

Engineering Students' Challenges at Malaysian Technical University in Learning English as a Second Language

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Abstract: Language is a significant way of communication and crucial for human interaction despite its intricacies in usage. The advancement of technology has enabled people around the world to communicate with others using international languages such as English to participate in the current growing business and trade worldwide. Thus, this study was conducted to identify the challenges of learning English among engineering students. A total of 100 third-year students of an engineering faculty from a technical university in Malaysia participated in a survey. In addition, a semi-structured interview was also conducted where ten randomly selected participants took part in an interview. A descriptive statistic was used to analyze the data of the survey and thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data. The study showed that university students were facing problems with grammar usage, vocabulary acquisition, and proper pronunciation. The study suggests that students conduct more practice in English and find ways to overcome shyness to speak in English with others.

Keywords: Learning English, Second Language, language issues, university students

1. Introduction

Language is a very significant way of communication and crucial for human interaction (Shahid Farooq et al., 2012). Globalization and interconnectedness have increased the importance of immediate

and relevant ways of communication in this modern world. In addition, the advancement of technology has enabled people around the world to communicate with others from different locations using international languages such as English (Rao, 2019). Thus, such a common language (English) is needed for interacting in order to participate effectively in communication for various reasons including participating in the current growing business and trade worldwide. There are four main skills in English: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. These skills are essential to master the language. Listening and reading are the receptive skills that are utilized as channels for obtaining information, whereas speaking and writing are productive skills.

English is used as a second language in numerous countries, including Malaysia, India, and Singapore (Suryanto & Sari, 2021). In Malaysia, English language is highly stressed at all levels of school, from primary to higher education levels (Mohd Nor et al., 2019). Moreover, Malaysians need to master English effectively as it is engaged in various activities such as business, education, and management (Kashinathan & Abdul Aziz, 2021). However, English language is challenging for some students due to numerous language components including unfamiliar vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. Thus, teachers and learners need to find proper ways to overcome challenges in mastering English (Tippabhotla Vyomakesisri, 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify the challenges of learning English among students. This is important to suggest ways to help the students improve their English language skills.

2. Literature Review

Generally, students' talents and abilities to study are motivated by personal skills and demands, and the difficulties faced in learning English varied according to gender differences (Banditvilai & Cullen, 2018). Apart from that, Yacob and Md Yunus (2019) found that students' limited vocabulary and lack of knowledge of the language are two obstacles that caused the inability to express themselves in English where students became demotivated to use English as frequently as they could. Another study also stated that insufficient proficiency in grammar and vocabulary also could cause problems, especially in writing (Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2017). According to a previous study, the challenging aspect of learning English was pronunciation, which was more difficult than spelling where students were suggested to focus on pronunciation rather than spelling (Banditvilai & Cullen, 2018). Thus, students need to develop the ability to listen since it can assist them in identifying sounds that distinguish meaning, learning new vocabulary, and understanding grammar. Students also should possess good reading skills since they would learn new vocabulary through reading exercises. Many people could not understand the language due to a lack of reading and awareness of the meaning of particular English terms. This is because they are more likely to use technology to access social media and shop online rather than read online. According to Boonyarattanasoontorn (2017), writing difficulties among students are high due to many factors including anxiety which was the outcome of shortcomings in grammatical and vocabulary aspects. Therefore, learning English language among Malaysian undergraduates is deemed to be very challenging for a majority of them. Thus, this study was conducted to identify the challenges in learning English as a second language among the third-year students of BPB in UTHM and suggest ways to enhance the learning of English language.

3. Methodology

A mixed method was employed to achieve the objectives of the study. Firstly, a survey was conducted online on the targeted respondents. The items of the questionnaire were adapted from a questionnaire established by Banditvilai and Cullen (2018). It consisted of two sections: Section A (demographic) and Section B (language issues). The questionnaire consisted of a 5-point Likert scale with anchors ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A total of 100 third-year students of an engineering faculty from a technical university in the Malaysian southern region participated in the survey. The online questionnaire was distributed to the students via Google Forms. Next, a semi-structured interview was conducted to address the objective where ten participants were randomly

selected to participate in the interview. A descriptive statistic was used to analyze the data of the survey and thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data.

4. Results and Discussion

The data were analyzed in two categories. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed descriptively and data from the interview were analyzed thematically. The survey highlighted some important aspects of learning difficulties faced by university students in mastering English. The results are highlighted in the tables below.

4.1 Identify the Key Difficulties in Learning English

Table 1: Difficulties in learning English as a Second Language among students

Items	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation
I have a problem mastering English grammar	100	3.59	4.00	4	1.173
I have a problem pronouncing words in English	100	3.42	3.50	4	1.208
I have a problem in spelling words in English	100	3.25	3.00	4	1.048
I have a problem with English vocabulary	100	3.55	4.00	3	1.095

Table 1 shows the difficulties in learning English as a second language among students. The table indicates the number of respondents, mean, median, mode, and standard deviation for every difficulty. The mean for ‘I have a problem in mastering English grammar’ is 3.59, for ‘I have a problem in pronouncing words in English’ is 3.42, for ‘I have a problem in spelling words in English’ is 3.25, and ‘I have a problem in English vocabulary’ is 3.55. This observation shows that the key difficulty in learning English is the problem of mastering English grammar. After that, students have difficulty with English vocabulary as the second difficulty in learning English among students. Then, pronouncing words in English and lastly spelling words in English. Hence, mastering English grammar is the key difficulty for 3rd-year students of BPB in UTHM students in learning English as a second language.

4.2 Investigate the Problems of English Language Skills Faced by Third-Year Students of BPB in UTHM

4.2.1 Listening Skill

Table 2: Problems with English Language in listening skill

Items	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation
I do not know the vocabulary	100	3.20	3.00	3	1.119
I do not catch the meaning in time	100	3.43	4.00	4	0.997
I do not understand the accent	100	3.38	3.00	3	0.982
I cannot get the main idea	100	3.32	3.00	4	1.043

I cannot distinguish the sounds of similar words	100	3.45	4.00	4	1.009
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Table 2 shows the problems of the English language in listening skills. The table indicates the number of respondents, mean, median, mode, and standard deviation for every problem. The mean for 'I do not know the vocabulary' is 3.20, for 'I do not catch the meaning in time' is 3.43, for 'I do not understand the accent' is 3.38, for 'I cannot get the main idea' is 3.32 and 'I cannot distinguish the sounds of similar words' is 3.45. The main problem perceived in listening skills was that the students cannot differentiate between similar-sounding words. This is followed by the struggle with understanding the meaning of words in time, students not sure what accent the speakers used, students being unable to understand the main idea and students do not know the vocabulary. Hence, it is suggested that students can not differentiate between similar-sounding words is the major problem among third-year students of BPB in listening skills.

4.2.2 Speaking Skill

Table 3: Problems with English Language speaking skills

Items	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation
I have limited vocabulary	100	3.55	4.00	3	0.989
I am afraid of making grammar mistakes	100	3.71	4.00	3	1.066
I need to think in Malay first	100	3.49	4.00	4	1.087
I feel embarrassed to speak	100	3.60	4.00	5	1.163
I am afraid to mispronounce words	100	3.68	4.00	4	1.136

Table 3 shows the problem with English language speaking skills in five items. From the table it indicates the mean for 'I know limited vocabulary' is 3.55, 'I am afraid of making grammar mistakes' is 3.71, 'I need to think in Malay first' is 3.49, 'I feel embarrassed to speak' is 3.60 and 'I am afraid to mispronounce words' is 3.68. The main problem perceived in speaking skills was that the students are afraid of creating grammatical errors. This is followed by concerns about mispronouncing words, students being ashamed to speak in English, students with limited vocabulary, and students having to think in Malay first before speaking in English. Thus, it is suggested that the main problem for third-year students of BPB in speaking skills is students' fear of creating grammatical errors.

4.2.3 Reading Skill

Table 4: Problems of English Language in reading skill

Items	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation
I lack vocabulary causing misunderstanding	100	3.55	4.00	3	1.123
I need to translate the words into Malay first	100	3.45	3.50	3	1.086
I do not have strategies for reading	100	3.50	4.00	4	1.059

I do not understand the grammar or structure	100	3.34	3.00	3	1.075
I cannot comprehend the meaning and main points of the passage	100	3.42	3.00	3	1.037

Table 4 shows the problem of the English language in reading skills in five items. From the table it indicates the mean for ‘I lack vocabulary causing misunderstanding’ is 3.55, ‘I need to translate the words into Malay first’ is 3.45, ‘I do not have strategies for reading.’ is 3.50, ‘I do not understand the grammar or structure’ is 3.34 and ‘I cannot comprehend the meaning and main points of the passage’ is 3.42. The main problem perceived in reading skills was that the students lack vocabulary causing misunderstanding. This is followed by concerns about not having strategies for reading, students having to translate the words into Malay first, students cannot comprehend the meaning and main points of the passage and do not understand the grammar or structure. Thus, it is suggested that the main problem for third-year students of BPB in reading skills is that students lack vocabulary causing misunderstanding.

4.2.4 Writing Skill

Table 5: Problems of English Language in reading skill

Items	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation
I have only a small vocabulary	100	3.54	3.00	3	1.058
I am not sure of the grammar	100	3.73	4.00	3	1.024
I always think in Malay first and then translate it into English	100	3.44	4.00	4	1.113
I cannot write sentences grammatically	100	3.50	3.00	3	1.068
I do not know sentence structure	100	3.30	3.00	3	1.010

Table 5 shows the problem of the English language in writing skills in five items. From the table, it indicates the mean for ‘I have only a small vocabulary’ is 3.54, ‘I not sure of the grammar’ is 3.73, ‘I always think in Malay first and then translate into English’ is 3.44, ‘I cannot write sentences grammatically’ is 3.50 and ‘I do not know sentence structure’ is 3.30. The main problem perceived in writing skills was that the students were not sure of the grammar. This is followed by concern about students who have only little command of vocabulary, and cannot write sentences grammatically, students always think in Malay first and then translate into English and do not know sentence structure. Thus, it is suggested that the main problem for third-year students of BPB in writing skills is students are not sure of the grammar.

4.3 The Ways to Enhance the Learning of English in UTHM

4.3.1 Listening Skill

5 respondents suggested the same about the improvement of English language learning by listening and paying full attention to the correct words and songs in watching English movies. This is followed by concerns about students needing more exercise, listening to a video or podcast without subtitles,

listening to videos with different accents, doing English broadcast sessions or break time and students need to always focus when listening to instruction in English and take note of the new vocab and remember their accent. Thus, the suggestion for the improvement of English language learning at UTHM is to encourage students to always listen and pay full attention to the correct words and songs when watching English films.

4.3.2 Speaking Skill

A total of five (5) respondents suggested a similar improvement in English learning that students need to use English as a basis by having to regularly speak in English with family, friends, and lecturers. This is followed by concern about students' need to cultivate English language and presentation in English, more study, practice speaking alone and record it and hear your voice back to know your problem, surround me with the English language and find a conversation partner and record my conversation practice to work on the pronunciation. Thus, the suggestion for the improvement of English language learning at UTHM is that students need to use English as a basis by having to speak English regularly with family, friends, and lecturers.

4.3.3 Reading Skill

A total of five (7) respondents suggested a similar improvement in English learning. The suggestion is students need to find and prepare many books, novels, and comics that they like and understand the story to improve comprehension skills and list the grammar they do not know. This is followed by concern about students' need to adopt a culture of borrowing books from friends, taking notes while reading, and watching television programs and films with English subtitles. Thus, the suggestion for the improvement of English language learning at UTHM is that students need to find and prepare many books, novels, and comics that they like and understand the story to improve comprehension skills and list the grammar they do not know.

4.3.4 Writing Skill

A total of five (5) respondents suggested a similar improvement in English learning. The suggestion is students need to constantly increase their reading material in order to improve their writing and to know the new vocabulary, and grammar to be applied in writing. This is followed by concern about students need to do more exercise-related English language, encourage students to have conversations or exchange letters, practice more writing and find the mistakes such as spelling and grammar, focus on basic principles of grammar, writing, and spelling and student need to always write an essay to improve English because practice makes perfect. Thus, the suggestion for the improvement of English language learning at UTHM is that students need to constantly increase their reading material in order to improve their writing and to know the new vocabulary, and grammar to be applied in writing.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the subject of "what are the students' problems in daily English speaking activity at UTHM among BPB students" was addressed. We can conclude from the study's findings that many students lack confidence and are fearful of making mistakes while speaking English. When speaking English, they were likewise apprehensive and concerned. Students also struggle with a lack of motivation. The lecturer should push students to be more fearless in their English speaking. Pronunciation is a language issue. This issue is about the speaking factor that makes it difficult for students to communicate effectively in English. The majority of the students have trouble pronouncing words effectively.

They find it difficult to distinguish between how vowels and consonants are pronounced in English and how they are pronounced in Indonesian, which causes them to become confused when speaking vowels and consonants in English. After that, the majority of students claim that this factor makes it

difficult for them to communicate effectively in English. There are a variety of reasons why students struggle with vocabulary terms. To begin with, kids are too sluggish to practise speaking, and they are occasionally embarrassed to do so with their peers. Second, they're too sluggish to look up a word in the dictionary. They only consult the dictionary when they come across difficult or unusual terms in the lesson materials. Grammar comes last. Grammar is a challenge for students when it comes to speaking English. Students often use incorrect oral grammar when speaking English. They don't know everything there is to know about the subject. They do not have a thorough understanding of grammar tenses.

The students can improve their skills in English by focusing on the main difficulty of learning English and improving it. Also, students can improve their English skills by using what is suggested in this study to improve their reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills. Students need to do more practice in learning English for their future because nowadays companies would like to hire people that can speak other than their mother tongue, especially English. Meanwhile, lecturers should take the lead in ensuring that their lesson plans are effective while student learning becomes meaningful through various teaching methods to meet most of the students' learning styles and preferences. An empathetic teacher can motivate students who are reluctant to explore their maximum potential through consistent encouragement and self-confidence.

In addition, the psychological factors of nervousness and embarrassment also had little impact on their performance in lessons. When they experience nervousness and shyness, they are unable to express their ideas properly and at the same time, they are not confident in their abilities (Rusreena, 2018). By overcoming this problem, students are able to express their ideas correctly and also increase their confidence level. In addition, medium and low -skilled students need to proactively and consistently strive to improve their English proficiency until they are able to reach their maximum ability. In the end, the result will be the same achievement and success for both educators and students.

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