

A STUDY ON ORAL PROFICIENCY LEVELS OF FIRST YEAR INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MALAYSIA

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ABSTRAK : Dipercayai bahawa terdapat perbezaan dalam tahap kefasihan bertutur dalam Bahasa Inggeris di antara pelajar antarabangsa dan pelajar tempatan. Ini berlaku disebabkan oleh beberapa faktor luaran yang mungkin mempengaruhi kefasihan bertutur seseorang pelajar. Laporan kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji faktor-faktor yang mungkin mempengaruhi kefasihan bertutur dalam Bahasa Inggeris seseorang pelajar. 100 orang pelajar tahun satu dari Universiti Teknologi Malaysia dipilih untuk menyertai kajian ini di mana 50 orang daripadanya terdiri daripada pelajar antarabangsa manakala 50 orang lagi terdiri daripada pelajar tempatan. Di dalam laporan ini, penyelidik mendapati bahawa terdapat perbezaan dalam tahap kefasihan bertutur di antara pelajar antarabangsa dan pelajar tempatan. Kajian mendapati bahawa pelajar antarabangsa menunjukkan tahap kefasihan bertutur yang lebih tinggi berbanding pelajar tempatan. Perbezaan ini adalah disebabkan oleh faktor-faktor seperti, status sosio-ekonomi, latar belakang bahasa, sikap and jangkakan ibu bapa serta latihan di rumah. Kesimpulan daripada kajian ini adalah, tahap kemahiran bertutur seseorang sememangnya dipengaruhi oleh faktor-faktor luaran. Tahap pendedahan terhadap faktor-faktor ini akan mewujudkan perbezaan dalam tahap kefasihan bertutur seseorang individu.

ABSTRACT : It is believed that there might be differences in oral proficiency level between international and local students of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) where there may be factors that might cause these differences. This paper deals with the issue and a study was conducted in order to find out what are the factors that might influence the students' oral proficiency levels. 100 first year students of UTM were selected for this study where 50 were international students while another 50 were local students of UTM. From the findings, it was found that there are differences in oral proficiency levels between the international and the local students. The findings of the study show that the international students are more proficient compared to the local students. The differences in oral proficiency levels of these students were caused by factors such as socio-economic status, language background, parental attitudes and expectation as well as home practices and resources. From this study, it can be concluded that one's oral proficiency level can be affected by the external factors. The level in which the students are exposed to the factors will influence their level of proficiency.

Keywords : *oral proficiency, socio-economic status.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) has gained international recognition in the fields of science and technology and has become a well established university. Hence many students from foreign countries have chosen this prestigious institution to pursue their study. It is in line with the government vision to make all universities in Malaysia become as prestigious as other international universities. In UTM, most of the international students come from countries such as Sudan, Iran, China, Somalia, and Yamane. The main language used by these students as the medium of interaction with locals is English. However, a question comes to rise regarding this matter, whether they are proficient enough in the use of English language compared to the local students.

Both international and local students have been exposed to the English language learning since childhood. However there might be differences between the methods and approaches used in English language learning for international and local students whether it is formal or informal, that might as well affected their oral proficiency level. Besides, there are many factors that can contribute as well as influence one's oral proficiency. Among the factors that might affect the students' oral proficiency are socio-economic status, language background, parental attitudes and expectation as well as home practice and resources.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It has been generally assumed that international students are usually more proficient in oral communication compared to the local students. This perception has been made by the society in the campus especially by some lecturers who taught both international and local students as well as students that have direct contact with the international students. This perception arises because it can be seen that the international students tend to communicate in English language more often compared to the local students who prefer to use Bahasa Malaysia to communicate and tend to avoid using English communicatively. One good example for this situation is during oral presentations where it can be seen that local students sometimes seemed to be reluctant when requested to use English for the oral presentation. Was it because they are not proficient enough in English compared to the international students that make them feel reluctant to use English communicatively? A question arises whether the perception is true and if it is true, what causes this to happen? What are the implications of this situation? What makes the international students different from the local students in terms of their oral proficiency level?

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

- i. To find out the perception of English subject lecturers on the oral proficiency levels of international and local students.
- ii. To compare the oral proficiency levels of international and local students.
- iii. To find out factors that influence the oral proficiency levels of international and local students.

SCOPE OF STUDY

This study was conducted in order to study the factors that influence the international and the local students' oral proficiency and how it affect the different levels of oral proficiency between the international and the local student. The respondents were selected randomly from first year international students and first year local students of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) at Skudai, Johor. The data were collected via questionnaires and interviews.

METHODOLOGY

Research Instrumen

The research instruments used to collect the data for this study are interviews as well as questionnaires. The information gathered from this data was analysed to get the findings of this study. There are two sets of questions for the interview, one for the students and the other set is for the English subject lecturers. For the first set, there are six questions and these questions intended to find out what are the perceptions of the English subject lecturers on the students' oral proficiency

levels.. The second set of interview questions contains ten questions and the respondents consisted of five students of both international and the local students. The respondents answered all the questions and the interview sessions were recorded using voice recorder. The interview questions were used as the oral interview test to measure students' oral proficiency levels. For the questionnaires, a set of questions consisted of 46 questions were constructed and divided into five sections using samples of questions adapted from the previous study. These five sections include Section 1: Respondent's Personal Background; Section 2: Parents' Socio-Economic Status; Section 3: Language Background; Section 4: Parental Attitudes and Expectation; Section 5: Home Practice and Resources. The scale used for most of the questions was Likert scale. However there were also yes and no questions, multiple choice and open-ended question included in the questionnaire.

Respondents

For this study, the respondents were divided into 2 groups; international students and local students of UTM. The respondents were selected regardless of their race, gender, age, faculty, and courses. However, there were questions in the questionnaires regarding the personal background of the respondents for references. For the questionnaires, both groups of students were given the same set of questionnaire and as for the interview questions, only five students from each group were selected to be interviewed. The students selected for the interview were based on the average grades of the group. There were also five English subject lecturers selected for this study and all of them were interviewed.

The reasons of choosing the respondents among the first year students were because one of the researcher's aims was to find out how the respondents' language learning background during primary and secondary levels affected their current levels of oral proficiency. Since the respondents came from different language learning background, it is assumed that these students entered tertiary level of education with different levels of oral proficiency. The reason for including English subject lecturers is to find out their opinions based on their experiences in teaching both international and local students, regarding the levels of oral proficiency of these students. The researcher wants to know whether or not both groups have different levels of oral proficiency.

Research Procedure

Questionnaire : The questionnaires were distributed to 50 first year international and 50 first year local students. To locate the first year international students around the campus, the researcher approached lecturers who were teaching international students and asked for their permission to enter their classes and distribute the questionnaires. The respondents were given an introduction of the study and some explanations were given on how to answer the questionnaires. Other than that, the researcher asked for the cooperation from Bachelor of Science in Education (TESL) students of Education Faculty who were involved with Friends of English (FoE) Program conducted by Centre of Teaching and Learning (CTL) in UTM to arrange a meeting in order to distribute the questionnaires. As for the local respondents, the researcher had approached several lecturers and asked for their permission to enter their class by the end of the period and distributed the questionnaires. The respondents were also given an introduction of the study and explanations on how to answer the questions. The researcher waited for the respondents to finish answering and collected the questionnaires.

Interview : For the interview, the respondents were selected among the international and local students who has answered the questionnaires. They were selected based on the average English examination grades in school of respective group. The researcher first introduced herself and gave some brief introduction on the study conducted. They were then asked about their English examinations in schools before they were asked for permission to be interviewed. When the permission was given then only the interview sessions were conducted. In order to collect the data, the interviews were conducted at random places with minimal distraction and the respondents were comfortable in, for example, at the library, in residential colleges and etc. Each respondent were interviewed separately and alone. This ensured that their responses would not be influenced by other respondents and to make the analysis of the recording become easier.

FINDINGS

Father's Occupation : For this question, the occupations are divided into five groups. They are Professional/Managerial, Clerical/Sales/Services, Trades, Production/Labourers and other than these groups will be classified as Others. For international students, 29.5% of their fathers' occupations are Professional/Managerial, Trades, and Others respectively. 11.4% falls under Clerical/Sales/Services group of occupations. For the local students, majority of the respondents' father's occupations, which is 32% falls under Clerical/Sales/Services group, 22% of them falls under Professional/Managerial and Others groups respectively and another 12% is under Trades and Production/Labourers groups respectively.

Father's Monthly Income : Father's monthly income for international students are, 29.5% are between USD 263.4 to USD 789.5, 27.3% are between USD 789.7 to USD 1314.8, 22.7% are over than USD 1316 and 20.5% is lower than USD 263.1. For the local students, majority of the respondents' father's monthly income which is 42% earn between USD 263.4 to USD 789.5. 22% earn between USD 789.7 to USD 1314.8, 20% earn over than USD 1316 and 16% earn lower than USD 263.1.

Mother's Occupation : For international students, 56.8% of the respondents' mother's occupations fall under *Others* group, 27.3% are from Professional/Managerial group, 9.1% are in Trades group, 4.5% are in Clerical/Sales/Services group while the rest of 2.3% falls under Production/Labourers group. For the local students, the percentage is, 66% in *Others* group, 20% in Professional/Managerial group, 10% in Clerical/Sales/Services, and 2% in Trades and Production/Labourers groups respectively.

Mother's Monthly Income : Mother's monthly income for international students are, 43.2% are between USD 263.4 to USD 789.5, 34.1% is lower than USD 263.1, 15.9% are between USD 789.7 to USD 1314.8, and 6.8% are over than USD 1316. For the local students, majority of the respondents' mother's monthly income which is 54% earn lower than USD 263.1, 22% earn between USD 263.4 to USD 789.5, 14% earn over than USD 1316 and 10% earn between USD 789.7 to USD 1314.8.

Language Used to Communicate With Siblings. : Findings from the data collected on language used at home with siblings show that majority of both international and local students answered that they use mostly their mother tongues to communicate. The percentage for international students is 63.6% and for local students, 76%. None of the international students have chosen *More in English* as their answer but 2% of local students have chosen this answer. However, there is a high

percentage of answer which is 11.4% respectively for *Mostly English* and *Equal Amount of English and Mother Tongue* and 13.6% for answer *More in Mother Tongue* for the international students. As for the local students, 2% answered *Equal Amount of English and Mother Tongue* and *More in English* respectively, 4% answered *Mostly English* and 16% answered *More in Mother Tongue*.

Language Used to Communicate With Relatives : While with relatives, 54.5% of the international students and 72% of the local students answered that their mother tongues are mostly used with their relatives. There is none of the local students who answered *More in English* for this question. However, there were 9.1% of the international students who have chosen this answer. The percentage for answer *Equal Amount of English and Mother Tongue* for the international students is higher than the local students with 18.2% for the international students and only 4% for the local students. For answer *Mostly in English*, the percentage is 4.5% for international students and 6% for local students. There are 13.6% of international students answered *More in Mother Tongue* and 18% for local students.

Language Used to Communicate With Friends : For languages used at home with friends, majority of the international and local students answered *Mostly in Mother Tongue*, 34.1% for the international students and 56% for the local students. 27.3% of the international students answered that they use English more with friends, 22.7% answered that they use an equal amount of English and mother tongue, 11.4% answered *Mostly in English* and 4.5% answered *More in Mother Tongue*. For the local students, 26% answer *More in Mother Tongue*, 10% answered that they use equal amount of English and mother tongue and 4% answered *Mostly English* and *More in English*. Overall, the percentage of the international students who use English when talking to their friends is higher than the local students.

Language Used to Communicate With Neighbours : With their neighbours, the highest percentage of answer for the international students is *Mostly in Mother Tongue* which is 50%. This is followed by *Mostly English* and *More in Mother Tongue* with equal percentage of 15.9%, 13.6% for *Equal Amount of English and Mother Tongue* and the lowest percentage is 4.5% for answer *More in English*. For the local students, majority of them answer *Mostly in Mother Tongue* and the percentage for this answer is 70%. This is followed by 16% who answered *More in Mother Tongue*, 8% for *Mostly English*, 4% for *Equal Amount of English and Mother Tongue* and 2% for *More in English*. The overall findings show that the usage of English language in conversation for the international students is higher than the local students.

Exposure to English Materials by English Teacher : For this question, majority of international students answered *Never*, *Rarely*, and *Sometimes* while majority of local students answered *Sometimes*, *Frequently* and *Always*. The percentage is 68.2% for the international students and 96% for the local students. For the international students, the lowest percentage is for the answer *Frequently* with 6.8%. The lowest percentage of answer for the local students is 4% for the answer *Rarely*. For the local students, there is none of them who answer *Never* for this question. The overall findings show that the percentage of the local students who have been exposed to English materials by English teacher is higher compared to the international students.

Communicative Approach Used by English Teacher When Teaching English in Classroom : 31.8% of the international students answered that their English teachers always used communicative approach in classroom while 50% of the local students answered the same. However, there is 2.3% of the international students answered that their teachers had never use communicative approach in the classroom. None of the local students answered *Never* and *Rarely*. The lowest percentage of answer

for this question is for *Sometimes*, 16%. The overall findings show that all of the local students have been exposed to the communicative approach compared to the international students.

Extensive Use of English in School : 29.5% of international students and 38% of local students answer *Sometimes* for this question. Only 13.6% of international students and 16% of local students answer that English has always been used extensively in school. As for the overall findings, it shows that English is used extensively in most of the students' schools.

Confidence in Using English in Conversation : Majority of the international and local students agreed that sometimes they feel confident using English in conversation, the percentages are 43.2% for international students and 52% for local students. Only 2.3% of the international students think that they do not feel confident at all using English in conversation while 10% of the local students think the same. There is also a big difference in percentage between the international and local students for the answer of *Always*. 29.5% of the international students always feel confident using English in conversation while only 10% of the local students answered the same.

Parents Asking About English Subject at School : For this question, 38.6% of the international students and 38% of the local students, the highest percentage for each group responded that sometimes their parents did ask about English subject at school. 22.7% of the international students responded that their parents always asked about English subject at school. This is higher than the percentage for the same response of the local students. There was also a high percentage of response for *Never* which is 13.6% for the international students and 12% for the local students.

Parents Talking and Discussing English Subject at School : There was a high percentage of the international students who answered *Sometimes* for this question which is 36.4%. As for the local students, the majority or 42% of them answered *Rarely*. There was a high percentage of the international students who answered *Always* which is 13.6% of the students while only 4% of the local students answered the same. The overall findings showed that the parents of the international students are more concerned about their children language learning compared to the local students.

Parents Concern on What Was Learnt in School : The figures above show a big difference in percentage for the answer, *Always* between the international and the local students. It is 20.5% for the international students and 4% for the local students. For international students, 25% answered *Never*, 20.5% answered *Rarely*, 22.7% answered *Sometimes* and 11.4% answered *Frequently*. As for the local students, 42% answered *Never*, 36% answered *Rarely*, 16% answered *Sometimes* and 2% answered *Frequently*.

CONCLUSION

a) Oral proficiency levels of international and local students

From the interview done to a number of English subject lecturers of UTM, there were differences in oral proficiency levels between international and local students of UTM. This was proved through the small scale oral interview test done to a number of students from both groups. The difference in oral proficiency levels between international and local students were in terms of fluency, vocabulary, self-confidence, motivation as well as effort made to use the language in conversation. International students were more fluent when conversing using English compared to local students. Their knowledge of English vocabularies is also better than the local students. Besides, they have shown high level of self-confidence when conversing in English even though they make quite a number of grammatical mistakes compared to the local students who seem to be very shy and cautious on what

they want to say and what they have to say. Other than that, they seemed to be more motivated in using the language because English is the only language that they can use to make other people especially locals understand them. As for the local students, many of them are not motivated enough in using the language because they can always find ways not to have to speak in English and it seems that they tend to take the language for granted.

b) Parents' socio-economic status

From the questionnaires distributed in order to study the factors that influence oral proficiency levels of the students, it can be concluded that parents' socio-economic status do influence the students' levels of oral proficiency. From the findings, it shows that the percentage of international students that came from a high socio-economic status is higher than the local students. This is based on the data collected on the parents' occupation, education level as well as monthly income. It can be concluded that students who came from a high socio-economic status are more orally proficient than the students who came from lower socio-economic status. This can be supported by the small scale oral interview test done to the students; international students' level of proficiency is higher than the local students. Besides, lecturers of English subject who teach the students also agreed that international students are better than the local students in terms of oral proficiency level.

c) Language background

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the frequency of English used to communicate with several others such as siblings, relatives, friends and neighbours do influence the students oral proficiency levels. The frequency percentage of English used by international students is higher than the local students thus proved one of the factors that influence the level of oral proficiency levels of the students. The more frequent the target language used to communicate with others, the higher ones' oral proficiency level is. This happens because, using the language communicatively is one of the best ways to increase ones' oral proficiency level. However, in this study, it shows that formal instructions of the language in schools are the least factor that influenced the students' oral proficiency levels. This can be seen through the overall findings of the exposure to the English materials, communicative approach, and the use of English in school generally. Even though there were a high percentage of local students who responded that they were always exposed to the English materials, communicative approach, and English usage in school compared to the international students, still, they are very low in oral proficiency if compared to the international students. In terms of the students' level of confidence on using English in conversation, the study shows that a high percentage of international students feel more confident using English in conversation compared to the local students. Hence, it can be concluded that students level of confidence affect their level of oral proficiency. Once they feel confident using the language, they will use the language more frequently and this will eventually increase their level of oral proficiency. The parents' language ability is also important and can influence the students' oral proficiency. When the parents' language ability is high, it is believed that in some way it will help to increase the students' oral proficiency level.

d) Parental Attitudes and Expectation

From this study, it is proven that parents' attitudes towards the language do influence the students' oral proficiency. When the parents show their support and give attention to the child language learning, they will become more motivated to learn hence it can help to improve their language proficiency. Their expectation on the child performance can also contribute to the language learning.

When they put a high expectation on their child performance, they will provide the child with all the facilities and materials needed in order for their child to excel. They will also encourage the child to participate actively in the learning process.

e) Home practice and resources

Home practice and resources do influence the oral proficiency level of the students in a way that when they listen and read to various types of English sources, it can trigger their interest of the language. Besides, they will also be exposed to and become aware of the real-life function of the language thus will encourage them to use the language. As the result, this will help increase their level of proficiency.

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