
ESP in Malaysia - The Background and Problems

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Background

This article reviews the background to English for Specific Purpose (ESP) teaching at the tertiary level in Malaysia. It the University of Malaya, that examines the role and requirement guage teacher as a facilitator of academic studies.¹

Following the colonisation of the country, English became the sole official the transitional decade that followed, English was used as an official language together with Bahasa Melayu (B National Language. In language of the newly independent state of Malaya in 1957, English continued to be the other official was not until 1976 that English was completely replaced by B.M. as the medium of instruction in government secondary schools and in institutions of higher learning. Despite the loss of its official status, English continues to be

an important second language for a variety of purposes. At the social level, English is widely spoken among the urbanised middle class Malaysians. They are among the Malaysians “raised bilingually” (Asmah, 1991)

Post-Independence Language Policy and English in Education

A series of Education and Language Acts and Amendments, from the 1950's through to the 1980's drastically transformed the education system. In a span of almost 20 years, the colonial education system was replaced.

As the national education policy was implemented, significant changes occurred in the language use pattern and proficiency among the new generation of educated Malaysians. Policy implementation by various government departments appears to be highly successful as far as the national aspirations were concerned. Non-Malay Malaysians born a decade after Independence have become far more proficient and comfortable speaking, reading, and writing in B.M. than in English. This contrasts with the pre-independence, English-school-educated generations, whose ease with the English language is now seen as a desirable but not easily attainable achievement. It appears that the relatively high level of English language proficiency that the country once enjoyed cannot be maintained in view of the aspirations of the new nation state. In the case of Malaysia, the status of the national language is not just paid lip service, nor ascribed mere symbolic value as in the case of some neighbouring countries. It has very effectively replaced the colonial language. “With the type of educational planning the government is embarking on, the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia receives the degree of importance that had never been given to it before.” (Asmah, 1976:6)

Economic Development and Communication Needs to the Year 2020

The English language has been recognised as an instrument for economic advantage and professional advancement (Chitravelu, 1980). It is the major international language in critical spheres such as science and technology, innovation and development, international trade and commerce, as well as diplomatic relations. Its importance to future development of the country, and in relation to “the advent of the global village” was officially recognised (New

Straits Times, 8 Oct. 1997). Indeed, a serious agenda such as Vision 2020³ can hardly afford to ignore the decline in English proficiency among the young, vibrant and energetic section of her workforce.

The Government and private sectors have become aware of the under-performance in areas such as English proficiency. It is noted that since 1978 there has been a decline in the standard of English among graduates (Khairi, 1997) in their respective workplaces (Ushadevi, 1997).

The need for human resource training and development at a more sophisticated level is necessary and urgent. The implication of this trend of development on education and more specifically language education is quite clear. While Bahasa Melayu (B) is the national language, the concept of "unity in diversity" (Asmah, 1997) have constantly been reminded of the role and value of the English language by political leaders. This is in view of the rapid development and industrialisation of the country since the mid-1980s. The challenge was for ESP scholars to help in national human resources development through language training. Language educators have been asked to consider "...language planning in terms of curricular changes, pedagogical approaches, textbooks preparation and teacher training, (to) meet the challenges of the rapid social, economic, scientific and political changes taking place." (NS, 1997, Oct. 1997)

The lament over the deterioration in the use of the English language by Malaysian youths, especially university undergraduate students, suggests a need to make young Malaysians more effectively communicative in English. This lack of communicative skills in English among young professionals or professionals-to-be is worrying as the country aspires to become an industrialised society by the earlier part of the next millennium. Among the many projects that the Malaysian government has launched or plans to launch is the high-profile Multi-media Super Corridor (M) route. It is expected that the economic and technological benefits of the route by the year 2020 will be obtained. This ambitious and technologically advanced undertaking requires highly skilled and sophisticated manpower capable of translating the national aspiration into a reality. The training of young

professionals of calibre has never been more urgently needed. The hallmark of professionalism has to do with intelligent thinking, operational skills and a pro-active outlook tuned in to the articulation and solution of problems. Implicit in these requisites is conceptual and communicative competence. A pertinent consideration, and a real challenge before the nation would be, how may the most highly educated group among Malaysian youths, namely university undergraduates, be trained to become conceptually adroit and communicatively effective.

Undergraduate English Language Programmes in the University of Malaya

“With regard to the decline of the standard of academic excellence in the existing national system of education, there is in fact a definite downward movement in the level of proficiency in the English language among the present generation of Malaysians.” (Asmah, 1982). This has caused sufficient concern to prompt the Education Minister in 1996 (NST, 26 May, 1996) into suggesting the reintroduction of English as a medium of instruction for some technological and science subjects at the university level.

As with other institutions of higher learning in other previous British colonies, for example, Sri Lanka, (Gunawardena & Knight, 1986), deterioration in English language proficiency sets in following the adoption of the mother-tongue as the medium of instruction in education. The decline in the language use of the former colonial language, both in terms of quality (standard) and quantity (the extent to which the language is used), is felt most keenly at the tertiary level.

All language courses at the University of Malaya are run by the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics. The forerunner of the Faculty, the Language Centre, was primarily a service centre meeting the language needs of the university students and staff by offering various language courses. As B.M. replaced English as the medium of instruction in school and ultimately in the universities, students proficient in English became the exception rather than the rule. Since then students are in effect either Malay-educated or Chinese-educated.⁵ There was a large gap between the English reading competence of the school-leaver (even after eleven years or more studying English as a sub-

ject) with ease and efficiency.

Further, the University was faced with the prospect of a student community, the majority of whom would be unable to take full advantage of a university one's knowledge independently. The University attempted to arrest the increasingly deficient use of English language among the students. This is shown by the Reading for Academic Purposes Project (U) at the students' difficulty in coping with reading in English for purposes. The primary objective of the project was to provide students with a set of reading strategies which would provide students with the facility to become more efficient and independent in their reading of academic texts (Chitravelu,

In the Project, UMSEP, was launched with the objective of developing spoken English courses for professional communication in the fields of law, business, commerce and public administration (H) in collaboration among the same organisations involved in the UMSEPP

Commencing in the 1996/97 and the University began to restructure the undergraduate courses to adopt a credit unit system. Under the new system, English language would be taught as a university course, comprising eight credit units, but not counting towards the Grade Point Average (GPA). All first-year students with limited proficiency in English are required to follow a general proficiency course. Upon passing, these students then proceed to the English for Specific Purpose (ESP) course in the following academic year. This ESP course is compulsory for all students to take and to pass. This would suggest 'customised' courses for different disciplines of study

The time invested by both teachers and students in teaching and following the course works out to be four hours a week over fifteen weeks. In addition, the large number of students and lan

thousand students a year) means it is important that the ESP programme meets the criterion of being truly effective and relevant.

The Situation in Institutions of Higher Learning in Malaysia

The consequence of the insistence on a clear-cut boundary between language teaching and subject teaching has in many instances led to the teaching and learning of language and specialist subjects in isolation. This probably partly explains the frustration and confusion experienced by many students with limited proficiency in English language, in their struggle with the learning of the specialist subjects, where much of the course materials are in English.

The feelings of confusion and anxiety are not confined to the students. Language teachers too experience similar problems in teaching the ESP courses. Language for specific purpose teaching targets specific purpose settings and language. Consequently, many teachers are uncomfortable with their teaching assignments. Evidence shows that students' problems and difficulty with English language learning in general, and at the University of Malaya in particular, have been well-researched (Cheong, 1996; John, 1996; Khong, 1996; Lee, 1994; Ng, 1992; Ponniah, 1993; Sheena Kaur, 1996; Sim, 1993; Tan, P.L, 1994; & Tan, S.H., 1985). However, problems and difficulties faced by the language teachers have not been given sufficient attention in research. There are few in-depth studies on ESP practitioners in Malaysia. The ESP teacher often finds herself in an unenviable and uncomfortable position having to cope with the content of a discipline she has problems understanding. It is the commonly expressed view of the language teachers that they feel incompetent and intimidated by their lack of familiarity with the specialist content with which they are expected to help their students to read and comprehend.

The apparent under-performance of local university students raised questions about local university lecturers' teaching competence. A Diploma in Education programme for ineffective lecturers was recommended as a possible course of action to bring about better teaching in the university (NST editorial, 16 April 1997). Although the approach was deemed unsuitable, it was agreed that lecturers should stimulate minds and help students see things in different perspectives, and that the lecturer needs to be called upon to invent new approaches to teaching (Khoo, NST, 8 Oct. 1997).

An in-depth investigation of language teachers' treatment and understanding of specialist materials would help to shed light on how new approaches may be invented and adopted to enable the language teachers to be effective "facilitators

be put into one teaching situation after another which is clearly untenable, such as having to teach students to read subject-matter material which we ourselves have trouble in understanding." (1

At the tertiary level, the relevance and value of language instruction has to be more specifically defined. Unlike learning at the secondary or pre-university level, the development of cognitive abilities or conceptual knowledge and its creative application to problem solving constitutes a critical aspect of tertiary education. As Selinker points out,

"For ESP teachers to understand text properly, they would need to know the concepts and presuppositions involved. ...Ignorance of these means that the text as a whole is not understood. Language teachers (who insist that their duties rest solely within the realm of language teaching) are likely to devote their efforts and energy...to lower level features of grammar and vocabulary. However, these may not be properly understood either as their role in the overall discourse (and in the scientific area generally) is not understood." (1979:191)

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students cannot afford the time for learning the English language for its own sake. Most of them are pragmatic in their attitude towards the learning of English

As Bhatia sees it, "... in a number of ESP situations subject-specific ESP teaching materials are likely to be more effective

process if the cognitive needs of the specialist discipline are allowed to be fulfilled

activate the cognitive strategies that the learners need to acquire to cope with specialist texts."(1986:

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"...content provides a cognitive basis for language learning in that it provides real meaning that is an inherent feature of naturalistic language learning. Meaning provides conceptual or cognitive hangers on which language functions and structures can be hung. ... If ... motivational and cognitive

bases are to be realised, then content must be and interesting to the learner. Where language learning is concerned, this is achieved by selecting content that is part (1989:202)

What needs to be considered thus is how young professionals-to-be may be trained to acquire the necessary 'cognitive abilities' and petence for academic enquiry The preponderance of studies on students and student-related problems in ESP seems to suggest the source of the problem lies with the learner. Such a view could be misleading.

The Challenge Ahead

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tite collaboration among the subject-lecturer, language-teacher and the student. It
the ESP practitioner's growing concern with the "total
ment of the student." (Swales,
recognition that the language teacher needs to be able to grasp the conceptual
structure of a subject his students are studying if he is to understand fully how
language is used to represent that structure." (Swales,

In
edge assumed in a specialist text has to rely on the specialist teacher to provide
her with the pertinent background information to help her understand the special-
ist writings. The
to be a critical dimension of the teaching of ESP courses. Borrowing
Widdowson's term (1983), evidence of this "parasitic"
ship between language and subject teachers has been reported in many studies
on language and subject teacher collaboration (Selinker,

The ESP teacher's schema, and its effect on her comprehension and treat-
ment of specialist writings has yet to be fully explored. If
is to be taken seriously, it is important for the ESP teacher to demonstrate what
she is capable of contributing in a specific-purpose language course. It
indisputable that the language teacher cannot expect, nor be expected, to oper-
ate independently in her attempt to come to grips with the content of the spe-
cialist discipline. It

the tripartite collaborative learning and teaching scenario as suggested by Johns and Dudley-Evans (1980).

the particular schema or mindset of the parties concerned in the tripartite collaborative learning and teaching model put forward by the authors. It is suggested here that for collaborative team-teaching to be effective it is imperative to state beyond the obvious, that ESP is "parasitic" Both Widdowson (1983) and Bhatia (1986)

is necessarily of a parasitic nature. According to Bhatia, the ESP "... goals, procedures, methodology, classroom practices and evaluation procedures are, to a large extent, guided, if not entirely determined, by the goals, procedures, methodology, expectations and practices in the specialist discipline that it is intended to serve." He further suggests that ESP "... will serve its appropriate purpose only if the language work for which this input is used helps the learner to acquire the cognitive abilities that he will require in order to cope with the specialist material in his subject-discipline." (1986:60)

Faced with such a proposition, the language teacher is expected to be able to identify the purpose of the learning of the specialist subject matter. She then has to devise appropriate language tasks to help students develop their cognitive abilities in their subject area. In other words, in the ESP context, the purpose of language teaching is to enhance specialist subject learning through the medium of the English language.

Insofar as the subject specialist and students are concerned, the proposition is straightforward and justified. What may have been taken for granted is the language teacher's ability to cope with the teaching and learning demands of such a collaborative nature. The success of collaborative learning and teaching would have to depend on how far the language teacher is able to match her language teaching skills and schema to that of the specialist subject learning and teaching situation. This would require a modification of the tripartite scheme as mentioned above. How language teachers treat and read specialist texts might provide valuable information that would impact on the learning and teaching of the specialist subject. There have been few empirical studies on how language teachers go about constructing the meaning of specialist subjects. (Ng, 1999)

The optimism that the learning of reading strategies would enhance students' ability to cope with the academic subjects of various disciplines would

in part depend on how effectively language teachers taught such strategies. However, this critical aspect of the teaching and learning dynamics has been largely overlooked. In-depth language teachers poses contexts have not been undertaken previously. The difficulties by English language teachers in dealing with specialist texts are many, and, in some instances even pressing (Bhatia, have been few empirical studies to suggest what these difficulties are, and how they could have prevented the language teachers from effectively helping their students with the reading of specialist academic texts.

The ever increasing demands for English for Specific Purposes courses clearly imply that English language teachers have a definite contribution to make in the various disciplines and fields of study. As the new Minister of Education, Tan Sri Musa Mohamad, puts it, the problem with many students now was not the inability to use and understand English language, but rather technical English. . . They are not used to scientific and expressing themselves in the language of science, which is (30 Oct. 2000). Therefore, the specific expectations of the language teachers must be considered. One interpretation to handle and cope with the demands of all specialist materials and learning situations with equal felicity. tions that need to be answered before the contribution that language teachers bring to ESP instruction and learning suggests a need for what ESP instruction entails.

Notes

- ¹ The study is a doctoral thesis by the author, focusing on how language teachers from materials
- ² The country was renamed Malaysia following the addition of and the two Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak into the Federation of Malaya in 1963. Singapore left remaining as part of Malaysia, referred to as East Malaysia. The 11 states of
- ³ Vision 2020 was first proposed by the Prime Minister, Dr Mohamad Mahathir in 1991. It fully the next millennium.
- ⁴ The Multi-media Super Corridor (MSC) was the brainchild of laysian Prime Minister Dr. Mohamad Mahathir, put forward in 1996. He saw it as the way for information technology (IT)
- ⁵ The English schools, which used were closed by 1972, being replaced by the Malay medium schools using Bahasa Melayu as the medium of Chinese and Tamil primary schools pendent Chinese secondary schools, continue to use their mother tongues as a medium of
- ⁶ The UMESPP project (1975-1980) produced Reading for Academic Purposes (B ence. The purpose was to teach general and reading skills for Science, i.e. reading for Special Purpose in English (ESP).

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