



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**ACCURACY AND FLUENCY IN SPOKEN ENGLISH AMONG  
THE ESL LEARNERS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTION**

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**ACCURACY AND FLUENCY IN SPOKEN ENGLISH AMONG THE ESL  
LEARNERS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTION**

by

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The project entitled **Accuracy and Fluency in Spoken English among the ESL Learners in Tertiary Institution** was prepared by Chang Siew Lee and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Education with Honours (Teaching English as a Second Language).

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## ABSTRACT

### ACCURACY AND FLUENCY IN SPOKEN ENGLISH AMONG THE ESL LEARNERS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTION

Chang Siew Lee

This case study aims to examine the nature of accuracy and fluency in spoken English among the ESL learners in tertiary education. The purposeful sampling technique was used to select the forty-two students of the Preparatory English 1 Course in UNIMAS. Data were collected through the distribution of participants' demographic particular forms and the recordings of the language data from the five role plays in the three oral assessments of the Preparatory English 1 Course which were later transcribed using the transcription key system proposed by Eggins and Slade (1997) for data analysis. The study highlighted the five common grammar errors made by learners in terms of syntax and morphology, which were preposition, subject-verb agreement, tense, article, and singular-plural. The errors made were largely influenced by participants' mother tongue. Results also showed that learners were rather fluent with the average hesitation score ranged from 1 error in 26 words to 1 error in 6 words and they produced more variety in the use of formulaic phrases by the end of the course. These findings revealed that formulaic phrases contribute to learners' fluency. Generally, it was found that learners have improved their accuracy and fluency in spoken English by the end of the course. However, there was no significant correlation between accuracy and fluency ( $r = .066, p < .05$ ) and this indicates that a person who is more accurate in speech does not mean that he or she is likely to be more fluent, and vice versa, suggesting that the development of these two components of oral skills are independent of each other.

## **ABSTRAK**

### **KETEPATAN DAN KEFASIHAN DALAM PERTUTURAN BAHASA INGGERIS DI KALANGAN PELAJAR-PELAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA DI INSTITUSI PENGAJIAN TINGGI**

*Chang Siew Lee*

*Kajian kes ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji ketepatan dan kefasihan dalam pertuturan Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan pelajar-pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua di institusi pengajian tinggi. Teknik persampelan bertujuan telah digunakan bagi memilih empat puluh dua orang pelajar Kursus Persediaan Bahasa Inggeris 1 di UNIMAS. Data telah dikutip melalui pengedaran borang-borang maklumat demografi peserta dan perakaman data bahasa daripada lima drama peranan dalam tiga ujian lisan Kursus Persediaan Bahasa Inggeris 1 yang kemudiannya telah ditranskrip menggunakan sistem kunci transkripsi cadangan Eggins dan Slade (1997) untuk analisis data. Kajian ini menunjukkan lima kesalahan umum tatabahasa yang dibuat oleh pelajar-pelajar dari segi sintaksis dan morfologi, iaitu kata hubung, muafakat subjek-kata kerja, kala, artikel, dan mufrad-jamak. Sebahagian besar kesalahan-kesalahan tersebut adalah dipengaruhi oleh bahasa ibunda para pelajar. Keputusan kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa pelajar-pelajar adalah agak fasih dengan purata skor kefasihan daripada 1 kesalahan dalam 26 patah perkataan hingga 1 kesalahan dalam 6 patah perkataan, dan mereka juga telah menghasilkan lebih banyak kepelbagaian dalam penggunaan ungkapan-ungkapan berformula di akhir kursus. Keputusan-keputusan tersebut menunjukkan bahawa penggunaan ungkapan-ungkapan berformula menyumbang kepada kefasihan pelajar-pelajar. Umumnya, pertuturan Bahasa Inggeris pelajar-pelajar telah bertambah tepat and fasih di akhir kursus. Tiada korelasi bermakna antara ketepatan dan kefasihan ( $r = .066, p < .05$ ) and ini menunjukkan bahawa seseorang yang bertutur dengan lebih tepat tidak bermaksud bahawa dia berkemungkinan menjadi lebih fasih, dan sebaliknya. Ini seterusnya mencadangkan bahawa perkembangan dua komponen lisan tersebut adalah saling tidak bersandar antara satu sama lain.*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| CLS      | Centre for Language Studies                            |
| EA       | Error Analysis   |
| EAL      | English as an Additional Language                      |
| EFL      | English as a Foreign Language                          |
| ESL      | English as a Second Language                           |
| ESOL     | English for Speakers of Other Languages                |
| FACA     | Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts                   |
| FEB      | Faculty of Economics and Business                      |
| FENG     | Faculty of Engineering                                 |
| FCSHD    | Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development    |
| FCSIT    | Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology |
| FRST     | Faculty of Resource Science and Technology             |
| FSS      | Faculty of Social Sciences                             |
| H0       | Null Hypothesis  |
| H1       | Alternative Hypothesis                                 |
| KBSM     | <i>Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah</i>            |
| MUET     | Malaysian University English Test                      |
| <i>r</i> | Correlation coefficient (Pearson- <i>r</i> )           |
| TESL     | Teaching English as a Second Language                  |
| TESOL    | Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages       |
| UNIMAS   | Universiti Malaysia Sarawak                            |

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter contains five parts which include the background of the study, aim and objectives, significance of the study, operational definition of terms, and the scope of the study. Firstly, it introduces the background of the study. Next, the chapter presents the aim and objectives of the study which include the research objectives and hypotheses. Then, it presents the justification for the significance of the study. The operational definition of terms which include the spoken English, accuracy, syntax, morphology, fluency, hesitations, formulaic phrases, error score, and hesitation score are also explained in this chapter. Later, this chapter presents the scope of the study and ends with a brief chapter review.

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Language makes communication possible; without it, people are unable to convey thoughts and ideas, transmit culture and disseminate information to others. Generally, language is used for meaning-making, either in oral or written forms. According to Gao (2001), “the purpose of acquiring or learning a language is for communication”. Likewise, Canale (1983) stated that “communication is the essential purpose of language” (p. 5).

In the era of globalization in the twenty-first century, English language is a means of global communication as it is the international language, a major language in the world. English language is used dominantly worldwide for Information Communication Technology (ICT), science, diplomacy, mass media and global business communications (“Language of the Global Economy”, 2003). Its use for occupational purposes is becoming more and more obvious. Furthermore, the British Council stated that “English is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, diplomacy, sport, international competitions, pop music and advertising” (as cited in Dieu & Pauster, 2005). Thus, English is the major window for us to explore and get in touch with the outside world. Clearly, a good command of English is the key to social and economic advancement. Users with a good command of English are presumed to have accurate knowledge of the language and the ability to use the language to achieve their communicative purposes. Competency in English is important for effective communication as one stands a better chance of being understood when one conveys information accurately and unambiguously. Hence, those who do not know English are at a great disadvantage. However, to achieve the purpose of effective communication, a native or non-native speaker has to possess certain degree of competence (Gao, 2001). Thus, this highlights the notion of communicative competence.

Communicative competence refers to the knowledge about a language and other aspects of communicative language use and the skills in using the knowledge when interacting in actual communication (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). In communicative competence, there is a great deal of emphasis on how to use the language, yet linguistic competence still has its weighty impact in communication. This is because “in order to be able to communicate effectively, learners need an adequate mastery of grammar and vocabulary” (Byrne, 1991, p. 11). Thus, this is where the accuracy of spoken English is emphasised. Fluency, on the other hand, is also taken into account as the two notions, fluency and accuracy, are relatively crucial in spoken language. This is because oral fluency is

the main goal in teaching the productive skill of speaking (Byrne, 1991). According to Byrne (1991), fluency can be defined as “the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably accurately and without too much hesitation; otherwise communication may break down because the listener loses interest or gets impatient” (p. 9). Thus, this sums up that the ability to speak English accurately and fluently is an essential skill for effective communication.

However, in a non-native English-speaking environment, it is not possible for non-native speakers of the target language to achieve the competence of being able to speak as accurately and fluently as the native speakers. Gao (2001) stated that “native speakers acquire their first language at an early age by picking up naturally in the rich cultural and linguistic environment they were born or grew up in”, but not for the non-native speakers. This is due to the reason that the non-native speakers, who may be either children or adult learners, are selective in the kind of input they take since they have already learnt their first language (Gao, 2001). Thus, non-native speakers “cannot feasibly learn a second language as they did in acquiring their first language” (Gao, 2001). Moreover, Davies (2003) stated that the non-native speakers are normally “exposed to limited set of encounters and has little or no exposure to the cultural beliefs and knowledge which the target language bears” (p. 115). In addition, there is lack of exposure and good model of English native speakers, and there is less opportunity to use the language, particularly in a non-native English-speaking environment. Therefore, the only success that these non-native speakers have is “through learning the knowledge, learning like a book” (Davies, 2003, p. 115).

In second language acquisition, there are a large number of people who never acquire a second language to a high level of proficiency (Brumfit, 1984). This is evident in the Malaysian context, a non-native English-speaking environment. At present, there are a lot of Malaysians who are weak in English as they acquire English as a foreign language for communication with tourists or for the purpose of studying abroad. According to Schuetze (2002), in learning English as a foreign language environment, the target language plays no major role in the

community and it is usually learnt in the classroom formally. Hence, there is lack of exposure and less opportunity to use the language. Thus, this causes some problems in users' oral English proficiency. Nonetheless, some users are more proficient because they have slightly more exposure to the target language as it plays an institutional or social role in their community. In the past, Malaysia was once a second language English-speaking country during the British rule. At that point, the English proficiency level in the country was encouraging. However, after the country achieved its independence, the Malay language is widely used because it is accorded the status as the national and official language of the country, but English has become the second language (Jamaliah Mohd. Ali, 2000). Since then, the English proficiency in the country has declined due to the limited exposure and good model of the target language. Nevertheless, there are some Malaysians with good proficiency of English because they learn it as their first language and spend a majority of their time communicating in English; but they are only the minority group.

Generally, insufficient exposure and opportunity to use the target language has led to some problems in the oral English proficiency. As Davies (2003) suggested that the language problem is compounded when the learners learn the linguistic knowledge like learning a book, the four skills in the target language may not be well developed, especially the speaking and listening skills because learners have less opportunity to use the language in a non-native English-speaking environment. In Malaysia, studies have shown that proficiency in English is much lacking especially in speaking (see Lim, 1994). Moreover, Fauziah Hassan and Nita Fauzee Selamat (2002) found that the low proficiency in English could be due to the great focus on major examinations in the country and lack of emphasis on listening and speaking in the classroom. Therefore, this draws attention to an important issue in the country where the low level of graduates' proficiency in spoken English has caused them to perform poorly in job interviews. Their poor command in English and weak communication skills have hindered them from being employed, especially in the private sectors and international institutions ("Language of the Global Economy", 2003). The level of

English language proficiency in the country has decreased in spite of English being made the compulsory subject in all primary and secondary schools' curriculum where "the syllabus aims to extend learners' English language proficiency in order to meet their needs to use English in certain situations in everyday life, for knowledge acquisition, and for future workplace needs" (Ministry of Education, 2000, pp. 1-2). As the declining standard of English among school children and younger citizens has worried many quarters, the Ministry of Education has taken drastic measure in requiring Year 1, Form 1 and Lower Six students to learn mathematics and science in English from 2003 onwards (Fauziah Hassan & Nita Fauzee Selamat, 2002). In addition, due to the issue of graduates being jobless because of poor command in English and lack of communication skills, local institutions of higher learning were urged to introduce many language courses for language proficiency and public speaking in order to train students on speaking and oral communication skills ("Language of the Global Economy", 2003). However, they have largely failed to produce graduates with good command in English and communication skills ("Language of the Global Economy", 2003).

Besides that, the English language spoken by some Malaysians may present some variations in terms of pronunciation and some features of deviant structures (Jamaliah Mohd. Ali, 2000). Hence, these highlight the problems in accuracy and fluency of spoken English that may hinder effective communication in some ways. However, in Malaysia, there is not much research available on the problems of accuracy and fluency in spoken English; only a few in written English. For example, Abdul Rashid Mohamed, Goh, and Wan Rose Eliza (2004); and Haja Mohideen bin Mohamed Ali (1996). Meanwhile, the two studies mentioned earlier, which were conducted by Lim (1994) and Fauziah Hassan and Nita Fauzee Selamat (2002), only investigated the factors that contribute to the low proficiency of English in the country and not the errors of accuracy and fluency in spoken language. Furthermore, Kow (1995) and Norrizan Razali (1995) examined the features of question tag among Malaysian speakers, but not much on the errors. Therefore, on the research front, it calls for a need to study the exact

problem of Malaysians' oral English proficiency in order to find out what is lacking in the accuracy and fluency in spoken language. Hence, this leads to the aim of this study which is to examine the accuracy and fluency problems in spoken English among the ESL learners in tertiary education.

## **1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to examine the accuracy and fluency problems in spoken English among the ESL learners in tertiary education. Specifically, the research objectives are:-

1. To identify the errors made by learners in spoken English in terms of syntax (grammar error) and morphology (lexical error);
2. To determine learners' oral fluency by identifying hesitations in their spoken English;
3. To identify the use of formulaic phrases in learners' spoken English as an indicator of fluency; and
4. To investigate the association between accuracy and fluency in spoken English.

### H0:

There is no relationship between accuracy (as measured by the error score of each individual's interaction) and fluency (as measured by the hesitation score of each individual's interaction) in spoken English.

### H1:

There is a relationship between accuracy (as measured by the error score of each individual's interaction) and fluency (as measured by the hesitation score of each individual's interaction) in spoken English.

## **1.3 Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because of its theoretical and practical contributions to the field of language studies. Theoretically, as the study focuses on the

accuracy and fluency in spoken English among the Malaysian ESL learners in tertiary education, this study is significant because the results may describe the nature of Malaysian ESL adult learners' oral proficiency. This is because the learners' demographic particulars and their background in using English in daily life, which were obtained during the data collection, may offer possible explanations for some patterns of language errors and fluency in learners' spoken English. Therefore, the results of the findings may increase understanding on the nature of learners' oral proficiency in a non-native English-speaking country, particularly Malaysia.

From a practical perspective, as the tertiary education level may be considered as the last stage of education, especially for the ESL courses where English is formally learnt, the purpose of this study is to find out the accuracy and fluency problems that the learners could have in this last stage. Hence, the result of the study may show how far learners have gone through in their spoken English after thirteen years of education. Therefore, in terms of accuracy, these results may highlight to educator the errors made by learners in their spoken English in terms of syntax and morphology. Moreover, in terms of fluency, the results may highlight to educators the use of formulaic phrases and the effect of hesitation in fluency in spoken English. This is because some hesitations promote fluency but not to the extent of annoying or irritating the listeners. Too much hesitation might cause listeners to lose track of the speaker's message. According to Corder (1967), learners' errors are significant because they serve a pedagogic purpose by showing educators what learners have learned and what they have not yet mastered (as cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 51). As a result, the findings on common errors may give insights to educators in designing and planning for more effective and meaningful activities to develop students' accuracy and fluency in spoken English.

Specifically, since the study is carried out in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), it holds special significance to the Centre for Language Studies (CLS) because these findings may give insights to the instructors and panel group

of the Preparatory English 1 Course to design and plan for more effective and meaningful activities in developing students' accuracy and fluency in spoken English.

#### **1.4 Operational Definition of Terms**

The operational definitions of nine terms are explained in this section: spoken English, accuracy, syntax, morphology, fluency, hesitation, formulaic phrases, error score, and hesitation score.

##### Spoken English

Spoken language is also known as oral communication. It involves “the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of listening with understanding” (Byrne, 1991). In other words, speaking and listening are the two skills in spoken language. Moreover, spoken language has prosodic features such as stress and intonation, which are part of the meaning of the spoken utterances (Byrne, 1991). It has incomplete utterances, false starts, repetitions and sometimes ungrammatical utterances (Carter & Nunan, 1995). In this study, the term spoken English is used to refer to the spoken language of English used in simulated role-play situations which involve social interactions between two interlocutors. However, in this study, the term ‘spoken English’ only refers to the accuracy and fluency of speech and excludes para-linguistic features (such as facial expression and body language) and prosodic features.

##### Accuracy

In this study, accuracy refers to the accuracy in spoken English. According to Bartram and Walton (2002), accuracy in spoken English refers to “utterances as near as to a native speaker’s as possible” in terms of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (p. 32). Moreover, Thornbury (1999) refers to accuracy as the production of grammatical utterances. It means that the attention is on the rules and forms of the language when it is concerned with the accuracy in spoken English. In other words, it is linguistic competence. In terms of accuracy in

spoken English, this study focuses on the accuracy of grammar, excluding vocabulary and pronunciation as the learners are the ESL learners where the non-native speakers' variation in terms of pronunciation is too great and there may be some features of deviation in the vocabulary usage. In the accuracy of grammar, the focus is on the aspects of syntax and morphology of the spoken English in simulated role-play situations that involve social interactions between two interlocutors, which are explained below.

### Syntax

Syntax refers to the rule system of the order of words in a sentence (Thornbury, 1999). Syntax rules disallow the sentence: "Now I at not my right office am". This is not an English sentence structure and it does not make any sense. The correct grammatical sentence is: "I am not at my office right now".

### Morphology

Morphology refers to the rule system that covers the formation of words (Thornbury, 1999). Morphology rules disallow the sentence: "I are not at my office right now". "I are" is grammatically wrong. The correct form is "I am".

× : I are not at my office right now.

↓  
√ : I am not at my office right now.

### Fluency

In this study, the two definitions of fluency by Fillmore (1979) are taken into account, which are:

1. "the ability to talk in coherent, reasoned and semantically dense sentences, showing a mastery of the semantic (meaning in language) and syntactic resources of the language"; and
2. "the ability to have appropriate things to say in a wide range of contexts, so that you do not become tongue-tied or lost for words" (as cited in Brumfit, 1984, pp. 53-54).

In other words, fluency is about coherence and context-sensitivity in utterances. In this study, the fluency of spoken English in the simulated role-play situations which involve social interactions between two interlocutors is measured. The fluency level is measured using hesitation. This is because hesitation is one of the criteria considered in determining fluency in major standardized test such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Besides that, the formulaic phrases used in learner's spoken English are identified as an indicator of fluency. Thus, the term 'hesitation' and 'formulaic phrases' are explained below.

### Hesitation

Various kinds of hesitation such as "um", "er", "you know" and "well" are usually used to slow down output and create planning time (Bygate, 2001). Hence, hesitation fills in the pauses and makes utterances smooth and fluent as hesitations fill time with hesitation markers. In this study, hesitation functions as an indicator of fluency and the various kinds of hesitation are counted in measuring fluency. However, too much of hesitation may decrease fluency (Byrne, 1991). Furthermore, unusual long silent pauses which occur at places that are not supposed to have halts may also indicate that the speaker is hesitating or uncertain - not sure of what to say or loss of words. In his or her utterances, the speaker needs to indicate that he or she is thinking rather than just being silent because it would affect the fluency of the utterances. Hence, in this study, the pauses which are longer than three seconds are considered as unnatural hesitations and they are counted as hesitations.

### Formulaic phrases

Formulaic phrases refer to the chunks of language (Thornbury, 1999). Some of the examples of formulaic phrases are such as "What's the matter?", "That's interesting" and "How come?" Formulaic phrases function as an indicator of fluency. In this study, the formulaic phrases are recognized as the phrases that keep reoccurring in each particular simulated role-play situation.