

Chapter 20

Engineering Students' Communication Apprehension and Competence in Technical Oral Presentations

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ABSTRACT

The demand for 21st century engineering graduates to be communicatively competent, particularly in English language, is increasing. Effective communication skills are one of the main competencies listed by the Malaysian Engineering Accreditation Council Policy with the expectation that all Malaysian engineering graduates will master it upon graduation. This involves skills in presenting information to technical and non technical audience through oral presentations. This chapter aims to examine engineering students' communication competence and their level of apprehension in delivering a technical oral presentation. Questionnaires, adapted from McCroskey's (1988) Self-Perceived Communication Competence and Richmond & McCroskey's (1988) Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety, were distributed to 193 final year Universiti Malaysia Pahang engineering students who were preparing for their Undergraduate Research presentation. The results of the study have direct and indirect implications to the teaching and learning of oral presentation skills among engineering undergraduates.

INTRODUCTION

In coping with rapid transformations in the fields of technology brought about by the effects of globalization and internationalization, Malaysia is focused on progressing and advancing actively towards extensive economic transformation towards achieving developed nation status by the year

2020. Having a dynamic business environment, technological advancements and well-developed infrastructure, Malaysia is indeed well positioned to play a role in today's competitive world. With current Malaysian strategic economic planning emphasizing on a knowledge-based economy, grooming human capital has become the major concern of the Malaysian government. Further-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9970-0.ch020

more, as quality human capital is one of Malaysia's greatest assets, great emphasis has been accorded towards ensuring demands from expanding manufacturing and services sectors are met. In order to cater for the needs of these sectors, workforce supplied must not only be technically skillful, they must also be competent in using the global language, English. With the current emphasis on progressive knowledge economies, having sound technical knowledge and being highly proficient in English (especially in oral communication) have become critical skills for Malaysian employees to attain in today's increasingly globalized workplace contexts. Such crucial assets in the workforce will go a long way in helping Malaysia to play a more competitive role in ensuring that we do not get left out in the current social and economic environment.

BACKGROUND

Educational Policy on English Language in Malaysia

Realizing the importance of workforce to be highly proficient and competent in written and oral English, some changes to the educational policy regarding English language have been made by the Malaysian Ministry of Education such as the introduction of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) in 2000 which aimed to enhance pre-university students' level of English language proficiency. Then, in 2003, English was used as the medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science subjects in secondary schools with the main intention of enhancing students' English language ability as part of their preparation before they enrolled in local universities in preparation to join the future workforce. However, the use of English to learn Math and Science was reverted in 2012 in all schools. Instead, more hours have been allocated to the teaching of English in an effort to strengthen mastery of the language. The

hotly debated issue of the declining standards of English proficiency among Malaysian students and university graduates has captured the attention of the Ministry of Education. Recently, the Education Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin announced that all Form Five students will need to obtain a compulsory pass in the English subject in the national examination (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia; equivalent to the British 'O' level) in 2016. This policy implementation is seen as being vital in ensuring and encouraging Malaysian students to be bilingually proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English (Singh, 2013).

To date, many studies attempting to establish the level of English proficiency among Malaysian undergraduates have been conducted. For instance, Pawanchik (2006) surveyed 120 matriculation students' English language proficiency levels. The findings show that almost 60% of the students achieved Band 1 (extremely limited user), Band 2 (limited user) or Band 3 (modest user) in their MUET scores. In another study conducted by Yasin et al. (2010) among 169 diploma and certificate students in one Malaysian Polytechnic found that more than 70% of the students only obtained low scores in the English subject in the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) examination. Besides results in national examinations which signify the low level of English among Malaysian graduates, the students themselves reported that they encountered problems in speaking English confidently as well as experiencing English communication apprehension (Sarudin, Zubairi & Ali, 2009; Radzuan, 2008). Despite the realization of the importance of good English language ability, many findings on Malaysian students' English ability raise much concern about the readiness of our graduates for the workplace. Research shows that the rate of unemployment among Malaysian graduates is attributed to their lack of technical skills and poor employability skills (Hanapi and Nordin, 2014; Ismail, Yussof, and Lai, 2011). They defined employability skills as "the quality and personal insights which a graduate should have"

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