



PROBLEMS WITH LEARNING ENGLISH IN A NATIONAL UNIVERSITY: INBUILT CAPACITY OR NATIONAL POLICY?



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ABSTRACT

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The objective of this study is to analyze the English learning outcomes of Higher Education students in a national university. Taking Chomsky's perspective on learning a language, this study is premised on the idea that people develop their grammar and language skill through informal learning process. Each individuals as argued by Chomsky has 'inbuilt capacity' to learn certain language since childhood. As method of collecting data, questionnaires were distributed and collected from 113 students from different background in a national university, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The respondents were asked to give comments related to English learning program which was done outside their classroom. The result of the study shows a high agreement on the English learning program and this could be seen as answers from the respondent were mainly agreed that English learning program in an 'off-class' university environment motivates them to pursue English speaking activities. Students agreed that they were not ashamed of speaking in publics, want to improve their English and most importantly will speak more English in future. Students in national university like UKM, though taken Bahasa Malaysia as a medium of instruction do not neglect the importance of English as international and market language. It is wrong to simply blame students' problem with their 'inbuilt capacity' to learn English. The other factor influencing student most is national policy with regard to official language or medium of instruction at the university. This study implies that university policy must take into account both, national language and English, in order to enhance students' performance in a job market.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by analyzing the English learning outcomes of Higher Education students in a national university.

1. INTRODUCTION

English is a global language. In some national universities in the world, students are at stake on either to put priority on their national language or English as a major medium of instruction. Hornberger and Vaish (2009) analyze tensions in translating multilingual language policy to classroom linguistic practice, and especially the paradoxical role of and demand for English as a tool of decolonization for multilingual populations seeking equitable access to a globalizing economy. Both also argue that multilingual classroom practices can be a resource through which students access Standard English while also cultivating their own local languages. In the same vein,

Hashim (2009) argues on the usage of English as colonial language in Malaysia. She also analyzes language and education issues in Malaysia as they have unfolded in the context of nation building, societal multilingualism and globalization from independence to the present day. Student's disability to learn and speak English effectively is due to several factors. However, the major factor is due to language policy exercised in certain countries. Contend that English language proficiency of Malaysian learners in schools and university deteriorated over the last thirty years with the implementation of a national language policy where Bahasa Malaysia became the language of instruction in schools. At the face of globalization, nations and institutions need to adjust their language policy to suit economic needs. This is no exemption to UKM, a national university in Malaysia, which had struggled since its early days in 1970 to champion Malay language (a national language of Malaysia) as a major medium of instruction in the university. As a result, more students and academicians are encouraged to use Malay language than English.

Nevertheless, English is widely spoken due to its commercial value. We can say that English plays an important role in the employment perspective in Malaysia. To realize this, the Education Ministry had introduced Malaysian University English Test (MUET) to university students a few years ago. The MUET must be taken and passed before a university or college student is allowed to graduate. It is increasingly becoming an indication used by employers to know a job candidate's proficiency of English by looking at the level of pass in MUET. However, at the university level, students were not keen enough to speak English publicly and regularly regardless of their MUET level. This means both students with low or high MUET level are still facing problem with speaking good English. One of the major reasons is that students are afraid that they will make grammatical error when they are speaking in English. This in a long run will result to students' low self esteem, lack of confidence and further unable to communicate effectively in English.

Taken Chomsky's perspective on learning language, we can understand that the best for a person to learn a language is from age two to seven as ones innate capacity is at the best. However, most of the university students are between 19 to 21 year old. This put them in a category of those learning a language but not in a best of their innate capacity. However, what we can derive from Chomsky is that a principle that it is normal for a learner to speak without a proper grammar as at the end a learning process will naturally perfecting them. Therefore taken most of ESZ respondent in this case, most of them are not English native speaker but they might have high confidence in speaking the language although with various grammatical error. Thus if we take Chomsky's theory, any English learning program in a university will be a successful one as long as students achieve a high confidence in speaking the language amid grammatical errors they made. However, taken Chomsky's nativist perspective on learning a language, it is argued that humans are biologically programmed to gain knowledge. Chomsky proposed that all humans have a language acquisition device (LAD). The LAD contains knowledge of grammatical rules common to all languages. The LAD also allows us to understand the rules of whatever language they are listening to. His approach to the study of language emphasizes "an innate set of linguistic principles shared by all humans" known as universal grammar, "the initial state of the language learner," and discovering an "account for linguistic variation via the most general possible mechanisms (Chomsky, 1999).

Chomsky then argues that over the years from two to seven, when language is mastered, children constantly adjust their grammar until it matches that of the adult speaker population. This critical period between the ages of 2-7 suggests that (first) language learning, like walking, is an innate capacity of human beings triggered by a level of development more than feedback from the environment. That is, as long as a child hears a language-any language-when they reach this critical period they will learn it perfectly. However, to some critics, this is not true. To them Chomsky differentiates between competence and performance. Performance is what people actually say, which is often ungrammatical, whereas competence is what they instinctively know about the syntax of their language - and this is more or less equated with the Universal Grammar. Chomsky concentrates upon this aspect of language - he thus ignores the things that people actually say. The problem here is that he relies upon people's

intuitions as to what is right or wrong - but it is not at all clear that people will all make the same judgements, or that their judgements actually reflect the way people really do use the language. Furthermore, study also found that learning styles actually influence the way students learn and how they approach learning institutions (Ruslin, Jelas, & Saemah, 2011). Thus, unofficial and off class English learning could be one learning style appropriate for students. Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze the English learning outcomes of UKM students.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study applies qualitative approach. Questionnaires were distributed and collected from 113 students who are member of JAKSA or Student Welfare Committee of all colleges in the UKM. A descriptive analysis is applied to measure the learning output of English course and its effectiveness. 'Effectiveness' is measured through feedback from students by answering questionnaires. The respondents were also participated in English learning camp which was held for three days. Upon completion of the English camp, all the respondents were given questionnaires to test their attitude towards learning English.

The questionnaires were distributed to 113 respondents which are 57.5 % female and 42.5 % male. A total of 91.2 % of respondents are within the age range of 20 to 22 year old. There are 57.5% female and 42.5% male. The main ethnic composition is 75.9 % Malay, 15.2 % Chinese, 7.1 % Indian and the rest goes to other ethnic. In term of MUET test score 15.9 % with band 2, 41.6 % with band 3, 28.3 % with band 4, 9.7 % with band 5 and 0.9 % with band 6 while 3.5 % has none test score. Thus, based on the score, majority of the respondents were either moderate or less proficiency in English and only 0.9 % could be said as having more proficiency in English. Respondents were also selected based on the representativeness of their respected residential college. The highest number came from Dato Onn College with 14.2 % and Pendeta Zaaba College at 13.2, while the lowest from Tun Hussein Onn College with 2.7 %.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Learning Outcomes

It is important to note that the main measurement is to see the learning outcomes of the program which is illustrated in Table 1. The range of answers are from the highest percentage of 73.5 % Agree that "Speaking broken English is not to be ashamed of" to a total of 56.6 % disagree that "they speak English fluently before".

It is found that 49.5 % agree that they get new English words while 51.5% disagree so. The data also shown that 63.7 % agree and 18.6 % strongly Agree that they not afraid to speak English in public. With regard to speaking broken English is not to be ashamed of, a total of 85.2% agreed with this statement. This is related to question that they speak English fluent before as 56.6 % disagreed with this. A total of 68.1 % agree and 28.3 % strongly agree that they are happy to speak English. Majority of the answers are 42.5 % and 57.5 % of the respondents want to improve their English now.

A total of 85.9% agree that they are not feeling insulted when people correct their English. Majority and unanimously agree that speaking English not to show off.

Learning outcomes were also measured in term of how the respondents practically will improve their English speaking skill. A total of 64.6 % agree that they translate Malay language into English before speaking. 61% say that they speak English spontaneously and 82.3% say that they are not afraid being judged negatively for broken English.

With regard to further action to improve English learning and speaking, majority and unanimously say that they want to improve my English. A total of 91.2 % respondents agree that they do not judge others negatively for speaking English and 89.4 % say that they want to learn other language. It is interesting to see a high percentage

of 94.7% of respondents say that they will speak more English, 96.5% say that they are not afraid of speaking English and not afraid of reading English material and 94.7% say that they will read more English materials.

Table-1. English learning outcomes.

No.	Outcomes	I	II	III	IV	V
1	New English words	13.3	37.2	38.9	10.6	
2	Not afraid to speak in public		17.7	63.7	18.6	
3	Speaking broken English is not to be ashamed of		8.8	73.5	17.7	
4.	Speak English fluently before		56.6	34.5	3.5	5.3
5	Happy to speak English now		3.5	68.1	28.3	
6	Not feel insulted when people correct my English		14.2	67.3	18.6	
7	Speak English not to show off			60.2	39.8	
8	I translate before speaking		35.4	40.7	18.6	5.3
9	Speak spontaneously		38.9	51.3	9.7	
10	Not afraid being judged negatively for broken English		17.7	67.3	15	
11	Want to improve my English			42.5	57.5	
12	Do not judge others negatively for speaking English		8.8	67.3	23.9	
13	Want to learn other language	5.3	5.3	55.8	33.6	
14	Will speak more English		5.3	66.4	28.3	
15	Not afraid of speaking English means not afraid of reading English material		3.5	61.1	35.4	
16	Will read more English materials		5.3	59.3	35.4	

Note: I = Strongly Disagree II = Disagree III = Agree IV = Strongly Agree V = None.

In the same vein, on the learning output part, a high agreement on the English learning could be seen as answers from the respondent are mainly that motivating them to pursue such English speaking activities. Students agreed that they are not ashamed of speaking in public, want to improve their English and most importantly will speak more English in future. Student moral in pursuing English learning could also be seen on their agreement that "Speaking broken English is not to be ashamed of", "Not feeling insulted when people correct my English" and "Not afraid being judged negatively for broken English". The respondent also informs that "speaking English is not to show off". This is contrary to popular belief in UKM that those speak English are mainly to show off. The other perception to students speaking English is that they are showing off in a sense that they are either could speak better English or they are proud to protest the national language policy which made Bahasa Malaysia superior to English. Students from Faculty of Social Sciences for instance, always find that Bahasa Malaysia should be the supreme language. Sometimes, the students or academicians from this faculty look at their colleagues who speak English in a cynical way. In technicalities of delivering speech while speaking, students agreed that they do translate before speaking and speak spontaneously. This is probably main concern which needs to be improved. Students are expected to speak spontaneously and not hesitated to do so. Failure to do so may lead them to continuously fail to speak English properly. However, a direct translation and speaking spontaneously could lead to grammatical errors or linguistically inappropriate.

Finally, respondents agree that that they do not judge others negatively for speaking English. However, they are also 8.8% who said in contrary. It is important to note that, majority of students are motivated and want to learn other language other than Bahasa Malaysia, that they will speak more English in future and do not afraid of speaking English or reading English material. Speaking in English is also related to reading English materials such as books and articles. Based on the data, most students (95.3 %) agreed that they will read more English material in future.

Therefore, based on the data, students in High Education such as UKM have no problem with enhancing their English proficiency. While Bahasa Malaysia is a medium of instruction, most of students admit the importance of English. They might regard English as something compulsory for their future undertakings. It is wrong to blame students alone for a lack of motivation and interest in learning and speaking English. Sometime, our finger should

be pointing to policy makers who fail to create and implement good policy. It is the tension between the needs for national unity and market economy which led to policy makers to prioritize one language after another while we can actually achieve both at the same time.

3.2. National Policy

The problem of using and learning English in Malaysian university can be traced from the British whom also introduced English as a medium of instruction in their administration in Malaya (then Malaysia). According to Jomo “although limited by constraints, English education was developed to train workforce who are recognized by the British in view of the expanding capitalist sector” (Jomo, 1991). Therefore, in Malaysian context, English is very much related to business and employment opportunities. This is noted by Evans and St. John suggesting particular aspects of English to business communication, which can be observed in Malaysia (Evans & St. John, 1998). In April 2000, there was an issue highlighted in the newspapers and television about the reasons behind the inability of some 39,000 graduates in the country to get job. The Minister of Education, Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, quoted “..... Employers did not just look at one’s qualification but also factors like personality, potential, English proficiency and experience”. Thus, not only does English become a contributive factor for employment needs, it is still necessary for one’s professional career development.

Given the importance of English to Malaysian university students and it’s imperative for the sake of jobs and markets one should not forget that national language also has its role to build a nation state. This is in line with Fishman (1968) who developed the concept of nationalist-nationist functions of language in nation-building. In the context of this study, the Malaysian leaders believe that national language is critical for national integration. According to Gill (2004) one of the ways to achieving national identity and unity in a multi ethnic country like Malaysia is through an implementation of official language Policy and in Malaysia it is *Bahasa Malaysia*.

However, despite of national language as a tool of unity, one must also understand the importance of English as a global language. Students must master both national language as well as English to comply with both demands for globalization at one hand and national unity at the other hand. It is found that UKM students are keen and confidence to speak English and this is an important factor which could boost their English speaking skill and as they are bilingual they can perform better in a job market.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the result of study, it can be concluded that university student has the capacity to learn English besides Bahasa Malaysia as a national language and major medium of instruction. At the same time, the study found that the program guides the students to improve their level of English. We can perhaps better understand now the crucial roles of English from the employment opportunities view. However, English language alone cannot guarantee students will get a job but it can become a platform to enroll everyone in the university to participate in English programs. It is indeed a task that demands more participation from everyone in the university. The study implies that learning English has no age limit and university students regardless of age should be learning English effectively. This paves a way for more improvement in English learning in future.

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