

IS IT EAP OR ESP? THE WIND OF CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

The Centre for General Studies at UKM (National University of Malaysia) undertakes the duty to equip the university undergraduate students with English proficiency together with other soft skill courses. We offer English Proficiency courses in which students must to complete the University's credit unit requirements before they exit UKM. A recent awareness amongst the practitioners trigger the need to restructure the English courses offered to the students where we decided to 'blow a wind of change'. This paper highlights the review of English courses offered and the measures taken to map out the nature of English courses to offer in the restructuring. It is found that factors such as the allocation of English learning hours, a review on the previous English language courses, student exposure vs. students' level of proficiency and Malaysian workplace demands are relevant and significant in determining the nature of the courses; whether EAP or ESP.

Keywords: ESP / EAP, Academic Discipline, English Proficiency, English language teaching, Course design

1.0 Introduction

Is it ESP or should it be EAP? These are the frequent questions in the minds of ESP / EAP (the commonly known terms) practitioners. Hyland (2006) states that EAP in short is "specialized English language- teaching grounded in the social, cognitive and

linguistic demands of academic target situations, providing focused instructions informed by an understanding of texts and the constraints of academic contexts”. For those teaching in Asian context such as in Malaysia, such dilemmas boggle the minds of the university language tutors.

English is the second language in Malaysia and English Language proficiency receives considerable attention in schools in Malaysia where the subject has become a compulsory taught subject over the years in primary and secondary schooling years. This is pursued even up to tertiary level in public and private universities in Malaysian, given the scenario whereby English is used as medium of communication other than the mother tongue, Bahasa.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, UKM is one of the earliest public universities officially established in 1970. It was formed on the basis of establishing a university that could meet the educational needs of the Malays and the development of their language. It beholds a mission that safeguards the sovereignty of the Malay language while globalizing knowledge in the context of local culture and its educational aim is to produce graduates who are imbued with confidence, ethics, leadership and national integrity who are able to engage internationally. The mention of ‘globalizing’ and ‘internationally’ thus places the study of English a significant emphasis on the tertiary education at UKM. The baton is passed on to the Centre for General Studies to be responsible for the teaching of English Language Proficiency to the UKM undergraduates. UKM undergraduate’s programme requires the student population to take English, without which, students cannot graduate if they have not taken the required credits of English proficiency subject.

1.1 Teaching & Learning of English Proficiency at UKM

The English language teaching at UKM has undergone several programme structures since its establishment in 1970. Attempts have been made to provide the most appropriate English proficiency syllabus and structure that best suit the needs of UKM students. The dilemma situates within the approach to teach General proficiency, EAP (English for Academic Purposes), ESP (English for Specific Purposes) in which UKM has over the years adopted. The Centre for General Studies UKM has blown ‘a wind of

change’ in its structure of English teaching and learning in equipping UKM students with the necessary English language proficiency skills. A new structure of the English Language Proficiency Program was approved by the University Senate June 2009 and its implementation had taken place effective of the new 2009/2010 student intake.

1.2 Previous English Language Proficiency Programme

The University requires all students to complete a 4 credit unit of English Language Proficiency courses where each course is allocated a 2 credit unit other than the Foundation English course (4 credit unit). This means that students need only to take two English courses; a course per semester during that entire tertiary study at the university. Students attend 2 sessions of a two hour class for each semester. As for students who needed to take Foundation English, i.e. these are students of the low proficiency level; they are only required to take English once as they would have then completed the university requirement in their entire period of study. The course was requested to be offered to the first year students during their first year of study due to some administrative matters within faculties and universities.

The courses offered to the students were based on their MUET band results. MUET is an abbreviation for Malaysian University English Test. All candidates before entry to the local universities would have to sit for this test and the result is based on a score of band 1 –band 6 with band 1 as the least proficient. The English courses that students would have to take during their study years are based on their MUET results. The teaching of English proficiency was based on the teaching components such as shown in Table 1.

Table1: Previous English Language Proficiency Programme

Band 1-2	Band 3-6	Band 3-6
To equip students with basic English sentence structure in writing and speaking	Termed as EAP courses Reading of specific discipline texts	Termed as the LSP courses Speaking , analytical reading and writing skills

Foundation English	e.g. English for Law English for IT English for Business English for Islamic Studies English for Science & Technology English for Social Sciences English for Engineering	e.g. Speech Communication Public Speaking Interactive Reading Critical Reading Report Writing
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From the table, one can see from the titles of the courses that the nature of courses offered appear EAP based courses for Bands 3-4 while ESP for Bands 5-6. The EAP courses were supposedly to cater to the needs of students from the respective subject disciplines where much was focused on reading texts and materials of each discipline. The LSP courses on the other hand were offered as a follow up to the EAP courses. The structure then was believed to be most appropriate to cater to the needs of the undergraduate students of UKM.

1.3 The Wind of Change

For about more than 10 years, students of UKM had undergone the same structure of English Language programme. Similarly, the team of language instructors at UKM taught the same programme structure over these years. With the newly appointed Vice Chancellor with its newly appointed top management team plus remarks made by respective Deans of faculties, a concern over UKM graduates' level of English competence in general has been raised. A call for an attempt to revise the programme structure was deemed necessary and thus, the *wind of change*. The change was triggered by the three main concerns. They are:

- a new program needed to meet the new and challenging demands from the university, lecturers and more importantly, the industry

- the general perception that UKM graduates still lack English proficiency in general and mainly to function at workplaces
- the University ISO requirements: all courses have to be reviewed and assessed every 5 years

2.0 The New Structure of ELP (English Language Proficiency) Syllabus in UKM

The language team had taken the three main factors into consideration in the restructuring of the new ELP syllabus. They are as follows:

- Theory and practices
- Research findings
- A need to bridge the gap between English taught at our tertiary level and the English needed in the Malaysian work contexts.

2.1 Theory and Practices: ESP / EAP / General English

A dilemma situates to what English needs to be taught? Whether it is English for Specific Purposes, English for Academic Purposes or General English; terms of ELT (English Language Teaching) that have been commonly discussed and highlighted. How is English for Specific Purposes, English for Academic Purposes or General English defined in the context of Malaysian tertiary level and more specific UKM's context? UKM's team of language instructors have gathered and decided to firstly reflect on UKM's previous programme structure and programme structure of other public universities. Later to map out the purposes for the teaching of English to the undergraduates of UKM and outline out the most relevant structure.

2.2 The Reflection

The team reviewed the previous course structure through a presentation of its course syllabus from the various course coordinators focusing on their objectives and their course content. At the same time a task force was assigned to seek information from three other public universities (UPM Universiti Putra Malaysia, UIA University of Islam and UiTM Universiti Institute of Technology Malaysia regarding the English course programmes offered to their undergraduates.

The presentation revealed several significant findings. An overview of the findings is that the current courses firstly do not in many of the courses specifically tailor to the actual use of English in UKM academic setting; especially so with the EAP courses. For instance, it defeats the purpose of an EAP teaching such as reading texts and materials of respective subject disciplines when students in most faculties have reference books that are majority in Malay to read. On top of that, the lectures are conducted mostly in Malay and exams are also in Malay.

The LSP courses supposedly are LSP indeed based on its definition and as the course title suggests. But they do not cater to students' actual needs in preparing themselves for workplace English in the working arena once they exit. There appears to be a 'gap' between what is offered to these students at the university before they exit and the immediate English needs once they exit.

The findings from other universities show a general scenario of the kinds of English offered to undergraduates which are EAP course titled and for one or two other universities, a professional English course titled was offered. This resulted to a consensus amongst the team members to agree upon the types of English to offer. It was obvious that a need to map out a course structure that should cater to the needs of UKM undergraduates was addressed.

2.3 The Map Out

In mapping out the structure, the team put forth the students' needs to learn English as its spine and to triangulate the purpose of teaching English to UKM undergraduates. In defining the students' needs, we take into consideration the term ESP and to adopt Dudley-Evans and St. John's (1997) definition of ESP as the basis in the creation of the new structure. We place the emphasis on their claims that:

- ESP is defined to meet the specific needs of learner
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves
- ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities

- ESP is not necessarily related to a specific discipline
- ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners (university students)
- ESP generally designed for intermediate or advanced students

2.4 Previous Research Findings

The next consideration was based on UKM's research findings based on a recent study by Norizan Abdul Razak (2007) on the quality and marketability of local graduates. The study indicated that Malaysian GLC employers ranked English language competency third as one of the required qualities that they expect from graduates.

2.5 Bridging the gap

In bridging the gap between English taught at our tertiary level and the English needed in the Malaysian work contexts, several issues were addressed.

2.5.1 Learning Hours / Amount of Exposure to English in the Classroom

One of the constraints of student learning hours and time exposure to English learning at UKM were issues that were taken into consideration. Students are allocated only four credit units for English subject. The courses were offered during their first year degree programme which means no exposure to English learning for the next 2-3 years before students graduate and exit UKM.

Their learning hours is confined to 4 hours a week with 2 hours per class tutorial session of 14 weeks per semester. This applies to all students with MUET band result of 3-6 and differs than those who are of the least proficient (band 1-2) where Foundation English was offered only in one semester and during this time Foundation English carries a 4 credit unit as a whole. This led to students of the weakest proficiency to be exposed to only one English course and only a semester's exposure to learning English.

2.5.2 Review on the nature of Previous ELP courses in UKM

It was decided that a review on the nature of previous ELP courses in UKM was necessary before the process of re structuring even begins. As for the Foundation English course, the practitioners observed that these weak proficiency students have too little time

of exposure to English learning environment. It is of a concern that these students would have difficulties to learn and master the competence skill effectively within a short period of time. Moreover, it was brought to attention that these students undoubtedly have no workplace English training.

As for the Level 1 (refer table 1) courses; i.e. the so called EAP courses where English taught was supposedly tailored to the readings of texts of specific disciplines, several issues were also raised. They are as follows:

- UKM : was established as a National university that upholds Bahasa/ Malay (mother tongue) as its medium of instruction
- Lectures are generally delivered in Malay generally with most subject content lectures– some exception perhaps with the Science based faculties.
- On-going and Exam Assignments are mainly in Bahasa / Malay
- Students have the tendency to use reference books that are in Bahasa / Malay than English

In light of the above raised issues, the team concluded that all these defeated the purposes of EAP courses in nature. As with the Level 2 courses (refer table 1); i.e. further courses that were skill based in nature, there also raised some issues of concern.

- Some components of a specific course were redundant to level 1 courses : e.g. English for Business & Report Writing
- Students were required to choose ONLY one course : often pre determined depending on Faculties e.g. Faculty of Informatics Technology were required to take Public Speaking

It was realized that there exists an inequality between what training was offered to the specific proficiency levels of the students as well as to what is in store in Malaysian workplace demands.

2.5.3 English courses exposure vs. students' level of proficiency

The nature of the previous structure reveals that students of different levels of proficiency gained different exposure of English language teaching. Students of the weakest level of proficiency were only exposed to Basic English whilst students of upper

levels were exposed to different English as their courses were pre determined by respective faculties. This creates a loophole or a ‘handicap’ in preparing students with better English and more purposeful English during students’ tertiary learning.

2.5.4 Malaysian Workplace

Concerns over the demands of Malaysian workplace demands were triggered by specific issues such as:

- English is a 2nd Language

Most job interviews are commonly conducted in English in Malaysia workplace. Thus, job advertisements, applications and interviews are dealt in English.

- Growth of Multinational companies

The mushrooming of multinational companies in Malaysia offers vast job opportunities for newly graduates. The interaction between locals and internationals in correspondences and tele-conferences is a no escape.

- English as language medium

English has become the language medium in most private companies and has become important also in public sectors with meetings, discussions and negotiations taking place in English.

3.0 Aims and Goals of the Proposed Structure

The team of language practitioners at the Centre for General Studies at UKM has thus proposed a new structure that places aims to cater to 1) students’ needs based on their level of proficiency 2) exposure of similar English learning to all levels of proficiency and 3) to prepare students with more purposeful English. It offers the students with a new scenario of English programme adapting an approach by Carter (1983) who places emphasis on the combination of English for Academic and Occupational Purposes.

“Reason perhaps for combining Academic and Occupational Purposes together under ESP: Often, the language learned for immediate use in a study environment will be used later when the student takes up a job” (Carter 1983)

It puts forth two major mechanism of English syllabus and that is *English for Academic Communication* and *English for Workplace Communication*. As the centre serves the whole undergraduate student population, we determine that all students must go through the spiral of *English for Academic Communication* and climbing up the spiral to *English for Workplace Communication* within the duration of study slots allocated for language proficiency studies before they exit. With the blown wind of change, we foresee this newly adopted structure to be more significant and more relevant to equip students with the skills to communicate well in English in both academic and workplace settings. This indicates our emphasis on the components we believe should be the thrust to equip UKM students with regard to Language Proficiency skills at tertiary level. The new structure offers a new facade of English courses:

- Foundation English (a pre requisite)
- Academic Communication
- Workplace Communication

Taking into consideration the need to cater to specific student proficiency level, Foundation English becomes a pre requisite for students of MUET bands 1 and 2. As for Academic Communication; Academic Communication 1 is offered to students of MUET bands 3 and 4 while Academic Communication 2 is offered to students with MUET band results of 5-6. This similarly applies for Workplace Communication course.

By adopting Carter's approach, we adapt our focus on two main mechanisms and they are:

- To equip students with reading skills in comprehending texts of various disciplines ; social sciences and scientific texts so as to be able to function in academic communication and or intellectual discussions
- To equip students with the use of English in Malaysian workplace settings

In the restructuring of this new programme, there is a significant move to retain English for Law in this new structure. This is due to the observations and feedback from our language instructors on the nature of use of English in law discipline where the academic demands lie very much in the reading and understanding of legal texts.

Table 2: The New Structure of ELP in UKM

Band 1-2	Band 3-4	Band 5-6
Foundation English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Communication I • Workplace Communication I • English for LAW 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Communication II • Workplace Communication II

An overview of the targeted learning outcomes is as the followings:

- Apply reading skills in comprehending various texts of academic disciplines
- Apply critical thinking skills in discussions based on reading
- Interact with degrees of proficiency in formal and informal academic settings
- Ability to utilize good interpersonal communication skills at workplace situations
- Ability to write effectively on work-related matters such as resumes, cover letters, reports and memos
- Ability to participate effectively in group discussions
- Ability to employ negotiation skills in a variety of work situations

3.0 Concluding Remarks

This paper has presented a scenario of ELT at tertiary level where English is not the mother tongue. It brings to attention issues of dilemma in ELT of undergraduate students. It also indicates how this new façade of structure offers an innovative measure in improving L2 student learners' mastery of the skill at tertiary level of education. It highlights that ELT at tertiary level in Malaysia and at UKM itself needs a considerable attention in designing its syllabus structure. Aspects such as student profiling, university policies and set ups, the bridge gap between students' learning and demands of the outside world need to be primarily taken into matter other than merely providing students with the types of ELT there is in the lit reviews. The team concluded that the so called the teaching of EAP or ESP was not the basis to determine the nature of English courses to offer at undergraduate level. It was more determined by what is to bridge the gap

between student existing profiles as English learners vs. the expectations of the workplace demands.

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