

The Command of English Language among Semester one Students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College

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Abstract

The command of the English language is undoubtedly important in Malaysia, even though Malay language is the country's national language. English, as a global language, is used extensively and thus, need to be mastered, especially by students who are in the quest for knowledge and consequently, will be utilizing English in their working environment. Despite the fact that, the Teaching and Learning of Mathematics and Science in English (PPSMI) policy is no longer in practiced, the learning process in form six college requires the students to have a good proficiency in the English language. This study aims to identify the level of command in English among semester one students from various classes in Kuala Selangor Form Six College. This study shows that the level of command in English for semester one students from various classes in Kuala Selangor Form Six College is still at the average level, with SPM English results. While a majority of students do not have the mastery of communicating verbally and writing in English, they do not seem to have difficulties to make references, receive orders, and use operating tools which have instructions in English, and enjoy entertainment such as films, online games and dramas. They would frequently turn to the dictionary and adopt positive attitudes in order to increase their expertise and grasp of English, and are also ready to enroll in courses if given the opportunity.

Keywords: Command of English, English Language, Language of Communication, Proficiency in English, SPM English

Introduction

English is not only an economic international language, but also a technology language to enable the country to be more competitive especially in the era of a borderless world that shapes the environment more liberal in the use of services and resources (Yahaya et al., 2008; Yahaya et al., 2009). The need for mastery the English language is becoming increasingly urgent in this era of globalization until France, China, Japan and other countries start taking steps to learn it although they have rejected the language before.

In Malaysia, English has long been recognized in primary, secondary and higher education institutes (Ali, 2003). English is taught as a second language and it is a compulsory subject in Malaysia secondary schools. All students need to be proficient in English and it is one of the

main goals of the Malaysian National Education Philosophy, so that Malaysians have the knowledge, skills and values needed to become a competitive society in the globalization era. Proficiency in English is recognized as a cause towards better mastery of MUET (Bellingham, 1995; Cheng, 2008).

In the context of the world education, a student needs to master the English language to understand the reading materials in English as they are more abundant and easy to obtain. English has become the medium in interaction among the world's population, including obtaining various reading materials for references that can widely available online. There are about 99% of scholarly references which are published in English and they require mastery level and good understanding of the language plus the students' ability to master the techniques of finding the information themselves.

This situation prompts the government to implement policies to make sure the students to master the English language. The preliminary study was carried out by the Ministry Higher Education in all Public Higher Education Institutions found that the level English proficiency among students is less than satisfactory as 29.2% of the 120,000 respondents are in band 1 and band 2. This level is the lowest level in the standard set by Malaysians University English Test (MUET) (Harian, 2005).

Purpose of the Study

This study identifies the level of English language proficiency among Semester One students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College and then examine how the daily use of English affects their level of mastery the language.

The awareness of the importance of English proficiency in the community Malaysian students have long been aware, prompting the Ministry of Education to implement Science and Mathematics Learning Teaching in English (PPSMI) in stages for Year 1, Form 1 and Lower Form 6 students. Examination questions using bilingualism were introduced, while the full use of English in Science and Mathematics exams was started in 2008 for the Primary School Assessment Examination (UPSR) and 2007 for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM). However, in 2009, PPSMI was stopped as the policy of "Glorifying Bahasa Malaysia and strengthen English" has been introduced.

Students' command of English gives them an advantage to explore a variety of knowledge, make references and do research, then they can apply it when entering the world of work. Mastering at least two languages have many advantages compare to students who master only one language. They are able to master reference materials, get more up-to-date info quickly, confidently submit arguments and debates, then able to communicate confidently and comfortably in terms of using correct vocabulary, spelling and grammar (Bochner, 1996). This directly strengthens reading, listening, writing and speaking which are basic skills students need to master (Selamat, 2000).

Research Objectives

This study was conducted to examine

- i. the level of English proficiency in among Semester One students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College, whether the students are fully mastered in this second language.

- ii. the level of English language use affects mastery students to the language.

Literature Review

The whole world has accepted that English is an international language used by all walks of life. Mastery of English is very important because English is recognized as the world language (Nordin et al., 2007). In a study by (Clyne & Farzad, 2008), they mentioned that English is used as a second language by more than 56 percent of the people in this world who have different cultures and backgrounds. It is seen as a language that allows the people of the world to interact easily and effectively (Jamil, 2002).

Lee (2006) states that countries such as Asia use less English in their lives, especially students. The study of Fadhili et al (2009) found that most institutions in Malaysia do not focus on creating an environment that helps learning that can improve students' English proficiency. This is in line with the findings of previous researcher, Amran (2003), who stated that students do not communicate in English due to the environment that uses Malay language entirely. Furthermore, most students rarely or never speak English whether at home or anywhere because majority of them will interact using their mother tongue instead of English.

English is not only intended to provide students with communication skills but it is also used as a source to acquire more knowledge that is relevant and indeed useful for our life (Yahaya, 2010). Therefore, students' weaknesses in mastering English need to be addressed more objectively and practically. According to (Hussin & Abdul Razak, 2004), English is the second language for Malaysia and an international language that needs to be improved among students.

Language mastery according to the TESOL Association cited by Kamarudin et al (2008) is defined as the mastery level of an individual using language in oral communication and written form. Latif & Hanifah (2010) in their study of the level of mastery and the use of English among PKPG students at the Faculty of Education, University of Technology Malaysia found out that the English proficiency among the 4th. year students of the Bachelor of Technology and Education program (Life Skills) are at a moderate level.

This finding is the same as obtained in the study of (Maniam & Liong, 2007). It showed that the students' achievement in exams were deteriorating, especially in both, rural and urban secondary schools. Haron et al (2008) also found out that the policy of using English to teach Mathematics and Science has failed to improve the learning and performance in Mathematics and Science students, especially the Malay students. Kamaruddin (2002) in his study also has stated that the decline in English proficiency among local school and university graduates is caused by the phenomenon where English cannot be spoken fluently and written well by them. This causes the students to feel that English is not important, and they decide not to deepen their knowledge in English plus they are not serious in learning English.

Abdul Halim et al (2011) in their study had identified that the perception, acceptance, and tendency of the accountant diploma students and those who have a CGPA of 3.5 or above did not agree that English became the medium of instruction in their final exam. The same thing was obtained in (Abu Bakar & Madni, 2010) research, which showed that the attitude factors,

peers, and parents affect the students' English proficiency but this factor occurs at a moderate level.

In general, English is less used in students' daily activities. They think that English is only a vital to score in the subjects taken. This causes mastery of this international language is very limited. They are also found not preferring to communicate using English with their current peers when doing group assignments and in daily life and that is also contribute to the moderate level of mastery English language (Abu Bakar & Abang Madni, 2010).

According to Carhill (2008), the level of English language proficiency for each individual are affected by the frequency of its usage in their daily life compared to using it only during the learning process. The findings of this study are also in line with the opinion of Klein (1986), (Abdul Halim, 2011; Abu Bakar & Madni, 2010). Abdul Halim et al (2011) suggest that the use of technical terms in English need to be improved, plus organizing a mentoring program between good and weak students as one effort to improve the English proficiency level among those students.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a survey research design that is mostly quantitative in nature. According to Creswell (2014), a survey is used to determine individual opinions. In this research it is used to examine the level of English proficiency among Semester One students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College, whether the students are fully mastered in this second language and whether the level of English language use affects mastery students to the language. This study uses a questionnaire as a method of obtaining research instruments. According to Konting, (2000), the questionnaire is more practical and effectively used because its use can increase the accuracy and truthfulness of the responses given by the sample, as well as no influenced by the behavior of the researcher. Respondents are free to express their opinions themselves when answering each given item. According to Chua (2006), the questionnaire method is very popular among researchers because the data collection process can be done more fast. This questionnaire instrument was developed from other research questionnaire instruments and little modifications had been made to answer the objectives of this study. Questionnaires in form of google form link was shared to Semester One students randomly. All information received is interpreted as quantitative analysis. The questionnaire contains questions that are divided into two parts namely Part A and SPM English results. Part B contains questions related to the level of English proficiency and the leading factors to those skills. This section is divided into two aspects, namely, first: the use of English in learning which covers oral, written and listening skills, and second: the frequency of using English in daily life.

Respondents of the Study

This study was conducted on a group of students which consists of various classes. Respondents are randomly selected. The population frame of the study was two hundred and twenty-eight (228) respondents consisting of 157 female students and 71 male students of Semester One students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College. The researcher used random sampling to select the subjects due to the limited time permitted by the director of the selected college.

Findings and Discussion

The following are the results of the gathered data in determining the command of English language among semester one students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College:

This study was conducted among semester one students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College, involving a total of 228 respondents, which is 31.3% made up of the male respondents and 68.9% of the female respondents. Respondents are comprised of 5.7% students of Science classes, 83.8% students of Social Science classes, and 11.8% are students from Social Science (Islamic Studies). Through this study, the following is the achievement of the SPM results obtained by the respondents involved:

Table 1

Respondents' English SPM Results

| Grade | Number of Respondents | % |
|-------|-----------------------|--------|
| A+ | 2 | 0.9% |
| A | 27 | 11.8 % |
| A- | 15 | 6.6% |
| B+ | 33 | 14.5% |
| B | 29 | 12.7% |
| C+ | 38 | 16.7% |
| C | 25 | 11% |
| D | 40 | 17.5% |
| E | 15 | 6.6% |
| G | 4 | 1.8% |

Based on Table 1, it was found that 25.9% of respondents did not get credit for their English SPM results as they only got grade D, E and G. Students' communication skills at this level are not fluent, often there is inappropriate use of language and there are grammatical errors. In terms of understanding, student achievement at this level is limited in terms of language and context, as well as limited implementation of tasks involving the use of language the said. Based on the SPM English results in Table 1, it is concluded that English language proficiency among semester one students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College which being the respondents of this study is still not satisfactory, and this causes they experience difficulties in mastering knowledge in their MUET learning.

The English Proficiency Level

Table 2

The English Proficiency Level of Semester One Students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College

| Question No. | Question | SD | | D | | N | | A | | SA | |
|--------------|--|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|
| | | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % |
| 3 | I am more comfortable using English in Science and Mathematics subjects. | 53 | 23.2 | 82 | 36 | 72 | 31.6 | 13 | 5.7 | 8 | 3.5 |
| 4 | I don't feel afraid to ask the lecturer in English in the class. | 5 | 2.2 | 25 | 11 | 87 | 38.2 | 63 | 27.6 | 48 | 21.1 |
| 5 | I can discuss using English in groups. | 6 | 2.6 | 29 | 12.7 | 91 | 39.3 | 69 | 30.3 | 33 | 14.5 |
| 6 | I easily understand the instructions delivered in English. | 2 | 0.9 | 19 | 8.3 | 88 | 38.6 | 75 | 32.9 | 44 | 19.3 |
| 7 | Lecturers need to have a loud and clear voice if English language is | 4 | 1.8 | 8 | 3.5 | 72 | 31.6 | 76 | 33.3 | 68 | 29.8 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|-----|
| | used as a medium in teaching. | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8 | I can write in English without grammatical mistakes. | 29 | 12.7 | 70 | 30.7 | 91 | 39.9 | 32 | 14 | 6 | 2.6 |
| 9 | I have no problem with the references written in English. | 6 | 2.6 | 50 | 21.9 | 99 | 43.4 | 51 | 22.4 | 22 | 9.6 |

Analysis of answers obtained from the respondents illustrates about their English proficiency is at a moderate level. Only a few of the respondents (13.2%) are not sure and feel doubtful to ask the lecturer using English. This illustrates that the respondent's confidence is at a satisfactory level due to dominance those who are sufficient in the use of this language. This finding is in line with Klein (1986) study which stated that language learning requires daily communication practice. When the students are brave to speak and use English in their daily lives, the level of mastery the language becomes good because that is mainly the nature and the cause of the good mastery of a language. Moreover, students who have good command of English often use English in their daily communication (Kamsur, 2015). The more frequent they use English in their everyday life, the more skilled and high the level of mastery the language. Although 75% of the respondents understood the instructions given in English, but they cannot communicate using the English language because of their low English proficiency. In fact, approximately 39.3% of respondents are not sure whether they can discuss using English in the discussion group or vice versa.

For related questions the use of English-language reference materials (question 9), 32% of respondents admitted had no problem understanding it, while 43.4% chose "not sure". This illustrates that, most of the respondents were not confident and did not understand instructions and references in English. However, there are still only 6% of respondents who agree that they have trouble understanding reference materials written in the language English.

For question 8 related to the ability to write in English without make a lot of grammatical mistakes, the answer choice for the category not sure is the highest choice which is as much as 91%. Although the respondents understand instructions and reference materials in English, but they do not have the confidence to write in English without doing grammatical errors, sentences or phrases in English. They are frequent making mistakes unevenly due to lack of knowledge about grammar and rarely practice it in writing.

According to Latif & Hanifah (2010), if students want to get broader knowledge of the English language in terms of vocabulary and terms causes respondents had difficulty making the reference. Based on 13% answers "Agree" and another 8% "Strongly Agree" for question 3 stated that they are comfortable to use English for Science subjects and Mathematics. This is because there are only 13 (5.7%) of respondents from Science classes. It shows that only these respondents who are in the field of Science and Mathematics do not have problematic with the use of English in teaching and learning of the course. They turned out to be familiar and understand with terminology as well as English terms in this field because has been exposed to the Teaching of Learning Science and Mathematics in English (PPSMI) while in primary school.

Last but not least, apart from communication skills in English which are very important, other skills such as reading, writing, and listening are also need to be parallel. These skills are not only used in learning, but they will also be used in their careers later. For example, such as listening to instructions from their superiors, reading illustrations, using writing such as memos, typed letters, notices, speaking like giving instructions, giving speech and many more (Owi, 2004). Therefore, the students need to create an interest to learn and at the same time master this language in order to strengthen their skills so that they can prepare themselves to be more advanced and become Malaysians who will develop their nation.

In short, it can be said that mastery of the English language in among semester one students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College is still at a moderate level. The use of English as a communication tool is quite good in the small group discussion session and in the classes because they have the confidence to use the language even when asking the lecturer. Furthermore, respondents have already had the suitable environment to encourage the use of English in communication plus there is no problem with the volume and clarity of the lecturer's voice when speaking in English. This illustrates that the influence of a lecturer and how to use English in teaching and learning affect students' understanding of the instructions given. The results of this study also shows that students do have problems from the angle of understanding of instructions, reading, asking the lecturers, discussing and making references in language English.

Students' Daily English Proficiency Level

This section analyzes the level of everyday English language use which affect the students' mastery of the language and how environmental factors influence the use of this language. Questions 1, 2, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 cover aspects of the frequency of use of the English language in daily life of respondents as shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3

Students' Daily English Proficiency Level

| Ques.No. | Question | SD | | D | | N | | A | | SA | |
|----------|--|----|------|----|------|-----|------|----|------|----|------|
| | | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % | F | % |
| 1 | I often use the dictionary to refer the English words which I don't know their meanings. | 5 | 2.2 | 3 | 1.3 | 103 | 45.2 | 78 | 34.2 | 39 | 17.1 |
| 2 | I have a lot of English reading materials. | 7 | 3.1 | 43 | 18.9 | 106 | 46.5 | 51 | 22.4 | 21 | 9.2 |
| 10 | I use English in daily socializing. | 29 | 12.7 | 60 | 26.3 | 106 | 46.5 | 22 | 9.6 | 11 | 4.8 |
| 11 | Criticism from people around me do affect the level of English language I used. | 14 | 6.1 | 48 | 21.1 | 110 | 48.2 | 43 | 18.9 | 13 | 5.7 |
| 12 | I am confident to use English language in the public. | 17 | 7.5 | 58 | 25.4 | 94 | 41.2 | 33 | 14.5 | 26 | 11.4 |
| 13 | I have no problem handling or using a system that uses English such as a computer. | 4 | 1.8 | 29 | 12.7 | 85 | 37.3 | 52 | 22.8 | 58 | 25.4 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|---|---|-----|----|-----|----|------|----|------|-----|------|
| 14 | I have no problem to understand any forms of entertainment such as songs, movies or animation in English. | 3 | 1.3 | 10 | 4.4 | 71 | 31.1 | 83 | 36.4 | 61 | 26.8 |
| 15 | If given the opportunity, I would like to follow courses that can improve my English speaking skills. | 3 | 1.3 | 6 | 2.6 | 55 | 24.1 | 61 | 26.8 | 103 | 45.2 |

Referring to Table 3, it can be concluded that respondents are rare is using English in their daily lives (question 10), with the total percentage of answers for "disagree" and "strongly disagree" (89%) compared to "agree" (22%) and strongly agree only (11%). If it is seen from the perspective of the respondent's confidence to speak in English in public, only 26% "strongly agree" and confident, compared to 94% of respondents who answered "not sure".

For question 12, it shows that 17% respondents who "strongly disagree" and 58% of respondents who "disagree" to use English in public is quite a big sum. In contrast, the respondents who are confident to use the language English in public are only (11.4%). This means, a low level of confidence in the use of English affects the level of use of the language if seen to a total of 41.2% of respondents who are "not sure".

When this is linked to question 11, it is found that 24.6% of respondents feeling influenced by criticism from people around. This means that, respondents are able to improve their English proficiency when they get support from friends, community and society through communication and use the language in all daily affairs (Klein, 1986). The confidence level of the students who want to speak in English can plummet only through negative remarks or criticism from the people around them.

Despite that, based on questions 1, 13,14 and 15, most respondents answered 'agree' and "strongly agree" that they often use the dictionary to refer to words in English that are not understood (51.3%), no problem in operating a system that uses English (48.2%), no problem to understand forms of entertainment based on English (63.2%) and interested in taking a course to improve language skills English (72%). This shows that the respondents can accept English and ready to improve their skills even if their mastery is still at a moderate level.

Based on this analysis it was found that the main weakness of the language English among semester one students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College in this study is in terms of communication skills and writing skills. Respondents have low confidence and not practicing its use when socializing and communicating verbally especially in public, but not during doing daily tasks such as operating equipment which use instructions in English and enjoying entertainment such as movies, online games, watching dramas or movies and so on.

Though they are not very fluent in English, they will consult a dictionary when faced with words that they did not understand. Moreover, they are even positive to improve skills and willing to follow related courses if given the opportunity. Improvement efforts towards English speaking skills can be done because of their level of acceptance which is positive in considering the great need in today's modern world.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that mastery of the English language among semester one students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College is at a moderate level. The use of English as a communication tool is quite good in the small group discussion session and in the classes because they have the confidence to use the language even when asking the lecturer. Furthermore, respondents have already had the suitable environment to encourage the use of English in communication plus there is no problem with the volume and clarity of the lecturer's voice when speaking in English. This illustrates that the influence of a lecturer and how to use English in teaching and learning affect students' understanding of the instructions given. The results of this study also shows that students do have problems from the angle of understanding of instructions, reading, asking the lecturers, discussing and making references in language English.

Based on this analysis it was also found that the main weakness of the respondent's English language is in terms of communication and writing skills. The findings of the study can also formulate the second research question, that is whether the level of English language use affects the level of mastery of MUET among semester one students in Kuala Selangor Form Six College. They have no confidence to practice its use while socializing and communicating in writing and oral especially in public. This shows that the frequency the use of English is proven to affect the level of mastery, whereas most respondents rarely use English in communication a whole day.

However, the respondents were found not to face with problems to do daily tasks such as operating equipment use instructions in English, enjoy entertainment such as movies, online games, watching dramas or movies and so on. Though they are not very fluent in English, they will consult a dictionary when faced with words that they do not understand. Furthermore, they are even positive to improve all the language skills in terms of being willing to follow related courses if given the opportunity. They need to be equipped with certain skills to improve themselves such as teamwork, communication, problem solving, adaptability and leadership. All these characteristics are injected indirectly into the student's personality throughout learning experience in the college for three semesters. Improvement efforts towards English speaking skills can be done because of their level of acceptance which is positive in considering the great need in today's modern world.

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