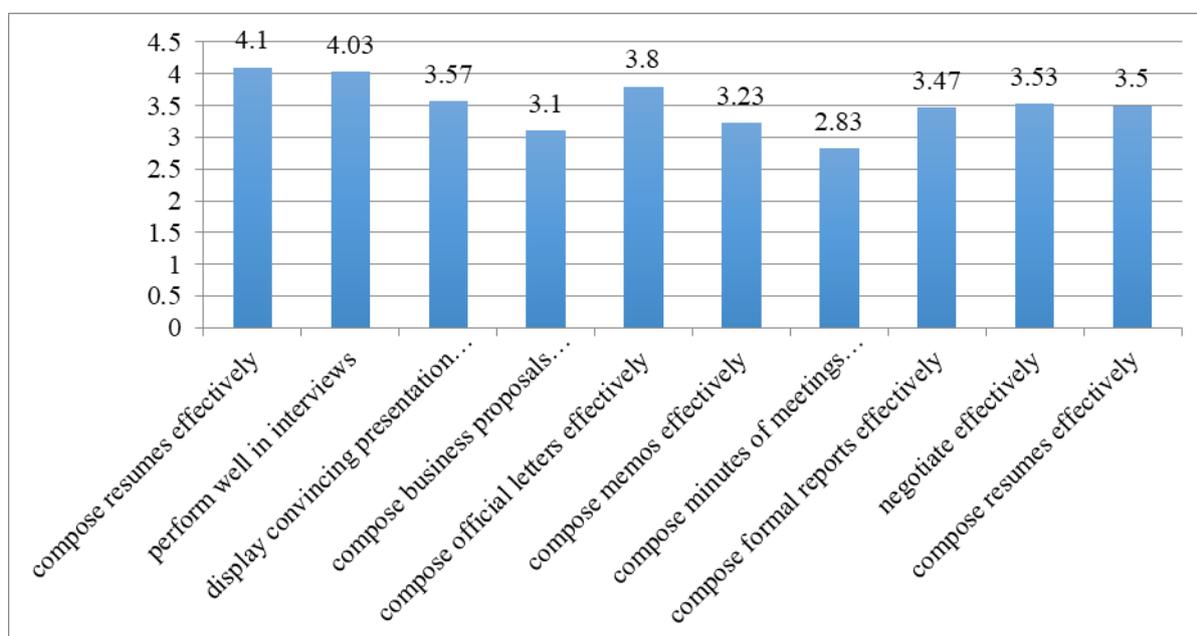
The survey was developed using SurveyMonkey, an online survey generator (refer to APPENDIX 1 for the questionnaire). It comprised of ten questions. Questions 1 and 2 aimed to elicit participants' demographic information. Questions 3 and 4 are 6-point Likert scale to determine the relevance of the course to the participants' professional life. These are open-ended items to allow the respondents to express their opinions as Kumar (2014) mentioned, "In a questionnaire, open-ended questions provide respondents with the opportunity to express themselves freely, resulting in a greater variety of information. Thus, respondents are not

‘conditioned’ by having to select answers from a list” (p. 186). The participants were invited to participate in this study through personal WhatsApp messaging. The link to the questionnaire survey was attached to the message. The respondents answered it online. The data obtained were analyzed using SPSS software.

Findings

The reliability of the questionnaire survey for the question on how much the course helped to develop their skills was measured, and the result shows that the items in the questionnaire survey have a high internal consistency ($\alpha=.928$).

Figure 2: The Skills that the Course Helped to Develop



Skills that the course developed

As seen in Figure 2, the majority of the participants felt that the course has helped them in writing their resumes. The second highest was performing well in interviews, and this was followed by writing official letters effectively. The figure also reflects that the course was not effective enough in developing their ability to write minutes of meeting.

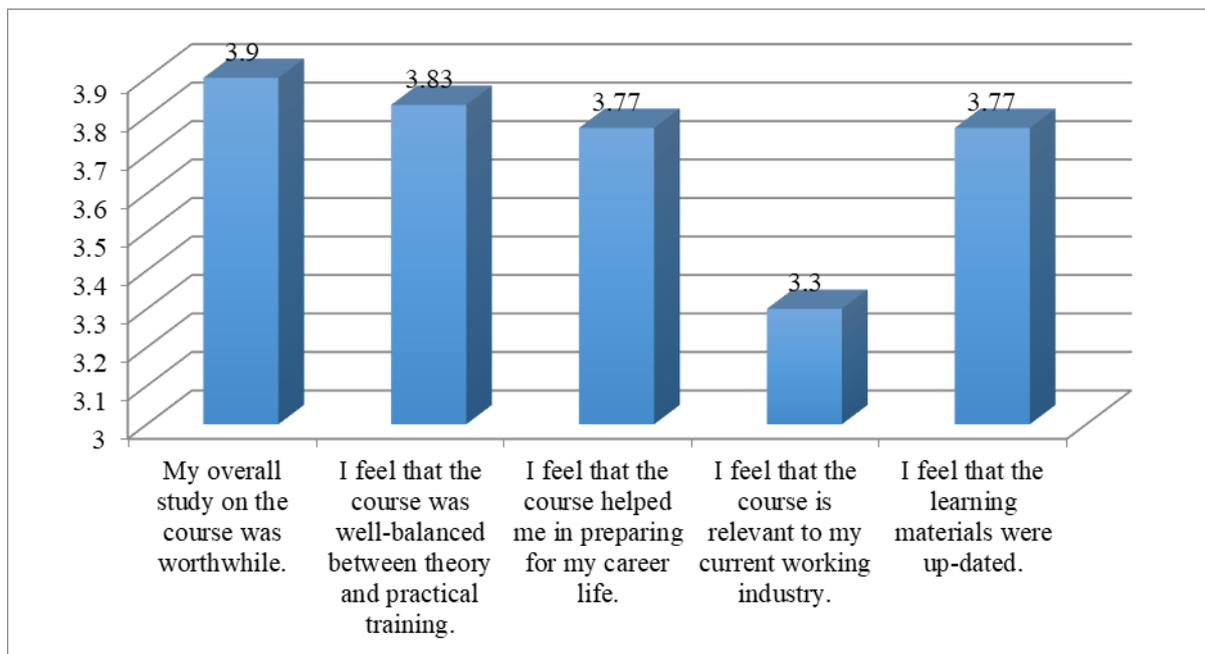
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Relevance to professional life

Based on a scale from 1 for strongly disagree to 5 for strongly agree, the participants’ responses to the extent to which they agree that the EOP is relevant to their professional life revealed that generally the participants agreed that the EOP course was relevant to their professional life (mean=3.71).

Figure 3 shows the detailed mean scores for each item contributing to the relevance of the course to their professional life.

Figure 3: The Relevance of the Course to Professional Life



The result above shows that generally, most of the students felt that the course was worth their time, and what was taught was applicable to real life. Most of them were also happy with the materials used, and the course helped them prepare for their career. However, of all the items listed, the relevance of the course to their current working environment was the lowest. Although generally they were happy with the course, this is a cause for concern.

Language used in the workplace

The respondents were also asked what language they were using in the workplace. Reliability check of the participants’ responses indicated a very strong alpha value which are as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis-scale (Alpha) for Language Used

No.	Scale	No. of Items	Alpha value
1.	Use Standard English	12	.936
2.	Use Malay	12	.946
3.	Use Malaysian English	12	.973

The results of the language used to perform 12 specific tasks in the workplace indicate that the participants used Standard English more often to perform all tasks except for small talks where Malay language was used more. This finding shows the relevance of teaching the EOP course at the university. These are as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Language Used in the Workplace

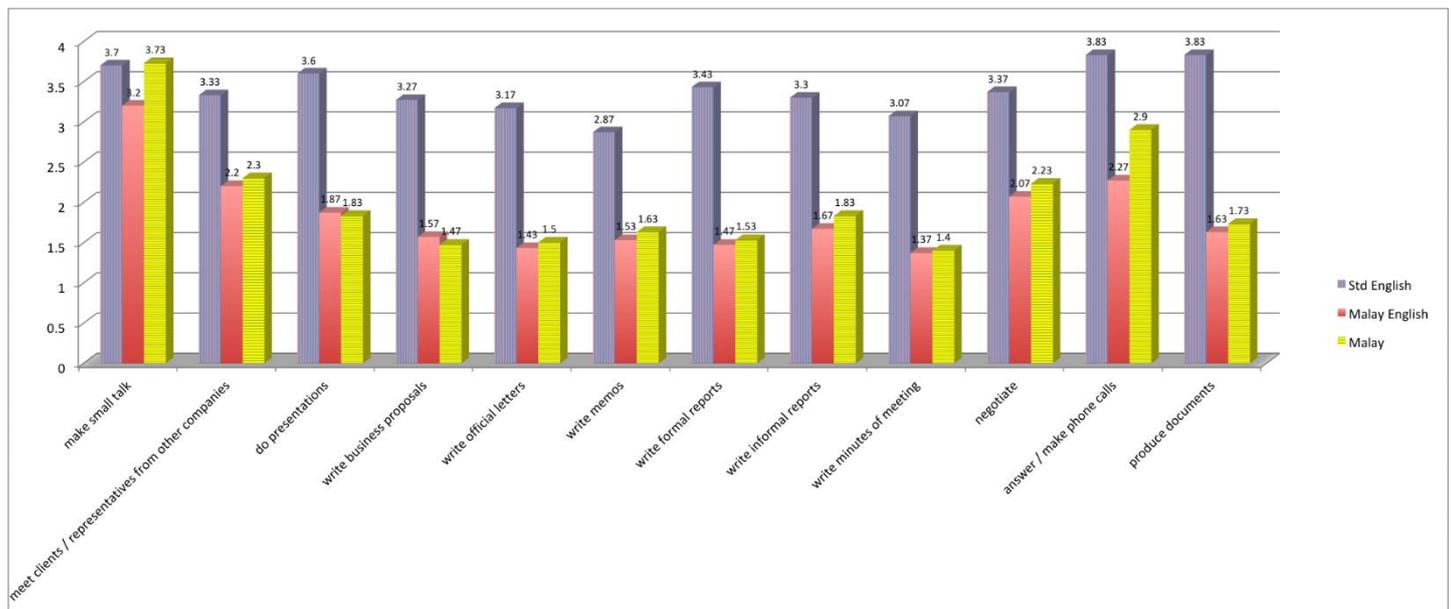


Figure 4 shows that Standard English tended to be the language used in formal situations. The majority used the Standard English variety when producing documents, answering and making calls, doing presentations,

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writing formal reports and negotiating. Writing memos was the lowest among the skills listed where the use of Standard English was concerned.

Satisfaction towards the course

The figures above show that not all of them found the course relevant to their needs at the workplace. Hence, it is interesting to know what is the percentage of alumni who were satisfied with the EOP course. Figure 5 presents the result of the analysis.

Figure 5: Satisfaction towards the Course

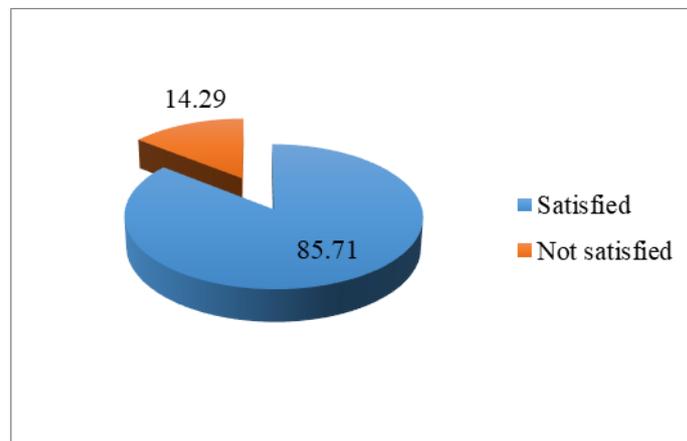


Figure 5 indicates that a large percentage of the alumni in this study (85.71%) were satisfied with the content of the course. Among the reasons given by those who were not satisfied were:

The course is out-of-dated. The structure have to be revised according to the current market of economy. The lecturers perhaps should have a meeting with the industries, pointing out what are the basic necessities skills should be imposed to graduating students. (sic) (P-15)

I believe the layout of the course is okay but the practicality has to improved. (sic) (P-16)

It did not touch much on diversity of working sector. Just one template to fit all. (sic) (P-21)

P-15 who was working as a sales and marketing junior executive was not satisfied with the content of the course as she believed the learning materials were outdated and did not meet the contemporary format of writing. Meanwhile, P-16 who was working as a subtitle editor believed that there was a need to improve its practicality. As for P-21, who was working as an executive officer, she felt that the format of business corre-

spondence did not cater to the diversity of the working sector. It can be inferred that the materials used might not be sufficient enough to meet the needs of the 21st century working environment.

Suggestions for improvements

Based on the suggestions given by the participants of the present study, the findings could be themed into three categories which were authentic materials, updated materials, and teaching styles. These are explained further as follows:

1. Authentic materials

One of the suggestions given was the need to use authentic materials in teaching the course. Three of the respondents suggested the use of samples taken from real business. The following are their comments:

Find samples for reports to reduce teaching time so more time can be spent for practical training.
(sic) (P-16)

Involve the students with the real workplace situation. (sic) (P-19)

Syllabus is customized to students' future working field which is more ideal. (sic) (P-21)

2. Updated materials

Another suggestion was to update the teaching and learning materials used in the course. This was suggested by one of the participants who claimed that they struggled to write a formal email because of the lack of exposure to such skills when they took the course.

Start to update a formal and proper example for students. Cause you right now whatever im doing was a little bit and pieces from the course. I have problem in writing formal emails. Do teach the students how to write formal email. (sic) (P-09)

Since email is a fairly new medium of communication in businesses, the Business English course needs to include formal email writing skills in its content. The format of writing such an email is different from the format of writing a formal letter. Therefore, students need the skills in writing an email.

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3. Teaching styles

Other than the content, it was also suggested that the instructor changed his teaching style. One of the participants suggested to include more fun activities in the teaching of Business English. A participant commented,

Include more fun activities. (P-01)

In addition, one participant suggested to make the course standardized for all classes and the teachers need to be evaluated by the Head of Department or the Dean.

To make the course standardised for all classes. I pity the students who didnt have good teachers to teach them such an important course. (sic) (P-06)

Lecturer's teaching has to be evaluated by their respective HOD or Dean. (sic) (P-07)

Discussions

The English for Occupational Purpose (EOP) course aims to help students understand the nature of business communication. The study aimed to determine the relevance of the course to the workplace, the skills graduates developed after taking the EOP course and the variety of language used in the workplace.

The findings of this study indicate that the EOP course is important to prepare students for the workplace. Majority of the participants realised that the course was worthwhile and could equip them with the necessary language skills required in the workplace. In the study, it was also found that the EOP course helped the graduates to prepare themselves mostly for job application particularly in coming up with a good resume and in responding to interview questions. However, a few of the alumni felt that the course did not prepare them well for the working environment which included the use of technology for communication.

Meanwhile, the findings show that Standard English was the most frequently used language in business communication. This finding indicates the importance and relevance of teaching Standard English in the EOP course. The study also highlighted the use of the local variety of English in carrying out the various tasks, particularly in small talks. This finding is similar to Nair-Venugopal's (2000) and Noriah Ismail et al.'s (2007) studies who claimed that Malaysian English was used in businesses. Hence, a topic on this va-

riety of the language may need to be included in an EOP course meant for those working in the Malaysian business settings.

A few of the graduates in the study felt that the course could be improved further. They suggested that authentic materials be used in teaching the course, as mentioned by Carver (1983). They also commented that the teaching and learning materials used in the course needed to be updated constantly. The adoption of a pedagogical approach that is relevant to an EOP course is important, particularly in the use of technology in teaching. The alumni also pointed out the importance of having quality measures to ensure quality education.

Conclusions

The study shows that the EOP course did assist students to function in the workplace. Seeing the importance of the course, there is a need for universities to obtain input that can help in improving the contents of the course. Alumni feedback is one important source of information when reviewing the relevance of a course. The findings of this study can be used by EOP practitioners specifically to improve the teaching and learning of this course. Such a move would help in designing a curriculum that is realistic and useful to the learners. This study highlighted the need for using authentic materials in teaching an EOP course. Since more technological applications are used by businesses, instructors teaching the course would also need to integrate the technology in teaching language skills that are needed in this century.

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APPENDIX 1

GRADUATE FEEDBACK ON ENGLISH FOR OCCUPATIONAL PURPOSES COURSE

Graduate feedback is crucial in reviewing a curriculum. According to Trinklein & Wells (1989), “As products of the educational institution involved, alumni are in an advantageous position to judge both the quality and adequacy of their education. They are able to identify both strengths and weaknesses in curricular composition based upon career experiences” (p. 21).

This questionnaire aims to determine the extent to which the English for Occupational Purposes course you took during your undergraduate studies (e.g. Language for Occupational Purposes (IRKHS IIUM)). Therefore, it would be much appreciated if you could answer the following 10 questions. Thank you for your time.

*** Required**

When did you graduate? (E.g. Semester 2 2016/2017) *

Your answer

Graduated in Bachelor of (please state the programme) *

Your answer

What is your current profession? *

Your answer

The course helped me to develop *

	To a great extent	To a moderate extent	To a slight extent	To a very little extent	Not at all	Not applicable to my current job
my ability to compose resumes effectively	○	○	○	○	○	○
my ability to perform well in interviews	○	○	○	○	○	○
my ability to display convincing presentation skills	○	○	○	○	○	○
my ability to compose business proposals effectively	○	○	○	○	○	○

ALUMNI FEEDBACK: AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH FOR OCCUPATIONAL PURPOSES

my ability to compose official letters effectively	<input type="radio"/>					
my ability to compose memos effectively	<input type="radio"/>					
my ability to minutes of meeting effectively	<input type="radio"/>					
my ability to formal reports effectively	<input type="radio"/>					
my ability to negotiate effectively	<input type="radio"/>					

The relevance between the course and Professional Life *

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Do not know
My overall study on the course was worthwhile	<input type="radio"/>					
I feel that the course was well-balanced between theory and practical learning	<input type="radio"/>					
I feel that the course did not help me in preparing for my career life	<input type="radio"/>					
I feel that the course is relevant to my current working industry	<input type="radio"/>					
I feel that the materials were outdated (e.g. did not follow the contemporary writing formats)	<input type="radio"/>					

I use Standard English when I *

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Very often	Always	Not applicable to my current job
make small talk	<input type="radio"/>					
meet clients/representatives from other companies	<input type="radio"/>					
do presentations	<input type="radio"/>					
write business proposals	<input type="radio"/>					
write official letters	<input type="radio"/>					
write memos	<input type="radio"/>					
write formal reports	<input type="radio"/>					
write informal reports	<input type="radio"/>					
write minutes of meeting	<input type="radio"/>					
negotiate	<input type="radio"/>					
answer/make phone calls	<input type="radio"/>					
produce documents	<input type="radio"/>					

I use Malay when I *

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Very often	Always	Not applicable to my current job
make small talk	<input type="radio"/>					
meet clients/representatives from other companies	<input type="radio"/>					
do presentations	<input type="radio"/>					
write business proposals	<input type="radio"/>					
write official letters	<input type="radio"/>					
write memos	<input type="radio"/>					

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write formal reports	<input type="radio"/>					
write informal reports	<input type="radio"/>					
write minutes of meeting	<input type="radio"/>					
negotiate	<input type="radio"/>					
answer/make phone calls	<input type="radio"/>					
produce documents	<input type="radio"/>					

I use Malaysian English when I *

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Very often	Always	Not applicable to my current job
make small talk	<input type="radio"/>					
meet clients/representatives from other companies	<input type="radio"/>					
do presentations	<input type="radio"/>					
write business proposals	<input type="radio"/>					
write official letters	<input type="radio"/>					
write memos	<input type="radio"/>					
write formal reports	<input type="radio"/>					
write informal reports	<input type="radio"/>					
write minutes of meeting	<input type="radio"/>					
negotiate	<input type="radio"/>					
answer/make phone calls	<input type="radio"/>					
produce documents	<input type="radio"/>					

Overall, are you satisfied with the content of the course? *

- Yes
- No

If your answer to the Question 8 is NO, why is that so? *

Your answer



What suggestions do you have for improving the course? *
