

Exploring Effective Communication Skills among Local and International Civil Engineering Undergraduates: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study focuses on issues faced by local and foreign undergraduates in communicating in English effectively in a public university in Malaysia. Apparently, there seems to be a gap in effective communication between the local students and the foreign students in speaking in English. This gap disrupts a smooth flow of discussion and understanding between the two groups of students during the course of learning while studying including lectures, lab activities, and projects. Therefore this study was conducted to identify the issues faced by the local and foreign undergraduates speaking in English to enhance the effectiveness of their communication. This case study was conducted by interviewing 10 participants comprising local and foreign. The thematic analysis highlighted three main issues including clarity, academic success, and cultural exchange. The findings also highlighted that the students perceived pronunciation and intonation as important aspects of communicating effectively. This study hopes to be an eye-opener to individuals and institutions with local and foreign students to be more aware of the effective use of English language circumstances within the diverse classroom environment.

1. Introduction

Malaysian and non-Malaysian engineering undergraduates studying in Malaysian universities encounter various challenges in speaking English. Malaysian students, although exposed to English in schools, often struggle due to a lack of practical application and limited exposure to English-speaking environments outside the classroom (Yusoff, 2018). Conversely, non-Malaysian students, particularly those from non-English speaking countries, may face language barriers stemming from differences in accents, colloquialisms, and cultural nuances (Zainol Abidin et al., 2020). These differences can impede their ability to communicate effectively with peers and faculty members, hindering academic performance and social integration.

Furthermore, both Malaysian and non-Malaysian engineering undergraduates may experience a lack of confidence in speaking English. This lack of confidence often stems from the fear of making mistakes and being judged by others, which is exacerbated by cultural expectations and educational systems that prioritize correctness in language usage (Goh & Matthews, 2017). As a result, students may shy away from participating in English-speaking activities such as presentations and group discussions, thereby limiting their opportunities for language practice and improvement.

While technical subjects are emphasized, language proficiency development in Malaysian universities may not receive sufficient attention (Aziz & Fauzi, 2019). Moreover, the curriculum structure in local institutions may not adequately address the specific language needs of engineering students, regardless of their nationality. Consequently, both Malaysian and non-Malaysian engineering undergraduates may struggle to express themselves confidently and accurately in English, especially in professional contexts where communication skills are essential for career success. Thus, research needs to be conducted related to tackling the important job of improving how well students express themselves, recognizing the special difficulties that both local and international students encounter. Being able to clearly express ideas, participate in positive conversations, and speak confidently is not just crucial for doing well in school. It's also a key part of getting ready for the worldwide professional environment they will step into after graduation.

2. Literature Review

Malaysian engineering undergraduates encounter several challenges when it comes to speaking English, predominantly due to the stark contrast between their native language, Bahasa Malaysia, and English. One of the primary obstacles stems from the lack of exposure to English-speaking environments outside of the classroom. Many students come from educational backgrounds where the medium of instruction predominantly remains Bahasa Malaysia, resulting in limited opportunities to practice English conversationally (Yusoff, 2018). Consequently, when they do need to communicate in English, such as during presentations or group discussions, they often struggle with fluency and confidence, hindering effective communication. Moreover, the fear of making mistakes acts as a significant barrier for Malaysian engineering undergraduates to speak English proficiently. This fear stems from cultural factors and societal expectations that place a high emphasis on correctness in language usage (Goh & Matthews, 2017). As a result, students may feel reluctant to speak up in English, fearing ridicule or embarrassment if they make errors. This fear of judgment can lead to a lack of participation in English-speaking activities, further impeding their language development.

Furthermore, the curriculum structure in Malaysian universities may not adequately address the specific language needs of engineering students. While technical subjects are prioritized, language proficiency often takes a backseat (Aziz & Fauzi, 2019). This lack of integration between language and technical education can leave students ill-prepared to communicate effectively in professional settings where English proficiency is crucial. Without proper support and resources to enhance their English language skills, Malaysian engineering undergraduates may continue to face challenges in expressing themselves confidently and accurately in English-speaking environments.

On the other hand, foreign engineering undergraduates studying at Malaysian universities face unique challenges in speaking English, particularly if they come from non-English speaking countries. One of the primary hurdles is adapting to the Malaysian accent and colloquialisms, which may differ significantly from what they are accustomed to in their home countries (Zainol Abidin et al., 2020). Understanding and interpreting Malaysian English, with its blend of British, American, and local influences, can be challenging for foreign students, impacting their ability to communicate effectively with their peers and professors. Moreover, foreign engineering undergraduates often struggle with English proficiency due to limited exposure to the language prior to their arrival in Malaysia. Many come from educational systems where English is taught as a second language but not extensively practiced in everyday communication (Zhang & Raza, 2019). As a result, when faced with the necessity of using English in academic and social settings, these students may find themselves grappling with language barriers, hindering their participation in class discussions, group projects, and extracurricular activities.

Additionally, cultural differences play a significant role in the challenges faced by foreign engineering undergraduates in speaking English at Malaysian universities. Cultural norms regarding communication styles, assertiveness, and hierarchy may vary between their home countries and Malaysia, leading to misunderstandings and discomfort in expressing themselves in English (Khamkhien, 2019). Overcoming these cultural barriers requires not only language proficiency but also intercultural communication skills, which foreign students must actively develop to navigate their academic and social interactions effectively in a multicultural environment.

Based on the previous research, some authors were found to support the idea that pronunciation and intonation in English are very important in enhancing communication matters for local and foreign students. However,

some researchers argued that there were other more important aspects of communicating in English effectively besides pronunciation and intonation. Both studies by Don (2023) and Sudarmo, (2021) who researched English-speaking skills in Malaysia and Indonesia respectively, stated that one of the most prevalent, but very intricate, activities to be taken into account while teaching English as a foreign language is oral communication in the language or known as English as Foreign Language (EFL). It was found that initially, students made three types of pronunciation errors. The first, and the most common type of errors stemmed from interference, intralingual issues, and developmental factors. They stated that in classroom communication, both lecturers and students influenced each other. Lecturers were responsible for identifying and correcting consistent errors, while students were urged to actively improve their pronunciation by understanding the theory and avoiding direct translation from their native language. In addition, Oh & Cui (2020) highlighted that practice makes perfect in speaking English, especially to local students who exhibited resilience and showcased a diverse array of strategies, encompassing both verbal and non-verbal approaches, to effectively navigate communication challenges arising from their accents. These strategies were employed to manage and overcome the barriers posed by linguistic differences, reflecting the students' adaptability and resourcefulness in ensuring successful communication despite the challenges presented by their accents.

Furthermore, Dussias & Piñar, 2010 and Sawir (2005) debated about how English as a second language (ESL) students known as international students should be noted in order to improve their English speaking skills. One of them believes that incorporating technology, particularly educational tools, contributes significantly to enhancing both their language proficiency and communication skills. These students utilize technology both within and outside the classroom to engage in English practice and to further develop their skills in writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Across the interviews, there is unanimous agreement among the students regarding the positive outcomes and advantages of leveraging technology in the process of learning a new language and understanding a new culture. Besides, Litte (2018) unveils instances of intercultural miscommunication by foreigners towards local individuals. The findings indicate that foreigners encountered challenges in both verbal and non-verbal communication. Verbal miscommunication encompassed areas such as lexical choices, paralinguistic elements (including the use of formulaic expressions), and phonological aspects, including accent and pronunciation. Non-verbal communication issues involved serious facial expressions, physical proximity to the respondent, and avoidance of eye contact. Hence, the amount of vocabulary in a person may give such a big opportunity to make connections.

However, a contradicting opinion from Wu et al. (2015), Baklashova & Kazakov, (2016), and Jarneby (2018), was that the local university should take notes about the behavior of international students such as slang and culture, while not taking the terms of pronunciation and intonation as a language barrier for both parties to communicate. In their research paper, they suggest key recommendations for local higher education institutions to assist international students, which are to establish English programs to address language barriers, promote awareness among local students and faculty about embracing international diversity through orientation and training and providing tutoring, counseling, and special orientation for international students to ensure academic success and cultural integration.

In an era characterized by globalization and interconnections, effective communication skills have become paramount for success in both academic and professional spheres. The ability to articulate thoughts, convey ideas, and engage in meaningful dialogue is crucial, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. However, English pronunciation can be challenging for both native and non-native speakers. The pronunciation of English words varies based on the various regions, and several contextual factors influence word pronunciation. Thus, this study focuses on enhancing speaking skills among undergraduates at the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Built Environment (FCEBE), at a public university in Malaysia by addressing the unique issues faced by both local and international students in communicating in English in the classrooms. Apparently, FCEBE at UTHM acts as a central point for the convergence of various cultures in the realm of higher education. It brings together local and international students who strive for academic excellence, creating a vibrant academic environment. FCEBE, with its diverse mix of cultures, offers a perfect environment to understand the many aspects of good communication. Local students, who have strong connections to the traditions and language of the area, share classrooms with international peers who bring various cultural influences and language backgrounds. However, this diversity also poses challenges, especially in terms of effective communication. The experiences need a careful way of developing communication skills that recognize and deal with the specific needs of each group.

The issue of understanding in communication between local and international students, especially in terms of pronunciation and intonation, is a crucial concern in an increasingly globalized educational environment. Local

students may encounter difficulties in comprehending international students who employ different pronunciation and intonation. These differences can lead to misunderstandings involving the meanings of words and phrases, resulting in a lack of clarity in conversations. For instance, international students may have accents or pronunciation styles unfamiliar to local students. This can give rise to confusion in understanding certain words, as incorrect pronunciation may lead to misconceptions. Additionally, variations in intonation and speech rhythm can also impact understanding, especially in fast-paced conversational contexts or classroom situations.

The objective is to identify the challenges faced by FCEBE (local and international) students in English pronunciation. Consequently, by delineating common challenges and identifying opportunities for improvement, the researchers aim to suggest targeted strategies tailored to the distinctive requirements of both local and international students. The study hopes to offer research-based suggestions for developing communicative competency. This is to provide FCEBE students with the effective communication skills they need to manage the challenges of a globalized environment by improving speaking skills among both local and international students within the FCEBE community.

3. Methodology

This research is a case study that focuses on assessing the English pronunciation and intonation skills of both International and Local students at a public university in Malaysia. The participants were from the Civil Engineering Faculty (FCEBE). A group of 10 students were selected to participate in this study. The study employs a qualitative method for data collection and analysis to identify the factors contributing to contemporary students' difficulties in pronunciation and intonation in speaking in English. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected second-year FCEBE undergraduates. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The participants comprised six local students and four international students. This selection is done to ensure that the respondents fulfill the research criteria developed based on previous and similar studies. The participants were asked to share their communication issues including the challenges and concerns in terms of speaking in English about pronunciation and intonation aspects. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The central issue addressed in this investigation is the potential negative impact of mispronunciation and inappropriate tone during interactions among FCEBE Department colleagues. Thematic analysis was conducted on the data collected by the researchers. This study recognizes the fundamental challenges faced by students with language difficulties, who may encounter challenges in articulating their thoughts clearly. The complexities inherent in effective communication within the academic setting at FCEBE necessitate a nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to speaking skill problems, specifically in pronunciation and intonation.

4. Discussions

A comprehensive exploration brought to light a consistent concern among FCEBE students regarding heightened sensitivity when establishing relationships with individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This study prompted an in-depth examination of communication dynamics, revealing notable variations in the abilities and backgrounds of FCEBE students from Malaysian and non-Malaysian student groups. These distinctions emerged as pivotal factors influencing the students' interactions. Based on the thematic analysis conducted, three main issues emerged: clarity of communication, academic success, and cultural exchange. Even when English is used as a first language, the idealism about pronunciation and intonation still becomes a main problem for both FCEBE Local students and FCEBE international students. The importance of English speaking, particularly in terms of pronunciation and intonation skills, is crucial for effective communication, both among local students and international students.

The first theme was related to clarity of communication. For FCEBE local students, clear pronunciation and intonation seem to enhance communication within a multicultural and diverse environment. It helps avoid misunderstandings and ensures that ideas are conveyed accurately while for international students, mastering pronunciation and intonation is essential for overcoming language barriers. It facilitates communication with local students and ensures that their ideas are understood clearly.

The second theme was related to academic success. In an academic setting, effective communication is essential for success. Local students feel that with good pronunciation and intonation skills, they can express their ideas clearly in presentations, discussions, and written assignments for FCEBE local students. On the other hand, FCEBE International students feel that mastering pronunciation and intonation is crucial for international

students to excel in their academic pursuits. It aids in understanding lectures, participating in class discussions, and producing written work that meets academic standards.

The third theme was related to cultural exchange. The FCEBE local students find that they may engage with international students to grab opportunities to learn about different cultures and perspectives. Clear communication facilitates meaningful cultural exchange. Meanwhile, for FCEBE international students, effective communication with local students allows them to share their cultural backgrounds, ideas, and experiences, contributing to a richer and more diverse learning environment.

It was found that, when it comes to establishing relationships with people who do not share their ethnic background, every FCEBE student expresses concerns about the over-sensitivity of both sides. There may be differences in the communication abilities and backgrounds of FCEBE students from Malaysian and non-Malaysian student groups. These results led to the conclusion that students might react and communicate differently from one another in studios and labs, among other learning venues. The demonstration of their capacity to identify these English components is necessary to assess the variety of the learning group. Thus, the findings highlight that both local and foreign students take speaking in English seriously by focusing on pronunciation and intonation as the main factors that can enhance effective communication.

Conclusion

The focal concerns of this research revolve around the heightened sensitivity observed in both parties (local and foreign students) when attempting to establish connections with individuals outside their ethnic backgrounds. Particularly, there is an interest in understanding the communication dynamics among FCEBE students belonging to Malaysian and non-Malaysian groups, as these groups may exhibit distinct communication abilities and experiences. Within learning communities, such as schools and research laboratories, individuals are likely to possess varied communication skills and response capabilities. It is imperative to comprehend these factors to accurately gauge the diversity within the learning group and recognize the nuances associated with different communication styles and backgrounds. The resolution to this issue involves awareness and collaborative practice in understanding pronunciation and intonation variations. Cross-cultural communication programs and opportunities for direct interaction can help improve understanding between local and international students, making the learning environment more inclusive and productive.

In conclusion, the research findings illuminate a significant aspect of the dynamics within FCEBE students, demonstrating that students exhibit distinctive reactions and communication patterns across diverse learning environments, including studios and laboratories. The nuanced display of their ability to identify and navigate English components serves as a focal point, shedding light on the intricate diversity within the learning group. This realization underscores the imperative need to tailor educational approaches to suit the varied communication styles and backgrounds prevalent among FCEBE students. The recognition of these nuanced interactions emphasizes the importance of fostering an inclusive learning environment that caters to the unique characteristics and preferences of the diverse student population within FCEBE. As educational institutions strive for effectiveness, acknowledging and adapting to these diverse communication dynamics is crucial for creating an enriching and supportive learning experience for all students.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

The authors confirm sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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