

## Investigating the Role of English Language in a Malaysian Public University: The Case of Administrative and Support Staff

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### Introduction

Towards these ends a study was conducted using respondents from two universities in Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). As Malaysian public universities cannot help but be affected by globalization, a study that looks at how they are equipped linguistically to meet the challenges of globalization is appropriate and timely and may serve to provide the general picture desired. Hence, the present study concentrated on two Malaysian public universities and focused further on a segment of the population of the universities, namely the administrative and support staff of the universities. The administrative and support staff represents an entity that sees not only to the administrative matters of the university and but also the public relations and promotion of the university. Within this category, respondents were selected from the "front liners", i.e. those involved directly with the universities' clients, and the "back benchers", i.e. those involved primarily in administrative work and not directly with clients.

### The Study

A questionnaire that attempted to extract information and compile data about university staff's usage of English in informal and formal settings at the work place was distributed to staff members from various departments of both universities. In addition to this data, the questionnaire also compiles data relating to the profile of the respondents; data that could be reconciled with the earlier set of data in order to give us a better picture of the users and the non-users of English.

The findings from this study are presented under two major headings: *Respondent Profile* and *English Language Practice and Usage*. The section is further sub-divided under six sub-headings detailed later.

### Respondent Profile

The findings reported in this paper represent feedback from a total of 326 respondents; with 275 respondents coming from Universiti Sains Malaysia and 51 from Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Out of this total, 139 (42.6%) were male respondents and 187 (57.4%) were female respondents. The table below gives the breakdown of the respondents according to age. The majority of respondents were over 30 years old and 22.7% is within the 25 to 29 year old age category. Table 3 gives the breakdown according to the ethnic group to which the respondents belonged.

Table 1 Number of staff according to age

Category	Number	Percentage
18- 20	2	0.6
21- 24	19	5.8
25- 29	74	22.7
30 and beyond	231	70.9
Total	326	100.0

Table 2 Number of staff according to ethnic group

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
Malays	283	86.8
Chinese	26	8.0
Indians	16	4.9
Others	1	0.3
Total	326	100.0

With respect to academic qualification, 58.6% of the respondents possessed secondary school level education. On the basis of the Malaysian school education, it could be assumed that these respondents would have gotten about 11 years of exposure to English through their English classes. 17.5 % and 16.6% possessed tertiary level education. Additional exposure may have been had if we assumed that English was also taught at these levels.

Table 3: Number of staff according to qualification

<i>Qualification</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
PMR	16	4.9
SPM	191	58.6
Diploma	57	17.5
Degrees	54	16.6
Masters	5	1.5
No response	3	0.9
Total	326	100.0

Although the majority of respondents had between 11 –14 years of exposure their performance at the Malaysian secondary school examination *Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia* (SPM) showed a range of proficiency. Table 3 below provides us with an idea of their proficiency as shown by their SPM results. A third of the respondents did not succeed in the examination with grades of P7 and P8 while close to a third obtained relatively good grades with C3 and C4, and close to another third obtained average grades with C5 and C6.

Table 4: Number of staff according to secondary school English language grades

<i>Grading</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
A1- A2	25	7.7
C3- C4	84	25.8
C5- C6	82	25.2
P7- P8	98	30.1
Failed	29	8.9
No response	8	2.5
Total	326	100.0

The respondents comprised respondents holding various posts and assigned various job functions. They included officer level posts such as those of deputy chief registrars, assistant registrars and administrative officers, and clerical level posts and support posts. The following table, Table 4 records the composition of the respondents.

Table 4: Number of staff according to job functions

<i>Office</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Security officers ( <i>Pegawai keselamatan</i> )	17	5.2
Deputy Chief Registrar ( <i>Ketua Penolong Pendaftar</i> )	2	0.6
Administrative assistant - clerical ( <i>Pembantu tadbir (perkeranian &amp; kesetiausahaan)</i> )	77	23.6
Administrative officer ( <i>Pegawai tadbir - kesetiausahaan</i> )	15	4.6
Administration officer ( <i>Pegawai Tadbir</i> )	24	7.4
Lower administration officer ( <i>Pembantu tadbir rendah</i> )	76	23.3
Assistant registrar ( <i>Penolong Pendaftar</i> )	8	2.5
Librarian ( <i>Pustakawan</i> )	5	1.5
Officer – cultural affairs ( <i>Pegawai Seni</i> )	1	0.3
Inventor ( <i>Pereka</i> )	1	0.3
Technician ( <i>Juruteknik</i> )	8	2.5
Laboratory assistant ( <i>Pembantu makmal</i> )	8	2.5
General assistant ( <i>Pembantu am</i> )	2	0.6
Publishing assistant ( <i>Pembantu penerbitan</i> )	2	0.6
Management system information officer ( <i>Pegawai system maklumat</i> )	3	0.9
Engineer ( <i>Jurutera</i> )	2	0.6
Quality surveyor ( <i>Juru Ukur Binaan</i> )	2	0.6

Youth and sports officer ( <i>Pegawai Belia &amp; Sukan</i> )	2	0.6
Assistant hostel warden ( <i>Pembantu warden hostel</i> )	1	0.3
Assistant accountant ( <i>Pembantu bendahari</i> )	3	0.9
Treasurer ( <i>Bendahari</i> )	1	0.3
No response	66	20.2
Total	326	100.0

## English Language Practice and Usage

This section will be divided under six sub-sections under six sub-headings. The first sub-section encompasses questions and information relating to the "self" of the respondents, i.e. to their familiarity with the language. The following are the sub-headings for each sub-section.

### English Language Practice and usage

- Usage & the "Self"/ Identity
- Usage in Formal Communication
- Usage & Technology
- Usage in Duties & Functions
- Frequency and consistency of Usage
- Usage for General Purposes

## Usage & the "Self"/ Identity

### *Communicating with Friends & Colleagues*

The usage of English language in relation to the "self" or the identity of the respondents was determined through the respondents' usage of the language in communication with friends and colleagues and the respondents' perception of their communicative competence and their ease with the language.

It was found that about two thirds of the respondents did not use or seldom used English to communicate with friends. However, about a third said that they used it frequently or always with their friends.

With their colleagues, less than a third used it frequently or always outside of their work hours. About two thirds responded that they did not use or seldom used the language with colleagues even in the course of carrying out their jobs. When communicating with colleagues of ethnic groups other than their own, the percentage that responded that they used English always and frequently is about the same as the percentage that said that they seldom did so with 43% making up the former and 42% making up the latter. However, 10.1% said that they never used the language to communicate with colleagues of other ethnic groups. This shows that communication in English language is relatively observable with people across ethnic groups. The figures are given in Table 10 below.

### *Communication with Heads of Department*

Besides communication between colleagues at the work place, it was found that close to a third of the respondents used English frequently when they communicated with the head or their superior. However, 19.6% said that they never used it.

### *Ease with English*

Although it has become almost vital to use English (where necessary) with the campus community, especially in the context of internationalizing the higher education, it was found that many staff members still did not feel comfortable speaking English. Slightly over 50% responded in the negative saying that they are seldom willing to speak English. A good percentage of 45%, however, said that they are often willing to speak the language.

The questionnaire also assessed an aspect of the attitude of the respondents to the use of English. It determined the respondents' perception of the opportunity for them to use the language. It was found that more than half of them said that they were not shy about speaking English. Only about 13% said that they were always or often shy about using English. More than 50% responded that they seldom or never got the chance to use the language. Only about 14% always or frequently used the language.

More than 75% of the respondents said that they would like to increase their level of proficiency in the language by following English language classes. Only 13% showed little interest in learning and increasing their command of the language.

### ***Usage in Formal Communication***

This section highlights findings related to the usage of language for the purposes of communication at the work place. The findings give us an idea of how the respondents communicated with other parties within the university community for example, the students, the administrators, university clients, etc.

### ***Fluency in Malay, English and Other Languages***

It was found that while over 90% of the respondents stated that they listen, speak and read Malay well only about 50% stated that they listen, speak and read moderately well.

A small percentage of respondents had mastery of other languages such as Mandarin, Tamil and Arabic. The respondents stated that they were more able to speak these languages than they were able to write. In addition, the questionnaire determined the languages used to communicate with various Malay groups of people.

In their communication with their heads of department, 95% of the respondents used Malay. The rest, which made up 4% of the total said they seldom used Malay. On the other hand, about 37% stated that they used English frequently to speak to their heads of department. Out of this percentage, 7% said that they used it always. A discrepancy arose when these figures were reconciled against each other. This 7% did not seem to match the percentage of respondents who said that they seldom or never used Malay.

With students, half of the total number of respondents said that they never or seldom used English to communicate them. A slightly lower percentage of 44.2% said that they used English frequently or always to speak with students.

Tertiary institutions receive local and foreign visitors often. The findings with respect to communication with visitors were that 86.8 percent of the respondents used Malay language when they speak with them. Only 9.2 who said seldom and never. The study also showed that 65.5% of the respondents responded saying that they used English when speaking to foreign visitors. One third responded saying that they seldom used Malay.

Besides Malay language and English language the respondents also used other languages even though the percentage, 2.4%, was negligible compared to the 25.2 % who said that they seldom and never. The languages concerned were Mandarin, Arabic and Tamil with 1.5%, 0.6% and 0.3% respectively.

### ***Usage in Technology***

The analysis in this section looks at the medium used in dealing with technology apparatuses like computer, and internet.

43.3% of the support staff, i.e. the respondents, said that they seldom used English when they emailed. 24.5% did not use English in communicating via email. Another 23% used it frequently or always in emails. Concerning e-mail receiving, 30.4% stated that they seldom received e-mails in English language and 18.4 percent said that they never got emails in English. Just as big a percentage, 43.6% to be exact, always or frequently received e-mails in English language.

It was found that support staff's involvement in internet site navigation in English language was moderate. The data showed that 57.4% always and frequently navigated internet sites in English while 36.8% responded seldom or never. It was also found that a high percentage of respondents never or seldom attended technical briefings in English. A high percentage of respondents never or seldom attended technical briefings in English. Where technical briefings were concerned, a high percentage of respondents (68.1%) never or seldom attended technical briefings in English.

### ***Usage in Duties and Functions***

This section contains findings related to the usage of English in carrying out tasks and functions at the work place.

### ***Attending to Telephone Calls***

45% of the respondents received enquiries in English through the telephone frequently or always as opposed to another 45% that seldom. Only a small percentage of 2.8% never received any enquiries in English over the telephone. These figures did not, however, indicate whether the respondents are entrusted with the responsibilities of attending to such a task. With respect to telephone communication, only 36.8% responded saying that they made telephone calls always or frequently using English. Almost double the figure said that they seldom or had never done so.

Still with respect to telephone calls, about 44% said that they always or frequently got telephone calls in English and about the same figure seldom got such calls. It should be considered that this figure might have included the respondents who had to attend to phone enquiries as part of their job functions while others had no such job functions.

### ***Attending to Visitors***

The next few paragraphs record findings relating to public relations and/or front desk communication. 54% of the respondents always or frequently received enquiries from visitors in English language. At the same time, 37% stated that they seldom received enquiries and 2.5% stated that they had never gotten enquiries in English. With respect to enquiries from students, only 35% said that students enquired in English. In their response to the enquiries, about 37% of the respondents said that they always or frequently responded to the enquiries in English. The rest said that they never or seldom responded in English and some of the respondents thought this question was not relevant to them.

### ***Attending to Written Communication***

Only a small percentage of the respondents stated that they frequently had to attend to enquiries and letters in English. Over a third seldom or never got such enquiries. Again, these figures did not indicate whether the respondents were entrusted with such tasks and functions in the first place. In other words, they never got written enquiries in English because their job functions did not include dealing with enquiries in the first place.

### ***Collective Work Activities***

The staff's use of English language was also identified based on collective activities. The findings showed that 56.1 percent of the respondents stated that they seldom used English language when they were involved in collective activities in the office and 22.4% said that they never used it. Based on data findings in Table 43, it was observed that most of the respondents interacted at meetings in Malay.

With regards to interdepartmental communication i.e. with staff from other departments, only 18% said that they frequently used English. Over 70% said that they seldom or never communicated in English.

### ***Frequency and consistency of Usage***

The findings in this section are related to the consistency and the implied policies of using English language at the universities.

Again similar to earlier findings, less than 20% of the respondents stated that they frequently or always used English at the office. The majority replied in the negative, i.e. they never or seldom used the language at work. Only 12% of the respondents said that notices affecting them were put up often in English. About 20% said that they received instructions from the head of department always or frequently in English. The rest said that instructions were never or seldom given to them in English.

### ***Usage for General Purposes***

Unlike the other sections, this section highlights findings related to the usage of English by the respondents outside of the work place or in general settings.

An equal percentage of the respondents read English newspapers as the percentage that seldom or never read English newspapers. This percentage was found to be about 43%. While this figure seems encouraging, a slightly lower percentage at about 37% was determined for respondents who used frequently or always English at public places.

With regards to watching television, a relatively high percentage responded saying they frequently or always watched English programmes on television. A third said that they always watched English TV programmes while 46.6% said they frequently did so.

The figure went up when the question whether they watched English films at the cinema or on the VCD was asked. About 30% said they always did so while about 40% said they frequently did so. Still 5.5% said they never did and a fifth of them said that they seldom.

Only a small number of the respondents said that they used English when having their meals at the canteen. A slightly higher percentage of 22.4% said that they frequently used English for the purposes of buying and selling. The percentages for both these activities were high for respondents who seldom or never used English. A similar breakdown of figures was found with respect to the usage of English in community or association activities.

## Conclusion

In general it could be seen that the percentage of respondents who always used English in all communication in the course of their work was low with figures ranging from 0.5% to about 8%. This would be appropriately so with Bahasa Malaysia being the official language of the country and the university being a public university which should abide by this. The figures for all communication for frequent usage of English were relatively high, however, with figures of up to 20%. Further, it was interesting to note that with certain aspects involving technology such as with the use of the internet and emails, the figures went up.

Generally Bahasa Malaysia was still used more pervasively in all communication and respondents seemed to indicate that they were much more comfortable using Bahasa Malaysia than English despite having the willingness to use English. Nonetheless, an encouraging percentage noted was that of the respondents who were often willing to increase their proficiency in the language through English language classes. The respondents who were always and frequently willing to do this was as high as 75% with 57% of them stating that they were always willing to take English classes to increase their proficiency.

Outside of their work duties, the respondents seemed to show a more frequent contact with English through the newspaper and English films. About 45% said that they always or frequently read English newspapers and watched English films at the cinema or on VCD and English programmes on television.

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