

STRENGTHENING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCY: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF UKM'S CURRICULUM.

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ABSTRACT

The importance of communication skills especially in English is irrefutable nowadays. One of the ways to secure employment is by having strong English communication skills. The graduates of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) are found to be lacking in their soft skills especially English communication skills compared to national average and this might affect their chance to secure employment as English communication skill is found to be among the most desired skills by employers. This paper presents and discusses the findings and discussion of a Content Analysis study conducted to examine the content of undergraduate programs offered by UKM to see whether or not English communication skill is given emphasis in the curriculum and how it is related to the roles and goals of the faculties. The content of the undergraduate programmes offered by 12 faculties in UKM were analysed in terms of their Vision, Mission and Learning Outcomes and discussed in relation to English communication skills. Findings indicate that even though communication skill is one of the criteria in the Learning Outcomes of the programmes, it is also found that the importance of English communication skills is not emphasized enough in the content of the undergraduate programmes offered by UKM. Out of twelve faculties' programmes' content examined, only three faculties clearly stated that their graduates must possess effective communication skills in both English and Malay language as one of the Learning Outcomes of the programmes. This calls for interventions to be taken in order to ensure that the graduates of UKM are well-rounded, competent, competitive and marketable.

Keyword: English communication skills, employment, curriculum, graduates of UKM

INTRODUCTION

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) was established in 1970. The establishment of UKM as a national university was done to fulfil the need and demand of Malaysian citizens for a university with national identity. UKM has become the first university that upholds the Malay Language thus making it the medium of instruction in all teaching and learning except for language related courses. Despite Malay Language being its medium of instruction, UKM is a well-respected university and has received many awards locally and globally for its contribution in many fields. One of the prestigious awards received was the Prime Minister's Quality Award in 2006 as a recognition of UKM's outstanding achievement in academic and management fields. Furthermore, UKM was appointed as one of the research universities in Malaysia in 2006. Aligned with the Vision and Mission of a research university, UKM is expected to fulfil the goals of a research university. It is expected of UKM to be a leader in innovation where it should be leading the academic world in producing new invention that will improve the quality of life in various fields. It is expected of a research university to produce world class research outputs. As English is considered the language of knowledge where majority of resources such as books, journals, articles and academic publications are written in English, lacking in proficiency and competency of it could be disadvantageous and potentially harmful to the vision of UKM to be the best in research area. How can UKM be the best in research field if the students and graduates do not possess the English competency needed when it is the aspiration of UKM to produce holistic graduates?

UKM has established 6 Key Result Areas (KRA) as a basis for its strategic plan for the future of UKM. These 6 KRAs serve as guidelines in the planning and implementation of all its policies. One of it is KRA 1 which is producing graduates with national aspiration, competent, competitive and innovative (Graduan beraspirasi kebangsaan, berkompeten, berdaya saing dan inovatif). These criteria are the criteria expected from UKM graduates so that they can be a productive member of the nation, contributing to its betterment. This is important because as a country that is moving forward and has a mission to achieve by 2020, Malaysia needs citizens with such criteria and as the Guardian of the Nation, it is the responsibility of UKM to produce graduates that possess all those traits which can help developing the country's economy by joining in the workforce of industry with fresh ideas and beneficial input.

Realizing the importance of having good English communication skills, Malaysian students especially UKM students should strive hard to achieve the reasonable proficiency. In the context of Malaysia, as English is the second language, and in line with the education policy, English is taught as a second language (Gill, 2002). In learning any skills, motivation to learn and positive attitudes towards it is crucial. Many studies that have been done suggested that Malaysian students realise the importance of English for their future undertakings (Ainol Madziah & Isarji, 2009; Chittravelu, Sithamparam & Teh, 1995; Samsiah, Kamaruzaman, Nurazila, Musdiana & Taniza, 2009; Thang, 2004) and that students are extrinsically motivated by factors such as desire to get good grades, opportunities to further their studies and career advancement to improve their English. However,

these studies also shown that the extrinsic motivation does not necessarily translate to better performance in English. This is a cause of concern as even though students are fully aware that proficiency in English communication skills is important for their future, and having learned English for 11 years of primary and secondary education and continue learning it in tertiary level, for some reasons, they still don't achieve the desired proficiency by the time they graduated.

Some scholars have discussed the issue of the low proficiency of English communication skills among Malaysian students despite having gone through 11 years of learning English in school and attributed the problem to the attitude of 'privileging examination' (Koo, 2008, p.56). According to Koo, "because of the high importance placed on national examination, it is reported that teachers tend to concentrate on the teaching of grammar and neglect the communicative aspects of language learning in their teaching". Consequently, when the students enter the tertiary level of education, they seem to be lacking in communication skills. Therefore, if the tertiary education doesn't equip them with the crucial said skills, they will become a half-baked graduate, unwanted by the future employers. Ambigapathy (2002) has reported in an analysis of the KBSM syllabus that students have to focus on learning too many grammatical skills because it is going to be tested in the examination. This excessive emphasis on rote learning of English and examination eventually will diminish students' communication skills hence producing batches of graduates who have enough credit in English subject to enter tertiary education but are not able to use the language effectively in communication.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Employability and communication skills, particularly English communication skills are closely related. Having good English language skill is undeniably a way in gaining good employment. As discussed in a speech by the Deputy Vice Chancellor of UKM, Professor Dato' Ir Dr Riza Atiq O.K Rahmat during 'K-Novasi Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran UKM 2015', it was stated that graduates who acquire the highest band which is Band 6 in Malaysian University English Test (MUET) will definitely get employed in which 100% Band 6 graduates are employed as opposed to graduates who achieve other bands. The employment rates of graduates who achieve Band 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 range from approximately 30% to 55%. The starting salary of graduates also varies based on their MUET achievement. For example, the starting salary of graduates with Band 6 in MUET is RM 4937.50 whereas the starting salary for graduates with Band 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 ranges from RM 2000 to RM 3000. These show how important it is for graduates of UKM to have good English skill as it will determine their future and distinguish them from their competitors.

2015 is the beginning of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). It is a step taken by ASEAN community towards more cooperation and integration in various fields. The Deputy Vice Chancellor of UKM, Professor Dato' Ir Dr Riza Atiq O.K Rahmat has brought out the issue of AEC during 'K-Novasi Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran UKM 2015' and how it will affect local graduates especially UKM's. AEC means there will be free flow of goods, services, investment, capital and skilled labor among ASEAN countries. Anybody from ASEAN countries can come to Malaysia and seek for employment and vice versa. There are many advantages of this move where it can enhance our economy as there is more opportunity for our citizens abroad. However, it too can be unfavorable to our graduates. This is due to the lack of English communication skills that will limit UKM graduates' chances to get an employment overseas. On the other hand, graduates from other ASEAN countries are free to come and work in Malaysia. They even possess better skills in English communication and willing to work for lower salary than our local graduates. This is why there is more than half of professionals who work in Cyberjaya are foreigners from the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. Again, this proves that having good English communication skills is very important in workforce. As English language is a lingua franca, every student is expected to possess this skill before they finish their tertiary education so that they are ready to face the many challenges of employment. However, in UKM, despite having a reputation as a respectable university and being one of the research universities in Malaysia, the unemployment rate of its students is becoming worrisome. This can be associated with the lack of English communication skills of its graduates.

As was revealed by the Deputy Vice Chancellor of UKM, Professor Dato' Ir Dr Riza Atiq O.K Rahmat during 'K-Novasi Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran UKM 2015', UKM students' soft skill achievement is below average as compared to national average. This shows that UKM graduates are lacking in soft skill, particularly in communication skills. As a public university that upholds Malay language, the courses offered by the university are conducted in Malay language (except for English-related courses). This is a noble act where Malay language is being retained its importance and value. However, the lack of emphasis on English communication skill is seen as one of the factors in the low rate of UKM's graduate employability rate compared to other public universities. In the speech, it was stated that even though there is an improvement in UKM graduates' employability rate which in 2014 was 72%, it is still low compared to other public universities in Malaysia (UKM is ranked 6th). This situation calls for an attention from the members of the university to ponder upon. This has raised a question on whether its policy of using Malay language as the medium of instruction and interaction in the programmes offered has finally taken its toll hence hindering the fulfilment of Vision and Mission of faculties in UKM. Are the graduates lacking in English communication skill as it is not emphasized in the content of the programmes offered by the university? This triggered this study to examine the undergraduate programmes offered by the university. To do so, the Mission and Vision of each faculty, the Synopsis of Undergraduate Programmes and Courses, the Objectives of the programmes as well as the Learning Outcomes (HPP) of the undergraduates programmes in UKM were analysed on whether English communication skill is given emphasis and reflected in the content of the programmes offered by the university and how it is related with the goal and roles of the faculties and UKM.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Employability and English Communication Skills

One of the soft skills required for employability is English communication skill. This is because as a lingua franca, English is widely used as a medium of communication formally and also informally. Lacking in the ability to communicate in English

might affect the chance to secure jobs. Malaysia's tertiary institutions produce batches of graduates every year without fail, however the issue of unemployment is becoming a threat to the nation. According to the numbers from the Department of Statistics, in July 2015, there were 459,900 Malaysians unemployed compared to 394,100 in July 2014, an increase by 16.7%. This implies that there is a need to develop skilled graduates that are able to fulfil the criteria of 21st century workforce so that they can secure employment after they graduated. It is a waste of human capital if the local graduates are not able to contribute after all the knowledge they have gained from their many years of education.

According to Shanta Nair-Venugopal (2000) in an article titled, 'English, identity and the Malaysian workplace', it has been found out that English is increasingly important in the workplace. English acts as a medium of interaction in the workplace between workers and also when dealing with outsiders. It is regarded as a proper and respectable way to communicate. This is supported by a study by Nick (2005). According to Nick (2005), long before the diversification in degree programs that we see now, an English qualification was the most assured ticket of success at the workplace. This shows how important having a good English skill is in employment in which it even precedes the importance of having any technical skills in the workplace

In a survey conducted among employers (originally from Jobstreet.com, then published by Ministry of Education for National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017), poor command of English is ranked as the number one problem companies have when hiring graduates. Another study by Parmjit Singh, Roslind Xaviour Thambusamy, and Mohd Adlan Ramly entitled "Fit or Unfit? Perspectives of Employers and University Instructors of Graduates' Generic Skills" yields the same finding. It is found that both employers and instructors agree that communication skill is the number one generic skill that graduates should possess in order to be employable. Communication skill, preferably in English should be one of the must-have skills for every graduate as its importance is acknowledged by industry.

2) Malaysian Graduates' Soft Skill and the Roles of Higher Learning Institutions

The Ministry of Higher Education has listed seven generic/soft skills that need to be mastered by students before they graduated. They are Communication skills; Critical Mind and Problem Solving Skills; Teamwork Skills; Continuous Learning and Information Management; Entrepreneurship Skills; Professional Ethics and Moral Skills; and Leadership Skills. According to the ministry, all graduates must have all these skills in order to fulfil the requirement of the job market. According to Zubaidah et al. (2006), soft skills are not specific to any particular job position or workplace environment. It is commonly required in all lines of work. According to Kruger (2006), these skills can be used widely in all jobs and tasks assigned in working sector. Straub (1990) gives the definition of non-technical skills as skills that are common to all jobs and tasks. Therefore, it can be concluded that non-technical skills or soft skills are very important because it is demanded everywhere regardless of fields. It is very important for graduates and future employees to understand that there is no use of possessing excellent set of technical skills but lacking in the way to communicating themselves in the efficient way.

Acknowledging the importance of graduates' soft skills, the question then would be whether Malaysian graduates are well-equipped with the necessary soft skills, and whether Malaysian tertiary institutions have prepared them well. Students should be taught of all the necessary employability skills especially English communication skills as it is ranked first as the most desired skill by employers. If the graduates don't have adequate communication skills, they will be valued less in working sector even though they have mastered all the technical skills relevant to their field. In a study by G. Nair, R. Rahim, R. Setia et. al (2012) entitled 'Malaysian Graduates English Adequacy in the Job Sector', it is found that the new graduates in Malaysia are not proficient in English language. They seem to be lacking in their ability to use English effectively especially in communication. As a result, the researchers further explained that Malaysian graduates are not widely marketable as a result of lacking in English language proficiency. This is an undesirable finding as higher learning institutions produce batches of graduates every year, but if they are half-baked, how are they beneficial to the country? That is one of the reasons why local graduates are not highly demanded by the industry. Consequently, they will just be a waste of human capital.

Higher learning institutions should set goals and objectives to achieve in teaching employability skills. They must be fully alert and responsive on what is the demand of the job market and how are they going to meet those demands. As communication skills especially in English seems to be the most desired skill an employee must have, extra emphasis should be given in order to develop students' proficiency in English communication. This is where the importance of policy planning is the most significant. The emphasis of English communication skills should start from the beginning stage which is the policy planning by the university. The content of the programs offered in the university should clearly outline the embodiment of English communication skills regardless of the fields of study. The content then must be translated in the teaching and learning of the courses and should be clearly visible. The importance of English communication skills should be repeatedly highlighted to the students so that they are aware of it. This is to make sure that their products, which are the graduates must be able to fully function when joining the workforce.

It is the role of universities and specifically the educators to prepare their graduates with English communication skills. In order to do that, educators themselves must first and foremost be ready to expand their academic role, not just teaching the theoretical and practical aspects of their fields but also the practical skills that will be used in the real world. This is where the role of lecturers/instructors are needed the most as facilitator to guide and facilitate students in the classroom teaching and learning and creatively and subtly embed the lesson with English communication skill through interaction with students. This notion can be based on the theory of Social Constructivism. According to social constructivists, knowledge is a part of human product which is constructed through their social and cultural surrounding (Ernest 1999; Gredler 1997; Prawat & Floden 1994). To apply this in the context of this study, students can develop the understanding and proficiency in English communication skills by interacting

with each other and the lecturers/instructors in the space of classroom teaching and learning in their respective field of study. By doing this, students can acquire knowledge and skills of both technical and non-technical simultaneously and in context. Moreover, social constructivists also regard learning as a social process. This is due to the belief that learning process does not only happen within an individual but also influenced by external factors (McMahon 1997). This show that learning and acquiring skills (in this context is English communication skill) require interaction with others as one of the factors that enhances the process of achieving proficiency. As students spend a lot of time in classroom, it is wise to incorporate the inculcation of English communication skills in the teaching and learning of the courses. Consequently, students who are engaged in social interaction using English language in classroom will experience a meaningful learning process.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative study where qualitative Content Analysis/Secondary Research was employed in order to obtain what the study was looking for. As the objective of the study was to examine/analyse the Undergraduate Programmes offered by UKM in the area of English communication skills, qualitative Content Analysis design was selected. As discussed by Hsiu-fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon in their paper titled 'Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis', "qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words to examining language intensely for the purpose of classifying large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that represent similar meanings" (Weber, 1990). In other words, qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns. As the categorisation process is done in a systematic way, the interpretation and discussion of the data can be done properly. In the context of this paper, all the aspects in the content of the undergraduate programmes were analysed and categorised into suitable themes based on the words and the interpretation by the researcher. One of the issues in employing qualitative Content Analysis is the issue of reliability in the categorisation and interpretation of the data. Therefore, to ensure the validity and reliability of the data analysis, the researcher used expert checking. Two experts who are the senior lecturers with years of experience in teaching and research in one of the public universities in Malaysia were asked to check on the interpretation and grouping of the data by the researcher. Upon recommendation from the experts in terms of the categorisation and interpretation of the data, the researcher made some amendments accordingly. All those measures taken are important to ensure that the interpretation and discussion of the findings are valid and reliable.

Regarding the selection of sample for this study, as there were 12 faculties that offer undergraduate programmes in UKM, all 12 faculties were selected for the purpose of the study. This was to ensure that a comprehensive analysis could be obtained through this study. In the context of this study, the data analysis is the document analysis itself. The gathered documents which are Buku Panduan Prasiswazah Fakulti, Synopsis of Undergraduate Programmes and Courses, and Objectives and Learning Outcomes of the Undergraduate Programmes (Hasil Pembelajaran Program Prasiswazah/HPP) were analysed on whether English communication skill is one of the criteria present in the content of the undergraduate programmes and how it is related with the goal and roles of the faculties and UKM.

The process of data analysis was done in three levels. First, the raw data gathered from the Buku Panduan Prasiswazah Fakulti, the Synopsis, the Objectives and the Learning Outcomes (HPP) of the undergraduate programs from the 12 faculties were extracted and tabulated according to the faculties and programmes. The second level of data analysis was done by tabulating data from the first level separately for the statements of: 1) Vision, 2) Mission and 3) Learning Outcomes for all the faculties to find the themes of each statement. Next, for the statements of Vision and Mission, the common themes found were grouped in the same category namely: 1) The Expected Roles of the Institution; 2) The Expected Outcome in Traits/Characteristics of Graduates and 3) The Intended Effects to Nation/Society. For the statement of Learning Outcomes of the programmes, the discussion focused on the 8 domains of Learning Outcomes. The findings then are discussed in relation to English communication skill and how it is reflected in the content of the undergraduate programmes offered by the university.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research was done to examine/analyse the Undergraduate Programmes offered by UKM in the area of English communication skills to see whether it is being emphasized enough in UKM's curriculum. To do so, the Mission and Vision of each faculty, the Synopsis of Undergraduate Programmes and Courses, the Objectives of the programmes as well as the Learning Outcomes (HPP) of the undergraduates programmes in UKM were analysed to see whether English communication skill is given emphasis and reflected in the content of the programmes offered by the university and how it is related with the goal and roles of the faculties and UKM.

The study found that based on the Vision and Mission of the 12 faculties involved in the study, it is their goal to produce well-rounded, holistic, competent and competitive graduates. The graduates must excel in both theory and practice of their fields as well as possessing strong soft skills especially communication skills. To produce such graduates, the faculties have outlined their own roles in providing quality education to their students. Without abandoning the identity of UKM as a national university, the faculties have their own plans in producing competent and competitive graduates with national identity that will be able to compete both locally as well as globally. To achieve that, apart from having strong knowledge in their fields of study, all graduates of UKM are expected to have the ability to communicate in English and Malay language. This is to ensure that they are highly demanded in the job market and do not be the waste of human capital of this country.

However, the findings suggested that the importance of English communication skills is not emphasized enough in the content of the undergraduate programmes offered by UKM. It is clearly stated in one of the 8 domains of Learning Outcomes/Objectives of the programs that Communication skill and Interpersonal relationship is one of the criteria in the content of the undergraduate

programs offered in UKM, in which it should be reflected in the teaching and learning of the courses and programs conducted in UKM. However, from the data gathered, it can be seen that the criterion of communication skills is not clearly outlined by most faculties. It is just vaguely mentioned in the Learning Outcomes/Objectives of the programs. Out of 12 faculties that were examined, only Faculty of Education, Faculty of Science and Technology and Faculty of Law clearly stated that their graduates must possess effective communication skills in both English and Malay language as one of the Learning Outcomes of the programmes while nine other faculties did not. This is not supposed to happen because in order to really achieve the faculties' goal in producing well-rounded, competent and competitive graduates that will fulfil UKM's aspiration to be the pioneer in education, and having acknowledging the importance of English communication skills in achieving said aspiration, the content of the programmes and courses offered by UKM should be made crystal clear on those aspects. It should be made clear in the Vision and Mission of the faculties and programs offered by UKM so that a strong emphasis can be given on this aspect in the content of the undergraduate programmes in UKM. Hence, as what has been outlined in the Vision and Mission of the faculties, it is hoped that the faculties will be able to nurture and produce educated society through the inculcation of knowledge and practice into their graduates. This is aligned with UKM's philosophy and Vision of building a credible civilisation infused with national identity.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION AND LIMITATION

The findings of the study suggested that the importance of English communication skills is not emphasized enough in the content of the undergraduate programmes offered by UKM even though the Vision and Mission of the 12 faculties, Learning Outcomes and Objectives of all the undergraduate programmes are geared towards producing holistic graduates who by definition should possess both technical skills of their fields and soft skills especially communication skills to ensure their competitiveness and marketability. Therefore, this study would like to offer some recommendations and suggestions for improvement regarding the issue.

In order to achieve UKM's goal of becoming a chosen academic hub which is producing holistic graduates, it is recommended that the planning and execution of the courses and programmes in UKM should include all the necessary aspects of both technical and soft skills of the students. Policy makers of UKM should take into consideration the need to give more emphasis on English communication skills in UKM's curriculum and follow market demands. This is very important as to make sure UKM graduates are demanded and looked for by the employers, the university should equip them with the skills according to the market demands. There is no point in producing batches of graduates year by year but undesirable by the employers. As university's policy makers have included English communication skills as one of the criteria in the content of programmes offered, course designers then will design the courses accordingly to embed and include English communication skills in the curriculum of all programmes and courses in UKM regardless of fields so that it will be translated in the teaching and learning process. Apart from that, the outline and guidance of the courses also should be made clear on how to include and embed English communication skills in the lessons and assessments. Furthermore, it is also important to note that apart from including the aspects of technical and soft skills in the curriculum of all the programmes offered by UKM, it is also important to provide proper guidelines on how to carry out each aspect. The Learning Outcomes and Objectives of all programs should clearly state English and Malay communication skill as one of the desired goals in all programmes. The curriculum of the programmes should also show how English and Malay communication skill is going to be embedded in the teaching and learning of the programmes. This is to make sure that the desired goal is accomplished. Consequently, it will make it easier for the lecturers and instructors of the courses to conduct their lessons accordingly. There will be no confusion on the execution of the courses that will hinder the objectives from being achieved. By doing this, the content of the lessons and the soft skills can be combined and well-executed simultaneously in the teaching and learning process in classrooms. As a result, UKM's aspiration to produce well-rounded and competent graduates that are well-balanced and competitive to compete in the job market will be achieved. Students, as the client as well as the asset of the university will benefit the most from this and in turn, will benefit the university.

The study also would like to stress the importance of good policy planning of UKM's curriculum in the area of English communication skills. This is because, whatever it is that the curriculum wants to achieve at the end, it must start with solid policy planning at the very beginning. The aspect of English communication skills should be clear in the stages of planning, execution and evaluation as well as assessment of the programmes. UKM's curriculum should take into consideration the needs of graduates nowadays and also what employers want in their future employees. UKM should be more alert and responsive to current needs and ready to evolve according to market demands. This is to make sure that its graduates are marketable, competent and competitive locally and globally, hence fulfilling the KRA 1 of UKM.

There are a few limitations of this study. The first limitation is the setting. As the study is done specifically in the context of UKM where the data gathered is exclusively UKM-based, the findings of this study are not intended for generalization purpose and not applicable to any other universities. It is only true for UKM. The second limitation is this study is only done in the context of undergraduate programmes where 12 faculties' undergraduate programmes' content are analysed for the purpose of this study. Therefore, it is not applicable to the other levels of study. The third limitation is the methodology. This study employs Content Analysis design where the researcher analyses the documents to fulfil what the research is looking for without using any other means to triangulate the data.

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