Perceptions Of Selected UiTM Penang Engineering Undergraduates in Learning Written and Spoken English

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Article Information

Abstract

Studies have shown that Malaysian undergraduates and graduates at workplace alike have inadequate competence in English grammar which affects their written as well as spoken English communication (Isarji, Ainiol Madziah, & Afiza, 2009; Jobstreet, 2009; Metom et al., 2013; Groves, 2013; Kaur and Sarimah, 2013; Norfazlika & Mohamed Ismail, 2014). Therefore, the main objective of the present study is to find out the perceptions of selected ESL Engineering undergraduates of Universiti Teknologi MARA Penang (UiTMPP) on the degree of difficulties they faced in learning written and spoken English. The instrument used in the study was a questionnaire adapted from Isarji et al. (2009) who had conducted a study on difficulties faced by selected undergraduates in International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Data were analyzed by SPSS. Results indicate that more than 80% of the respondents perceived they faced difficulties both in writing grammatical sentences as well as using grammatically correct language in spoken English. Based on the results, the researcher concluded that the respondents are ‘at risk level’ and urged UiTM to embark on necessary remedial interventions among the ESL learners. As the first measure, the researcher suggests UiTM to carry out benchmarking process among all the newly enrolled undergraduates of UiTM in the first semester on their grammar proficiency. Based on the results the language department would be able to streamline the undergraduates into the respective levels of English courses which would finally lead to achieving a more effective teaching and learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, English is a subject taught to students at all levels of education; from kindergarten to university. Students must learn and master English if they wish to be successful in their studies in higher learning and secure a job easily after they leave university. However, many researchers have reported that Malaysian ESL learners are weak in grammar (Norfazlika & Mohamed Ismail, 2014; Hijjo, 2013; Metom, Tom, & Joe., 2013; Groves, 2013; Kaur & Sarimah, 2013; Isarji et al., 2009; JobStreet, 2009). Based on the literature review, the bulk of suggestions made by researchers were to encourage instructors to focus on imparting grammar knowledge to ESL learners because grammar is important in mastering a language and they claimed that with grammar knowledge learners of English could utilize their knowledge to produce better written and spoken English.
**WHAT IS GRAMMAR AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?**

Based on the literature review, the meaning of grammar may be defined in two ways; the simplistic dictionary definition and the comprehensive language experts’ definition.


Secondly, from the comprehensive language experts’ definition (Swan, 2005; Newby, 1988), ‘grammar’ is a system of language that explains from the very basic level of how words may be appropriately formed so that it would be meaningful. Consequently, it proceeds to explain on how words may be appropriately arranged to form phrases, clauses and finally the sentences; all of which would be meaningful. Additionally, in order for these constructions to be meaningful the ‘grammar’ system of a particular language would also explain other elements and factors that should be considered such as time, purpose, and et cetera.

Hence, grammar is important because without grammar no language can exist (O’Grady, Dobrovolsky, & Katamba 1997). In line with this, Hughes (1986) mentioned that grammatical competence or incompetence would determine to what extent language performance can be achieved by an individual as far as his language use is concerned. In addition, the local researchers, Fatimah and Nor Aini (2008) also noted that knowledge of grammar is vital which would enable one to speak and write appropriately.

In a nutshell, it means that without grammar one would not be successful in using a language, and this applies to all students in Malaysia as well.

**PREVIOUS STUDIES**

In terms of spoken English, Norfazlika and Mohamed Ismail (2014) reported that the selected 25 final year engineering respondents of the International Islamic University, Malaysia (IIUM) are ‘still making errors which violate the accepted principles of Standard English grammar’ despite having learning English since primary school and being exposed to more ESL lessons while pursuing their degree programmes at IIUM which were conducted in English medium.’ Hence, they suggested that ESL instructors should guide and emphasize grammar teaching for the undergraduates at all levels of language correctness; that is, the different uses of grammar for informal and formal spoken English. In addition, focus should also be on the word level as well as the sentence level of grammar.

In terms of writing, a study by Hijjo (2013) on grammar use at word and sentence level among selected secondary Malaysian ESL learners showed that they lack ‘knowledge of the English grammar system’ and also ‘misapplying of the rules.’ Consequently, he suggested that all ‘school teachers at all educational levels to focus on these issues.’

Meanwhile, Isarji et al. (2009) carried out a study to find out the perceived beliefs on difficulties encountered by selected 612 engineering undergraduates of a technical university in Malaysia. Besides, the aim of the study was also to probe the perceived belief of 36 lecturers on the difficulties faced by the ESL learners. Results showed that 71% respondents perceived they have difficulties in writing grammatical sentences. Similarly, 73.3% of them also perceived difficulties in producing grammatically correct speech. Thus, the researchers suggested that instructors should ‘adapt, adopt or develop relevant materials and design suitable learning activities to ensure university students are better prepared’ not only in learning English but also for entering the employment world. Besides the students’ perceptions, the lecturers perceived that 94% of the ESL learners have difficulties in writing as well as speaking grammatically correct English.

Lastly, one of the foreign studies in writing of English is carried out by McNaught and Shaw (2016) among 94 commencing undergraduates of University of Notre Dame, Australia. Results demonstrated that the respondents faced problems in spelling, punctuation, vocabulary choice and grammar in their writing tasks in which majority of them were at the ‘borderline standard.’ They also described the respondents as ‘at risk’ level’ English users as far as writing is concerned. Hence, they suggested that there should be ‘a scope for direct instruction’ according to their needs in these four aspects. This is to ensure for a more effective learning outcome. In addition, the instructions should also be carried out consistently.

**BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

The present study is carried out among selected undergraduates of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) ESL learners who are learning English as a second language. Since grammar is the main factor causing problem in
written and spoken communication among ESL learners in Malaysia as reported by previous research findings, the objective of the present study is to find out the percentage of undergraduates who perceive they faced difficulties in grammar as far as written and spoken English is concerned.

Besides, apart from the research findings stated earlier about the weakness of grammar among ESL learners in Malaysia, in the context of UiTM, there are research findings (Mah et al., 2011; Syarifah et al., 2009) which reported that one of the factors why UiTM undergraduates and graduates have low English proficiency is due to their weakness in grammar. In addition, from the recent final examination result of April 2014 among semester one UiTM Penang ESL learners for the English course ELC120, there is evidence that the scores in the grammar section were very low (University Teknologi MARA, 2014). Specifically, the results were taken from two classes. Class one consists of 29 students from the science and technology faculty and class two consists of 25 students from the social science faculty. They were all ESL learners of UiTM Penang in semester one. This has been summarized in Table 1 below. Firstly, it shows that 83% of the students from the science and technology faculty and class two consists of 25 students from the social science faculty. They were all ESL learners of UiTM Penang in semester one. This has been summarized in Table 1 below. Firstly, it shows that 83% of the students from the science and technology faculty failed and only 17% managed to pass. Secondly, from the faculty of social science, it shows a 100% failure. As far as the students from the social science is concerned, a majority of them were the ESL learners in the Pre-diploma program of UiTM in the previous semester.

### Table 1
PERCENTAGE OF PASSES AND FAILURES OF SELECTED CLASSES FOR FINAL EXAMINATION IN GRAMMAR SECTION AMONG SEMESTER ONE DIPLOMA STUDENTS OF UiTM PENANG FOR SEMESTER DEC 2013 – APRIL 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class / Faculties</th>
<th>Pass %</th>
<th>Fail %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class 1 (N : 29)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; Technology Candidates</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class 2 (N : 25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science Candidates</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This scenario creates a problem which needs to be addressed. This is because UiTM is the largest higher learning institutions in Malaysia with the main campus in Shah Alam, Selangor and branches all over Malaysia. Evidently, it also consists of the largest student population in the country compared to other public universities. Hence, if the students’ problem of weakness in grammar is not addressed, at least among the learners of this study, it would negatively impact the overall outcome of their CGPA result as well as to UiTM in one way or another. In addition, we may not know if these situations do happen among other ESL learners in other UiTM campuses as well. If this happens, it may create additional problems to the one already existing among the learners in UiTM Penang campus, and consequently it would create bigger problems in this matter to UiTM as a whole. Thus, a remedial intervention is urgently needed.

However, before any intervention of teaching techniques could be introduced and implemented, a preliminary study should be carried out so as to ascertain to what extent is the seriousness of this problem. Hence, it is wise to initially find out the percentage level of the UiTM ESL learners who face difficulties in producing grammatically correct written and spoken English. Therefore, with this backdrop, specifically, the research questions are as follows:

i. What is the percentage level among the selected UiTM Penang ESL engineering undergraduates who perceived they faced difficulties in producing grammatically correct sentences?

ii. What is the percentage level among the selected UiTM Penang ESL engineering undergraduates who perceived they faced difficulties in producing grammatically correct speech?

**Methodology**

The present research employed a quantitative approach in which data were collected based on a questionnaire developed by Isarji et al. (2009). Data collected were analysed by SPSS. Results are presented in bar graphs. Respondents were 50 engineering ESL undergraduates learning English as a second language. Specifically, they were from the Electrical Engineering faculty. Sampling of respondents was by convenience approach. Data collection were carried out by the researcher himself by administering the questionnaires among the undergraduates.
RESULTS AND ANALYSIS
In this section, firstly results will be presented and analysed. Then, the research questions will be answered.

Fig. 1.
Perceptions of Undergraduates who faced grammar difficulties in writing
“I have difficulty in writing grammatically correct language”

Fig. 2.
Perceptions of Undergraduates who faced grammar difficulties in writing
“I have difficulty in using grammatically correct language”
Result Analysis

Figure 1 and 2 above present findings on the percentage of the selected engineering undergraduates in facing grammar difficulties in written and spoken English. The findings are based on two items. Firstly, for the ‘writing’ item the statement is “I have difficulty in writing grammatically correct sentences”; and for the ‘speaking’ item the statement is “I have difficulty in using grammatically correct language”.

Firstly, an analysis of Figure 1 shows that as far as the respondents are concerned, the data shows those who agreed they have difficulties in writing grammatically correct sentences outweigh those respondents who responded they did not have any or less difficulties. Specifically, the data shows 88% of the respondents agreed they have difficulties in writing grammatically correct sentences. Secondly, in terms of speaking Figure 2 shows that as far as the respondents are concerned, the data reflects those who agreed they have difficulties in speaking grammatically correct sentences. Secondly, in terms of speaking Figure 2 shows that as far as the respondents are concerned, the data reflects those who agreed they have difficulties in speaking grammatically correct sentences. Specifically, the data shows 86% of the respondents agreed that they have difficulties in using grammatically correct language.

Answering research questions

The two questions of the present study are:

i. What is the percentage level as perceived by the selected engineering undergraduates of UiTM Penang in facing difficulties in producing grammatically correct sentences?

ii. What is the percentage level as perceived by the selected engineering undergraduates of UiTM Penang in facing difficulties in producing grammatically correct speech?

Based on Figure 1 and 2, the data clearly reflected that more than 80% of the engineering undergraduates perceived they faced difficulties in producing grammatically correct sentences as well as producing grammatically correct speech in spoken English. Specifically, as reflected in Figure 1 it clearly shows that 88% of the respondents faced difficulties in grammar as far as writing is concerned and 86% faced grammar difficulties in spoken English.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, the researcher concluded that the respondents are ‘at risk level’ and urged UiTM to embark on necessary remedial interventions among the ESL learners. As the first measure, the researcher suggests UiTM to carry out benchmarking process on all the newly enrolled undergraduates of UiTM in the first semester on their grammar proficiency. Based on the benchmarked results the language department would be able to streamline the learners into the respective levels of English courses which would lead to achieving more effective teaching process and learning outcomes.

Although the result of the present study may not be generalized to other UiTM ESL learners conclusively, it is an insight to be pondered upon. It is advisable that further research be carried out among more UiTM ESL learners in the same campus as well as in all other campuses so that a more conclusive generalization could be made.

Last but not least, the results also support findings of previous studies which prove true that majority of Malaysian ESL learners are still weak in English grammar (Isarji et al., 2009; Jobstreet, 2009; Metom et al., 2013; Groves, 2013; Kaur & Sarimah, 2013; Norfazilka et al., 2014). This phenomena is also true in the context of UiTM ESL learners as supported by previous studies carried out by Mah et al. (2013) and Syarifah et al. (2009) in which they stated that a majority of UiTM ESL learners are still weak in English grammar. Hence, the researcher urges UiTM to embark on pro-active measures in addressing this problem. Even though most researchers discouraged grammar lessons to be fully carried out in the classrooms to address grammar problems among ESL learners, the researcher strongly agrees with McNaught and Shaw (2016) that there should be a ‘direct instruction’ focusing on the learners’ needs so that a more effective learning outcome could be achieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As stated earlier, the initial step that the researcher recommends is that UiTM should benchmark all the newly enrolled undergraduates in the first semester on their grammar proficiency.

Ideally, the instrument to assess the new ESL learners’ grammar proficiency should be based on the requirements of UiTM English program. In this context, the researcher recommends UiTM to develop a good
standardized English proficiency test for assessing the grammar proficiency among the new undergraduates as there is no such instrument yet. Presently, there is only the writing and listening placement test conducted ‘online’ (e-EPT) assessing the new UiTM learners at Diploma level (Dean Academy of Language Studies, 2014). It has been recently administered beginning from the December – April 2015 semester. Hence, with the additional grammar proficiency assessment test, it would complement the existing e-EPT written and listening test.

The value of this new grammar assessment test, as perceived by the researcher, lies in its ability to provide specific results of grammar abilities of the new students who enroll into UiTM compared to the SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) English result which is composite in nature. The grades the students gained from the English SPM result does not provide clear information to English language lecturers about the learners’ ability level as far as grammar is concerned. Thus, the researcher strongly perceives that by having a good grammar proficiency test to be administered among the new learners of UiTM, it would give a clearer information of the new learners’ English grammar proficiency. This perception could be supported by Norfazlika and Mohamed (2014) who noted that the SPM English result only provides a composite result which does not inform clearly which part of grammar students are weak or proficient in. Hence, he recommended for a more effective test to be created so that learners’ grammar proficiency could be assessed more effectively. Likewise, in the context of UiTM, the results from the English grammar proficiency test of the new learners into UiTM would enable lecturers to have a clear idea of the new learners’ language proficiency. Thus, a better and more informed lessons could be planned for more effective teaching and learning process which would hopefully lead to effective learning outcomes.

REFERENCES
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