



Faculty of Language and Communication

**Investigating the Beyond-classroom English Literacy Practices of
Malaysian Public and Private University Students**

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Investigating the Beyond-classroom English Literacy Practices of Malaysian
Public and Private University Students

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgements have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, proficiency in the English language has become a vital component of academic success, particularly in university studies, allowing students to comprehend and share ideas more effectively, whether orally or in writing. It is therefore imperative that students are exposed to the English language and apply it within various settings, not just in the classroom. Studies have shown, however, that there is limited opportunity for students to practice using English outside the classroom. This study reported that students in this modern era are exposed to various avenues and technologies that enable them to have a greater opportunity than ever before to make use of their English skills. Thus, this study sought to identify the beyond-classroom activities that students participated in in order to determine the frequency of use of English outside the classroom. Two public and two private universities were taken as representative samples of the Malaysian university student population. A total number of 200 undergraduates enrolled in both the public and private universities participated in this study. This quantitative study involved tertiary students aged between 18 and 23 from different backgrounds. A questionnaire that consisted of 4 sections, namely demographic information, self-perceived English language proficiency, how students use English in various activities and how students cope with using English in different situations was distributed. The questionnaire consisted of 48 items. Data analysis through SPSS was conducted. The study showed that Malaysian university students are actually surrounded by opportunities where they can practice using English. Participants who possess high English proficiency tended to use English more frequently in their beyond-classroom activities as compared to those with low proficiency. There was a direct correlation found between better English SPM results and increased use of English in the beyond-classroom activities. Students with low levels of English proficiency tended to

depend more heavily on tools such as *Google Translate*, bilingual dictionaries, and computer-based thesauri to help cope with the difficulties faced when using English in their beyond-classroom activities. Students from private universities, however, tended to communicate verbally more in English compared to their public university peers. Overall, students from both public and private universities used English very frequently in their beyond-classroom activities. By better understanding the frequency and the context of use, we can identify activities that can be used to effectively foster further use of English among university students to improve their proficiency.

Keywords: English literacy, literacy practice, literacy as social practice, Malaysian university public and private students

***Penyelidikan Terhadap Amalan Literasi Bahasa Inggeris di Luar Bilik Darjah
Pelajar Universiti Awam dan Swasta Malaysia***

ABSTRAK

Di Malaysia, kemahiran bertutur dalam Bahasa Inggeris telah menjadi komponen yang penting untuk kejayaan akademik, terutamanya dalam kajian di universiti bagi membolehkan pelajar memahami dan berkongsi idea dengan lebih efektif sama ada secara lisan atau bertulis. Oleh itu, adalah penting pelajar didedahkan kepada Bahasa Inggeris dan mengaplikasinya dalam pelbagai persekitaran bukan hanya di dalam kelas. Walau bagaimanapun, banyak kajian melaporkan bahawa peluang untuk pelajar mempraktikkan penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris di luar kelas adalah terhad. Kajian ini pula, mengemukakan alasan yang pelajar pada era moden ini terdedah kepada pelbagai kaedah dan teknologi yang memberikan lebih banyak peluang daripada sebelumnya untuk menggunakan kemahiran berbahasa Inggeris yang dimiliki. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti aktiviti di sebalik kelas yang disertai oleh pelajar untuk menentukan kekerapan penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris di luar kelas. Dua universiti awam dan dua universiti swasta telah diambil sebagai sampel bagi mewakili populasi pelajar universiti di Malaysia. Seramai 200 orang mahasiswa daripada kedua-dua universiti awam dan universiti swasta telah menyertai kajian ini. Kajian kuantitatif ini melibatkan pelajar pengajian tinggi yang berumur di antara 18 hingga 23 tahun daripada pelbagai latar belakang. Borang soal selidik yang terdiri daripada 4 bahagian iaitu maklumat demografi, penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris yang dari segi pandangan sendiri, bagaimana pelajar menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris dalam pelbagai aktiviti dan bagaimana pelajar berurusan dengan Bahasa Inggeris dalam situasi yang berbeza telah diedarkan. Borang soal selidik terdiri daripada 48 pernyataan. Analisis data melalui SPSS telah dijalankan. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa

pelajar universiti Malaysia sebenarnya dikelilingi oleh peluang di mana mereka boleh berlatih menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris. Peserta yang mempunyai kemahiran Bahasa Inggeris yang tinggi menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris dengan lebih kerap dalam aktiviti di luar kelas berbanding pelajar yang berkemahiran rendah. Terdapat korelasi langsung yang ditemui antara hasil SPM Bahasa Inggeris yang lebih baik dan peningkatan penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris dalam aktiviti di luar bilik darjah. Pelajar yang mempunyai tahap penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris yang rendah lebih mengharapkan alat seperti Google Translate, kamus dwibahasa, dan komputer yang berasaskan komputer untuk membantu menghadapi kesukaran yang dihadapi apabila menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris dalam aktiviti di luar kelas mereka. Walau bagaimanapun, pelajar dari universiti swasta lebih kerap berkomunikasi dalam Bahasa Inggeris berbanding pelajar dari universiti awam. Keseluruhannya, pelajar dari kedua-dua universiti awam dan swasta kerap menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris dalam aktiviti di luar kelas mereka. Dengan memahami kekerapan dan konteks penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris pelajar, kita dapat mengenal pasti aktiviti yang boleh digunakan untuk memupuk penggunaan Bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan pelajar universiti untuk meningkatkan kecekapan mereka.

Kata kunci: *Literasi Bahasa Inggeris, amalan celik huruf, literasi sebagai amalan sosial, pelajar universiti awam dan swasta Malaysia*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELL	English Language Learning
ESL	English as a Second Language
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
MUET	Malaysian Universiti English Test
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background and rationale, aim, objectives and research questions of the study. This chapter also outlines the definition of operational key terms, overview of the study and the significance of the study as well as the organisation of the thesis.

1.1 Background and Rationale

The English language is today recognised as the lingua franca of the world, and it is the dominant language used for international communication in many of the most important fields such as science and technology, business and international relations (Wrigley & Guth, 2000). Consequently, there is a need for every individual in this 21st century to master English well. The rapid growth of the Internet and its immense contributions to information sharing in this modern epoch has also put forward the need for individuals to master the English language well (Barnes & Lock, 2010). Many non-English countries are thus subsuming English proficiency in the strategic endeavour to drive the countries towards modernisation and internalisation (O'Neill & Chapman, 2015). Moreover, being competent in the use of English has become a chief requirement for many highly sought-after jobs, especially in a world of multinational organisations. It is well-known that the global as well as the local multinational companies will not only pursue academically qualified graduates, but also those who are able to convincingly articulate their ideas in English during interviews (Kaur, 2013). All these that add to the significance of the English language proficiency in the world today has urged the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Government of Malaysia

(GoM) to come up with various interventions and implementations with the hope to improve the Malaysian student's English proficiency level at all education levels.

In Malaysia, the English language is recognised as the second language and it is a mandatory subject at primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. It is compulsory for the Malaysian primary and secondary school students to sit for the English subject test in the public examinations known as Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) for primary school students, Pentaksiran Tingkatan Tiga (PT3), and Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) for secondary school students (Hiew, 2012). Before entering tertiary education, students are required to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) if they intend to further their study in the public university (Hiew, 2012). For those students who intend to attend classes in the private university, they would have to sit for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test (Carol & Anne, 2008). The government has come out with various initiatives to help in the teaching and learning of English language in Malaysia. The learning of English through Science and Mathematics in the secondary education, the incorporation of literature component in the syllabus and introducing the Professional Up-skilling of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT) programme and Intensive Course in English Language Teaching (ICELT) to improve English teachers command of the language are among the efforts that have been done by the government. Also, The Education Act 1996 for example, commended and supported the use of English as a medium of instruction in technical areas post-secondary curriculum in support of the then Malaysia's vision 2020 which was to be a fully developed and industrialised nation by the year 2020 (Puteh, Dali, & Sari, 2004). On top of focusing on the English language teachers, the Ministry of Education initiated the English Language Learning (ELL) ecosystem to facilitate

students to apply and practise what they have learnt in the classroom in real-life situations (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018).

1.1.1 Research Problem

Despite the efforts of the Malaysian government to enhance and further develop the English proficiency of the Malaysian students and also the skills of English language educators by implementing numerous methods to improve English language teaching and learning in class, the English proficiency of Malaysian university students remains below par (Abdul Aziz, 2007). This claim is further strengthened when Malaysia Employers Federation (MEF) executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan voiced out his concern on the failing of a job seeker to converse using English in an interview conducted by him (The Star, 2017). He further stated that the English proficiency of the Malaysian fresh graduates, SPM and diploma holders are still deemed as low (The Star, 2017). A survey carried out by the Malaysia Employers Federation (MEF) found that more than 90% of the participants pointed to the need for the Malaysian graduates to improve their English proficiency in order to be more employable. Even though Malaysian tertiary students have undergone the English language learning process for 14 years (Primary 1 – Degree), the English proficiency level is still unsatisfactory. Ujang (2019) reported that employers in Malaysia tend to hire private university students over public university students as in the Malaysia public universities, the amount of English used in teaching and learning is trivial.

There are several key factors as to why the Malaysian university students' English proficiency is still low. A lack of confidence of in use of English (Ibrahim, Hassali, Saleem, Haq, Khan, & Aljadhey, 2013), the strong influence of the national language (Musa, Lie, & Azman, 2012), the influence from cultural diversity (Nun Ramlan & Maarof, 2014), and

mother tongue (Suliman, 2013) are some of the factors that have been understood to strongly affect the level of students' English proficiency. Because of this, many current studies have looked into these factors, trying to search for solutions to enhance Malaysian learners' English language competency. In a study carried out by Musa, Lie, and Azman (2012), it was reasoned that one of the most significant factors contributing to the low level of English proficiency was the near total lack of emphasis given to the use of English outside of the classroom. Many studies have researched the factors contributing to the low English proficiency of Malaysian students (Kumar, 2016; Misbah, Mohamad, Yunus & Ya'cob, 2017; Musa et al., 2012; Nun Ramlan & Maarof, 2014; Rifai, 2010; Yahaya, Ooi, Bon & Ismail, 2011). Research focusing on beyond-classroom English literacy practices remains lacking. Most studies on English Language Learning (ELL) in Malaysia have thus far focused on teachers' and learners' teaching and learning experiences in the classroom. This, however, omits the ELL that takes place in beyond-classroom activities. Beyond-classroom activities for this study is defined as any activity conducted outside of the confines of a formal classroom setting. It could be co-curricular activities within the university and/or general everyday life activities such as watching the television or interacting with friends. It is important to move the focus to beyond-classroom English learning, as this is where the majority of ELL occurs. This is because the amount of time students spends learning English in formal classrooms is less than the amount of time, they spend in activities that occur outside of the classroom. This clearly shows that the time students spend learning English in formal the classrooms are less than the amount of time they spend in activities that occur outside of the classroom. According to Richards (2015, p. 6), "what goes on inside the classroom and what goes on outside of the classroom" are the two crucial scopes of successful second language acquisition. He further stated that traditionally classroom-based

language instruction was limited in its effectiveness, and that the majority of second language learning has now shifted to out-of-class learning that involves the use of Internet, information technology and popular media. Out-of-class is defined as ‘any places except inside the classroom, including the home and the community (Benson, 2001, p. 62). Students nowadays have the good fortune of having various avenues to learn from and tools with which they are able to develop their English proficiency. Through extensive literature review, it has been found that technologies such as the Internet, smartphones, television and social media have given the opportunity for students to use English outside of the classroom (Maros & Mat Saa, 2016; Mukundan, Khojasteh & Pearson, 2009; Sargsyan & Kurghinyan, 2016; Tonoian, 2014). Out-of-class activities may in turn be devised to demonstrate to students common English is in their daily lives, and if sufficient effort was given to pay attention, they would be able to improve their English proficiency (Guo, 2011).

Malaysia’s great cultural diversity has played a significant role in influencing the way Malaysian students learn and use English inside and outside the classroom. Malaysia is a country well-known for its intriguing multicultural diversity where different people from assorted backgrounds and ethnicities live together harmoniously, and it is this plurality of differing cultures and languages that shapes the way Malaysian students learn and use English. It is typical for a classroom to be composed of a mixture of students who are of different ethnicities and social backgrounds. For this reason, various pedagogical strategies have been adopted in order to address this multicultural education environment (Nun Ramlan & Maarof, 2014). In terms of English language learning, it is imperative for educators and policy makers take into account students’ social backgrounds and cultural differences when designing instructional strategies, as this will help students to better understand and learn the language. Bakhtin (1986) argued that language learning does not solely take place in the

brain of the individual learner, but is also shaped by the social factors faced by the learner. Literacy learning involves an extended understanding of language learning that includes unitary concepts of specific skills, learning and abilities, as well as competencies in decoding printed words to critical literacy (Purcell-Gates, 2007). As a result of its multicultural diversity, Malaysia possesses a variety of dialects and languages used and spoken in everyday conversation. According to Bayham and Prinsloo (2009), English literacy is progressively intellectualized as a social practice and literacy is always socially situated.

According to Street (2013), literacy is ideological and it is concomitant to the cultural and power structures in a society. The ideological idiosyncrasy focuses on meanings, and the uses of literacy practices vary according to context. From a sociocultural point of view, language is treated as a social practice and it does not involve autonomous systems. In this approach, literacy is known as what people do with texts and not what they study. It is therefore taken to mean a social practice in which individuals use different texts to take part in meaning-making activities in the society. Literacy is understood as a social practice that is embedded in social and cultural contexts (Barton, 2001). The literacy practices of this study, i.e. the beyond classroom activities undertaken by students that contribute to the acquisition of literacy, are treated as independent on the social institutions in which they are learned and used. This idea is in line with how New Literacy Studies (Barton, 2001; Gee, 1990; Perry, 2012; Street, 2013) treat literacy, in which literacy is viewed through the lens of organisations, institutions and groups. By recognising that various literacy practices, including beyond classroom activities are needed in different situations and based on the fact that private university students were favoured over public university students in the aspect of employment (Ujang 2019), this study investigates the beyond-classroom English literacy