

## COVER STORY

# Proficient way to better English

ZULITA MUSTAFA  
zulita@nst.com.my

**E**NGLISH language proficiency is an important factor in employability, especially in an era of globalisation.

While the level of proficiency among local undergraduates continues to be poor, should universities be responsible for improving their English language skills or should it come under the purview of teachers in schools?

For most Malaysians, the English language is taught to them formally through the education system from primary to tertiary level.

Dr Hazita Azman, a professor of Applied Linguistics and Literacy at the Centre for Literacy and Sociocultural Transformation at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), said these formal encounters are limited in terms of hours, use of the language and restricted to fundamental linguistic knowledge about the language.

At the same time, she added, as the English language is foreign to the majority of students, learning it will be a lifelong endeavour.

Associate Professor Dr Arshad Abd Samad, who is Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Centre for the Advancement of Language Competence director, said English proficiency is required at various levels of a student's education and at each, there is a different emphasis.

Arshad added that schools should provide students with basic proficiency to communicate in the language while universities focus on its academic aspect.

Language experts refer to these two kinds of language abilities as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

"Universities often find that some students are unable to use basic interpersonal language and therefore need to improve their ability before they can move on to the more demanding aspects of academic English."



**Over-reliance on instructors and institutions beats the purpose of preparing students for the workplace. If they consider themselves to be functioning adults, then they have to behave and learn like one.**

**ABU BAKAR RAZALI**  
English lecturer,  
UPM Department of  
Language and Humanities  
Education

English lecturer Dr Abu Bakar Razali from the Department of Language and Humanities Education at UPM said that apart from teachers and lecturers, other parties are not taking on the responsibility for providing students the teaching, learning, experiencing and practising of the English language.

The language has to be not only taught but also experienced and this is where, for example, the family, the neighbourhood and the workplace can step in.

"School teachers are already burdened with clerical tasks."

**THREE LEVELS**  
Hazita said that at university, three levels of English language proficiency are expected of undergraduates.

"Firstly, they are expected to have achieved at least the intermediate level and should be able to speak, read, write, understand and communicate in English.

"Secondly, they must master the language well enough to grasp specialised texts for academic purposes and synthesise them to generate critical views or knowledge to demonstrate opinions and new ideas.

"Thirdly, they must master enough language repertoire and related skills to function effectively in the language at the workplace so as to secure employment."

However, Arshad said many undergraduates are not confident to use the language as they are afraid of making mistakes, lack reading and prefer to hang out with friends who speak their mother tongue.

Hazita agreed that the lack of a reading culture among undergraduates and limited opportunities to speak the language are common factors affecting proficiency.

"The undergraduates have not acquired enough vocabulary in the language to be fluent users of it. They lament that they 'do not know the words' and are reluctant to express themselves and explain something in the language, even though they understand what they hear and read.

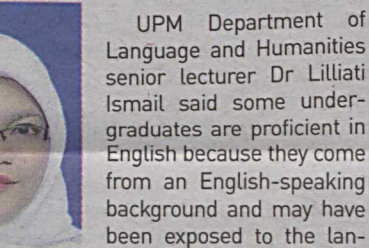
"Their dependence on lecture notes and simplified or translated texts further reduces their exposure to the language.

Even though the formal medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia, this should not curb reading in English or any language," she added.



Undergraduates aptly listening to trainers during an English language workshop.

**English workshops help undergraduates to develop communication and presentation skills.**



Lilliati Ismail

UPM Department of Language and Humanities senior lecturer Dr Lilliati Ismail said some undergraduates are proficient in English because they come from an English-speaking background and may have been exposed to the language from young while others may have limited access to resources in English.

"A positive attitude and a high motivation to learn the language can enhance proficiency."

University of Malaya (UM) Language and Literacy Education Department senior lecturer Dr Zuwati Hasim said undergraduates should show initiative such as organise activities at residential colleges and take part in student mobility programmes at English-speaking countries.

"These activities provide a platform to improve their writing, speaking and communication skills."

Hazita added: "UKM's decision to assess the

overall oral proficiency of its third-year students highlighted the focus on proficiency and its link to employability.

"The assessment led to more students' requests to hold oral presentations, while academic programmes included reading lists in English for students to read-and-respond."

## BEYOND THE CLASSROOM AT TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

The undergraduate's pathway in learning English at university is first determined by the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

The lower in proficiency at entry level, the higher the need for fundamental language knowledge and skills.

Most often students who are at this level require a rich and extensive input of the language as well as extended opportunities for language use.

Hazita said the English language curriculum at university comprises three categories — Foundation English, English for Academic Purposes and English for Workplace Communication.

Foundation English caters for the beginner where general linguistic knowledge and general English proficiency skills are given focus.

"This level is for in-coming students who achieved Band 1 and Band 2 levels in the MUET test. As the entry requirement for MUET Band 3 is not mandatory at most public universities, it is thus incumbent on them to provide training for students to attain the said level before they can go on to academic English."

MUET Band 1 and Band 2 levels are for the extremely limited user and limited user respectively while Band 3 level is for the modest user.

Those who have achieved Band 3 learn English for Academic Purposes to prepare for reading at the tertiary level.

"In both speaking and writing tasks, students are trained to synthesise and respond to the written information. Students in their second year or third semester at university learn English for Workplace Communication. Presentation skills are also given focus but not extensively."

Depending on the university, two to three credit hours are allocated for this basic level per semester.

The formal structure of the English language curriculum at the university is limited to the three categories and exposes students to only 80 to 120 hours of English per semester throughout the three years at university.

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment recommends at least 600 to 800 structured hours in a four-month term for an individual to achieve mastery at any one level of the six levels on the CEFR scale (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2).

"Therein lies the main problem with learning the English language at university as very limited time is allocated for the subject in the degree programmes."

Nevertheless, in an effort to provide additional exposure and opportunities for language use, the Language Centres, which are responsible for English language proficiency at university, do provide students the chance to experience English in action beyond the classroom and in collaboration with the faculties.

At UKM, English enrichment programmes are conducted beyond the formal structure through English camps, role-play immersion programmes such as Bravehearts, and English-speaking zones at residential colleges where debates and drama play-acting are held. However, these programmes are not compulsory.

UPM Centre for the Advancement of Language Competence (CALC) is responsible for raising English language proficiency of students.

Arshad said as the university expects its students to have a basic command of the English language, the modules focus on reading, writing and oral presentation skills.

"CALC has introduced the three-component English Language Experience (LEEx) package that allows students to use the language in a more meaningful and interactive manner.

"The first is the conventional course component delivered in the classroom with a focus on academic language required at university while the second is the Language Activities segment with no credit component which focuses on student interaction in English in order to complete specific tasks.

"For example, group discussions are conducted in English and to minimise student anxiety, the teacher plays only a peripheral role in the interaction.

"With the introduction of this package, students have become more willing to interact in the English language, which is a good first step towards better language proficiency, especially for less proficient students.

"Another part of the LEEx package is the Certificate in English Language Courses which focus on workplace or occupational language needs. We plan to also introduce higher level English language courses such as Critical Reading and Creative Writing for more proficient students so that they can hone their abilities in the language.

"We encourage outbound as well as inbound mobility programmes that allow students to use the language in real-life situations. Hence, language use is more meaningful and students will want to use good and correct language.

"At the same time, other entities in UPM, most notably the residential colleges, conduct activities that encourage the use of the English language through activities such as debates and drama and writing competitions," said Arshad.

Lilliati added that UPM has a stringent selection process to ensure that undergraduates are proficient in the English language.

"We further polish their English language ability and equip them with the necessary pedagogical knowledge and skills through courses such as content-based second language instruction and teach writing skills and grammatical descriptions.

"There is also a strong emphasis on teaching literature in English and developing classroom practices in line with current developments in second language teaching.

"The high quality of our graduates contributes to a supply of well-trained and proficient English language teachers in schools all over the country," added Lilliati.

Zuwati added: "The pedagogy of teaching the language should be fun learning. The lecturer should create modules in class that attract students to learn the language in a fun way.

"Encourage students to engage with their peers and lecturers in an interactive session and speak their mind."

There is no one best approach to teach the language as the lecturers are free to design their lesson plans.

Abu Bakar said in tertiary education, the focus of instruction, especially in the first few semesters of the students' English language learning experience, is on developing skills in reading, writing and communicating.

As their courses progress, students will be taught to read, write and communicate in their specialised fields of study.

## CONTINUUM

Hazita said in dealing with English language proficiency, the relevant ministries and agencies should put in place an English language education plan that is comprehensive and inclusive to ensure there is a continuum from school to the tertiary level and right up to the employer.

"The responsibility for helping the young generation to master the English language should not be confined to the school and university but should also be borne by the employing agencies.

This empowering approach will see all stakeholders collaborating rather than putting the blame unfairly on the school and university.

"If well implemented, the English Language Education Roadmap will realign responsibilities and ensure the continued development of language skills from pre-school to tertiary and employment," added Hazita.

Abu Bakar said when it comes to education, be it English, Malay, Math, Science or STEM, everyone should be responsible especially the student, parents and society.

"Undergraduates have the responsibility to improve their own learning, and not rely 100 per cent on teachers and institutions.

"Over-reliance on instructors and institutions beats the purpose of preparing students for the workplace. If they consider themselves to be functioning adults, then they have to behave and learn like one," he added.

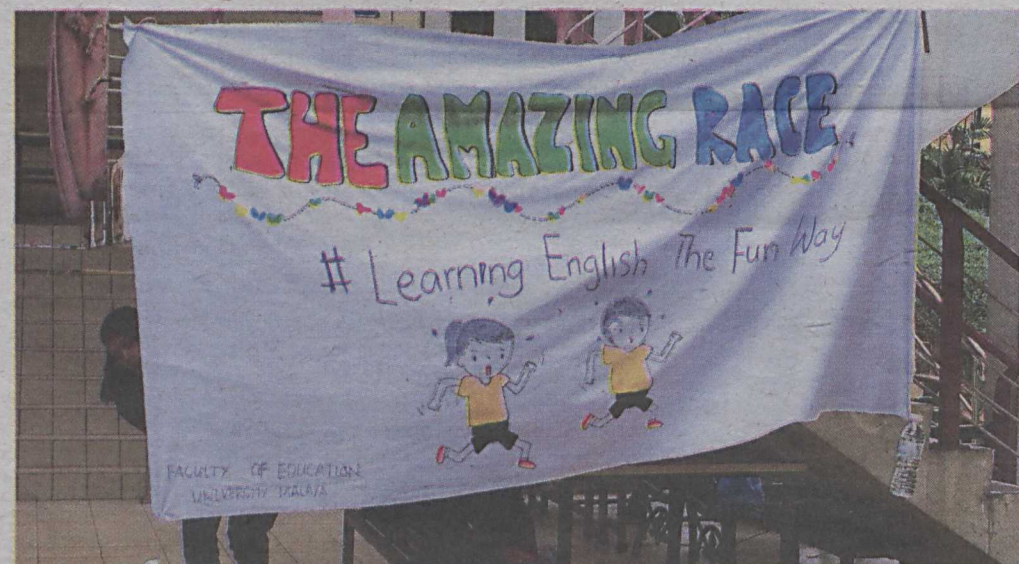
Zuwati said the university should provide a support system for tertiary students to learn not only general English but also the language used in these and dissertations.

"As students have different language exposure before university, the tertiary institution should emphasise content and language integrated learning such as English for communication, law, engineering and science undergraduates.

Arshad said universities should also try to give attention to workplace-related English proficiency even with the constraints of the curriculum that focuses on the content of the programmes.

"With a good functional ability in English, language skills can be honed while on the job."

With the implementation of the revised English language curriculum that is aligned with the CEFR beginning last year (for Year One and Secondary One), there is hope that the approach to teaching English and the purposes for learning it will be more communicative in nature.



UM Faculty of Education conducting The Amazing Race as part of learning English in a fun way.