UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

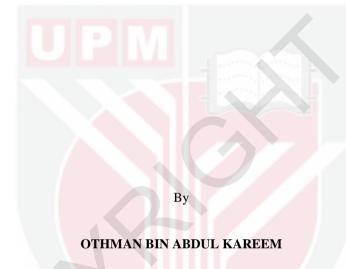*COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES IN IMPROVING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG NON-ENGLISH MAJOR UNDERGRADUATES IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY, MALAYSIA*

OTHMAN BIN ABDUL KAREEM

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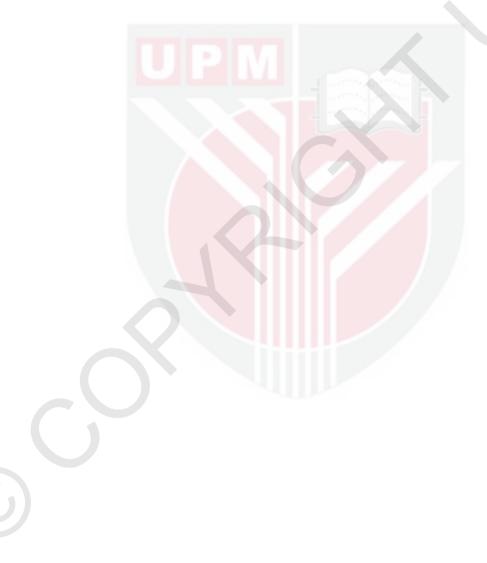
By

OTHMAN BIN ABDUL KAREEM

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science

April 2018

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES IN IMPROVING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG NON-ENGLISH MAJOR UNDERGRADUATES IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY, MALAYSIA

By

OTHMAN BIN ABDUL KAREEM

April 2018

Chairman   **: Othman Talib, EdD**
Faculty   **: Educational Studies**

This study examine the relationship of communicative activities and English language proficiency of non – English major programme undergraduates from various faculties at Universiti Putra Malaysia. 60 non - English programme undergraduates were selected based on their performance in a proficiency course and Malaysia University English Test (MUET) for this study. They were categorised into experiment and control groups. The experimental group will be exposed with several communicative activities while the controlled group has normal classroom lesson. This research employed pre- and post-tests, questionnaires and interviews as its instruments for data collection. The duration of this study was for one semester. The significance of findings indicated that there are relationship between these communicative activities in improving undergraduates' levels of English language proficiency**.** Impacts and implications of these findings are detailed in the discussion of this study.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

AKTIVITI KOMUNIKASI UNTUK MEMPERBAIKI KEMAHIRAN BERBAHASA INGGERIS UNTUK PELAJAR BUKAN BIDANG BAHASA INGGERIS DI UNIVERSITI TEMPATAN, MALAYSIA

Oleh

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Penyelidikan ini mengkaji hubungan antara aktiviti kemahiran akademik dengan kemahiran berbahasa Inggeris pelajar bukan bidang Bahasa Inggeris, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Seramai 60 orang pelajar bukan bidang bahasa Inggeris dipilih berdasarkan dua penilaian; iaitu satu kursus kemahiran bahasa Inggeris dan ujian *Malaysia University English Test* (MUET). Pelajar-pelajar ini bahagikan kepada dua kumpulan; kumpulan yang diselidik dan kumpulan yang dikawal. Kumpulan ynag diselidik didedahkan dengan pelbagai activiti kumunikatif manakala kumpulan yang di kawal hanya mengikuti pembelajaran seperti biasa. Kajian ini menggunakan kertas soal-selidik, ujian dan temuduga sebagai instrumen kajian. Tempoh kajian ini adalah selama satu semester. Penyelidikan ini telah menggariskan hubungan dan kesan aktiviti kemahiran bahasa terhadap tahap kemahiran bahasa Inggeris pelajar-pelajar yang terlibat. Implikasi dan cadangan akan dibincangkan secara lebih terperinci dalam kajian ini.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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I hereby confirm that:
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Declaration by Members of Supervisory Committee

This is to confirm that:
- the research conducted and the writing of this thesis was under our supervision;
- supervision responsibilities as stated in the Universiti Putra Malaysia (Graduate Studies) Rules 2003 (Revision 2012-2013) were adhered to.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KBSM	Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
KSSM	Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah
MOE	Ministry of Education, Malaysia
MCQ	Multiple Choice Question
ELE	English Language Learning
ESL	English as Second Language
L2	Second Language
CLT	Communicative Based-Teaching
EP	Experimental Participant
CP	Control Participant

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

English has been in the Malaysian's education for many years, and this could be related to the historical and educational backgrounds of the country. The development of the English Language Education (ELE) in Malaysia and its improvements during the pre and post-independence have been reviewed, critiqued and analysed extensively (Hazita Azman, 1999 & Wong, 2010). Other than that, English is used as a second language (L2) in ex-colonial countries of the United Kingdom or the United States such as Malaysia, India, the Philippines and Nigeria (Jantmary Thirusanku & Melor Md Yunus, 2012). Malaysia is one of the Asian countries that has adopted a multilingual education system. The main factor for this adoption is to establish a balance between the national and international requirements and challenges acknowledged through linguistic educational policies (Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013).

Since independence, English has been made as a compulsory subject in schools by policymakers. However, since the Malaysian education system has evolved and changed several times for reasons such as to empower *Bahasa Malaysia* as the main medium of communication in the country, the language medium policy has been altered several times as the government senses a decline in the result of the English language subject among students. The issue that arises is that most students who excel in their core courses have failed to continue their excellence in English and other English language-based subjects. For instance, students who manage to pass or excel in their English language subject at school fail to pass the subject at the university or college level. One possible reason is that the current school system is still exam-oriented.

Till today, the Malay language is viewed as the official language in Malaysia. Normazidah Che Musa, Koo Yew Lie and Hazita Azman (2012) mentioned that the national language or Bahasa Malaysia has a strong influence on the learning of the English language among Malaysian learners. The language is used in many circumstances, especially when dealing with private or international entities as English is used worldwide. People around the globe are aware that the only way to get information across or to close a deal is through English. In addition, English is the main medium of instruction for any kind of operations for today's technology. These are some of the reasons why Malaysians need to acquire and master the language.

In any languages, there are four crucial skills involved: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The same goes for the English language. However, amongst these four skills, speaking or oral communication is one of the vital tools for everyone to survive in

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today's society. Since young, students and learners have been drilled to answer English test or exam paper through writing. Nevertheless, despite scoring a good grade in the examination, they are still unable to master the English language. This occurs because most students learn English just to excel in examination, not to acquire the language. Unfortunately, failure to master the English language will lead to a deficiency in the language that can have an adverse impact on the future of the students, particularly those at tertiary level. Tertiary students need to have good communication skills for various reasons such as completing their assignments, preparing for presentations and tasks assigned and interacting with lecturers and administrators in regards to academic matters. Therefore, poor communication skills would be detrimental for the students' academic success and social interactions. Currently, the main problem among today's students is communication skills. Most students, even those at the tertiary level, have difficulties to convey their ideas academically. Firstly, students unable to present their thought effectively as language barrier occur. This will also affect them physically and mentally as well. Consequently, problems in English will hamper students' progress in their studies. For instance, even if the students are top scorers in a particular subject, they will not perform at their best if English is the requirement needed for that subject. They are unequipped with all the necessary skills in communication as this could also lead them to be incompetent in English. Hence, this will indirectly affect their future as well. Most students, even those at the tertiary level, have difficulties to convey their ideas academically. They are unable to present their thought effectively due to language barrier. As a result, they will be affected both physically and mentally as poor communication skills or English language proficiency will hamper their progress in their studies. For instance, even if the students are top scorers in a particular subject, they will not be able to perform at their best if English is one of the requirements for the subject. Lacking the required communication skills could also lead them to be incompetent in English and hence, indirectly affect their future.

The education policy related to the implementation of the English subject in the Malaysian education system has changed several times. Zalizan Mohd Jelas and Manisha Mohd Ali (2014) cited that the National Education Policy issued in the 1970s established the position of the English language by acknowledging it as a significant second language (English as a Second Language) in the Education Ordinance 1957 and Education Act (GoM 1961 & 1996). Policymakers have taken this move due to several reasons. Firstly, it is because of the students' poor English language competency. The English language competency of the students, particularly those in rural areas, is still below the expected level. This is ironic, considering that Malaysian students have spent 11 years of formal English language learning at schools (six years during the primary level and five years during the secondary level). Secondly, it is the perceptions and approaches taken by the students towards the language. Most of the students act rather passively when it comes to English. In order for significant learning to happen, positive attitudes should be cultivated among Malaysian students who still have to learn English at the university level. The current system at institutions of higher learning requires students to take the English subject even though it is not one of their core subjects. UPM business administration students, for instance, are required to take certain English proficiency courses to fulfill the requirements of the programme. The aim of this policy is to strengthen the students' English language competency before they graduate. Lastly,

the surrounding environment is not conducive as it does not promote the use and learning of the language; thus, English is seldom used as the medium of interaction. This has a vast implication on the students as the system programmed by policymakers restricts some of the students from performing their best at the tertiary level. In order to help students acquire the language better, they need a conducive surrounding that promotes the use of and allows them to engage with English as frequently as they could. Therefore, the linguistic setting for language acquisition is vital for language learners. According to Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017), people who live in a foreign country or mix with speakers of another language are usually very enthusiastic. They have the aspiration to communicate and get their meaning across as they have the environment that triggers them to learn and practice the language.

In order to investigate this problem, the researcher has decided to use an approach that is suitable in improving the students' ability in the language. Communicative Language Teaching, also known as CLT, is an approach to the teaching of the second and foreign languages that highlights communication as both the means and vital aim of learning a language. It is also known as the "communicative approach to the teaching of foreign languages" or simply the "Communicative Approach". Since 1974, CLT has been recommended for the English language learning syllabus as it is a method to make learners engaged in interactions and meaningful communications. As CLT is a language teaching approach based on the linguistic theory of communicative competence, developing students' fluency and language proficiency level in the target language (English) is the central focus of this study. Hence, it is the researcher's task as a researcher to carry out this study to investigate the issue raised. According to Hazita Azman (2016), in relation to English language teaching and learning, initial results have shown that more intense and serious efforts are needed to guarantee improved English language proficiency. Therefore, the researcher hopes to investigate whether communication-based activities could benefit the learners in acquiring the English language skills. The population for this research is the undergraduates from non-English programmes in UPM who enrol in an English course in their second semester. This research is mainly conducted to contribute to the society especially learners in improving their academic communication skills. The rationale of the study could be seen after the implementation of communication-based activities in the lesson.

Good communication skills are beneficial for all ages especially for students because they could portray themselves better in any circumstances. For example, if they attend a job interview, they could answer with confidence since they are well-equipped with the necessary language skills. Zarina Othman, Nor Hasni Mokhtar and Rozmel Abdul Latiff (2011) claimed that it is essential to measure the awareness and readiness of the undergraduate towards employability with a focus on English competency as an attribute to employability. This is also fundamental especially for fresh graduates who will venture into the job market in the near future. Koo (2001) claimed that the success of undergraduates at universities or colleges would mean better jobs and white-collar employment, which supports the idea that better attribute towards communication would secure the chances for better work opportunity. Latisha Asmaak Shafie and Surina Nayan (2010) also agreed that graduates will find it difficult to seek employment upon

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graduation if they lack the required communication skills as they are vital in securing any kind of employment. If students failed to be successful at school or the tertiary level due to English language deficiency, this would definitely jeopardise their chances to secure a job once they graduate.

Similarly, if they have poor communication skills, they might face difficulties in life. As a result, they could be affected by an undesirable emotional breakdown which could lead to low self-esteem. This situation will be the students' worst nightmare as they will not be able to execute their real potentials as their morale declines due to poor communication skills. Therefore, these are some of the reasons to carry out this study. Students will benefit from this study as they need the communication skills in order to face the real world once they graduate. Furthermore, the students' performance will be better academically and non-academically if they develop their English communication skills. For instance, students with a good command of English could express and share ideas better when they take part in a discussion session. Weak students, in contrast, have no other choice rather than to listen and remain passive in the discussion even if they do not agree with the discussion or decision made. These students, despite having a great idea or the ideal solution for the problem that is being discussed, would not be able to express their idea due to their incompetency in the language. This also has an indirect effect on the students' progress and intellectual level. As a result, the researcher hopes that the findings of this research will help the students in developing their communication skills.

1.2   Statement of the problem

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a common approach in teaching the English language especially for ESL learners. The mutual goal of the communicative approach is communicative competence (Power, 2003). CLT is also one of the approaches to help language learners to communicate more effectively in order to acquire the target language (English) as CLT advocates the use of the language as the medium of communication in realistic situations.

CLT is said to have helped many teachers in schools. It provides teachers with the necessary aid for them to create a conducive environment for the learners to acquire the target language. As mentioned earlier, the main agenda of CLT is to provide students with a meaningful context for them to apply what they have learned in the classroom. In other Asian countries, CLT does assist the teachers in teaching English as a Second or Foreign language.

Most of the previous research focus more on primary and secondary level students as the researchers felt that CLT activities might not be suitable for tertiary level students. Littlewood (2007) claims that most of the communicative and task-based language teaching in East Asian classrooms are only conducted at primary level. This statement

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is also agreed by researchers from British Council; Enever & Moon (2010) stated that most of the revolution in teaching English using communicative activities happened at primary school In addition, there are also claims that even if these activities are implemented at university or college level, it might not be able to yield a positive result that would be beneficiary for the students. Chang (2011) found that the learners are too afraid to be involved in communicative activities in English language class as it is too late. The result will also not as effective as the implementation during earlier stage of school.

After reviewing related literature on the background of CLT in language teaching, it is clear that only few studies have tackled the use of CLT amongst undergraduates to determine the extent to which these activities have affected the students' English language competency. Thus, a study is required to examine the effects of the application of CLT activities at the tertiary level. The study will also discuss communication issues with regard to the problems faced in teaching English. It is hoped that this study will provide a better understanding of this approach, especially in the context of the higher institutions in Malaysia.

1.3 Aims of the study

There are two major aims of this study: first, to examine the level of English language proficiency of the undergraduates from non-English programmes; and second, to examine the relationship between communicative activities and English language proficiency of undergraduates from non-English programmes. This research will also reveal whether communicative activities support the English language proficiency of the undergraduates.

1.4 Objectives of the study

1. To examine the level of English language proficiency of undergraduates from non-English programmes
2. To examine the relationship between communicative activities and English language proficiency of undergraduates from non-English programmes

1.5 Research Questions

1. What are the levels of English language proficiency of undergraduates from non-English programmes?
2. What is the relationship between communicative activities and English language proficiency of undergraduates from non-English programmes?

1.6   Significance of the study

The study has a great significance on the learning paradigm at the tertiary level education as it will enhance the method used by undergraduates from non-English programmes to acquire English language. There are several parties who will benefit from this study. These beneficiaries are divided into two: the direct recipient and the indirect recipient. The first direct recipient of this study are the undergraduates. The study is designed to help undergraduates from non-English programmes to improve their English language acquisition and develop their competency in the language. This is because these students would be exposed to the best method in learning academic communication skills. Furthermore, the skills that they learn are not only useful for their studies, but also after they have graduated. Secondly, the findings of the study will also assist English language teachers and lecturers in planning and initiating any appropriate strategic materials or instructions in teaching English at university level. It can also encourage other language teachers and lecturers to improve their methods in the teaching-learning process.

In the context of indirect recipients, there are three: the university administration, policymakers and other universities. This study creates an awareness among the university administrations to plan an appropriate intervention that fits the needs of the undergraduates, especially those with learning difficulties, and to provide necessary instruction aids to upgrade the quality of education offered at the tertiary level. As for policymakers, this study helps them to design a curriculum that caters to the needs of the learners in acquiring the English language. Moreover, policymakers will be able to devise a curriculum that strengthens the academic communication skills of the students so that it can improve the English language competency of the students. Lastly, other universities will also benefit from the findings of this research as in general, this research contributes to the betterment of the pedagogy used in the teaching and learning activities. Lastly, the findings of this research could also act as a reference for future study.

1.7   Operational Definition

1.7.1   Academic Communication Skills

Academic communication skills are the formal communication skills used in an educational environment setting (Jones & Alexander, 2000). In the context of this study, communicative activities are mainly used for the enhancement of academic skills in teaching the English language. It also refers to the methods of communication that are highly structured and generally only used in pedagogical settings.

1.7.2 UPM's Non – English Major Undergraduates

Noora (2008) has also used this term in her research. These undergraduates are those who do not take English as their major in UPM. The undergraduates are also considered as ESL learners since English is considered as the second language after Bahasa Malaysia, the official and first language among most citizens in Malaysia.

1.7.3 English as a Second Language (ESL)

ESL (English as a second language) refers to the use or study of English by speakers with a different native language. The precise usage, including the different use of the terms ESL and ESOL in different countries, is described below. These terms are most commonly used in relation to the teaching and learning of English, but they may also be used in relation to demographic information. In Malaysia, the English Language is the nation's second language after 'Bahasa Malaysia', and it is widely used for varied purposes.

1.7.4 Communicative-Based Activities / Communicative Activities

In the context of this study, the communicative-based activities are activities such as presentations, interviews, role-plays and discussion, debates and many more (Butler, 2011). These activities are incorporated in the study for the treatment group to promote communication and interaction among the language learners.

1.7.5 ESL instructions

The instructions for the students in class during the treatment period were prepared by the language instructor for this study. The ESL instructions are also to assist the lecturers and teachers in developing and implementing materials appropriate to their educational institutions and situations (Kasper, Babbitt, Mlynarczyk, Brinton & Rosenthal, 1999).

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the English language teaching scenario and its execution in the Malaysian education system. This chapter describes the aims, objectives, significance and statement of problems of the study as well as the benefits especially to the undergraduates to help them learn the English language effectively. The following chapter will discuss the existing literature related to the research.

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