

Students' Awareness of the Importance of English Language Proficiency With Regard to Future Employment

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English language proficiency has an important impact on the opportunities of new graduates for employment. Thus, how could teachers of non-English languages assist in increasing English language proficiency? This study looks at the issue of English language proficiency of business major students from the perspective of business lecturers. This study uses a qualitative method through interviews with two focus groups consisting of nine business major students to investigate the awareness of business majors on the importance of English language proficiency for future employment. In addition, the barriers from the context of the university environment are also examined. The findings of this paper suggest that students have a medium level of awareness of the importance of English for job employment. In addition, the use of the national language during classes leads some students to take advantage in certain situations

JEL Codes: M10

1. Introduction

For developing countries to attain the level of developed country status within a set time frame, its graduates need to achieve certain levels of competencies. These competencies have to be developed within the population so that the country's human capital has the required talent to provide the skills needed for both global and local companies.

For Malaysia, the government has set a goal to achieve developed country status by 2020, as recommended in Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020) (Sarji 1993). One of the key aims is to ensure that the population has achieved certain necessary competencies. In the last decade, concerns about improving the quality of education have led to several initiatives by the government. In 2012, the Malaysian Education Blueprint was presented to enable a revamped educational policy. The declining level of English fluency among graduates was considered one of the factors contributing to the unemployability of some graduates. This was related to comments from the industry as well as practitioners that the level of English among graduates was declining. As both private and public organizations are competing with global companies in a global arena, such concerns seem valid. The research literature has also noted the problem with respect to the decline in English and overall competencies as well as the issue of employability of graduates. However, though programs have been implemented and research conducted on the various efforts to improve students' language learning and overall competencies, research is also needed to examine student efforts and points of view.

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Is there awareness among the students on the importance of English for future employment? Whereas previous research has focused on the efforts of the students from the viewpoint of English lecturers, this study focuses on the viewpoint of subject content lecturers for final year students who are facing graduation and future employment.

The aim of the study is to investigate student experiences in developing English capability as they face future employment. This paper presents the research literature, with particular emphasis on the Malaysian environment, and gives an overview of the topic of acquiring competencies, particularly English, and graduate employment in Malaysia.

The paper is arranged as follows. The next section discusses competencies and graduate employability followed by English language competency and later student belief. The following section is on the methodology, and the later section is on the findings and discussion. The paper ends with the conclusion and implication of this research study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Competencies and Graduate Employability

Some countries have acknowledged that educational policy plays a major role in the development of the nation and contributes to future growth. By ensuring heavy investment in education, the expectation is this strategy will contribute to economic growth of the country through supplying and developing human resources and upgrading the capability of human capital. The issue of employability of graduates has become a concern in the last few years. Ismail, Yussof and Lai (2011) noted that statistics from the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), Malaysia, for 2008 and 2009 showed 24.1% and 26.7%, respectively, of graduates were unemployed six months after they graduated. Among the main reasons for being unemployed were they were unable to find jobs (71.8%) or jobs offered were not suitable (18.4%) (Ismail, Yussof & Lai, 2011). Countries, such as the US and Australia, as well as Malaysia have implemented changes in their educational policy to ensure that generic skills would lead to competency development, growth, competitiveness and productivity (Marthandan, Jayashree & Yelwa 2013). The authors stated that in Malaysia, the MOHE has implemented policies to ensure that Malaysia would achieve world-class human capital. In their research, Marthandan et al. (2013) investigated the competencies acquired by management students who had graduated and left university for a minimum of one year. In their study, the students reported that after one year of graduation, 77% had found jobs, while 16% were still unemployed and 7% were either self-employed or furthering their studies.

2.2 English Language Competency

Focusing on English language competency specifically, studies have shown that there is a global concern about the increasing gap between the level of competency of the graduates and the level needed for employment (Sarudin et al. 2013). The authors noted that studies in Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Malaysia have mentioned a decrease in standards of English, and this concern has led to these countries taking active measures to improve the standards since English is considered the language of business and technology. The Malaysian government published a study on graduate employability in 2012 and presented survey findings from Malaysian employers that stated that the most common problems among graduates seeking jobs were poor command of the English language (55.8%) followed by poor character/attitude or personality (37.4%) and unrealistic

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salary/benefits (33%) (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012). Another study, which assessed employers' perception on Malaysian graduates, focused on the services sector (Ismail Yussof & Lai, 2011). Respondents, who were senior human resource managers in the services industry, felt that graduates needed to improve soft skills, which included communication skills as well as Malay and English language proficiency.

This suggests that Malaysia needs to assess its educational system to improve the level of English language proficiency of its graduates to improve employability. The National Graduate Employability Report (2012) had suggested improving the university curriculum as well as having short-term courses for recent graduates. In addition, realigning the English courses curriculum to improve the level of competency of graduates was also suggested.

Authors, such as Murray (2011), have suggested that to improve English proficiency, particularly for non-English university students (for example, in Malaysia), universities need to re-examine their curriculum. The author suggested that subjects that had been in the domain of English language teachers, such as professional communication skills and academic literacy, be adopted into the curriculum and be taught by subject teachers, subject to these teachers being trained to specifically teach English learning. Murray (2011) defined language proficiency to consist of proficiency, academic literacy and professional communication skills. Thus, proficiency is 'a general communicative competence in language that enables its users to express and understand meaning accurately, fluently and appropriately according to context, and which comprises a set of generic skills and abilities' (Murray 2011, p. 305). The author argued for this when reflecting on the changes in the educational environment of many universities that have experienced an increase in students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, for example, through the increase of international students. The research literature also noted that English teachers need to collaborate with subject content teachers, particularly as students progressed further along the academic ladder. Horn, Stoller and Robinson (2008) suggested that interdisciplinary collaboration is essential. The authors indicated that the English language teaching (ELT) professional would provide the learning structure of activities while the subject content professional could provide knowledge and skills that would be of value for the students involved. Therefore, this collaboration would in the end help the students who are the end goal of the teaching environment. Another study also echoed similar sentiments (Pattanapichet & Chinokul 2011). The authors found that in a study on public relations graduates in a Thai university, the gap between the skills needed in the industry and graduates' English skills was significant. The authors suggested revising the curriculum and inviting practitioners and academics as well as both content lecturers (public relations) and English language specialists to contribute to a new curriculum. Thus, past literature suggests that through the focus of enlisting the assistance of subject content teachers, non-English-speaking students, like Malaysian students, could help English language proficiency, which as Murray (2011) suggested, could be defined as proficiency, academic literacy and professional communication skills. The focus here is helping the students to improve their English language proficiency in order to improve their competency to increase their chances of graduate employability. However, the previous viewpoints were from the academic and university staff. What about the students themselves?

2.3 Student Belief

The situation facing Malaysia is also similar to that in China. China, too, faces the problem of improving the English language fluency of its graduates. The low level of English fluency of Chinese graduates is the focus of Liu's (2013) paper. The author noted that historically

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several factors could explain the low level of competency; among them is the focus more on reading than on listening and speaking skills (Liu 2013). The author focused on self-efficacy beliefs in the study in analysing student strategies to achieve improvement in English-speaking fluency. The area of research on self-efficacy beliefs and language learning is based on the theory that self-efficacy has an impact on language learning capability. Bandura (1997) stated that self-efficacy refers to 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments' (as cited in Liu 2013).

Liu (2013) noted several studies that have reported a positive relationship between self-efficacy and achievement (Tilfarlioğlu & Ciftci 2011), reading capability (Mills, Pajares and Herron 2006) as well as listening (Rahimi & Abedini 2009). Liu's study (2013) revealed that students with higher self-efficacy tended to visit the English bar (a place with non-alcoholic refreshments within the university campus). This was in order to practice English more often than those who had lower levels. Liu (2013) noted that a possible fact that compelled students of all levels of proficiency to visit the English bar to improve their English was that in China, graduates with fluency in English tended to have a higher probability of getting a job in a competitive environment. Liu (2013) concluded that the success of the English bar suggests that activities outside the classroom could improve proficiency in English as some students might be unwilling to talk in class or are intimidated by the formality of the classroom. In addition, students also had access to native speakers to practice with in an informal environment. Similarly, Shaik-Abdullah, Yaacob and Abdul Rahim (2013) in their study suggested that students could improve their English level skills at the postgraduate level by communicating with each other on Facebook and discussing their reading of academic texts. The authors attributed this to the fact that reading at the postgraduate level could be demanding and tiring, particularly if the students also had limited proficiency. Both studies, though they differed in their emphasis (English bar versus communicating through social media), are similar in that they emphasise the need for the students to take the initiative to get involved in the programs needed to improve their capabilities. However, what appears to be missing is the context or background on the students themselves. What is their background for learning English? How are they learning English among their friends at university? What are the obstacles for them to learn English? Are they aware of the importance of English for getting a job?

In this study, the viewpoint is that these students will one day be part of the workforce of business and organisations. There is a need to understand the complexities that this cohort faces now. Qualitative studies could help society in understanding the complexities that business organisations face. Gummesson (2006) stated that context is important because 'we experience daily that information taken out of its context can mean something totally different from what was originally intended' (Gummesson 2006, p.172). Thus, the intent of this study is to contribute to the literature on the context or background of students learning English from the viewpoint of the subject content teachers. The aim of the study is to investigate students' experiences in developing their English capability as they face future employment.

Based on the above literature review, the research questions for this study are as follows:

Research Question 1: What is the level of students' awareness of the importance of English for job employment? How do these situations occur and why?

Research Question 2: What are the barriers to students' development of their English capability? How do these factors impact their development and why?

3. Methodology

For this study, qualitative research using a multiple-case study approach was used. Interviews were conducted with business major students through two focus groups. A total of nine students were interviewed with five in the first focus group and four in the second focus group. These students were selected as they were in their final semester of their studies and would be doing their internship the next semester. The first focus group consisted of students taking a strategic management course, while the second focus group consisted of students taking a human resource management seminar. Interviews focused on students' awareness of the importance of English language fluency on future employment. In addition, students were asked about the challenges that they faced as they tried to improve their language capability. A short questionnaire was filled in by the students to acquire demographic data and feedback on their English capability. Data were analysed based on Miles and Huberman's methods (1994). In the three-phase analysis as suggested by the authors, interviews were transcribed, data were coded and arranged into tables and matrices and conclusions were drawn and verified. The nine cases differed in three dimensions: course taken (strategic management versus human resource management seminar), program major (accounting, international business and human resource management) and race (Chinese, Malay, Indian). Reliability was through coding checks and data quality checks. External validity was based on theoretically diverse sampling centred on the three dimensions. To maintain anonymity, the nine cases chose anonymous names unrelated to their actual identities.

The number of qualitative interviews was determined to be enough when the saturation point was reached (Glaser & Strauss 1967), that is, when no new 'theoretical insights are being gleaned from the data' (Bryman, in Baker & Edwards 2012, p.18). Jenson (in Baker & Edwards 2012, p.39) suggested that though the number of interviews might be few, if they were 'written up with dignity and care for the respondents; and because the researcher has taken their time' could actually provide more valuable insights than if the numbers were larger. In addition, for this research a short questionnaire was given to the respondents for demographic information, and general questions that reflected the interview questions were also given. Thus, this provided a triangulation of data methods (interview, questionnaire and observation), which provided robust data and reinforced the data from the interviews. Charmaz (in Baker and Edwards 2012, p. 22) stated that qualitative interviewers sometimes 'do not give themselves credit for observational, archival and documentary research that they have done. Mixed qualitative methods can strengthen a study with a small number of interviews'. Thus, though some might question the number of interviews for this study, the use of questionnaires, ensuring saturation point was reached as well as the opportunity to ensure time and care for concentration on the interviews should help alleviate concerns.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the case profile is presented and discussed along with excerpts of quotations from interviews with the students. As this research emphasised the English fluency of students, the authors felt it necessary to present **the exact interview data** based on the interviews with the students, with no editing to make reading easier. Thus, some readers might find it difficult to understand the conversation because of the lack of fluidity of the conversation and by the general level of competency of English. Our focus is to show as precisely as possible the level of English proficiency of these students in ordinary

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conversations since this level could be expected were they to communicate during their future employment.

4.1 Case Profile

Table 1 shows the profiles of the student respondents. Students numbered 1 to 5 were in focus group May (interviewed in the month of May), while the rest were in focus group June (interviewed in June). Table 1 also shows the student demographic data and their Malaysia University English Test (MUET) scores. Students also answered a question on their perception of their level of English ability.

The student respondents were students who were taking either strategic management or human resource management (HRM) courses. Three were from accounting programs, while four were from the HRM program. The rest were taking international business. All the student respondents had MUET scores of Band 3 except one student with Band 4 and another student with Band 2. The highest MUET score is Band 6, which is identified as a 'Very Good User', while the lowest score is Band 1 'Extremely Limited User'. Students are required to take MUET for university admissions, and there is a proposal for a minimum band level to be acquired before graduation (Malaysia Budget 2015).

The respondents came from a number of states. There are 13 states in Malaysia. For this group, three were from Perak and two from Negeri Sembilan, while one each was from Selangor, Johor, Penang and Kelantan. Based on Census Malaysia (2010), states that are categorized as a high level of urbanisation are Selangor and Penang; states, such as Kelantan, Perlis and Pahang, have lower levels of urbanisation. The students were either in their final year or their final semester. All of the students were required to take internships after their final semester, as part of their program requirements.

Based on a brief question on their perception of their own capability in English in the questionnaire, answers from students were categorized into levels of Low, Medium and High. Most of the students perceived their levels of English capability as 'Medium' (seven out of nine), while two perceived their capability as 'High'. The student with the highest MUET level (Band 4) felt that her capability was only at the Medium level. However, the two students who felt very confident of their English capability level (High) had achieved only Band 3. The student with the highest score in MUET came from the accounting program, while the lowest score on MUET (Band 2) was from the HRM program.

Analysing the data on MUET level scores by state, the student with the highest level of MUET (Band 4) came from Johor, which has a medium level of urbanization, while the student with the lowest level of MUET achievement (Band 2) came from the least urbanized state (Kelantan). In addition, though not clarified in the case profile, the student respondents comprised three male students and six female students. Racial composition comprised five Chinese students, one Indian student and three Malay students. All students were Malaysians. Though qualitative research outcomes are not expected to represent the population, a diverse group of respondents ensures that as many viewpoints are taken into account as possible.

Table 1: Case profile

Student	Group	States*	Perception of own level of English**	Major	MUET	
1	Leven	May	Negeri Sembilan -Medium	Medium	Accounting	3
2	Jess	May	Negeri Sembilan-Medium	High	Accounting	3
3	Jake	May	Selangor-High	Medium	International Business	3
4	Florence	May	Johor-Medium	Medium	Accounting	4
5	Sim	May	Penang-High	Medium	International Business	3
6	Malar	June	Perak-Medium	Medium	HRM	3
7	Aimi	June	Perak-Medium	Medium	HRM	3
8	Fan	June	Perak-Medium	High	HRM	3
9	Ira	June	Kelantan-Low	Medium	HRM	2

*Urbanisation levels based on Census Malaysia 2010

**Respondent own words on ability: Broadly categorized as follows:

Low: "bad", "very bad", "poor" Medium: "need to be improved", "medium", "average" High: "good"

4.2 Students' Awareness on the Importance of English

The first research question for this paper focused on what is the level of students' awareness on the importance of English for job employment and how these situations occurred and why.

Table 2 presents the findings based on this question. The students were asked about their perspective on English usage in the university and how important it was with regard to future employment. This reflected their awareness of the importance of English for a future career. For Group May, two students showed a high level of awareness of the importance of English for job employment. These two students had gone through an application process to get internships. Another two students also showed some awareness of the importance of English, however their awareness related more to a general awareness of the requirement for English in the workplace and less to a personal experience. One student, however, seemed to have a lower level of experience and contributed little to this area. In contrast, though two students in Group June also showed a high level of awareness, no student mentioned an internship application experience. Overall, Group June discussed their experience with English in the university environment. The other two students seemed to have a lower level of awareness, with one student at the medium level and the other more at a lower level.

This suggests that some students, even in the final semester, seem to have a lower level of awareness of the importance of English for future employment.

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Table 2: Students' awareness of the importance of English

	Student	Group	Level of Awareness	Comment
1	Leven	May	High	Have gone thru own experience of job search
2	Jess	May	High	Have gone thru own experience of job search
3	Jake	May	Medium	No personal job experience, but aware of issue
4	Florence	May	Medium	No personal job experience, but aware of issue
5	Sim	May	Low	Little mention of own or others' job experience, less awareness of issue
6	Malar	June	High	Many suggestions to improve students' level of English
7	Aimi	June	Medium	Some suggestions on improvement
8	Fan	June	High	Gave the most suggestions for improvement of students' level of English in Group June
9	Ira	June	Low	Limited suggestions, less awareness

Comparing the two focus groups, we found some differences, in particular with regard to the question on awareness. Group May had some members who had been through interviews as they searched for places for their internship, which would take place in the following semester. In contrast, Group June, none had gone through a similar process.

The contrast between Group May and Group June is due to the following reason. Two of the students in Group May were accounting students, who through their own admission had high grade-point averages and were targeting multinational accounting firms (the Big Four audit firms) that had offices in Malaysia. Thus, the competition to get places in these companies for internships would be more intense. Therefore, the experience of these two students reflected a more global aspect of the hiring process compared to other students.

For example, the excerpt below describes Leven's experience of the internship interview process:

Excerpt 1:

"We found that the English capability is the most important, crucial, to be accepted by the big company like the Big Four Audit firm like the [Big Four Audit Firm 1, Big Four Audit Firm 2]...they will test us about our English level first before they accept the interview session with us" Leven [page 1, line 6]

Leven explained that this experience taught him that if students did not have the right level of capability in English, students would not get an interview for the internship. His statement was further corroborated by Jess who explained that the high number of accounting graduates (in Malaysia) resulted in high competition for places at the Big Four audit firms, but an accounting student could get in depending on his English capability:

Excerpt 2:

"There is very high competition among the Accounting students because our dream is to enter the Big Four (audit firm) then that is why we want to study so much and study well and get into the Big Four, then one day I saw

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my senior and talked to him then he told me that “I only get 2.8 (CGPA)” then I said ‘Then where do you work?’ “I work at [Big Four Audit Firm 2]” “Then how come you get the [Big Four Audit Firm 2] at 2.8 because I taught result is very important?” then he said “English!” Jess [page 3 line 11]

The experience of these two students in Group May contrasted with the experience of the two students in Group June. Though two of the students in the latter group also showed higher awareness compared to others in their group, they did not mention any similar experiences with internship applications. However, all students were in their final semester, and all students were required to take internships before they could graduate.

4.3 Barriers towards Improving Students’ English Fluency: The University Environment

Research Question 2 focused on the barriers towards students’ improving their English fluency within the University environment and how and why these barriers occur.

Table 3 presents the findings based on research question 2. In the previous section, Group May had two students who had the advantage of going through the internship interview process. For this question, the findings showed that the answers of the two groups were more similar. Among the barriers that the students faced when improving their English fluency were three related to lecturers and classes: two focused on the impact of the national language (Bahasa Melayu) and one on not having enough English classes. On the question of the impact of national language used in classes, four out of nine students agreed on this issue. In a related issue of the national language used by lecturers and/or administration staff, two students raised this concern. Two other students mentioned the issue of not enough English classes in their curriculum program.

On the issue of the national language used in class, the students explained that the national language had an impact on how they used English in class. In the university, classes are either taught wholly in English (based on their program) or a mix of English and the national language so that advanced students who were not proficient in English could understand the content of the classes, which could be university core courses, program core courses, elective programs or free electives. In the College of Business, less than four courses are English related; the others are program based, for example principles of management or research methodology.

The students explained that when lecturers use the national language to explain the course content, students are given the opportunity to listen to lecturers in mixed languages, submit assignments in either language, answer final exams in either language and give presentations in either language. As the medium language pre-university is in the national language, the students are familiar with lectures, assignments and exams in the national language. Thus, the transition to English is difficult, and students’ struggle with this. For example, many lecturers give the student flexibility to do their presentation in the national language, and so students’ tend to choose the national language. Some lecturers place a slightly higher emphasis on the presentation grade out of the overall grading. Thus, students prefer to give presentations in the national language rather than give a less perfect presentation in English. Excerpt Three gives Sim’s explanation on this

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Excerpt Three:

Some lecturers, it really depends on presentation - if they (the students) do well they have very high marks, if not do well, then they really... If I do in Malay (national language), I will get good grades **Sim** [page 10 Line 1]

The situation is similar during exams. Students will ask their lecturers if they can answer in the national language or if the exams are dual language (English and Bahasa Melayu). Fan described this:

Excerpt Four:

Even...during like, period near the exam, like people will ask aaa.. 'Doctor *Doctor kita jawab dalam Bahasa Inggeris or Bahasa Melayu, boleh jawab dwibahasa?* (Do we answer in English or Bahasa Melayu, could we do dual language? **Fan** [page 6 line 31]

Other than the use of both English and the national language in classes, there is also the issue of lecturers and administrators using the national language in class and in dealing with students. One student, Jake, noted that such a situation would not help the related staff to improve their level of English. Thus, the students seem to have noted that not only are the students having trouble with English proficiency, the staff, too, is facing similar problems. The issue of dual language classes also raises the issue noted by Jake, who recommended that all courses be taught in English. However, there are some courses taught in the national language. Aimi, suggested that lecturers should ensure that not only are their classes conducted in English but also that all groups taking the same course are conducted in English. This would prevent students from moving to another group.

Interestingly, two students, Leven and Jess, from accounting programs, suggested that there should be more English classes in their program as they felt that only one English course in their program was not enough. They suggested that instead of increasing the curriculum credit hours, some courses that overlapped with another should be removed. Only one student, Fan, noted that he felt peer pressure from other students when he started speaking English. However, he persisted, even taking classes in 'A' groups, which tended to be held for international students as they were conducted in English. Fan even suggested that higher MUET band level requirements should be implemented in order to make students take English more seriously.

To summarise, this section examined the barriers that students face in the university environment when they wish to improve their English fluency. The students highlighted the use of English in program courses and the conduct of the academic staff. They pointed out that students who had been in a pre-university system that used the national language persisted in using either the national language or a mix of the national language and English. This influences the students' decisions when choosing classes, assignment submissions, answering exam questions and giving presentations.

In addition, some lecturers gave presentation marks, which had a high impact on overall grades, and this influenced students to give their presentation in the national language to get a better grade. Only one student mentioned feeling peer pressure as a result of his proficient English; his friends sometimes made fun of him when he talked in English instead of the national language, which is his mother tongue. This student also suggested that a higher MUET requirement would ensure students take English more seriously.

Table 3: Barriers towards improving students’ English fluency: the university environment

Student	Group	Peer pressure	National Language (NL) used in class	National Language (NL) used by Lecturers/ Admin	Not enough English classes	Others	Comments
1	Leven	May			✓		English should replace other courses in order to maintain total credit hours
2	Jess	May	✓		✓		Some students prefer to do presentations in NL; Some courses are a repeat of another
3	Jake	May		✓		Some course program conducted in NL when should be in English; Should self-learn with workbooks	Lecturers/ Admin tend to use NL thus become less confident in using English
4	Florence	May					
5	Sim	May	✓				Some lecturers grade on presentation, thus prefer to do in NL – get higher marks
6	Malar	June	✓				Students could answer either in English or NL in exams – tend to do in NL
7	Aimi	June		✓			Lecturers need to strictly enforce all courses in English – if not, students could choose other classes
8	Fan	June	✓	✓		Suggest higher MUET band level requirement to make students take English more seriously	Some students make fun of him of using English often; Option of dual language in exams – students answer in NL
9	Ira	June					

5. Conclusion and Implications

This paper presented research on the importance of English language fluency on future employment from the perspective of business major students and investigated the awareness of the importance of English language fluency among final year business students. In addition, we examined the barriers that students face in improving their English language fluency in the university environment.

The findings of this research revealed that a majority of the students had either high or medium level of awareness on the importance of English for future job employment. Two students had been involved in an internship application process that made them realise that their level of English was still lacking. Two students seemed to be unaware of the importance of English, though they were in their final year. This suggests that the university needs to ensure that all students are aware that English language fluency is important for future job employment.

The second part of the research focused on the barriers that students faced when trying to improve their capability from the perspective of the university environment. The majority of students noted the classes they were taking and how not all classes are conducted in English, that some are dual language—a mix of English and the national language. The students explained that this situation was not only a barrier to learning English but led students to do assignments, exams and presentations in the national language as they could get higher grades. There was also an opinion that not all academics and administrators were themselves fluent in English, thus exacerbating the problem. A few students also suggested improving the requirement for English, either through increasing English courses by removing courses that overlapped or increasing the MUET band level requirement for entrance and/or completion of university. One student mentioned the peer pressure he faced when talking in English rather than the national language, which suggests that peer pressure could be an intangible barrier to improving a student’s fluency in English.

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This research paper, similar to Liu (2013), presented findings that showed students were intimidated when speaking in English in a formal environment. To avoid giving presentations in English when the presentations are graded, students would initiate several strategies to avoid doing so, either asking that lecturers permit them to use the national language or a dual language option or choosing another group where the class is conducted in the national language.

This research differs from Liu's research in that Liu's focus was on English classes; thus, the student had no option to do assignments in another language. However, for program courses, the students had the option of either English or the national language. In addition, as the lecturers were non-English teachers, they were less likely to insist students used English exclusively. This study also differed from that of Shaik-Abdullah, Yaacob and Abdul Rahim (2013) since in that study the students used social media for English learning activities. However, in this study, students seemed to prefer to use social media for leisure activities. In addition, the language used seemed to be their native language for this study.

This research contributes to the literature on English language proficiency of non-English speakers, particularly through the context of the students as they develop their English capability during their program. Barriers, such as the use of the national language, subject content lecturers preferring to use the national language and issues of peer pressure, are topics that could be developed for future research. In addition, the medium level of awareness on the importance of English for job employment suggests that the university needs to highlight the importance of English for career success much earlier so that future graduates can make the necessary preparations. This research thus highlights a dilemma in improving English language fluency of university graduates—when students finish their English courses and continue with program courses, where is their incentive to improve their English fluency? The situation that exists might be unique to developing countries where the national language is not English. Thus, the above situation might be less frequent in a university in Australia or New Zealand, for example.

The above research is limited in that it focuses on business major students in their final year in one university and concentrates on the barriers within the university environment. Future research might examine the background of students and how this impacts not only their use of English but also their self-efficacy and how they develop learning strategies.

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