

# English Language Literacies of Undergraduate Students in Malaysia's Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Environment: Casualties of National Language Policies and Globalisation?

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The issue of Malaysian graduates' unemployment, attributed largely to their flawed English language competence, has been a major concern in the country for many years. The study reported in this paper sought to better comprehend future graduates' perspectives and practices in dealing with the English language literacies prior to graduation. This paper deliberates on the patterns and dimensions of the undergraduate students' perspectives on the challenges they endured, together with the educational and environmental factors influencing their current English language competencies. The qualitative case study drew on data primarily from focus group interviews with 21 undergraduates from the Engineering faculty in a Malaysian public university. Individual interviews with the students, non-participant classroom observations, field notes and written summary sheets supplemented the focus group data. These data were contextualized with documentary resources from students and their teachers. Key findings centre on the complexities of students' English language academic literacies and their pessimistic outlook on their marginal competencies in English. This study contributes new knowledge and new dimensions to understanding university students' predicaments at the intersection of English language literacies, undergraduate studies, and the struggle for employment. These outcomes are predominantly beneficial for informing policy makers' agendas in producing competent graduates for future local and global workforce.

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## **Introduction**

English language holds an intricate and ironic status in Malaysia (Lee et al., 2009). Given the wide variety of Malaysia's linguistic repertoires comprising the Malay language (or Bahasa Melayu) and its diverse dialects, various Chinese dialects, Punjabi, Tamil and the languages of East Malaysian ethnic groups such as Iban, Bidayuh and Kadazan, the use and position of English in the culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in Malaysia is extremely complex. With rising globalisation, English language literacies have become even more complex and intriguing especially in mainstream academic domains. Students entering Malaysian universities come from diverse individual, educational and social backgrounds and experiences. While the English language is used in tertiary education, the Malay language is sustained almost universally in academic discourses in primary and secondary schooling. Concurrently, communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the CALD environment which provide constructive support and extensive opportunity for use of English beyond academic contexts are practically restricted. These factors foreground significant issues and challenges pertaining to university students' development of and competence in English language literacies.

This paper deliberates on the perceived values of English of a group of Malaysian undergraduate students' and changes that had occurred in their perceptions throughout their schooling prior to their tertiary education. The patterns and dimensions of the students' perspectives on the challenges they endured, together with the educational and environmental factors influencing their current English language competencies, will be discussed. Essentially, the study presented in this paper sought to better comprehend the extent to which the undergraduate students' English language literacies are affected by changes in educational policies and the impact of globalisation in their academic settings.

### ***Reforms of English language policies***

English is an ‘inherited’ language, a ‘legacy’ of British colonialism, progressed and altered through a long historical journey. It was the medium of education and the language of administration for many years prior to independence in 1957. Post-independence to contemporary times, English language education has been governed predominantly by political and national aspirations. The new national educational curriculum was designed to form a common national educational system, attempting to bind diverse groups into a unified whole and create a national identity or a Malaysian outlook through a standardised medium of instruction, the Malay language (referred as BM henceforth). Since then, BM has been accepted as the national language and given its legitimate status as enshrined in Article 152 of the Constitution of Malaysia.

This policy change impacted significantly on the status of the English language in the country. Given the language’s international standing and global significance, the post-independence government had to concede that mastering English would always be crucial should the country progress economically and politically (Hashim, 2004). Therefore, English was declared ‘an important second language’, retained as the medium of instruction in the former English schools and as one of the compulsory subjects taught in national schools. Until 1970, two distinct school systems operated, namely national schools which used BM as the medium of instruction, and ‘national type’ English schools which used English exclusively as the medium of instruction. However, the English medium was replaced gradually by BM, slowed by limited availability of textbooks in BM in various disciplines, notably medicine, law and engineering (Omar, 1987). Despite its second language status, English was still significantly used in commercial and communication sectors.

In 1978 the National Language Policy promoted BM as the premier language for nation-building and administration, and

established BM as the medium of instruction across all national schools and tertiary institutions. The National Language Policy reaffirmed English as ‘the second most important language’. In the national system of education after 1978, English was taught as a second language and a compulsory subject for all students from their first year of primary schooling through eleven years until the end of their secondary education. It was acknowledged as an important language for local and international trade as well as a language that provides an additional means of access to academic, professional and recreational materials. Although it is taught only as a subject in the school curriculum, it is still used quite extensively outside the classroom in some urban schools.

From independence to 1987, the education system remained geared toward achieving national identity for economic and national growth and, by 1983, the entire national school system used BM as the medium of instruction. Subsequently, the aspirations of the nation began to shift; by the 1990s, emphasis was less on politics and ideology, and more on economic imperatives. In 1991, the then Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohamad, publicly announced his Vision 2020 objective to transform the country into a fully-modern industrialised society by the year 2020. Vision 2020 envisaged Malaysia as a scientifically and technologically advanced nation by the year 2020 if it could surmount nine challenges (Mohamad, 2011). One had particular implications for the role of English:

Establish a scientific and progressive society, a society that is innovative and forward-looking, one that is not only a consumer of technology, but also a contributor of the scientific and technological civilization of the future.

In the context of Vision 2020, the position of English was more clearly defined. Essentially, it was to serve as a tool for human resource development and technological advancement towards achieving developed nation status. The process of transforming Malaysia into a modern industrialised society by 2020 was

equated with the development of an information and communication technology (ICT) and knowledge-based economy.

The Education Act 1996 commended the use of English as a medium of instruction for technical areas in post-secondary curriculum to enable Malaysia to make a quantum leap, towards achieving competitive industrialised status in the globalisation era (Puteh et al., 2004). English was to be studied at an advanced level, particularly the sixth form or pre-university curriculum to fill the two-year gap until the study of English was resumed at university, thereby creating continuity in the English language curriculum from primary school to university.

In 2003, after more than 30 years of using BM as the medium of instruction for all subjects except English, the Malaysian educational system experienced another wave of change compatible with the growth of ICT and the knowledge-based economy; English was to be used to teach Mathematics and the Sciences. This move responded to growing demand by governments, industries and corporations for scientific and technological advancements, mostly available in English. Implementation of English for the Teaching of Mathematics and Science (ETeMS) policy was deemed necessary to upgrade mastery of English to enable Malaysian students to access the latest scientific information and knowledge and to communicate and participate effectively in the global context while raising the standard of Mathematics and Science (Syed Zin, 2004). Furthermore, the then Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohamad was quoted as saying:

We want to create a new generation of Malaysians who are well-educated and able to compete with the developed world. Despite objections from various sectors, the Malaysian Cabinet made a decision on using English as the medium for teaching of Science and Mathematics. The rationale behind selecting these two subjects is the light speed pace of development of these disciplines. (The Star, 10 October 2002)

Thus, reinstatement of English language as the medium of instruction in both subjects “acknowledges the dual role of English as the language of technology and as a global language for international communication” (Azman, 2004, p. 20). Nevertheless, in 2009, after nine years of its execution, the government revoked the ETeMS policy effective from 2012, based on feedback received from various parties concerning its implementation. According to Othman and Krish (2011), such an ‘abrupt’ change caused teachers and students to be cognitively and linguistically challenged. Correspondingly, Tan and Ong (2011) observed that implementation of the ETeMS policy had intensified the existing severe pressure of major public examinations to the exam oriented educational system in Malaysia.

In essence, taking into account the various spheres of life embracing education, communication, commercial and legal sectors, the position of English was clearly defined as a second official language in the country (Omar, 1992):

A second language covers more domains of communication than a foreign language, and a second language speaker shows a higher fluency than a foreign speaker of the same language (p. 91).

This discussion has outlined some of the key movements in English language literacy in Malaysia. Clearly, the rise of English was witnessed within the colonial era while its decline was evident amidst nationalism and nation building; it is well acknowledged as a global language in the contemporary scenario. The literacy landscape also observed shifts in approaches to English learning in higher education.

### ***Interplay of globalisation and English language literacies in higher education***

Over the last decade, the higher education industry in Malaysia has expanded rapidly through the formation of new universities

and colleges. The imperative for higher learning institutions to provide sufficient opportunities and platforms to meet the increasing demands of globalisation, accelerated growth of private and public higher education in Malaysia through privatisation and internationalization. Investment in the expansion of public tertiary education and a change in state policy on privatisation of education produced more graduates with higher educational qualifications.

While BM remains the medium of instruction at the school level, it is not the case at the tertiary level of education, where two distinct arrangements have been in force for over a decade. All public institutions of higher education, with the exception of MARA University of Technology (UiTM) and International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), use BM as the medium of instruction, while most private higher education institutions use the English language.

Azman (2006, p.99) claimed that “underlying the naturalisation of teaching and learning of English in the Malaysian education system are ideological pressures and political dogmas, often emerging from colonial, urban/rural and even local ethnic conflicts and hierarchies”. This is evident in the English language programs at universities, which generally are government funded, to reflect the language policy of the sponsors (Wong, 1998). The most powerful influence on the nature of English language programs is the government’s stand concerning the place of English in the National Education System and society at large. Compliant with the National Language Policy in 1970, all universities initially adopted BM as the sole medium of instruction. English was relegated to the position of a second language and its role confined to a means of acquiring knowledge. However, limited resources in BM in certain important disciplines led to continued use of English in most aspects of teaching and learning. Furthermore, English was predominant in reference books used in higher education (Nik, 1981). That was beyond the control of university policy makers and educators since the global knowledge base and

information is predominantly in English (Subramani & Kempner, 2002).

In response to accelerated globalisation since 2002, the role and status of English as a second language has evolved to its becoming the language through which instruction and communication of knowledge in science and technology are conducted, particularly in tertiary education. Indeed, the exceptional advent of new media technologies, global communications and increasingly diverse population has created profound implications and demands for English among university students (Pandian, 2007). Cognisant of the challenges, the Ministry of Higher Education established its National Higher Education Strategic Plan for 2007 to 2010 which focuses

squarely on holistic human capital development, to produce Malaysians who are intellectually active, creative and innovative, articulate, adaptable and capable of critical thinking. (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2007a, p. 7)

This plan was intended to ensure that Malaysian universities would be able to compete more effectively on the global stage and produce an employable skilled workforce to strengthen the nation's economic development.

Because English language literacy has now become crucially important for effective transmission of knowledge in higher learning institutions, the Ministry of Higher Education has made it a compulsory requirement for admission to local universities. Students must obtain a minimum of Band 1 in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) to be enrolled in any public university. The MUET test is designed to assess English language proficiency of prospective university students in four areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is used to determine whether the students have adequate levels of English language competence to follow undergraduate courses in their chosen disciplines. Explicitly, the MUET syllabus seeks "to consolidate the English language ability of pre-university students to enable



them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary level, in line with the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy” (Malaysian Examination Council, 1999, p. 11). Furthermore, the general objective of the MUET syllabus is to bridge the gap in language needs between secondary and tertiary education.

It is apparent that within the higher education industry the importance of English has intensified given its significant role as the leading language of academic publications, communication and technologies. Numerous attempts to develop and increase mastery of the English language among university students have been made across all tertiary institutions with crucial responsibilities in educating young Malaysians to fill the needs of the national and international workforce.

### **The Study**

The key informants of this study were 21 third year students from the engineering faculty at a public university in Malaysia. These engineering students were selected because they were the only group at the university who were specifically required to study two English courses, Foundation English and English for Engineering. All student participants attained Band 2 in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) , the lowest level accepted for entry to engineering at university. In their first year of tertiary study, they were required to undertake a proficiency English course, Foundation English, designated specifically for all newly-enrolled students who obtained Band 1 or 2 in the MUET. The participants were not required to enrol in any English courses during their second year. Following a special requirement made by their Dean of Faculty, they subsequently were required to take an English for Engineering course in their third year of studies, prior to their internship program.

This study was conducted at the exit point of completing the two compulsory English courses, in particular, at the end of the

English for Engineering course. The reason for conducting this study at this particular point was because no further English training was provided for the students after their industrial training. Upon completing their third year of full-time studies, the students were scheduled to embark on their industrial training for ten weeks before resuming their academic program in the final year, which dealt mainly with thesis writing in BM.

Generally, the participating students came from diverse majors in engineering studies and different ethnic backgrounds. For reasons of confidentiality, they are identified in the study only by alphanumeric codes. The majority were Malays, while three were Chinese. Nearly all came from non-English-speaking backgrounds mostly located in rural areas and ranged in age from 21 to 24 years.

In the tradition of qualitative research, the data obtained from the students were read reiteratively and analysed rigorously through an inductive process of identifying the recurring and salient themes. The similarities and differences of perspectives among the students were identified and explored from an interpretive paradigm to develop common themes, which are presented below.

### ***English is viewed as a foreign language***

The students universally regarded English as unimportant prior to their engagement in university studies. Additionally, the students admitted that they generally had pessimistic attitudes towards it prior to their enrolment. Their move into higher learning brought about a definite shift of interest in English owing to the major requirements placed upon them by their faculty. This was enunciated clearly by one of the participants: “When we were small, English was not important to us; only when we enter university that we feel it is important” (FG1c).

The students’ preconceived ideas of English were very negative as they found it entirely unfamiliar to their norms and surroundings.

In their early schooling, English was perceived as a foreign or “alien” language (FG2a) since their introduction to it was as one of the compulsory subjects to be learned in school. To them, English was “...different from what we are used to, we are not used to English as compared to BM.” (FG2a). They found learning English a bit awkward given that they had grown up using their mother tongue and that they heard everyone around them speaking the same. For these students, their first language at home generally was not the official Malay and Chinese language, but their respective mother tongues, which include different Malay dialects such as Kelantan Malay, Kedah Malay, Sarawak Malay, Javanese and Banjarese, as well as Hokkien and Cantonese for the Chinese dialects.

Furthermore, most students reported that learning English then was like learning “a new subject and yet troublesome” (FG2b), “a difficult language” (FG4b) and “a very complicated language.” (FG3a). Consequently, learning the language was considered as an overwhelming experience and “...a heavy burden that made us felt overloaded...” (FG3d). This was especially true when they had limited application for English in their daily lives and were practically surrounded by the prevalent use of Malay or Chinese dialects in their society. In fact, they used English only in their English classes as affirmed by FG3a “...the use of English was limited; only in the classroom” and FG1e “We speak English only in our English class. Sometimes the teacher called us to read English texts out loud; that is all.”

It appears that using the English language was a demanding task for these students as it required them to translate from their first languages into English. They revealed that more often than not they thought in their mother tongues and subsequently translated their thoughts into English. For example, FG4a explained that, “We do not know how to learn English from the beginning...We still think in BM and to produce English expressions is hard.” In the same vein, FG2a declared that, “I dislike English because I find it difficult to speak when I have to translate.” This suggests

that, in reality, English was not their second language as proclaimed in the country's policy; rather, it was indeed a foreign language for this group of students. It was observed that the students were comfortable talking in BM since it was convenient for them to express themselves clearly in that language.

***Insubstantial English foundation at schools***

On top of the students' lukewarm attitudes toward English, they lacked the required support from their surroundings during their childhood and early adolescence. In general, the students were of a strong opinion that the relatively minimal encouragement from their society on the use of English made a significant impact on their existing deficits in English language literacy practices and competencies. Several entities including their schools, peers and family members, were identified as contributory factors to their current conditions. Inevitably, these factors were found to be interrelated and dependent on their own situated contexts and the respective societies to which they belonged.

After the environmental factors identified by the students were probed, it became apparent that their experiences at school significantly contributed to their current competencies and attitudes to English. It was clear that the students considered the school as the key entity mostly responsible for their shortfall in the English language: "Everything begins from school." (FG3b). Since English was barely utilised in schools, the students were generally dissatisfied that schooling, especially at the early stage of learning, had not assisted them adequately to establish interest in the language, or to enable them to acquire a solid foundation of English. It is worth noting that English was introduced to the majority of the students for the first time when they attended the primary schools, described by one of them as follows:

English is like a new subject at school. I did not learn English at kindergarten, I learned 1, 2, 3, and read A, B, C. At primary school, I began to learn things like 'apple', 'duck' etc. in Year 1. Then, in Year 3, we started to write English sentences. At that

time I felt blurred, I did not know how to use the grammar. Then, I started to hate English. (FG2b)

In regards to learning English at schools, the students recounted discouraging experiences which they described as “unhelpful” (FG3a), “impractical because a lot of theories” (FG2g) and “insufficient exercises and difficult to apply in our present lives.” (FG4c). The students vividly described the dominant role of schools, specifically the primary schools, in their failure to develop their interest and enhance full understanding of English. They insisted that schools could determine success or failure in acquiring the language, as exemplified by FG1a: “I think schools are the most important. We can build our grammar there. When it is solid, it can be easier for us.”

The students repeatedly stressed the crucial function of primary school to help them build strong foundations of English grammar and to develop their interest in the language, because failure to grasp complete understanding of the rules of grammar would lead to more disappointment and resistance towards English. This gradually led to their deficiencies in the language, illustrated by these remarks:

We did not manage to catch up at schools; after some time we were reluctant to learn grammar, to memorise like ‘present and past tense’, then, we started to shy away from English. (FG3b)  
...we took a long time to pick up English, so, we felt less motivated and inferior. (FG3c)

Clearly, when describing their English learning experiences at schools, the students were inclined to associate them with their technical difficulties in mastering the rules of grammar. It was even more upsetting for them to have similar learning experiences at the tertiary level: grammar classes had always been considered as “not interesting” (FG1b), “boring” (FG1a, FG2c) and “...made me sleepy” (FG2a). These experiences had created a great aversion towards English grammar; “I do not like grammar the most.” (FG2b). Indeed, some students were of a strong opinion

that their shortcomings in grammar, caused by their lack of understanding and interest in the rules of grammar, had brought about their failure to achieve excellent results in primary and secondary schools. For instance, FG2a disclosed that her poor result in English had jeopardised her overall achievement in the primary school examination, reinforced her pessimistic feelings and increased her resistance towards the language.

The students' unconstructive experiences when learning English at school reflected their nominal interest in the language. The majority confessed that basically they had no interest at all for English during their school days. Taken into consideration that other subjects were primarily taught in BM or Mandarin (at Chinese schools), the students found English as a school subject as "uninteresting" (FG2b) and "insignificant" (FG4a), mainly because they were ignorant of the importance of learning English for their educational and future purposes. The expressions below illustrate their attitudes:

I just could not put up with English (FG3b).

I hated English a lot. I did not learn anything from English at schools (FG4e).

I felt so disgusted to learn English at primary school because I thought English was not important at all. There was no exposure on the benefit of English for our future (FG4a).

We did not see its importance; nobody made us realise how important it was when we were small (FG4b).

It is interesting to note that the location of the schools that the students attended for their primary and secondary education played a part in developing their competencies in English. Almost all involved in this study originated from rural areas. They generally agreed that they did not learn much English as there was less attention and exposure to use the language in their schools. For example, FG1e and FG3d stated:

One of the factors for my weakness is English is because of the schools in the village (FG1e).

Most of us come from villages, so, English was not emphasised there. We learn English but not like those in the city who speak English frequently. In our village, if we speak English, people will laugh at us (FG3d).

Use of English in the students' daily lives was almost absent as the majority of them normally spoke either BM or Mandarin as the official language in schools. Simultaneously, beyond their classroom settings they usually communicated in their respective dialects, Kelantan Malay, Kedah Malay, Javanese or Sarawak Malay for the Malays and Hokkien or Cantonese for those who attended all Chinese schools. In essence, the students disclosed that there was "lack of exposure to English" (FG4a), "no communication in English" (FG1d) and "limited use of English" (FG3a) in the rural schools.

Compared with those who lived in the cities, where widespread use of English is very much evidenced, the students felt they were disadvantaged; they were unable to speak English easily because speaking in English was not regarded as a common or natural thing in their schools. Furthermore, they regretted that they never had a broad exposure to English, nor extensive opportunities to use it, as there was little emphasis on use of English at school: "...the environment itself did not pressure us" to communicate in English (FG4e). This was especially true where there were limited platforms for them to apply the language in their daily academic literacy practices. Indeed, it was reported that English was acquired mainly through imitation and regurgitation of discourses from texts, while communication in English between the students and their teachers and with their peers was negligible. This is clearly described in the following quotes:

...less communication practice and less reading in class, (FG2c)  
Less communication in the class; we read and answered the reading comprehension questions or copy what the teacher wrote on the blackboard. (FG3c)  
...we did not apply what we had learned, we just learned... (FG2a).

Sometimes the teacher called us to read English texts out loud.  
(FG1e)

We memorised word to word and the format of essays. (FG4d)

### ***Unsupportive teachers***

Within the school community, it is generally acknowledged that teachers are the most important and influential individuals responsible for developing their students' interest and enhancing their competencies in the English language. However, the students in this study reported a contradictory case. The majority of them claimed that the support and guidance provided by their English teachers at schools was too nominal even to help them establish a strong interest in the language. Several disappointed comments by the students such as, "My teacher did not teach me" (FG1b) and "My primary school teacher did not guide me" (FG4c) indicated the students' view that their school teachers had contributed to their lack of interest and competencies in English.

Given the fact that English was a brand new language which they regarded as difficult to learn at school, the students admitted that they relied heavily on their teachers' assistance and encouragement to help them acquire the language. Indeed, they looked on their teachers as their role models and mediators of the language as the English class was the only channel for them to be exposed to the language. The majority of the students expressed their disappointment with the teaching approach implemented by their English teachers which they recounted as "uninteresting" (FG3a), "boring" (FG4e), "not cheerful" (FG1c) and "not skillful" (FG1a). Unveiling her frustration, FG4e explained that "...the teacher gave us a lot of exercises, but she never showed us how to go about doing those exercises." Eventually, the teachers' trivial effort and guidance had discouraged the students from learning more about the language. This led to their low competencies in English. A clear example was cited by FG2e:

I think teacher plays an important part...My teacher could not concentrate on us because there were so many of us in the class.



She could not be bothered about us, although we were weak in English, she did not care. We were not proficient; we just kept quiet since we did not know how to learn it.

Additionally, the students pointed out that the reason they were not so keen to learn English at schools was because they were scared of the teachers. They believed that the personality of their English teachers affected their interest to learn English. Generally, they described the English teachers who had taught them at school as “strict” (FG1e) and “fierce” (FG3d) which made them “fear of the English teachers” (FG4c) and “terrified to go to class” (FG4a). According to FG4b, stereotyping English teachers as unkind and unapproachable was commonplace among most students, and certainly caused them to shy away from learning the English language.

In essence, it is safe to say that there were basically restricted opportunities for English and nominal community of practice among the schools the students attended. Absence of other opportunities in their communities confirms that schools were the most responsible entity which significantly influenced the students’ existing competencies in English.

### ***Influence from friends***

Another noteworthy factor contributing to the students’ perceived shortfall in English concerned their circle of friends. In most circumstances where English was not favoured, or well accepted by their peers, the participating students reported that they were inclined to follow suit. Having identified failings in schooling as the major contributor to flaws in their English language proficiency, the students also recognised the limited interactions in English among themselves and their acquaintances. Moreover, the negative feedback they received from their peers when they attempted to speak English casually with them dissuaded them from persisting in their attempts. On several occasions where they had tried to converse in English with their friends, they received

no response. Instead, it turned out to be embarrassing and totally disappointing: "...sometimes it looks like we are talking to ourselves" (FG4b).

More often than not, the students revealed that they had been reluctant to communicate in English for they worried about the disheartening reactions from their friends. The remarks such as "they jeered at me" (FG4a), "they laughed at me" (FG1e), "they felt disgusted" (FG3a), "they hated it" (FG4b) and "they said I wanted to show off" (FG3a) exemplified the depressing responses given to the students' attempts to converse in English. Therefore, to avoid the "uncomfortable feeling" (FG4c) and the "discouraging looks" (FG3d) they received when trying to speak in English with their acquaintances, they simply stopped trying:

"Sometimes, our friends insulted us when we tried to speak in English. It feels like a phobia, so we quit" (FG1e).

### ***Restricted home practices***

Another explanation for the difficulties endured by the students was minimal community of practice of the language specifically among family members at home: "Family also plays important role; if our families speak English, we would have improved in the language" (FG1b). It is clear that the students believed that their family also contributed significantly to their low competencies in English. Considering their socio-economic background and rural settings where English was used minimally compared with their respective mother tongue dialects, the students declared that conversing in English was regarded as "odd" (FG2c) and "abnormal" (FG1b) in their domestic contexts. They generally felt that speaking English with their parents and siblings was pointless, as they did not use the language extensively in their daily lives. FG1c explained that, "Because most of us speak our own languages, speaking in English is awkward." A comprehensive explanation pertinent to their discouraging circumstances was offered by FG4b:

It is because of the surroundings. Like in our case, we speak BM all the time, at home and among our friends, there is no encouragement to speak English. English is like minority. If we want to apply it in our daily routine, others do not do it. Because others do not do it, we feel that we should not do it as well. It is the environmental factor actually.

In summary, the findings have disclosed that English is viewed as a foreign language by the students in this study. It is indeed a third or fourth language learned as a foreign language from onset of their education where it frequently was taught by non-native English speakers. Additionally, there was minimal exposure and encouragement to use the language within the school boundaries as there were limited authentic opportunities to use the language and improve their competencies. Furthermore, the community of practice beyond the academic context was observed to be negligible. There was little opportunity to use English and unconstructive support within their communities restricted the students' development of communicative competence and confidence in English.

### ***Perceived values of English at higher education***

Inevitably, the marginal attention and interest towards English prior to tertiary education exacerbated the students' difficulties in acquiring the language: "The interest has to start when we were small. If we were left behind at school, of course we could never make it now" (FG4d). Nevertheless, awareness of the importance of English was observed to emerge gradually after the students' admission into higher learning institutions:

I have now realised the importance of English (FG3d).

We realised how important it is only when we entered this university because most subjects are learned in English (FG4a).

In the context of their current studies, English is acknowledged officially as the primary language used for functional and

educational purposes in the faculties of the participating students. Indeed, English was deemed a crucial means of getting access to new knowledge and information "...because most information and books are in English" (FG4d). Considering the fact that every aspect of their academic discourses substantially involved the English language, the students on the whole have come to look on English as a vital and valuable element in their present studies and most importantly, in their future career intentions. They have overcome their past resistance and now recognise the need to acquire the language because it is highly valued and widely used in their university courses: "We have to like English and take the effort to learn it because it is very important" (Fg4b). Inevitably, for the students to gain new knowledge and achieve intellectual success they have to comply with the academic demands. A positive attitude towards English is considered obligatory:

Even though I don't like English, I still have to learn it for the sake of the exams. If I don't learn it, my results will be bad. I force myself to learn because of the exams. Nowadays, English is important, so we have to learn it. (FG2b)

In their current context, all students confirmed that their academic literacy practices entailed attending lectures and tutorials daily. These practices are crucial for them in order to gain new knowledge and keep themselves informed of matters pertaining to their studies. The majority of the students affirmed that a great deal of their lectures involved listening to instructions and explanations conveyed in English. With the exception of some conventional scientific terminologies which the students found less demanding, straightforward language and simple words of English were typically used in most lessons. Complying with the growth of science and technology in the global scenario, the faculty had officially established English as the legitimate medium of teaching and learning. While BM remains the official language employed across the university population, the use of English language is mandatory within the engineering faculty.

However, the findings also revealed several contradictory events. Some students reported having to cope with various approaches and language choices by diverse lecturers when attending their classes. This is because lecturers have discretion to choose their preferred language for delivering instruction. The students disclosed the fact that a blend of English and BM was normal in most courses. The following remark illustrates the case in point;

Some lecturers are not firm and persistent to speak English. They mix with BM. They use simple words when teaching. But most of the time, there are a lot of calculations like one, two, three, that's all. There are more of calculations. (FG3b)

To enhance students' comprehension, their lessons were normally supplemented by notes drawn from power-point slides which commonly were written in English. However, according to the students these teaching-aids also varied according to the lecturers' preferences. In most classes, the lecture notes written in English were read to the students and explained in BM. One particular example was a lesson on Quality which was taught in BM whereas the teaching materials were presented in English: "...the lecturer reads the notes first, then, he translates and elaborates in BM" (FG1d). However, a different scenario was observed in the Designs class, which was conducted exclusively in English while the teaching materials were presented in BM.

On the whole, the students agreed that their academic literacy practices at tertiary level increasingly constituted substantial amounts of English in comparison with their prior learning experiences. This was especially true when extensive use and exposure to English was part of their daily academic activities. FG4e noted: "I think this kind of environment is encouraging." Concurrently, most of them confessed weaknesses in responding to expressions in English even though they could understand them clearly. For example, FG4e explained that, "Even though I cannot reply, I can totally understand what has been said because I am used to utterance in English." In short, listening to English expressions had become a commonplace to the students.

In light of the language operated in the students' current academic context, the findings identified tension between English and BM in the discipline area as well as in the considerable variations of language choices. The findings identified discrepancies in the medium of instructions which necessitated the students managing multiple languages used in lectures, tutorials and teaching resources. Indeed, the choice of language use in these contexts depended highly on the discretion of their respective lecturers.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### ***The impact of school on the construction of English language literacy***

A notable finding of this study was the students' prevailing view of school as the pivotal entity responsible for their weak foundation of English language literacy. It is contended that resolution of students' language deficiencies at university level is impracticable, and too late to be effective. Most students strongly believed that restricted exposure and encouragement given by their schools early in their education caused their shortcomings in basic linguistic knowledge in English. Deficits in English were reported to have increased over time throughout the participants' primary and secondary schooling, jeopardised their overall academic achievement and exacerbated their resistance to English. Arguably, provision of a strong foundation and extensive exposure at the school level particularly in early stages of schooling is essential given the students' rural backgrounds. Chandrasegaran (1981) pointed out that students living in rural areas have limited opportunities for hearing and reading in English or for wider contact with English, making them less competent in the language.

In the absence of a community of practice of English at home, schools must play a vital role in developing student interest and competence in the language. This study complements the findings of a study conducted by Azman (1999), which depicted the

association of English with school practices or formal practices exceptionally used within educational or professional domains, and not with private or every day community living. This contributes to the students' equation of literacy with school success, future career opportunities and functioning in modern life.

The findings also call attention to the critical roles of responsive and highly committed teachers in fostering the students' success in the English language. Indisputably, teachers can play a major role in developing and fostering their students' interest and confidence in using English in their daily academic repertoire, particularly at primary school. It is imperative to build strong foundation of English at the primary level as it the crucial stage that makes or breaks the students' interest in the language. Alas, these students reported that their primary school teachers contributed significantly to their limited interest and hostility towards English.

Thang (2011) highlighted the need for Malaysian teachers to break the vicious cycle, by providing a conducive and stress-free environment for English learning and paying more attention to students with lower proficiency. Teachers should enhance their students' interactive and creative abilities, capture their interest and cater to their diverse needs in order to sustain their interest in learning the language. Similarly, Hassan and Selamat (2002) pointed to the need for teachers to break free from examination oriented lessons in order to develop their students' productive abilities and foster positive attitudes towards English. Enright (2010) maintained that most educators and practitioners are so overwhelmed by pass exit exams and standardised tests that often they disregard the value of language and literacy experiences that students bring into their classrooms.

### ***The impact of membership of various communities***

The findings highlight an outstanding shift of mindset in the students' perceptions of the importance of English language. From

the commencement of their education, marginal exposure and encouragement from their school and home communities prevented the students from appreciating the value of English for their future purposes and contributed to their negative attitudes towards it. The students identified as members of their school and domestic societies, pursuing local ways of belonging which placed high value on the use of their respective mother tongues. School English literacy practices reportedly consisted primarily of completing language practice activities such as answering reading comprehension questions, memorising grammar and copying information. The classroom was not regarded as a place to begin understanding the social uses of literacy. Instead, they reinforced the traditional view which regarded language literacy as a system of structures and vocabulary, not as a means to operating in the real world (Currie & Cray, 2004).

By contrast, the participating students' trajectories into higher education produced a significant shift of perspective on the importance of English. Certainly, expectations of English at tertiary level stimulated changes in students' perceptions of English language literacy because academic requirements for university success imposed the need to master the language. Widespread use of English in the educational media and resources reinforced the demand for competence in the language. From this perspective, the English language was seen as the vehicle to survive in the tertiary community. Social practices of knowledge acquisition in the students' academic community typically necessitated adjustments for them to develop a sense of belonging to that community. Being instrumentally motivated, the students' awareness of the importance of English within the university encouraged interest in it. This reaffirms the findings by Choy and Troudi (2006) of differences in students' perceptions and attitudes towards learning English in schools and college; students' attitudes were more positive in college where the social environment was more conducive for learning English.



The importance and necessity of English was underscored not only in higher education but also in employment prospects after graduation. Studies show that Malaysian students realise the importance of English for their future development and that they are extrinsically motivated to improve their English by factors such as the desire to get good grades, opportunities to further their studies and career advancement (Thang, 2004; Zubairi & Sarudin, 2009).

Nevertheless, the social reality of the current context of these students' revealed that even though English literacy was valued and appreciated, they had very limited venues for its use. BM was the main language of communication in the faculty, while a range of varied languages and dialects were in use in their non-academic domains. The students were aware of the importance of using the language habitually in their daily repertoire and that it required constant practice in their academic and non-academic activities. However, the support they received from their community of practice appears to have been insignificant and sometimes almost absent. This implies that, should they intend to overcome their current deficiencies, they must be willing to take risks and adapt to negative responses and non-acceptance by their circle of friends or unsupportive community for speaking in English. Their evidence was that the institutional emphasis on English medium was still not sufficient to create a homogeneous social network for students to learn and use English because of the presence of different social groups and contradictory learning priorities.

Inevitably, the findings also exposed the variation of medium of instruction throughout the students' academic trajectory. Congruent with changes to the national language policy, students were obliged to adapt and cope with switches of language use from the beginning of their primary up to their current tertiary education. Indisputably, the students experienced various contradictions in their language learning and academic literacies. Indeed, they have been tremendously affected by the variations and inconsistencies of language use in the educational system and

consequently face a language dilemma and marginalisation, especially in the university context where English is dominant. Arguably, with the constant changes of language policy and educational system in the students' learning trajectories, there is no guarantee that the students have been well equipped by their previous and current academic experiences to cope with the academic literacies required of them (Hirst et al. 2004). Correspondingly, the contemporary challenge endured by the students is the tension between their restricted English literacy opportunities, due to current policy mandates, and the broadening and intensifying literacy demands made upon them across the tertiary curriculum (Enright, 2010). Further, the expectations of their future career pathways also require some adjustments. No matter how well they know the substantive content of their Engineering discipline, their prospects will be impacted by their ability to convey it in English and their capacity to respond to more general interactions with the counterparts in the workforce.

Taken together, the findings made obvious that the membership of a particular group or society significantly influences the practices of the society. This is consistent with Koo's (2001) notion that membership of various discourse communities provides multicultural Malaysians with linguistic and cultural resources to establish multiple ways of behaving and adopting a full range of social roles. These roles, which create continuities and discontinuities, are confined by social membership of various communities, including nationality, religion, age, lifestyle, class and ideologically oriented spaces.

This study confirmed the crucial role of meaningful situated language use in construction of knowledge and learning opportunities of students, suggesting that language literacy learning is highly contextualised. The findings disclose that English is broadly utilised within the academic domain and the literacy practices in English are bound to the contexts in which they occur, whether in the institution or the workplace. Zamel and Spack (2006, p. 137) asserted that "crucial to this perspective on

language and literacy acquisition is an understanding of the contextualised, embedded nature of this process". Language and literacy are situated in specific educational contexts and acquired through the engagement by students with their academic literacy practices and experiences, while conforming to academic norms and conventions.

***English as a Second Language (ESL): Stretching the term***

Consistent with its official status as second language in Malaysia (Gill, 2002), the planned growth of Malaysia as an industrialised and developed nation (Mohamad, 2011) and the recent development of internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia, English is taught as a second language nationwide. A poignant feature of the context of this study is that the students were from a multicultural society, learning English taught as a second language, but not necessarily deemed so by them. In actual fact, this study attests that English is a language used in an environment that fits neither the description of a second language nor that of a foreign language. The prevailing view among the students was that English is an 'alien language' when first encountered as a compulsory subject to be learned in schools (Wahí et al., 2011). For these students, the first language at home generally was not the official Malay or Chinese language but their respective mother tongue. It is commonsensical that students felt awkward about learning English when it was, for them, a completely outlandish language, unfamiliar in the situated community contexts of their mother tongue languages.

The students' overall perception of English as a foreign language is an enlightening discovery in this study. In reality, English is a third or fourth language learned as a foreign language from the onset of their education and commonly taught by non-native speakers of English. English, a compulsory school subject, is taught as a second language next to BM, the national language and the primary medium of instruction in all national schools. Ortmeier-Hooper (2008) asserted that the term ESL is not only a

descriptor with all kinds of complications, it is also “an institutional marker, pointing to a need for additional services and also to the status of someone still marked as a novice in the English language” (p. 390). A number of educators argue that the term TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) is more applicable than TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) to the current position of English education in Malaysia (Kok et al., 2009).

Generally, the students here confirmed that there was minimal exposure to English outside the school boundary. Because there was no community of practice to provide authentic opportunities to use the language and enable the students to improve their competence, they used English only in their English classes. Razali (1992) maintained that students from remote and rural areas in Malaysia may not attach any importance to learning English, and thus lack motivation to learn this difficult foreign language. The findings of the present study support Schuetze’s (2002) observation that when learning English in a foreign language environment, the target language plays no major role in the community and it is usually learnt formally in the classroom. For the students in the present study, learning English was like learning a foreign language, and they had limited need for the language in their daily lives. Therefore, the lack of a community of practice limited development of their proficiency and confidence with the language. This suggests that, in reality, English is not a second language as proclaimed in the country’s policy; rather, it is indeed a foreign language for groups of students like these. Using the English language is a demanding task for these students as it requires them to translate from their own first languages such as Malay, Chinese or their own dialects into English.

Despite these constraints, the students had to endure two required formal English courses. Although considerable demands pertaining to the English language such as the medium of communication, references, written and oral assignments in

English were made on these students, the use of English among them was still insignificant. The real need for English language applied within the academic contexts, limited only to a few academic purposes and research areas. Beyond the four walls of the classroom, there was a restricted 'real' community of practice and contact with English was still nominal, with plenty of opportunities for avoidance. In a non-native English-speaking environment, as in the case of this study, it is difficult for students who are non-native speakers of English to speak it accurately and fluently (Gao, 2001). That difficulty is compounded by lack of exposure to good models of English and opportunities to use English (Davies, 2003).

While English is widely used as the *lingua franca* in the global economy, it is extremely complicated in the context of the academic literacies of the students studied here. Implicit in the variety of language expectations of the engineering faculty was an assumption that the students enrolled in the tertiary education with the necessary language competencies in both BM and English. The tacit academic requirements seemed to suggest that the students should be competent in both languages if they were to perform effectively and successfully in the variety of academic discourses. In reality, the students encountered challenging tasks in their quest to succeed in their studies while at the same time attending to various demands put on them to survive in the academic world. Resonant with Zamel and Spack (2006), the findings demonstrate that challenges to the students' academic literacies were intensified by the fact that the students entered the tertiary institutions with varying degrees of linguistic proficiency, and with multiple identities and life experiences. This remarkable diversity influenced their processes of acquisition of English language and knowledge of their discipline.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show the gradual shift of outlook and values associated with English among a cohort of undergraduate

engineering students in a CALD environment. The students' trajectories into higher education significantly imposed the need to master English, as the vital language of knowledge and communication, in order to keep pace with rapid technological change as a consequence of globalisation. While English is recognised officially as an important tool for globalisation, the national language, BM, remains the primary language of educational and social discourse. This has ideological implications as it affirms the influence of political factors on the position of English and BM in the CALD community.

This paper also has illuminated the dominant influence of the academic entities among other social communities that contribute to the students' English language literacies. It has established that the students' English language literacies are influenced by the social and cultural practices in which they are situated, suggesting that English language literacy learning in the multilingual and CALD context of education in Malaysia is complex and highly contextualized.

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