

MALAYSIAN GRADUATES: WHAT AND WHY

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ABSTRACT

Malaysians are bilingual, many are trilingual while a few are multilingual; language is essential for communication and to make connection. What do the local graduates need to equip themselves upon graduation? Communication skills as one of the soft skills, in particular the English language are important which is introduced and incorporated into the curriculum of English language courses in public universities in Malaysia. Why is the number of unemployed Malaysian graduates on the rise? The local graduates have done well academically but language proficiency and communication skills seem to be the competitive factors to secure jobs. This article discusses the needs for Malaysian graduates to be competent users of English language. It also draws some of the challenges in teaching English language to Malaysian learners.

Keywords: Malaysia; English language; globalization; soft skills; communication skills; employment.

INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Malaysian citizens consist of the ethnic groups Bumiputera (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%) and others (0.7%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). The Bumiputera ethnic groups include the Malays (63.1%). Apart from the structure of the society, the multiethnic composition of learners is also apparent in classrooms at tertiary level in Malaysia. Therefore, a major problem having heterogeneous background of learners in Malaysian universities is attracting the learners to participate actively in the language classrooms since they are competent in the first language (L1) and mother tongue (MT). Language is essential for communication to take place in our lives and to make connection with other people. *Bahasa Malaysia* (sometimes also known as *Bahasa Melayu* or Malay language) is the national language of Malaysia. Each ethnic group in Malaysia has its own MT including Cantonese, Mandarin and Hokkien (dialects for Chinese), Tamil (dialect for Indians), and several indigenous languages in East Malaysia. Children acquire MT before starting the formal education and will learn *Bahasa Malaysia* and the official second language (L2) of Malaysia, English at schools. Other than the Malay ethnic group, other ethnic groups acquire individual MT, they learn *Bahasa Malaysia* as the L1 and English language as the L2. The advent of the English language in Malaysia was initialized by intense British colonization in the 1800's (Pandian, 2002) and the teaching and learning of English are still entrenched in the current Malaysian education system (Asmah, 1992). The ability to communicate in L1 and L2 make Malaysians to be bilingual; in addition to MT many

are trilingual while a few are multilingual. This paper critically discusses the needs of Malaysians to be competent in English language in order to secure employment and advance in career.

MALAYSIA AND GLOBALISATION

Countries that aspire to achieve a developed country should focus extensively on human capital development. Human capital is an asset to any countries as they are “better equipped to face new global challenges and master technological discoveries” (Rosli et al., 2010, p. 1). In line with the aspiration, human capital development begins at tertiary or higher education playing its “role as dispenser and innovator of knowledge education, contributing towards a nation’s growth and development” (Rosli et al., 2010, p. 1). Ultimately, countries which possess high skill level of human capital are able to drive the countries to go global. Globalization is defined as a process where interlinking between countries in the world becomes more intense and the flow of inputs between one country and another will be much easier (Poo & Rahmah, 2012). Rahmah & Poo (2012) accounted that globalization offers opportunities for many kinds of input including labour, thus widening job opportunities for local graduates. Other personal benefits include high income, career prestige, good working conditions, and potential for promotion (Rosli et al., 2010). Simultaneously, Malaysia is focusing on two key areas to improve its competitiveness, which are:

- Competing in global markets to ensure that Malaysia participates successfully in international trade; and
- Competing strongly to attract foreign talent and investment in Malaysia ("Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011 - 2015," 2010, p. 100)

In order to achieve both key areas, the Malaysian tertiary education institutions have a role to train and equip their graduates with the necessary skills to fulfil the needs of employers. In light of the objective, the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia then determined seven soft skills for employees to achieve success at workplace (see Figure 1) which tertiary institutions need to inculcate among the local graduates. The ministry directed all public universities to introduce and incorporate the soft skill elements into the curriculum of every undergraduate course. Soft skills are identified as generic skills and require training; in contrast to hard skills which are associated with procedures or tasks that are observable, quantifiable and measurable. Since then, learning in tertiary classrooms has moved away from teacher-centred to student-centred learning.

The move to incorporate soft skill elements into the curriculum was made for two main reasons: first, employers acknowledge that graduates are academically proficient but still lack soft skills; and second, globalization of the work force and job market require the employers to select graduates having the most appropriate skills to their needs (Roselina, 2009). It was also the right move for Malaysia to incorporate soft skills in tertiary education when employers and industry associations emphasize soft skills as the primary factor that hampers employability of many Malaysian graduates ("Tenth Malaysia Plan 2011 - 2015," 2010).

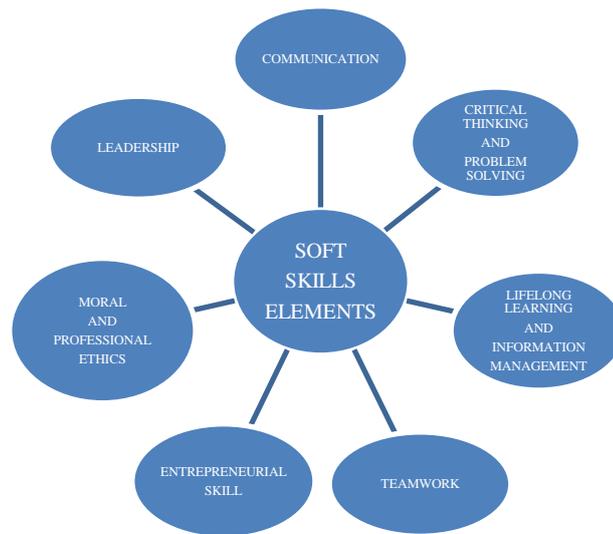


Figure 1. Soft skill elements (Source Ministry of Higher Education, 2006).

MALAYSIANS AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Malaysian media has consistently reported the unemployment rate of the country. The rate shows a fluctuation between 2007 and 2010. In relation to the study, the concern is on the unemployment rate among the local graduates. The Department of Statistics, Malaysia reported the figures to be 56,322 in 2007, a drop to 47,913 in 2008, a rise to 60,000 in 2009, and the New Straits Times dated 17th March 2013 reported the unemployment rate was 65,500 in 2010. The former Minister of Higher Education, Malaysia, Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, commented in a local newspaper that local graduates had not delivered their soft skills effectively and the four crucial ones included communication, values and etiquette, leadership and critical thinking ("4 punca utama graduan sukar dapat pekerjaan," 2010, March 6). The Star dated 27th July 2013 reported that the two factors that make local graduates still jobless after six months of graduating are lack of language proficiency, particularly in English, and insufficient knowledge and competency in the applied jobs. Every year Malaysian tertiary institutions - both public and private – produce new batches of graduates but the number of them being employed after six months of graduating has been increasing and this is a serious issue to the nation.

The English language appears to maintain its status quo (Rosli et al., 2010). Nevertheless, graduates have not been highly proficient in Malay and English (Azman & Razak, 2007; Gill, 2002); a problem to Malaysia which aspires to become a fully industrialized nation in 2020 (Vision 2020, cf. Mahathir, 1991, as cited in Karchner-Ober, 2012). Ten companies who had been recruiting graduates responded to a survey on the importance of English language to the organizations. 80% of them agreed on the importance of English language in the recruitment of staff (Carol, Khaun, & Singh, 2011). They strongly believed being proficient in the English language would make the employees work effectively in their organization. Similarly, 50 employers in Selangor and Perak affirmed the recruitment of employees depends on their command of English language especially for private sectors (Wei, 2011). Singh and Singh (2008) also stress good English proficiency besides high Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills, ability to work in a team, and good interpersonal skills as preference by

employers to recruit graduates. The researches show that English is used at the work place, especially in private companies that may own multinational companies and international subsidiaries; whilst *Bahasa Malaysia* is used for correspondence with government agencies. Apart from being competent in the English language and having good academic results, the 50 employers in Selangor and Perak also look for graduates having soft skills elements (see

Figure 1) (Wei, 2011); but acquiring them has been quite difficult. Based on the source from the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia (2006), the soft skills elements measure abilities to communicate in Malay and English languages (communication); think critically, creatively, innovatively and analytically and solve problems (critical thinking and problem solving); work in teams, build relationship, interact and work effectively (lifelong learning and information management); access and manage information (teamwork); develop business proposals and identify business opportunities (entrepreneurial skill); apply ethical principles and professional ethics (moral and professional ethics); and plan, supervise, monitor and lead (leadership). Therefore, tertiary institutions in Malaysia are taking efforts to fulfill the needs of potential employers to ensure the local graduates possess the soft skills for them to secure employment. This section has shown that economy will leverage on the human resource before achieving international trade. Globalization is happening rapidly with the advent of Information technology (IT) and it is a challenge for non-English speaking country like Malaysia to develop its human capital and ensure its learners demonstrate communicative competence in the English language (Nair et al., 2012). Nevertheless, English is the world lingua franca with more than 400,000,000 is either English as second language (ESL) or English as foreign language (EFL) speakers (Kitao, 1996).

MALAYSIANS AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Malaysia acknowledges the high importance of English yet graduates from public universities in Malaysia encounter challenges in speaking, writing, reading, and listening in the English language for job-related tasks at the workplace (Carol et al., 2011). The two forms of productive communications skills are written and oral; the receptive skills are reading and listening. Furthermore, the greatest challenge encountered by L2 or foreign language (FL) learners is expressing themselves clearly and fluently (Liu & Jackson, 2008) which is a form of production either in written or spoken. Horwitz (2010) and MacIntyre (1995) believe that language anxiety impedes language production; consequently affects achievement. Questions have been raised on the reasons for Malaysian English language learners to feel anxious towards the language. The first author views learners have no choice but to learn English language for academic purpose and do not foresee the need to use the language outside the classroom. Throughout the primary to the secondary education, the total number of years of learning English language is between 9-11 years. For some learners, English language learning continues to pre-university and undergraduate programs which are addition of 2-4 years. By the end of the formal education, it is anticipated that the Malaysian English language learners have good competency of the language that they are able to interact competently to convey their thoughts clearly with confidence. However, "this proved to be a misguided notion" (Pandian, 2002, p. 39) as the anticipation does not happen generally. Little attention is given on the language competence of Malaysian L2 learners despite the total number of years receiving English language input.

An observation noted by the first author on L2 learners in Malaysian tertiary institutions is those who are competent in the English language use the L2 extensively as their MT or L1. They have built the confidence to use the L2 and feel comfortable communicating in the L2. The confidence is believed to have been developed due to many factors. One of them is the location of the learners' previous schools. The use of English language does not happen at school, in the society nor at home (Gobel, Thang, Sighu, Oon, & Chan, 2013). For such learners, English language is a foreign language (EFL) since the language has been 'practically non-existent' to their lives. As a result, they experience great inferiority complex that could be overwhelmingly daunting. In contrast, learners in urban areas are "in frequent contact with English" (Gobel et al., 2013, p. 55) which directly develops their confidence level and motivation to communicate in the language. The finding suggests that depending on the societal context, English is not a language that is commonly used as an everyday language in areas away from cities either for transactions or conversations. In relation to the locality of learners, Gobel et al. (2013) mentioned that disparity in the urban-rural divide was strongly indicated from the difference in achievement levels between the urban and rural youths on the lower secondary school exit examination. The study shows that English is not spoken all over Malaysia with equal frequency but given the avenues, L2 learners are able to develop confidence in order to communicate in the language.

In Malaysian schools, learning the English language encompasses four language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking –as well as grammar component. Debate continues about the reasons local graduates are not competent in the L2. With reference to the national examinations, English is a compulsory subject but it is not compulsory to obtain a pass mark in the examinations (Jeannet, 2013). Consequently, not all learners realize the need to practise L2 outside classrooms and they feel adequate to learn the L2 in classrooms only. For example, English language teachers are not able to encourage learners to use the L2 for oral communication outside classroom though Thornton and Houser (2005) claim that if L2 learners get limited opportunity to use English outside the classroom, the engagement in the English language seems impossible for they get opportunities to speak and hear the target language (TL) only in the classroom. Therefore, extending learner opportunities to use the English language is an important strategy to develop the learners' level of competency.

Employees may realize the importance of the English language later in career. To cater to the needs of the public to improve their English proficiency, a few public universities in Malaysia offer English courses. They may take up the English language class again though on own expense for their own job-related tasks. Many government agencies in Malaysia also organize in-house trainings on English courses related to job requirements for their staff development. A Needs Analysis administered to a group of employees found self-confidence and effective oral communications skills in presenting ideas and disseminating information as the qualities that gave them a competitive edge in their jobs (Rohany, 2003). Thus, higher learning institutions provide opportunities for Malaysians to improve their English language competence for career advancement.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Malaysia is aiming to become a fully developed nation by the year 2020. Therefore, English language is relatively important for cross cultural communication involving international participation. English, as the world lingua franca, is a means for

social mobility and Malaysian graduates should have an awareness of its importance and develop a positive language attitude to master the language.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study has been made possible with the support from the Ministry of Education, Malaysia and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Malaysia.

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