

# IN SEARCH OF A NEW APPROACH IN THE TEACHING-LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN UTM

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## INTRODUCTION

Many of us agree that successful teaching and learning depend, to a certain extent, on viable and practical theory; "purposeful action is governed by theory," (Morris & Speer, 1980). However, a new theory takes time to be accepted and applied, and in the process, it seldom completely replaces earlier theories. One might say that a new theory often runs on parallel to or is superimposed upon another. Even when one is substantially proved to be inadequate, remnants of it persist in many minds and practices.

The Language Department of UTM is no exception to the above phenomenon. However, the situations experienced by the Department had arisen out of rather different reasons. It was not so much due to the inadequacy of the philosophy or concepts embodying the theory, rather it was the ever changing needs of the students and the priority emphasised by the institution that geared the Department towards the process of an ongoing change of its programme and approach in the Teaching-Learning of English as a Second Language.

In the past, several theories and approaches of Teaching-Learning of English had been experimented on and applied. Some of these theories included the Situational Approach, Audio-Lingual, Communicative, Structural, Notional approaches and a few others. Each time a new theory/approach was experimented and applied, in the process, a new situation arose, sometimes to the extent of nullifying the effectiveness of the theory/approach being tried, and the Department questioned its tenability. This invariably ended up in the department changing its programme (including the theory that went along with it) to a new one with the hope of achieving better results. However, this phenomenon did not, in any way, discourage the members of the Department from continuing the search for a more effective theory/approach in this field, even if it entailed the combining of certain aspects of the conventional theories into another theory and called it a "New Theory/Approach," as long as it could serve the Department achieve its desired goal. After all, it has been widely accepted that this trend is fast becoming a norm in the formulating of theories/approaches in the field of Teaching-Learning of English as a Second Language worldwide.

Recently, the Language Department has come up with a new theory/approach in this field. The change from the earlier theory/approach to a newer one was deemed necessary due to the changed situations both in UTM as well as in the outside world. These changes necessitated the Department to reexamine its curriculum with the possibility of restructuring it to meet the current trends and needs of the situations.

### **Rationale for Reorganisation of Programme**

The contributing factors that led to the change in theory and approach are enumerated below:

1. The students in UTM are sensitive about the relevance of what they are studying, and can be very unpleasant to what they consider to be "not useful" to their studies. The kind of English they have studied at schools is the generally termed "General English" and considered irrelevant to the English of scientific texts, with its distinct features compared to the former. Further more, upon entry to UTM, the English Language Programme exposed to them was primarily aimed at mastery at the receptive level with special emphasis on Reading Skills. The productive skills (Speaking and Writing) were relegated to a peripheral position. The Department, therefore, felt that a more balanced programme incorporating the four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing), using scientific and technological biased materials input, would be more useful for them. While continuing with the emphasis on Reading Skills, the other three skills (L/S/W) would be more equitably provided for in the new programme.
2. The uniform nature of the materials input used to teach the wide range of students' level of competencies in English was found to be ineffective. Although the students had normally studied English for eleven years at primary and later at secondary schools, a sizeable number of them was found to have attained very low proficiency and a few with nil proficiency in the language. Their inability to construct simple sentences in English and poor achievement brought along with them from their former schools had oftentimes killed their enthusiasm for the subject. This had created the belief in them that they were unable to learn the language. In view of this, the Department felt that a new programme must be evolved to revive their motivation and interest to learn the language. An effective system to cater for the wide range of the students' level of proficiency must be duly considered.
3. The programme was found to be lacking in adhering to the principles of intensity and recency in second language learning. The teaching and learning duration was thinly spread over years (six semesters for the Degree and five for the Diploma students respectively). This resulted in the students not being able to function sufficiently effectively both in their pursuit of academic achievement as well as for their job market. It was, therefore, thought that a solution to this problem would be an increase in contact hours and smaller class size and an integrated teaching-learning approach. At the initial stage, the time available in each week should be

spread across the four language skills with primary weightage given to the most rapid and effective progress in the development of skills pertaining to information retrieval while more emphasis would be given to the training of the productive skills at a later stage.

4. The Department had also been sensitive to the respective faculties' requirements for specialised courses. However, it also realised that the students were not ready for such courses due to their low level proficiency in English. There was, therefore, a need for a strong foundation programme which would pave the way for specialised courses to suit the needs of the various faculties.

5. The changing national trends and emphasis brought about by the Malaysian government's policies had also made an impact on UTM's English Language Programme. The government's inclination to pave the way towards a New Industrialised Country (NIC) for Malaysia away from her traditional agricultural counterpart had acted as a catalyst to a renewed emphasis on the role of the English Language, with the assumption that English is one of the key factors towards realising the national goal. This was further reinforced with the belief that the move towards high technology required a corresponding degree of competency in the acquirement and development of knowledge and the use of English (Mohd. Noor & Che Teh, 1991). Based on these assumptions, the Department was obliged to evolve a new programme to prepare itself for the up-and-coming environment.

6. Finally, the "norm-referenced" mode of assessment used to measure students' performances in English could not really reflect their abilities as envisaged (Roe, 1989). Hence, a new method of assessing students' performances termed "criterion-referenced" was thought to be more effective.

A "norm-referenced" assessment of students' academic performance is usually carried out in groups whereby each student's result is compared with the rest of the students taking similar test. The scores are then interpreted in the form of letter-grades. The information obtained from this method of assessment does not really help the tutor(s) scrutinise the strength and weaknesses of their students' abilities. This is because "evaluation by grading has always been subjective and not always representative of accomplishments in learning," (Morril & Spees, 1982). Moreover, students are falsely led to believe that since grades are the accepted form of measuring learning, they are likely to resort to anything, even to the extent of dishonesty, so long as they achieve higher grades compared with their peers, thereby sacrificing their long term educational goal.

On the other hand, a "criterion-referenced" assessment enables the tutor(s) to measure and ascertain individual student's abilities through his/her performance on a certain specifically designed task. The results attained are then compared/matched against a certain specifically designed English Language Proficiency Rating System expressed in terms of language skills levels to gauge the students' performance (Louis, 1991). The information gathered will be useful for classifying the students into their respective ability groups for appropriate instruction. Dr. Sally Brown (1980) describes the notion of "criterion-referenced" mode of assessment thus:

*Assessment that provides information about the specific knowledge and abilities of pupils through their performances on various kinds of tasks that are interpretable in terms of what the pupils know or can do, without reference to the performance of others.*

In the light of the above discussion, a number of English lecturers from the Language Department formed a committee (familiarily known as RELP Main Committee) and with the financial aid obtained from the Research and Development Unit of UTM set out to research into and subsequently experimented on a "New Theory" and "Approach" of Teaching-Learning English as a Second Language for UTM's students, given the acronym RELP (Reorganised English Language Programme).

### **Purpose and Motivation**

Basically, the programme is directly concerned with the purpose for which the students need English, and these purposes are interpreted in functional terms. The theoretical basis for this programme is to allow students to work at levels commensurating their capabilities and strive towards higher achievement.

Bearing in mind the needs of these students, course inputs need to be predominantly science and technology biased in content. This gives the slant towards English for Specific Purposes (ESP). According to Brumfit (1980), "The best work in ESP takes account of both the text and the interaction process." Taking the cue from this fact, the course content is organised in such a way that allows the students more open-ended work in which they are able to bring their full personalities to bear on the language, to use it through increasingly challenging and realistic simulation until the language course can meet part at least of the specific purposes themselves. Also, in order to ensure that the process of selecting relevant course materials input for the programme meets the requirement of the purposes, a cooperation between the Department and the subject specialists has to be established.

Ideally, the Department wants its course to provide language activities for UTM's students which are as closely as possible to the actual needs and levels of the students. At the same time, the Department is also anxious to see that the students achieve success in language learning in the direction of the desired goal. To do this, the course designer(s) have to consider various factors such as motivation, teaching approach and strategy, and students' age which seem to have a strong effect on the success or failure in language learning.

Motivation is some kind of "internal drive" that encourages somebody to pursue a course of action (Harmer, 1983). It seems that if the students perceive a goal (something that they wish to achieve) and if that goal is sufficiently attractive, they will be strongly motivated to do whatever is necessary to reach that goal. Evidently, language learners who are motivated also perceive goals of various types - short term goals or long

term goals. In the context of UTM's students, although the presence of a short term goal (to get good grades at an end-of-semester) cannot be ruled out, the long term goal (to be able to communicate effectively in English and to get good jobs upon graduation) seems more apparent. However, the process of motivating them to learn English, with the objective of sustaining their long term goal, is not an easy task. The method by which they are taught will have a profound effect on their motivation. If they find it deadly boring, they will probably become demotivated, on the other hand, if they have confidence in the method, it is likely that they will be motivated to learn.

Equally important is the level of course-content presented to them must correspond not only with their level of language competency but also their age; else it will become an "insult to their intelligence". Considering UTM's students are adolescents, getting the level of challenge right is vital. Where this level is too low, the students may simply "switch off": when it is too high they may become discouraged and de-motivated. Thus, it is the programme designer's task to put language teaching and learning into an involving context. However, the success or lack of it is largely left in the hands of the tutors. What is clear is that if the students gain confidence in the method/approach and perceive the related course content as being useful, the chances are that they will be motivated and learning will take effect.

### **Reorganised English Language Programme (RELP)**

In considerations of the above factors, a new English Language Programme (RELP) was proposed and experimented, bearing the following features:

1. The RELP is a five hour week programme covering two academic years spread over a period of four semesters of 15 teaching-learning weeks per semester.
2. It is an activity oriented or task-based programme and designed to integrate the four basic language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing) using scientific and technological biased materials input.
3. The evaluation or assessment of students' performances, while adhering to the principles of criterion-referenced mode of assessment, is based on the specifications of a 7-level Banding System expressed in terms of skill-levels. They are modified for control of language and style with level 7 showing the highest language proficiency needed by students to function efficiently both while studying at UTM as well a when placed in a job market, while level one being the lowest showing almost nil language proficiency.

4. The minimum targeted proficiency levels that every student has to attain by semester throughout the programme are outlined below:

<u>Semester</u>	<u>Level</u>	<u>Required performance</u>
I	2	(As stipulated in the
II	3	specifications on the
III	4	Banding system.
IV	5	- See Appendix)

5. The level of activities, tasks and materials vary in accordance with the students' differing competencies, achievements and maturity.

### **Banding System**

The UTM's RELP Banding System is somewhat analogous to a contract between a customer and a supplier. It provides a kind of instrument for purpose of negotiations between the customer and the supplier. In UTM's context, the two parties are between the Language Department and the various faculties in UTM. The levels in the Banding System, expressed in terms of language skills, will act as a yardstick or indicator which the customer may choose or select from and acquire to fulfill his/her needs or requirements. The supplier, on the other hand, will set the right price in rendering his services to meet the request in terms of time, value and other conditions. In fact, it was based on this understanding that most of the features underpinning the present RELP, as stated above, were considered when the programme was reorganised. They were the results of several negotiations held between the Language Department and the various faculties in UTM at the initial stage of this project.

This system comprises 7 levels of performance bands. Each band is characterised by its specific objective, linguistic items, kind/type of materials input and tasks befitting that particular band/level. These linguistic items and style are carefully scrutinised to suit the requirement and accuracy of the stated objectives, levels and tasks to be performed.

One important principle adhered to in formulating this system is that it shows an element of progression up the 7-level banding scale. Thus, the top bands, 6 and 7, indicate the advanced levels, bands 4 and 5 indicate the intermediate levels; bands 1, 2 and 3 indicate the elementary levels. The progression up the 7-level scale is shown by the difficulty of the assigned tasks and the complexity of the language items to be used. The descriptions of the tasks and their accompanying linguistic items form the input of the Banding System's specifications.

Another equally essential principle incorporated in the Banding System is that the assigned tasks and their corresponding linguistic items should enable the students to work at a level of difficulty that is challenging, neither frustrating or impossible nor elementary. For a detailed description of the RELP Banding System, samples of the system are provided in the appendix. However, it is necessary to mention at this juncture that these samples are by no means final. The members of the RELP committee are still working on them in their effort to finetune or amend some of the possible flaws found in the specifications.

## **Pedagogical Principles**

In preparing the programme (RELP), certain pedagogical principles were considered and applied:

1. Students should start from where they are and not from some artificial starting point. This calls for some kind of assessment, for example a placement test, at the beginning of the programme before they are placed at their appropriate level.
2. The feeling of success and satisfaction as sources of power in motivating students' learning are to be incorporated in the programme. Hence, the Banding System should provide these elements where students should work on the materials at levels of difficulty that is challenging, neither frustrating or impossible nor elementary (Roe, 1989). In short, students' rate of progress should relate to their effort.
3. Students should be continuously aware of their level of attainment while undergoing the process of learning. This should be done through Students' Progress Report Card and made accessible to them at all times.
4. In ensuring a more efficient and longer lasting learning, the programme should provide conditions that are real or near lifelike. Abundant, realistic practices through the concept of "Tasks" designed in an integrated manner across the four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) should be provided for in the teaching-learning modules.
5. In sustaining students' interest, the materials input for the programme should not only be university worthy but also relevant and meaningful for the students (Roe, 1989).
6. The programme should strive to inculcate in the students the sense of independence, creativity and self-reliance through self-initiated learning that involves the whole person of the learner.

## **Piloting the Project**

The new programme was piloted with a group of 60 First Year Technological Management students at the UTM's main campus in Sekudai, Johor in the July Semester 1990-91 session. It was implemented as an intensive 24-hour week programme for one semester.

The participating students were streamed into their ability groups based on performance in a placement test administered at the beginning of the session. The programme was divided into four components, each concentrating on one of the four basic skills of the language with differing weightage accorded to each skill in the ratio of 3:2:2:1 for Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing respectively.



## Result

The overall results of the pilot project indicated a measure of success for the programme, as shown below.

Fig.1 Analysis of students' achievements by skills and levels

Level	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking
7	7	1	3	1
	13	6	5	5
6	6	5	2	4
5+	26	23	7	6
	43	47		
5	12	17		
	5	7		
5-				
			min.level	49 52
4+	1	6	11	18
	4	7		
4	3	1	18	19
4-			13	9
				min.level
3+			4	2
			6	3
3			2	1
3				
Total	60	60	60	

As mentioned earlier, the minimum targeted levels are Level 5 for Reading and Listening comprehension (Receptive Skills) and Level 4 for Writing and speaking (Productive Skills) based on the 7-Level Banding System.

Based on the above data, 19 out of 60 students (31.7%) attained above the minimum targeted level in the Receptive Skills while 23 out of 60 students (38.3%) did in the Productive Skills. These students could be ranked as high achievers since they excelled in all the four skills. However, at the intermediate level, that is at the minimum targeted level, 43 out of 60 students (71.7%) attained Band 5 in Reading and 47 out of 60 students (78.3%) attained the same band in Listening, while in the productive skills, 42 students (70%) attained Band 4 and 7 students (11.7%) Band 5 in the Writing Skill, respectively. In the Speaking Skills, however, 46 students (76.7%) passed Band 4 while 6 students (10%) attained band 5 which was one level above the minimum targeted level in this skill. There were no students who failed to reach the minimum targeted level in the Receptive Skills. However, 9 out of 60 students (15%) failed to attain the minimum targeted level in the Productive Skills where 6 students (10%) only managed to reach Band 3 in the Writing Skill and 3 students (5%) in the Speaking Skill.

At the end of the semester, a survey, through questionnaires, was conducted on the students to assess the viability and practicality of the programme based on the following factors:

1. The suitability of the language used in the course materials.
2. The suitability of the tasks designed for the course.
3. The suitability of the course duration.
4. The suitability of the subject-matter and content of the course
5. Suggestions for improvement of the programme.

The feedback received from this survey revealed that the programme was too demanding for the students and warranted some adjustments. Using this feedback as a basis, some adjustments were made on the programme as follows:

1. The RELP programme was to be implemented as an extensive 5-hour week spread over 4-semesters with each semester carrying a 2-credit value.
2. The 4 basic language skills for each Band were to be closely integrated using semi-scientific and technological biased materials organised on a certain specific theme.
3. The presence of too difficult scientific and technological concepts and terminologies in the course materials was significantly reduced and replaced with more suitable and learnable ones.
4. The mode of evaluation of students' performances was adjusted and streamlined to match the requirements of the specifications in the Banding System. Hence, while equal weightage was given to all the 4 basic skills at the lower

Bands, 1 to 3, it differed significantly when dealing with the higher Bands, 4 to 7.

Based on the success of this pilot project and the subsequent improvement made on the programme, the Department was all set to officially launch the New Programme (RELP) in the ensuing semester.

### **Official Implementation**

The revised programme was officially launched in the July Semester of the 1991-92 session. About 2,018 First Year students from all faculties in both campuses (Kuala Lumpur and Sekudai) participated in the programme.

### **Learning Process**

Ideally, the new programme (RELP) tried to make students work at levels commensurating their learning abilities and strive towards higher achievement up the 7-Level Banding System. Upon entry to UTM, they were streamed into their ability groups based on their English Language results obtained from the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination.

During the English lessons, the students were activated in both the receptive and productive skills facilitated through the integrated tasks related to a certain specific theme. Adherence to the principles of the criterion-referenced mode of evaluation or assessment and the specifications in the Banding System, the students' performances in the assigned tasks were evaluated periodically to ascertain their level of ability whether they deserved to be promoted to the next higher level(s). Those who met the standard requirements were allowed to proceed to the next higher level/band while those who did not were retained to work at the same level until they were further evaluated for their possible promotion.

### **Results**

At the time of writing this article, the Department has completed two out of four semesters of the programme's implementation stages. The final results of the entire programme would only be known when the first batch of students working on it completed the final stage of its implementation at the end of the December Semester of the 1992-93 session. However, based on the previous two semesters' implementation of the programme, the results of the students' performances were very encouraging. The results are shown below.

**Fig.2 The RELP Progress Report  
1991-92 Session**

I.	Overall Results (Sem. I & II)	<u>K.L</u>	<u>Skudai</u>	
			<u>J.B</u>	<u>Total</u>
1.	Total number of candidates	864	1154	2018
2.	Number who passed the session's minimum targeted Band 3 at 65% performance	791	1039	1830 (90.68%)
3.	Number who failed to meet the session's min. targeted level at 65% performance	73	115	188 (09.32%)
4.	Number who failed to meet the session's min. targeted level at 40% (UTM's standard)	05	08	13 (00.64%)
II.	Band 4 Results (Semester II)			
1.	Number promoted to and took Band 4 tests.	559	578	1137 (56.34%)
2.	Number who passed Band 4 at 65% performance.	368	453	831 (72.45%)
3.	Number who failed at 65% performance and awarded Band 3 pass, for passing Band 3 in Semester I.	191	125	316 (27.55%)

### III. Band 3 Results (Semester II)

1. Number who took Band 3 tests	305	576	881 (43.66%)
2. Number who passed Band 3 at 65% performance.	232	461	693 (78.67%)
3. Number who failed Band 3 at 65% performance	73	115	188 (21.33%)
4. Number who failed Band 3 at 40% performance	05	08	13 (00.64%)

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At the end of the 1991-92 academic year, all the results of the participating students' performances from both campuses, Kuala Lumpur and Skudai Johor, were collected and tabulated as shown in the mid-term report in Fig. 2 above.

Based on the report, at the end of Semester Two of the academic year, 1830 out of 2018 students or 90.68% passed the minimum targeted level at Band 3 with the 65% required performance. In fact, 1137 out of these 1830 students or 62.13% had already reached this targeted level in their first semester at UTM while the remaining 693 students or 37.87% passed the band at the end of their second semester.

It was even more encouraging to note, however, that out of the total of 2018 students who participated in the programme, 831 of them or 41.20% worked on and passed Band 4, a Band which was one level above the minimum targeted level for the whole session, with the 65% or above performance.

On the other hand, only a small number of students, 188 out of 2018 or 9.30% who worked on Band 3 failed to achieve the required 65% performance at the end of the session and they were required to remain in the same Band in the following semester. This rate of failure, as far as the Language Department was concerned, was considered normal in most evaluations especially in UTM. This was so because the required performance level was pitched at a quite demanding 65% mark whereas most Departments in all Faculties in UTM pitched their passing mark for their course-subjects at 40% standard pass mark. This implied that if UTM's 40% pass mark was considered for purposes of evaluating the students' performances in the English Programme, only 13 out of 2018 students or 0.64% attained less than 40% performance. Thus, in terms of percentage, it was indeed negligible. Moreover, the students' failure was not so much due to their academic performance but rather due to some personal reasons. For

example, some students were unable to complete their course due to ill health while some had to leave the institution in the midst of the programme.

Apart from the overall general results discussed above, the implementation of the first half-cycle of the programme also revealed some pertinent information which helped the course designers better understand the students' learning strategy and style when working on the different Bands of the programme. This information was clearly shown in the students' overall achievements in the individual skill-components, that is, Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking, of the programme as shown in Figure 3 below.

Fig. 3 Overall Students' Achievements In Individual Skills (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking) For All Faculties In Semester 2 (1991/92)

Band 3

Skills/ Results	Band	Reading		Writing		Listening		Speaking	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Passed 65% and above perform- ance	3 66.63	646	73.33	477	54.14	719	81.61	587	
Failed Less than 65%		235	26.67	404	45.86	162	18.39	294	33.37
Total		881		881		881		881	

## Band 4

Skill/ Results	Band	Reading		Writing		Listening		Speaking	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Passed 65% and above perform- ance	4	764	67.19	861	75.73	547	4811	1002	88.13
Failed Less than 65%		373	32.81	276	24.27	590	51.89	135	11.87
Total		1137		1137		1137		1137	

Based on the above data, out of a total of 881 students who worked on Band 3 in the second semester, 646 students or 73.33% attained 65% or above performance in Reading, 477 or 54.14% in Writing, 719 or 81.61% in Listening and 587 or 66.63% in speaking, respectively. However, a sizeable number of students failed to attain the 65% performance level to qualify themselves for promotion to a higher Band. Among them, 235 students or 26.67% failed in Reading, 404 or 45.86% in Writing, 162 or 18.29% in Listening and 294 or 33.37% in speaking, respectively.

After analysing these data, it was found that those students who passed Band 3 did better in the receptive skills, that is, Reading and Listening, compared to their performances in the productive skills, that is, Writing and Speaking. The possible reason for this phenomenon was that the programme had greatly emphasised on the receptive skills right from its initial levels, that is, Bands 1 to 3, in the Banding System. Although the courses in the programme were conducted integratively, incorporating all the four skills, the Writing and speaking components were given less priority by the students. This, presumably, was due to the equal weightage in the provision of marks allocated for the four skills. Since the students' overall performance in the course was computed on the basis of their average cumulative performances across the four skills, it was, therefore, logical that they could have concentrated their effort on the receptive skills more than on the productive skills, thereby allowing them to gain an advantage over the system. However, the Department was quick to realise the weakness of the existing system and some positive measures were taken to rectify the weakness when dealing with the higher Bands in the second semester.

As stated above, a sizeable number of students failed to reach the 65% performance level when working on Band 3. Their failure to do so, in fact, was well anticipated by the Department staff from the beginning of the

programme. This was because of their very low proficiency in the language when they first came to UTM. However, this did not mean that they could not pursue the programme at all. What was needed was that they should be given extra coaching and be allowed to progress at their own pace. After all, this category of students needed only to arrive at the minimum targeted levels in the four language skills of the programme, in line with the request of the various faculties in UTM made during the negotiations between the Language Department and them at the initial stage of reorganising of the English Language programme.

However, at Band 4, the situation was quite the reverse compared to the situations in the lower Bands 1 to 3. Contrary to the Department's expectations that the productive skills were more difficult and demanding than the receptive ones, the students performed better in the former.

Again, based on the data in Figure 3, 816 out of 1137 students or 75.73% who worked on Band 4 passed with 65% or above performance in the Writing Skill while 1002 students or 88.13% attained the same status in the Speaking skill. On the other hand, in the receptive skills, 764 students or 67.10% reached the 65% or above performance in Reading Skills and 547 students or 48.11% did the same in the Listening Skills. The probable reason for this reversed situation from that of the lower Bands, in terms of the students' performances, was that at this Band the emphasis was more on the students' productive output when it came to evaluating their ability to perform certain tasks in the course. In terms of awarding marks to each of the skill-components too, more weightage was given to both Writing and Speaking compared to the other two skills, Listening and Reading.

On the failure list, as expected, the percentage was comparatively high. Among the four components, Listening had the highest rate of failures, 590 students or 51.89%, followed by the Reading component, 373 students or 32.81%. However, encouragingly enough though unexpectedly, the Writing and Speaking components recorded fewer failures; 276 students or 24.27% in the former and 135 students or 11.87% in the later. Again, the possible explanation for this occurrence was that the students, due to the nature of emphasis in Band 4, were inclined to concentrate their effort more on the productive skills than on the receptive skills. Judging by the high rate of failures recorded, the findings reflected the demanding nature of the course and more so at the higher Bands. Moreover, Band 4, which was one level above the minimum targeted level for Semester Two, was offered as an incentive for students to strive towards higher achievements up the 7-level Banding System. Hence, only the more proficient and conscientious students were able to perform well and qualify themselves for promotion to the next higher Band in the ensuing semester.

Thus, based on the mid-term progress report above, it was evident that the programme had to a certain extent, shown a considerable success in upgrading UTM students' proficiency in English. To say the least, the programme had helped to bridge the gap between the students' school level English proficiency upon entry to UTM and the level of English proficiency



that was expected of them to have in order to enable them to pursue technical courses in this institution.

## **Benefits**

Generally, the programme has, to a certain extent, overcome some of the deficiencies prevailing in the previous programmes. The Banding System has not only catered for the diversified range of students' proficiency levels but also accommodated the needs of the technical students. The level of activities and tasks assigned for each of the different groups of students in the programme commensurated with their differing levels of competency in the language, while the teaching materials chosen, to some extent, satisfied the requirements and needs of the various faculties in UTM.

The students as well as the tutors had clear purposes. The planning of the tutors was facilitated; the students knew what was expected. Broad content was broken down into manageable and meaningful parts sequenced in an integrated manner in the form of teaching-learning modules. Each section of the materials stood forth in its relative importance.

Every student participated responsibly in the learning process. Since the subject matter of the lessons was found to be relevant to their core-courses in their respective faculties, they had shown some positive signs of the urge to learn, thereby making learning significant.

The external factors, such as the increase in contact hours from three to five per week and the credit value from one to two per semester accorded to the programme, had also contributed to the success of the programme and at the same time increased students' motivation to learn the language. In such a conducive learning atmosphere, it provided the programme coordinators an opportunity to include a larger variety of quality materials input and meaningful tasks that helped motivate and sustain students' interest throughout the semester.

The application of the criterion-referenced mode of assessment in the programme helped the students progress at their own pace up the 7-Level Banding System, thereby minimising negative competitiveness among them. Although there were indications to show that a few students, who were weak in English, trying to resort to a short-term goal (getting higher grades at the expense of true learning) at the beginning of the programme, the situation gradually improved when they reached the intermediate level. They realised that they could not possibly adapt themselves to the more demanding courses in the ensuing semesters unless they were well equipped with the knowledge and skills taught at the lower levels. They also realised that they were given sufficient time to acquire the knowledge and skills in each Band during the given semester and in due course reach the targeted level expected of them at the end of the fourth semester to earn the full eight credits reserved for English. This helped change the students' attitude in following the programme; and they began to participate responsibly.

One fundamental aspect of the programme found most beneficial was that it provided an opportunity for the tutors to identify and weed out

the weaker students from the more proficient ones at any time during their learning stages. These weak students were then channelled into a "Language Clinic" where special tuition was provided. Areas or skills in the language that posed difficulties or problems to the students were dealt with intensively until such time when they were ready again to be absorbed back into the mainstream course to continue from where they stopped. This process of clinical work was not possible in the previous programmes due to the inavailability of appropriate measuring tools and the constraints of time. As such, the students were allowed to proceed with their courses even though they had experienced great difficulties following them.

Judged by the benefits derived thus far, RELP has proved to be fruitful. The students responded positively to the content as well as the approach and procedure incorporated in it. The inclusion of a variety of meaningful and manageable tasks based on relevant materials input helped revive students' enthusiasm towards learning the subject. The tutors too found the programme stimulating and challenging. It was most encouraging to note that some of them had demonstrated their professional talent and creativity by making their lessons more lively and learning fun for their students. However, the bottom line was that the programme has been successful in upgrading the students' proficiency in English to the level envisaged.

### **Limitations**

In the process of implementing this programme, there were a number of obvious limitations which needed to be considered and solutions found for future development.

The difficulty of arranging a block timetabling of English language periods at both intra and inter-faculty levels hindered the process of a continuous progressive mobility of students within the duration of a semester. The problem became even more acute when a tutor was confronted with the problem of differing levels of competency in different language skills among the students in the same class. Perhaps, the problem could be solved if the concept of team-teaching comprising at least two tutors to a class could be instituted.

Apart from the above problem, due to the constraints of time, the course designers (co-ordinators) could not possibly develop the much needed graded self-access supplementary materials, which otherwise would not only help alleviate some of the problems, but also enhance the application of the principle of allowing students to work and progress at their own levels of competency.

Finally, the shortage of manpower to handle a large number of classes, at the beginning of every semester, posed a serious problem for the Department. Owing to administrative constraints, UTM could not recruit the required number of permanent personnel to facilitate a smooth implementation of the programme. As an alternative, part-time staff were

hired to ease the shortage. Most of these part-timers were not involved in the preparation of the programme materials, and hence they were somewhat ignorant of the philosophy, objectives and pedagogical principles underpinning the RELP programme. Although they were briefed on these matters at the beginning of the semesters, there were indications showing that some, if not all, had differing interpretations of the pedagogical assumptions of the programme. These misinterpretations, if left unchecked, could undermine the effectiveness of the programme and possibly hinder its future development. A logical solution, therefore, would be to alert the sensitivity of the relevant authorities on the seriousness of this problem and at the same time persuade them to expedite the process of recruiting permanent personnel for the Department. The Language Department, on its part, would conduct in-service workshops on a regular basis so as to allow every member of the staff keep abreast with the latest development in the programme.

## **Conclusion**

The RELP, activated on the basis of tasks and Banding System, was not only aimed at making the students learn the language for the sake of learning but also training them to think critically and creatively. In carrying out the tasks designed for each of the modules in the respective Bands, the students were engaged in thinking process, the focus of which was the completion of the tasks. In the process, they deployed their hidden talent and creativity through a variety of activities which invariably brought out their preoccupations with meaning and struggle with the language. The success derived from the completion of the tasks would not only bring about a sense of satisfaction for them but also helped reinforce their confidence and motivation in the deployment of their language ability in their future assignments involving the English language.

In retrospect, notwithstanding all the benefits and limitations experienced in the past two semesters, the programme is still viewed as a pionering project with its not too insurmountable problems. As mentioned earlier, every new theory takes time to realise its potential. Given the required time and necessary support, the Language Department is determined, committed and confident in fulfilling its obligations towards realising its ideals, concepts, aims and objectives. This commitment rests strongly on the belief that RELP is both technically viable and practically achievable as proven by the positive results of the first half-cycle of its implementation.

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