

## English Language Literacies – Practices, Competencies vs Demands in Academic Discourses

### *Literasi Bahasa Inggeris – Amalan, Kompetensi lwn Keperluan dalam Wacana Akademik*

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**Abstract:** The role and position of the English language within the higher education has increasingly played a significant role as the leading language of academic publications, technologies as well as communication. The higher institutions in the country hold important responsibilities to educate and produce the younger generation of Malaysians as potential human resources that not only fulfil the needs of the local and international workforce in the attempt to achieve the national's aspiration of a developed country. This study seeks to understand the undergraduate students' English language literacies in relation to the demand of the literacy practices and competencies needed at the tertiary level. The literacy practices in this instance include academic literacies that encompass not only knowledge of discrete language skills and appropriate language use in context, but also competence in reading and writing. Subsequently, data were collected via questionnaires and focus groups with selected undergraduate from various disciplines to investigate whether their educational and environmental factors influence their existing level of English language competencies. Findings of the study provide in-depth insights of the challenges faced, and the language literacy practices needed in meeting the expectations of potential employers of the required English language skills to be used at workplace.

**Keywords:** English language, literacy practices, graduate employability

**Abstrak:** Peranan dan kedudukan Bahasa Inggeris di peringkat pengajian tinggi semakin meningkat kepentingannya dan telah menjadi antara bahasa utama didalam penerbitan ilmiah, bidang teknologi serta komunikasi. Institusi pengajian tinggi di negara ini memegang tanggungjawab yang utama didalam mendidik dan melahirkan generasi muda warga Malaysia yang berpontensi bagi memenuhi keperluan tenaga kerja yang berkemahiran tinggi di peringkat tempatan dan antarabangsa didalam usaha negara ini mencapai inspirasinya sebagai negara yang membangun. Kajian ini dijalankan untuk memahami keperluan penguasaan amalan literasi dan kecekapan Bahasa Inggeris yang diperlukan oleh pelajar di peringkat Sarjana Muda. Amalan-amalan literasi yang dimaksudkan merujuk kepada penguasaan literasi akademik yang merangkumi bukan saja pengetahuan kemahiran berbahasa serta penggunaan bahasa yang sesuai didalam konteks, malahan juga kecekapan didalam aspek membaca dan menulis. Oleh itu, dapatan data dilakukan melalui kaedah soal selidik secara bersasar kepada sekumpulan pelajar sarjana muda yang berlatar belakang pelbagai bidang di dalam mengenalpasti samada pengaruh persekitaran akademik mereka mempengaruhi tahap penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris sedia ada mereka. Hasil kajian memberikan gambaran yang jelas berkaitan cabaran serta amalan literasi bahasa yang diperlukan oleh pelajar sarjana muda didalam memenuhi tahap penguasaan

*bahasa Inggeris yang diharapkan oleh bakal majikan mereka berkaitan kemahiran Bahasa Inggeris yang diperlukan untuk digunakan di tempat kerja.*

**Kata kunci:** *Bahasa Inggeris, amalan literasi, kebolehpasaran graduan*

## Introduction

The importance of English language has now become evidently significant as a result of the rapid progression of globalization. Termed as “the interconnections of global economic, political, cultural and environmental processes that continually transform present conditions” (Steger, 2003, p.7-8), the on-going processes of globalization has resulted in the need for a common language of communication in overcoming the interlingual and intercultural barriers among different countries and cultures across the world (Smokotin et al., 2014). Subsequently, as the English language is regarded as a prominent instrument for communication purposes across the globalised world, having the knowledge of the particular language would then provide individuals with not only educational opportunities but also better career prospects. This notion is also supported by Crystal (2000) as the English language is regarded to have a large number of speakers around the globe due to its prominent role in various fields such as economy, science, culture and even education. For instance, as a global language for the economy, the English language also acts as a bridge to connect various cultures in the field of international business. The emergence of e-commerce also has further elevated the language not only to establish business connections but also to make transactions more flexible and efficient between different countries.

The on-going globalization occurring across the globe has inadvertently also affected Malaysia as a country that aspires of becoming a developed nation. The prominent role of Knowledge-economy that emphasises human capital investments, demands the need for not only creative, and innovative human resources but also world class knowledge workers that can compete at the international level (Mustapha. 2013). Accordingly, the role and position of the English language within the higher education has increasingly played a significant role as the leading language of academic publications, technologies as well as communication in ensuring that the country’s higher education system is in tandem with the demand of future employability skill sets needed for its graduates. Besides being cognizant with the knowledge within their field of specialisation, graduates are also expected

to demonstrate competence in soft skills, namely effective communication and interpersonal skills. In particular, graduates are expected to possess the competency to communicate well in English as to contribute effectively to the organisation that they are working in.

To support the English language demand in the country, various efforts have been taken to address the lack of proficiency of the English language that the undergraduate students have (Rethinasamu and Kee Man 2011). The launching of English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025 by the Ministry of Education in 2019, signifies the determination of the country to substantially improved the younger generation’s proficiency of the English language in preparing them to cope and compete in the increasingly globalised job-market. This effort is also manifested through the introduction of MUET as a prerequisite English exam to be taken by the students at the tertiary level as well as the newly introduced CEFR alignment to the current English language courses at the universities.

However, studies have shown that fresh graduates still face difficulties in getting employed due to their lack of English language proficiency and poor communication skills. Importantly, the ability for new graduates to communicate effectively in English also functions as a determinant factor for their employability (Balakrishnan 2017; Hazlina 2016; Shanmugam 2017). Reports documented in the mass media indicate the stakeholders’ concerns, especially those in the private sectors, regarding the lack of language and communications needed at workplace by the local graduates (Aruna, 2011; Azreen 2021; Teoh, 2011).

Subsequently, it is imperative that such concerns are addressed in order to have a clear understanding of the English language competencies needed in meeting the employers’ expectations set for workplace.

To this end, this paper seeks to find answers for the following questions:

RQ1: To what extend do the English language proficiency courses underwent by the students facilitate them in providing the competencies needed at workplace?

RQ2: To what extent do the students' academic literacy practices and competencies match the employers' expectations of the English language proficiency needed at the workplace?

## Literature Review

According to Wahi (2012), a general term for academic literacies can include having the ability to understand while reading and write various texts as well as to be able to listen and communicate in various types of conversation while in comparison. Workplace literacy refers to the student's ability to use the four language skills to perform specific assigned tasks in professional settings (i.e. workplace).

It is important to highlight that academic literacies also reflect the enabling knowledge of having the ability to write and read myriads of texts within the academic context (Hirst et al, 2004). In other words, it identifies academic literacy practice as being competent in the use of language apart from having the means to construct knowledge within the identified academic disciplines (Curry 2004). Additionally, Barton (2009) posited that literacy practices are influenced by different cultural identities and contexts hence resulting the term literacies may be interpreted differently depending on the context that a person is in. Subsequently, the concept of literacy practices may include an overlapping notion of talk and also other contextual and situated nature of social practices are crucial to be considered within this view.

In the context of Malaysia, the study of literacy practices was investigated by Wahi (2012) which aimed to ascertain the level of a specific group of undergraduates' English language proficiency pertaining to the demands of such knowledge to meet the demand of tertiary education as well as expectations at workplace. The qualitative study analysed data from focus group interviews, observations, and field notes of 21 Engineering undergraduates' views and responses at a public university in Malaysia. In addition, 13 managers of Human resources department from various organisations were also involved in answering a set of questionnaires. Other data include official documents of the organisations along with the researcher's filed notes. Findings of the study indicate that there exist great differences or gaps between the students existing English literacy competencies in comparison to the expectations held by the employers. Moreover, the participants were also found to be lacking in the required English proficiency needed at the workplace as the language is regarded as the third or more of a

language.

In comparison, Ahmad Tajuddin (2015) investigated the needs and requirements of Professional Communication Skills expected by employers upon the newly graduated students. Specifically, it focuses on the common practices of English language use in daily communication at workplace among the public and private sectors in Malaysia. In-depth interviews with 24 respondents were conducted from the various stakeholders (i.e. employers). While general findings from this study show similarities pertaining to the employers' expectation to that of Wahi's study (2012), this study found that there also exist complexities in relation to the graduate's English language workplace literacies. In particular, apart from being communicatively competent, many of the employers consider the graduates' personal attributes to also be crucial in determining the success of the graduate in joining a company.

It is noteworthy to highlight that while Wahi's study (2012) is much relevant to the current study, the investigation was focused on a specific group of students – i.e. those from the Engineering background. In comparison, Ahmad Tajuddin's study (2015) looked solely into the employers' expectation regarding the competency needed at workplace. Accordingly, there is a need to investigate students' academic literacy practices and competencies of the English language, involving students of various background with that of the employers' language expectations needed at the workplace. In doing so, this study not only hopes to contribute to the literature, but also to further understand how students' competencies of the English language can be honed to meet the employers' expectations.

## Methodology

### *The Study*

The study aims to ascertain the level of literacy practices that would provide the required language proficiency and skills needed by the undergraduates at the university level. As a university is a place for these undergraduates to prepare and equip themselves specifically in the use of English within the working world, it is hoped that the knowledge and language skills offered, would meet the expectations of future employers.

In the attempt to understand the student's language literacy practices as well as their competencies in English language with reference to

employability, the research employs ‘purposive sampling’ (Creswell 2009). In this case, a deliberate selection of students and employers were made to understand the research problem and hence obtain the information needed.

To address this aim, a set of questionnaires regarding the undergraduate students’ literacy practices are distributed as to ascertain the level of literacy practices that the undergraduate students achieved. Additionally, to gain in-depth understanding of the perceptions of the expectations of the level of English language skills and proficiency level needed, the potential employers’ views regarding this matter is also gathered by means of questionnaires. The questionnaires adapted were based on the study conducted by Ahmad Tajuddin (2015) and Wahi (2012) that investigated the demand of English language use at workplace in terms of communication at workplace as well as the English language academic literacies for employability of Malaysian undergraduate students.

### *Research Context and Participants*

The participants involved are 151 students of USIM (Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia) who achieved MUET Band 3 and Band 4 prior to enrolling to the selected English language courses. The participants came from various faculties in USIM, namely Faculty of Muamalat, Faculty of Shariah and Law and Faculty of Leadership and Management. Regarding the English language, these courses are considered as advance level courses which include English for Professionals, English for Business and Legal English for Professionals. The main objective of these courses is to reinforce students’ English language skills in preparation for their future workplace. However, emphasis is also given to specific context of English language use at workplace. For instance, while English for Professionals focuses on strengthening the oral communication and written activities that reflect the authenticities of the language use at workplace (eg. Meetings and memos), English for Business and Commerce expands the usage of English to Business Context (eg. Interview session, project presentations), while Legal English for Professionals emphasizes on developing written and oral abilities in English in the context of the legal profession. It is noteworthy to highlight that all these courses are designed to closely meet the use of language at workplace as required.

Additionally, the study also includes a group of employers who are currently working at various local and multinational companies, ranging from providing training services, to handling legal

documents. All 30 of these employers have the experience of involving in the interview process to recruit new employees at their workplace. Hence, their views regarding the expectations that employers have toward the level of English language needed at workplace provide a crucial insight of the required language competency needed at the workplace.

### *Research Tools*

The study employed a set of questionnaires that was distributed to the students. The questionnaire consists of questions related to several themes namely, their preference of daily language use in academic and personal contexts, the challenges of using English to complete the assigned tasks, and the language skills that they deemed to have improved and would like to improve following the respective courses taken.

In comparison, a set of questionnaires was also distributed to the employers to ascertain the perceptions of English language proficiency needed at workplace. Among the central themes found in the set of questionnaires include the employer’s perception of the level of proficiency found among Malaysian graduates, the language used in their companies for daily purposes or even to complete specific tasks – e.g. Business meetings and presentations, or even preparing legal documents.

### *Procedure for data collection*

Data were collected at 2 different stages involving the two groups of participants – i.e., the current 151 undergraduate students as well as 30 employers. In the first stage, the learners were briefed regarding the purpose of the study before a consent letter was distributed and signed individually. This was then followed by administering the set of questionnaires to all 151 students in which participants were given a week to hand in their completed questionnaires to the researcher. Similarly, potential employers who volunteered and agreed to give their consents to answer the questionnaires designed to gain insights on employers’ expectations, were also given a week to answer the set of questionnaires. However, due to the restriction of time, the questionnaires were distributed and collected online via Google platform.

### **Findings and Discussions**

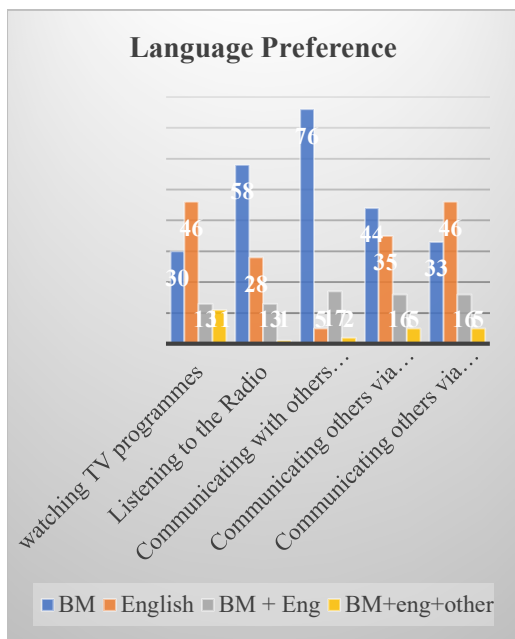
This study aims to identify whether the English language literacy practices as well as competencies

needed at workplace matched the employers' expectation of the language needed at the workplace. Therefore, the results of the findings are organised according to the aims identified regarding the issue in question.

*Students' literacy practices*

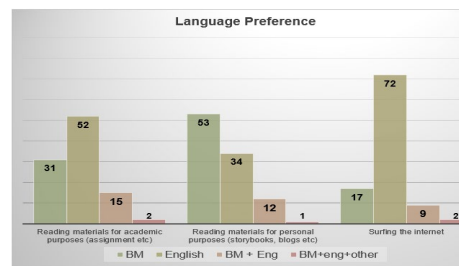
Based on the given Figure 1, the student's language preference differs in terms of the contexts that they are participating in. For instance, Bahasa Melayu (BM) was much preferred when they communicate with their friends online (eg. Facebook, Instagram) which stands at 76%, followed by when they listened to the radio (58%) and when they communicate with their friends via text messages for personal and academic purposes. In comparison, the English language was favoured when communicating with their lecturers as well as watching tv programs and films.

**Figure 1 Daily language preference**



Comparatively, Figure 2 shows that the language preferences which students identified when searching for materials for personal use or for completing specific academic tasks. In this case, while BM was selected as the main choice of language to read materials for personal purposes (53%), the English language is selected when reading academic materials (52%) and when searching for materials for academic purposes (72%).

**Figure 2 Language preference to access and retrieve materials online.**



In the case of the English language proficiency courses underwent by the students in their respective academic programs, the participants identified that they viewed their level of proficiency in the language has gained some improvements to meet their communicative needs in the academic context as well as preparing for workplace. As illustrated in Table 1, majority agreed that their English language skills had enhanced in terms of using the language to converse with others in specific contexts (87%), followed by having the ability to present (78%) and understand the content of the presentations/discussion in specific contexts (84%). Additionally, it is interesting to note that many felt that they had gained much of their confidence in using the language after undergoing the course (79%).

| Skills acquired/enhanced                             | Agree |
|--|-------|
| Use at workplace                                     | 78%   |
| Increase confidence to use English                   | 79%   |
| Conversation with others                             | 87%   |
| Able to understand discussion/presentations          | 84%   |
| Able to contribute ideas – discussions/presentations | 78%   |

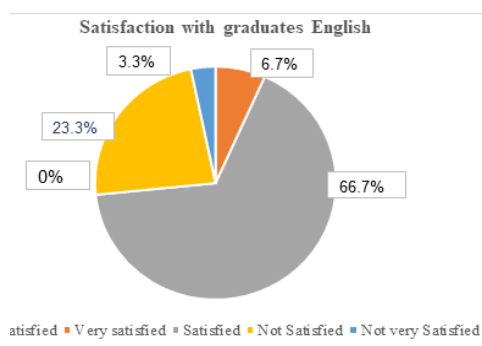
*Employer's expectations of English language proficiency at workplace*

Findings from this study indicate that the employers perceived that having good communication skills is synonymous with having good level command of English (76.7%). This is because being able to express well the thoughts in the English language in different business contexts is also regarded having

good communication skills at the workplace. Moreover, majority of the employers perceived that being competent in the language is one of the ways for career advancements as employees need to be able not only to demonstrate their competencies in their related fields, but also to communicate and articulate their thoughts critically with other fellow colleagues as well as clients. As the English language is mostly the main language for business, many of these employers viewed it as a crucial language to be mastered besides the national language, Bahasa Malaysia.

Generally, it can be concluded that many of the employers were satisfied with the level of proficiency demonstrated by the Malaysian graduates prior to entering the workforce. Based on the data analysed, 10% indicated a high satisfaction level while 66.7% employers were generally satisfied with the proficiency attained (Figure 3). Among the reasons provided by the employers is that many of the graduates interviewed were able to answer the interview questions moderately well. Apart from that, new graduates joining the companies were also found to be able to understand clearly the instructions given and were able to carry out the tasks given as required. In comparison, among the reasons provided by the employers regarding graduates' lack of proficiency and competency of the English language at workplace include graduates' inability to express or articulate their ideas and thoughts using the correct jargons or vocations as well as demonstrating lack of confidence in conducting business presentations in the presence of colleagues or even potential and existing clients. Other dissatisfactions identified by the employers are graduates inability to critically analyse the relevant issues in question as well as their low command in grammar.

**Figure 3 Level of employer's satisfaction pertaining to Malaysians' graduate English language proficiency level**



However, while the level of satisfaction of English language proficiency among graduates is considered to be that of a high percentage among the employers, there are a few key areas which the employers viewed to be important language skills that should be addressed. Among them include the ability for a graduate to communicate effectively with their colleagues (87%) as well as their foreign counterparts in business meetings or projects (89%) and the ability to receive instructions (70%) and understand the gist of discussions in meeting and business negotiations (67%) in the English language. Additionally, having the ability to write a clear, grammatical, and concise information within the business context has also been identified by the employers as being important. For instance, many employers demand their employees to be competent in the language in writing emails and memos (83%), writing company's portfolios in the company's websites (81%), as well as writing business proposals for potential clients (77%). Finally, in terms of the reading skills, future employees or graduates should also be proficient in the English language as the language is much needed when reading instructions regarding assigned tasks (81%), reading documents related to tasks assigned (74%) as well as reading reports and agreements (74%).

In essence, while significant percentage of employers agreed that the graduates have so far met the required expectations of language competence needed at workplace, majority of the employers felt the emphasis on specific language skills should still be addressed in ensuring that future graduate would be able to communicate effectively in the language to perform their daily tasks. Importantly, graduates are not only expected to be able to communicate effectively in the language with their future colleagues and foreign partners, but they must also be able to use the language to convey as well as seek relevant information in completing their daily tasks at workplace.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the findings, it can be concluded that the selected English language courses offered at the university levels, namely English for Professionals, English for Business and Legal English for Professionals, do to some extent meet the requirement needed by potential employers as discussed in the previous section. Among the skills that are found to be met include using the language to present information, to conduct meetings as well as write a well-organised report in specific contexts.

Using the language for daily conversation was also found to be the main selection for both the students and potential employers hence, this finding reflects that the courses are on the right track in providing students with the much-needed practice of using the language for workplace purposes. Hence, it is not a surprise that the majority of the students agreed that the courses had provided them with higher confidence level in using the English language.

However, on that note, it is important to highlight that the English language skills offered by these courses often were accompanied with a much more general language skills with less specific terms and jargons used at workplace. Therefore, there is a need to look into specific repertoire demanded in such contextualised workplace in future research. In other words, it is important for higher education institutions to play a greater role in providing the much-needed English language skills for their students in preparing them to be able to use the language effectively at workplace after graduation.

## Discussion

It seems that there are a few obstacles faced by the English language teachers in teaching the indigenous school children. Firstly, there were problems of absenteeism among the students especially during the fruit-picking season. Teachers noted that this scenario happened due to the nature of their lives in the village, where fruit-picking is a source of income for their families. This finding coincides with the data presented by the Psychology Department of the Malaysian Ministry of Education, where the study showed that the attendance of indigenous children in an indigenous national school decreased from 84% in April-May 2018 to 76% from June to July 2018 (Mohd Rozi, 2018). The issue of school attendance has been discussed in several studies such as Amiruddin, Abd. Samad & Othman (2015) and Singar & Zainuddin (2017).

The second issue is the position of the English language as the third language that was making it difficult for the indigenous student to learn the language. Some teachers highlighted that the students had their own mother-tongue, which is Semai, making the Malay language, which is the national language, as the second language spoken by the school children. The English language is the third language of the indigenous children as mentioned in Mohd Asri Mohd Noor (2012). Thus, due to this fact, mastering a third language proved a bit difficult as the language was taught and practiced only in the school environment. Mohd Asri Mohd Noor (2012) described this task as a

‘formidable task’ as after the Ministry introduced the clusters school to upgrade the English language mastery among the indigenous school, data showed that the passes in the subject was around 42%.

Finally, the lack of expert teachers was also mentioned as one of the obstacles mentioned by the teachers. They stated that they were not majoring in teaching the English language subject thus, they were unsure whether they were teaching the subject right. The lack of English teachers is not a new problem in Malaysia and not specific to indigenous school (Yee, 2020). It is a nationwide issue where English language subjects are taught by English option and non-option teachers. Yee (2020) defined English option teachers as teachers who are specifically trained to teach the English language, while non-option teachers are trained to teach other subjects but are given the responsibility to teach the subject to address the issue of shortages of the English language teachers.

The findings of the study also indicated that the teachers made several efforts to improve the teaching and learning activities despite being faced with a few difficult encounters. First, the teachers worked on developing a positive relationship with the students. They stressed the implications of understanding the sociocultural norms and ancestral language of the students. Teachers who made the effort to build rapport among students; according to the teachers, would inspire the students to be more participative in classroom lessons. Apart from that, the teachers also attempted to understand the students’ culture and use the knowledge to facilitate learning. These findings are parallel to the findings by Abdullah et al (2013) and Wahab & Mustapha (2015), in which they also highlighted the point that indigenous students value teachers who made efforts in building a relationship with the students. Abdullah et al (2013) stated that the teaching and learning process would go smoother if teachers apply more efforts in generating relationships among teacher and students. Their study also showed a similar finding with this study as they stated that most teachers did try to build good relationship with the students. In addition, Wahab & Mustapha stated that students were more willing to learn high-cognitive subjects provided that the teacher has good personality and willing to cultivate good bonding with the indigenous students.

Finally, the findings also illustrate that the teachers tried to focus on the strength of the students in other domains, and not concentrating solely on academic achievement. The teachers claimed that they organized more cocurricular activities with the students as the indigenous students showed more interest in

certain cocurricular activities. The teacher claimed that they involved the students in sports activities and cocurricular activities as the students showed potentials in excelling in those two areas. It means not only they are interested in joining the sport activities, but the students were also good at playing sports. This finding concurs with the findings of Wahab & Mustapha (2015), where their study highlighted that the indigenous students showed more interest in subjects that involve psychomotor skills such as Art education, physical education, music, and cocurricular activities.

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