



# Defining English Language Proficiency for Malaysian Tertiary Education: Past, Present and Future Efforts

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## Abstract

Any attempt to define English language proficiency can never be divorced from the theories that describe the nature of language, language acquisition and human cognition. By virtue of such theories being socially constructed, the descriptions are necessarily value-laden. Thus, a definition of language proficiency can only, at best, be described as developmental, following changes that are linguistic, pragmatic, cultural and political. In defining English proficiency for tertiary education, the context is naturally also linked to the focus on university education. The argument has been that an ‘acceptable’ level of language competence of a university applicant is anything but constant. Tremendous social changes have seen traditional values of elitism in university education giving way to the ‘massification’ of education. As Kaplan and Baldauf (1997:257) affirms, “The principal problem in tertiary education is not declining literacy standards but rather it is about meeting changed societal, cultural and informational requirements and circumstances”. In the light of these changes, this paper attempts to trace influencing factors that help define an ‘acceptable’ level of English proficiency for Malaysian tertiary education. The paper examines past and present efforts of establishing an English language policy and assessment practice for tertiary education, and concludes with some views on future development that could evolve from the current indicative pursuits of establishing language learning and ability.

**Keywords:** English language proficiency, Malaysian tertiary education, language policies, language learning

## 1. Defining English language proficiency

In defining the construct of language proficiency, a number of questions invariably come to mind: 1) What does it mean to be proficient in the language? 2) How is proficiency defined in the context of socio-political changes? And finally 3) How is proficiency defined by institutional needs?

In the early learning of the English language in Malaysia, there appears to be an ‘assumed’ proficiency for tertiary use. Under the British, Malaya did not have a clear or uniform language policy. In these early days, the emergent system could be traced to the Education Code of 1899 which spelt out the nature of learning in school to be one that:

... emphasize(s) the importance of teaching English by making English Vocabulary and Composition one of the 'elementary subjects' with reading, writing and arithmetic, and strengthening it further by making 'English grammar and construction' a class subject to be taken with it.

(Gaudart 1987)

Asmah (2003:102) in her review of early education in Malaya, states that “A certificate from the English school promised jobs in the government and in the private sector, and most of all **it opened the path to higher education.**”(my italics). In contrast, the vernacular schools only “produced literate farmers, carpenters and small time shopkeepers”.

The outstanding practice of a quadrilingual educational system (English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil) led to a British legacy in education that perpetuated unequal opportunities and access to English proficiency. Those enrolled in English medium schools naturally had better chances at acquiring a better level of English proficiency compared to those in vernacular schools. It also moulded “a cosmopolitan, modernizing group drawn in varying proportions from the three traditional communities whose common bond was English....” (Asmah 2003: 102) or proficiency in English.

The dynamics of non-Anglo Englishes (as discussed in Seiderhofer 2003), set into motion by forces that were social, political and economic, created a profile of a proficient pre-independent Malayan with regard to English language use. He generally had the opportunity of an English education and on average could be described as having achieved a high level of competence in the English language especially if he were to enter tertiary education. It could thus be said that a successful English medium student was expected to have the ‘assumed’ proficiency necessary to follow tertiary education which used English as the medium of instruction.

Along with the socio, political, and economic dynamics that affected the educational developments, there existed also specific linguistic developments that impacted the language teaching syllabus. These were manifest in new theories of language ability. Early linguists in the west became more concerned about promoting literature and culture, and grammar as ingredients that would help the students to gain respectability and mileage in universities. The concern with literature and culture, and grammar filtered into the teaching of the English language in Malaya.

There were also other parallel developments that led to the revamp of the English language curriculum and pedagogical approaches. In the early 1950s, learning theories were strongly influenced by behaviourists and the accompanying structural approaches. To be proficient in English, in other words, is to know the structures of the language well and this translated into a heavy emphasis on the learning of grammar used in contrived situations. Years later, the structural-situational syllabus of English was replaced by the Communicative Syllabus that emphasized the teaching of language functions and forms, with a de-emphasis of the teaching of grammar. Debates continued among the linguists on the competence/performance distinction leading to more theories and frameworks that attempted to explain the construct of language proficiency (among them are Oller’s grammar expectancy (1973), Canale and Swain’s (1980) competence framework and Bachman and Palmer’s competency model (1996)).

## **2. Pre- and post-independence definition of a proficient Malaysian in English**

As a result of the various forces influencing education, it was unsurprising that English medium schools were generally accused of promoting the acquisition of foreign, Western

values through language use. The processes had defined a pre-independence proficient Malayan speaker of English steeped in such values. A typical first generation of Malaysians educated in the English medium school graduated with a certificate that described the graduate as having ability in dictation, composition skills and literature. It implied that he or she was exposed to English culture, read English literature and used English for most cognitive processing and problem-solving. The graduate must have a credit pass in English for the awarding of the certificate and it was this Malayan who would then enter tertiary education, usually abroad. In addition, the value of being proficient in English was specifically seen in the training of the upper-class Malay children in English as they were seen to be the future leaders of the people. For this intention, a special English medium school was set up, the Malay College (Wong and Ee 1975).

Drastic changes related to the defining of English proficiency came about with the post independence movement. The prelude to change was the Razak Report of 1956 which formally defined English as the 'second most important language'. It firmly laid the foundation for a national integrated educational policy. The report recommended that the existing types of primary schools (missionary schools, vernacular schools, religious schools, etc.) that had sprung up under the British rule be integrated into a national system, thus paving the way for a common curriculum and a common language for instruction. This signaled formally the detachment of the esteemed status given to English. The May 13, 1969 racial riots played a major role in hastening the completion of the change in the language of instruction which had ripple effects on the learning English language right up to the tertiary level. The policy change was completed in 1977, spanning a period of thirteen years. This period of change witnessed English to be entrenched only as a core subject with a status like any other content subjects such as History, Geography and Science. By 1983, the change had filtered to the tertiary institutions where Malay is used as the medium of instruction.

Parallel developments in policy enactment also resulted in changes in the status of the English language in formal education. In 1988, a pragmatic move that followed the change of the MOI (medium of instruction) policy was the reversal of the requirement of a credit pass in English for university entry. In 1995, it became official that English was not a compulsory subject to pass in order to obtain the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*) after 11 years of school education.

While there was an official demise on the use of English as MOI, English, however, remained very much a language widely used for interaction especially in the urban areas. The policy spawned a language situation where there were communities which became monolingual as a result of the National Language Policy, and in other communities, the bilingual or trilingual orientation became dominant. The multilingual continued to enjoy a language advantage especially when he or she continued into tertiary education where much of the reference materials remained in English. The system of the past in fact has helped defined the competent English language user of today. He or she is likely to come from a background where English is widely used for a diverse range of purposes and could come from a community which had a reasonably high or middle class socio-economic status.

### **3. English language proficiency at the Malaysian tertiary level**

Undoubtedly, the university plays a significant role in promoting educational or language policies. While there was no one overt national policy that promotes proficiency in English in the university then, it was observed that it was the norm in universities to include the learning of English as part of the tertiary experience. However, the degree of emphasis differed from university to university though it was common for universities to give the proficiency courses a status similar to other content courses. Failure in the English courses could lead to a failure

in graduation. In this sense, a minimum level of English proficiency is expected of the undergraduate before he leaves for the workplace. Some universities see English courses as a burden to the normal curriculum and place them as courses that were considered as ‘outside the curriculum’ courses. While it was compulsory to pass them, they do not add to the total credits of a programme.

Malaysian universities, on the whole, were found to conduct many remedial courses for the improvement of the English language as students who entered tertiary education began to show a significant lack of English proficiency especially after the implementation of the National Language Policy. This situation became a cause for concern. Many reports were written to address the problems, among which, was the perennial problem of staffing to teach the courses.

Unlike schools, universities, however, were able to define their own parameters with regard to the learning of English. Course offerings for English could differ from university to university and so were attempts to define language ability. In some universities, such as Universiti Putra Malaysia, a placement test was used in the early years to put students in the appropriate level. The early English courses in the 70s adopted a structural approach with some emphasis given to the other language skills which included dictation. An example of a fundamental course is shown below:

BB 051 Fundamental in English Usage (2 credit hours)

Understanding and mastering the fundamentals of English; Revision of the normal verb and its five forms, the use of the five forms including infinitives, gerunds, and participles; regular and irregular verbs, knowing and using all the irregular verbs, their forms, and meaning; The verb ‘be’, auxiliary verbs; All the basic tenses; The verb ‘be’, auxiliary Verbs; All the basic tenses; The active and passive aspects of the basic tenses; The affirmative, negative and interrogative, The personal pronouns; The countable and uncountable nouns, The article; Simple and short comprehension passages for oral and written work (criteria for choice of passages will be of relevance to the science and interest); Vocabulary extension via vocabulary substitution; Study of words and phrases in context – importance of context in determining meaning; The use of the dictionary; Basic English sentence structures; Pattern practice; Rapid reading and comprehension; Dictation; Listening comprehension; Writing of simple paragraphs. (The course will comprise 2 contact hours and 1 hour in the Lab).

For several years, three basic levels of general English were offered in UPM (English Skills 1, 2, and 3).

|         |  |    |
|---------|--|----|
| BBI 200 | <i>English Skills Level I</i>            | 02 |
| BBI 201 | <i>English Skills Level II</i>           | 02 |
| BBI 202 | <i>English Skills Level III</i>          | 02 |
| BBI 203 | <i>Academic Writing Skills</i>           | 02 |
| BBI 252 | <i>Written Communication in Business</i> | 02 |

From the courses offered, it was clear that English proficiency was defined mainly in terms of using English for general purposes. A placement test was used to evaluate entry proficiency level and if the student was placed at the lowest level, he had to complete three courses before he was deemed adequately ‘proficient’ in the language. For those who were more proficient, there was the option of pursuing a course in academic English, while business students had to take Written Communication in Business as part of their programme.

The courses offered became the de facto language policy at the tertiary institution. It was a period largely characterized by ‘experimentation’ influenced mainly by external aid and collaborative programmes under the auspices of the ODA or CHICHE programmes- both of which are British funded. In the 80s when students’ proficiency was perceived to suffer a decline, some universities began to increase their contact hours (e.g. three hours of lecture/tutorial and one hour of lab session). Self-access lab materials complemented the lecture hours to help improve the students’ proficiency.

In UPM, the general English syllabi were revamped to give more focus on ESP in the early 90s. Hence, courses called *English for Academic Purposes* were introduced. Recognition was given to reading at the first level while the second focused on reading and speaking and the third on reading and writing. After the first level, students were streamed according to three strands:

- a) Tropical Agricultural Science : This catered to students from the Faculties of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Marine Science, and Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science
- b) Science and Technology : This catered to students from the Faculties of Food Science and Biotechnology, Biomedical Science, Science and Environmental Studies, Engineering, and Design and Architecture
- c) Social Science and Humanities : This catered to students to students from the Faculties of Economics and Management, Educational Studies, Human Ecology, and Modern Language Studies

One main complaint of the language practitioners at the tertiary institutions was the lack of a clear statement of a university language policy that could help define the construct of language proficiency. Even within the same university, policies could differ about the level of proficiency for the students. For example, a survey conducted on the status of the English Language proficiency courses in UPM in the 80s revealed a lack of conformity in the English language requirement in the students’ curriculum. Some faculties allocated only two credits for it but still insisted on students completing the full three basic proficiency courses. This showed concern for the improvement of the language proficiency though the policy did not translate into a concrete common working plan among faculties.

Meanwhile, schools continued to show dismal national examination statistics for English language attainment leading to the media reporting grave concern expressed by the former Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mohd Mahathir. The private sector also attested that many local graduates had failed to secure jobs because of their lack of competence in the English language, evident particularly during the interviews. Lee (2004) reported that there were some 44,000 unemployed graduates in 2002 and Gopinathan (2003) added:

One of the difficulties faced by these unemployed graduates was their low proficiency in the English language. This lament became a motivating push for the revival of English seen necessary “for its utilitarian value, for employment and for guaranteeing access to the science and technology of the West...” (p.21).

#### **4. The MUET and its implications for Tertiary Language Proficiency**

In line with the paradigmatic shift from a narrow focus to a wider knowledge based purpose in the use of English, a milestone language policy that affected the attainment for local tertiary students was initiated with the emergence of the Malaysian University English Test

(MUET) in 2002 for pre-tertiary studies. The MUET was seen as providing the essential continuity in the exposure and use of English for students after leaving the general school system, that is, after obtaining the fifth form school-leaving certificate. In other words, students who aspire to further their studies in the local tertiary institutions will need to sit for the MUET before they can be accepted into the institutions. This gave the impetus for English to play a bigger role in the national education system.

The MUET came into being as a result of a number of factors. The main reason was the concern expressed about the decline of the state of the English language that has serious national repercussions. This was traced in part to the inadequacy of the STPM curriculum (the preparatory years for tertiary education) where English was not taught at all. The Ministry was also especially concerned about the undue emphasis placed on the provision of remedial English at tertiary level as this seems to be incongruent with the core business of universities education. In its effort to converge diversities in the conduct of English language courses among tertiary institutions, the Ministry suggested the setting up of an inter-university/college committee to discuss the prevailing situation and to make recommendations to overcome existing shortcomings.

Language policies among tertiary institutions in terms of spelling out the number, type and level of English proficiency courses undergraduates need to follow in order to graduate differed widely. It was found that compulsory credits for English courses ranged from 4 -12 and contact hours per week ranged from 3-16 accordingly. In the universities, the number of students serviced ranged from 4500 to 11000.

On December 22, 1998, the Minister of Education who chaired the Higher Education Council, announced that all students who wish to apply for a place in a university, be it private or public in the year 2001, will have to sit for a special English test, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The 1999 MUET Syllabus and Test Specifications were prefaced as follows:

*The syllabus aims to equip students with the appropriate level of proficiency in English so as to enable them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary level. Broadly, the syllabus seeks to bridge the gap in language needs between secondary and tertiary education by enhancing communicative competence, by providing the context for language use that is related to academic experience and by developing critical thinking skills through the competent use of language skills.*

However, when the policy was translated into practice, it was confined to apply only to the public universities. To date, the MUET now held thrice a year had been taken by thousands of students with the following information issued for its initial implementation.

Table 1. Relative Weighting of the Four Language Skills in MUET

| Paper            | Skill                    | Time       | Weight | Score |
|------------------|--------------------------|------------|--------|-------|
| 800/1            | Listening                | 30 minutes | 15%    | 45    |
| 800/2            | Speaking                 | 30 minutes | 15%    | 45    |
| 800/3            | Reading<br>Comprehension | 90 minutes | 40%    | 120   |
| 888/4            | Writing                  | 90 minutes | 30%    | 90    |
| Aggregated Score |                          |            |        | 300   |

A six point scale used was for the interpretation of aggregated scores. Thus proficiency was reported in the following manner:

Table 2. Description of MUET Aggregated Scores

| <b>AGGREGATED SCORE</b> | <b>BAND</b> | <b>USER</b>            | <b>COMMUNICATIVE ABILITY</b>  | <b>COMPREHENSION</b>                                | <b>TASK PERFORMANCE</b>                          |
|-------------------------|-------------|------------------------|---|---|--|
| 260-300                 | 6           | Highly Proficient User | Very fluent, accurate, highly appropriate use of language; hardly any grammatical error | Very good understanding of language and context     | Very high ability to function in the language    |
| 220-259                 | 5           | Proficient User        | Fluent, appropriate use of language; few grammatical errors                             | Good understanding of language and context          | High ability to function in the language         |
| 180-219                 | 4           | Satisfactory User      | Generally fluent, generally appropriate use of language; some grammatical errors        | Satisfactory level of understanding of the language | Satisfactory ability to function in the language |
| 140-179                 | 3           | Modest User            | Fairly fluent, fairly appropriate use of language; some grammatical errors              | Fair understanding of language and context          | Fair ability to function in the language         |
| 100-139                 | 2           | Limited User           | Not fluent; fairly appropriate use of language ; many grammatical errors                | Limited understanding of language and context       | Limited ability to function in the language      |
| Below 100               | 1           | Very Limited User      | Hardly able to use the language   | Very limited understanding of language and context  | Very limited ability to function in the language |

Undoubtedly, the MUET has given a new benchmark for a national display of proficiency for pre-tertiary students. A sample synthesis of the scores obtained since its implementation is shown below:

Table 3. MUET Results According to Bands (2002 – 2006)

| Band         | No. of Students | %      |
|--------------|-----------------|--------|
| 3            | 256845          | 32.76  |
| 2            | 247421          | 31.56  |
| 4            | 130332          | 16.62  |
| 1            | 115182          | 14.69  |
| 5            | 32741           | 4.18   |
| 6            | 1504            | 0.19   |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | 784,025         | 100.00 |

It is seen from the table that the bulk of the students obtained scores between bands 2-3 (64.32%) with 14.69 % in Band 1. Thus we have a large range of very limited users to modest users (hardly to fairly fluent).

As a result of the MUET implementation, tertiary level English proficiency programmes underwent a revamp. Many new courses in universities were designed with an ESP orientation. Academic English was emphasized accompanied by courses that provided workplace preparation.

### 5. The use of English for Mathematics and Science and its relation to English proficiency

While the policies at the universities continued to give students the English language contact and experience, it was also evident that the concern about English proficiency needed to be also addressed at the school level where early learning is moulded. In the context of the rapid developments in science, technology and business, knowledge of which is secured predominantly through English, Malaysia embarked on varied educational strategies to meet the nation's needs. Among them were sending students overseas, and allowing more twinning degree programmes in which the medium of instruction is in English. However, these measures had resulted in many problems, among which, were undesirable capital outflow and cultural destabilization (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997). One other approach was to develop an effective global network of information system in English based primarily on "an English sociology of knowledge" (ibid, p. 244). This means efforts to improve English language had to be accelerated so that the tertiary student would have the necessary advantage for global operations.

Accordingly, the Education Minister announced a genre specific approach in the learning of English in 2003 *English for Science and Technology* was introduced and it was to be taught as an additional subject alongside the existing English language subject starting from the Secondary Four level (Mazlin et al. 2011). A converging decision to strengthen the move in this direction was the successive introduction of the policy to teach mathematics and science in English. *English for Science and Technology* was seen as a prelude to the teaching of mathematics and science in English. *English for Science and Technology* helped to kick-start the orientation towards the prioritized use of English to teach mathematics and science as a long-term education plan. The implementation of the new policy of using English to teach mathematics and science was quick and decisive, reflecting the urgency of training technocrats (Chan & Tan 2006, Musa 2003). This implementation of the new policy in 2003 was simultaneously carried out at Primary one, Form one and Form four. The rationale was to create the immediate environment for the use of the language at the beginning primary level

and also to reach the older students at the secondary level at the same time. This action in fact was spelt out in definitive terms as the sixth curriculum challenge (among eight identified by Wan Zahid Noordin, 2002). It reads:

The sixth is the challenge of establishing a scientific and progressive society, a society that is innovative and forward looking, one that is not only a consumer of technology but also a contributor to the scientific and technological civilization of the future.

(ibid. p.29)

In turn, the significance of the change for English in higher education was reported as: “All public universities will also have to switch to English as the medium of instruction in science and technology subjects in 2005 when the first batch of STPM students taught in English enter university”(Sunday Star, 21 July 2005: 2).

In justifying his decision, the former Prime Minister said:

We do not want to be involved in an academic exercise. You know how it is; when the Government decides and writes a paper on it, people will study the paper and criticise the paper and give their own ideas and all that and we will be bogged down by academic discussions and not doing things and we want things done. So we minimise reasoning and polemics as much as possible.

Gill (2002: 110–113)

Following the policy implementation, preparations at the universities to reflect the growth of the language contact was launched with timelines as follows:

Table 4. Stages of implementation of English as a medium for science and technology education at universities

| <b>Stages</b>        | <b>Progression of implementation</b>  |
|----------------------|---|
| Stage I: 2004/2005   | Content for 1st year students within the stipulated ratio (30%)                   |
| Stage II: 2005/2006  | Content for 1st and 2nd year students within the stipulated ratio (30%–50%)       |
| Stage III: 2006/2007 | Content for 1st, 2nd and 3rd year students within the stipulated ratio (50%)      |
| Stage IV 2007/2008   | Content for 1st, 2nd and 3rd year students within the stipulated ratio (50%–70%)  |
| Stage V: 2008/2009   | Content for 1st, 2nd and 3rd year students within the stipulated ratio (70%–100%) |
| Stage VI: 2009/2010  | 100% use of English in science and maths subjects                                 |

This schedule was agreed upon by all vice-chancellors and rectors of the country’s 17 public universities (Gill 2006). While efforts in improving English in tertiary institutions basically remained stable, the scene at the school level was effervescent. Debates on learning English

through the math and science language policy were continued by many quarters that opposed the change. While proficiency in English is generally lauded, it was difficult to compromise on the approach taken for the learning of the language. In 2009, the policy of teaching math and science in English was reversed and replaced by a policy that proclaims a dual approach of “Upholding Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthening English”. A flurry of suggestions was offered on how the policy could be implemented amidst continual expression of the need for choice in developing proficiency in the English language.

The rift in opinion appears hard to mend and the differences in opinions can be damaging for both the individual and the society. The controversy led one retired English language teacher to suggest that a tiered system of reporting proficiency may be the desirable outcome to satisfy the different stakeholders. She opined that perhaps a sensible approach in defining the desired level of proficiency is to offer a choice of different levels of examinations for different purposes. For example, for those who desire to pursue the learning of the language on a deeper level, they should aim for an expert level of proficiency, while an elementary level could be the benchmark for all students who do not need the language beyond basic communicative competence. This level may then be the realistic level for all to pass to indicate minimum proficiency in the language (Sunday Star, 2011).

## **6. Benchmarking Language Ability for the Workplace**

Meanwhile, the university continues to wrestle with approaches to provide students with a level of proficiency in English that is considered to be suited to industry needs. The pragmatics of getting their graduates employed after university education remains a social responsibility on the part of the university. The lack of communication skills is said to be a major factor among those who failed to secure gainful employment. The future for these people would be bleak.

Expectations about English language proficiency remain high, with little indication of a radical change in future opinion. Thus it would appear that whatever the policies practiced, a ‘projected’ predetermined level of proficiency among graduates has remained constant and unwavering, especially for graduates who wish to work in multi-national companies. These companies appear to have equated work efficiency to a great extent with communication skills. Like it or not, that is the reality with regard to the definition of English language proficiency for the commercial workplace. The future of how it can be best reported is, however, left to a broad mutual understanding on the part of government, academics, students, industry and society. The different parties should collaborate to establish a workable framework or frameworks that can be used to report on the standard of achieved proficiency to satisfy expectations, bearing in mind different needs that may be domain specific.

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