

Perceptions and barriers towards English language proficiency among pharmacy undergraduates at Universiti Sains Malaysia

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Abstract

Aim: The study aims to evaluate perceptions and barriers towards English language proficiency among pharmacy undergraduates at Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Method: This study was designed as a questionnaire based, cross sectional survey. In addition to the demographic information, the association among study variables was observed by using Chi-Square/Fischer Exact test.

Results: Two hundred and thirty two (52.1%) of the students agreed that they can communicate confidently in English. Furthermore, 350 (78.7%) felt that they possessed good English language listening skills. Three hundred and ten (69.7%) respondents claimed no problem in reading but 205 (46.1%) remained neutral towards their capabilities to write in English language. Lack of time was reported by 224 (50.1%) of the respondents as a potential barriers towards attaining English language proficiency.

Conclusion: The present study identified pharmacy students' perceptions of their capability in English language and identified some areas of concern for improving their English language proficiency. Such areas of concern should be addressed to improve English proficiency level for pharmacy undergraduates.

Keywords: Perceptions, Barriers, English Language Proficiency, Pharmacy Undergraduates, Malaysia.

Introduction

English language proficiency for the university students is defined as "the ability of a student to make use of the language to communicate in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies" (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009). The term "use" ranges from tasks as simple as discussing work with fellow students to complex exercises, such as writing an academic paper or delivering a speech to a professional audience (Swales, 1990). This view of proficiency as the ability to organize language to carry out a variety of communication tasks distinguishes the use of 'English language proficiency' from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence structure (McKay & McKay, 2002).

English language proficiency has become an important issue in Malaysian higher education; due in part to a heightened awareness of the role of English language ability in employment outcomes (Musa *et al.*, 2012). There is also an increased recognition within universities of the fundamental nature of language in learning and academic achievement for

all students (Musa *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, students entering the universities need to be proficient in English in order to have a better edge in the job market and be better prepared to meet the challenges of globalisation (Pawanchik, 2006).

Within this context, Bahasa Malaysia (BM) was made a medium of instruction within all educational institutes around the country in 1957 (Gill, 2005). However in 1992, a controversial decision was taken by the Malaysian government approved English language in addition to BM as medium of instruction in higher educational institutes (Heng & Tan, 2006). The government supported this transformation by declaring it as an "essential for the economic and technological development." Even though, Malaysian citizens had acquaintance towards English language, majority of the Malaysian people estimated an increase in unemployment due to their poor command of English language (Abdullah *et al.*, 2010; Heng & Tan, 2006; Lim *et al.*, 2008). In relation to the impact of this language transformation on Malaysian students and their command of English language, it was revealed that

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most Malaysian university graduates were uncomfortable using English and preferred to communicate using their native languages. A contributing cause was absence or poor fluency in English, thus resulting in a sense of discomfort while using English during the phases of conversation (Musa *et al.*, 2012).

Shifting our concerns to the Discipline of Pharmaceutical Sciences, English language is important. In recent decades, the pharmacy profession has expanded significantly in terms of professional services delivery and is recognised as an important foundation in the multidisciplinary provision of healthcare. Pharmacists are shifting from product-based services to patient-oriented care and this change requires an excellent command of communication and presentation skills. This shift is not easy as pharmacists in Malaysia are already facing competition in the form of non-dispensing separation, the trend to globalisation and resource allocation (Abdullah *et al.*, 2010). In addition, the majority of standard references, written communications and dialogues use English (Azhar *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, for enhanced product and patient-oriented services, undergraduate pharmacy training around the globe (including Malaysia) emphasises the importance of a good command of the English language. This intends that pharmacists can use the English language proficiently for professional purposes at the end of their graduation (Abdullah *et al.*, 2010).

To the best of our knowledge and through extensive literature review, the majority of the studies from Malaysia that evaluated English language proficiency of undergraduates were from the physical sciences (Othman *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, there is a paucity of data reporting the level of English language proficiency from allied health sciences. Comprehending the seriousness of the issue, the current research aimed to assess English language proficiency among currently enrolled pharmacy undergraduates from the School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Penang, Malaysia.

Methods

Study design, sampling and settings

A questionnaire based cross-sectional survey design was adopted. The research was conducted among all pharmacy undergraduates (n=542) enrolled at the School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, USM, Penang, Malaysia: 117 students in 1st year, 126 in 2nd year, 139 in 3rd year and 160 in 4th year.

Research instrument

Items included in the survey were modified from previous work conducted on English language use among USM undergraduates (Che Lah & Kaur, 2003) and consultation with experts. The questionnaire was constructed in three parts. The first part requested demographic information from the respondents while the second part consisted of ten questions evaluating the pharmacy student's perceptions about their English language proficiency. The third part consisted of ten questions that investigated their perceived barriers affecting improvement of English language proficiency. The questions in the second and third part were designed using a five-point Likert scale format ("strongly

agree", "agree", "neutral", "disagree", "strongly disagree").

The survey was assessed for content and face validity by a panel of three experts which included one lecturer from the School of Education Studies and two lecturers from the School of Pharmaceutical Sciences. The survey was pre-tested with 15 respondents, which resulted in a refinement of question wordings. The internal consistency analysis was used to test the reliability of the items. An alpha value of 0.75 and 0.77 was obtained for items in section B and C respectively. Data from the pilot phase was not included in the final analysis.

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the departmental ethical committee of Discipline of Social and Administrative Pharmacy, School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, USM. The respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and their right to withdraw from the study.

Survey administration

The survey was administered with the help of two lecturers from the School of Pharmaceutical Sciences. The questionnaire was given at the end of their respective classes. All questionnaires were collected on the same day of the administration by the lecturers. The questionnaires were later given to the researcher for data entry and analysis.

Statistical analysis

The K-S test was used to identify the nature of data and non-parametric statistical tests were used accordingly. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) v16.0 was used for data analysis. Responses to questions producing ordinal data were compared to detect differences according to demographic characteristics using chi-square/Fischer Exact test where applicable. The significant associations were further analysed for the strength and direction by using phi/Cramer constant (ϕ). *P* value less than 0.05 was considered as statistically significant.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

A total of 445 responses were received with a response rate of 82.1% as described in Table I. The study cohort was dominated by females (n=320, 71.9%). The majority of the respondents (n=238, 53.5%) belonged to the Malay ethnicity and reported "Bahasa Malaysia (official national language of Malaysia)" as their preferred mean of communication (n=242, 54.4%). Moreover, 377 (84.7%) of the respondents joined the pharmacy program after the completion of their matriculation.

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) scores were obtained to depict English language proficiency of the undergraduates. MUET consists of four components with an aggregate score of 300. The scores are graded in six bands, with Band 6 being the highest and Band 1 the lowest. One hundred and ninety two (43.1%) respondents achieved Band 4 in the MUET followed by 187 (42.0%) who managed to receive Band 3.

Table I: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	125	28.1
Female	320	71.9
Ethnicity		
Malay	238	53.5
Chinese	186	41.8
Indian	12	2.7
Others	9	2.0
Spoken language at home		
Malay	242	54.4
Chinese	156	35.0
Tamil	11	2.5
Others	36	8.1
Current Year of Study		
First year	111/117	24.9 (95%)
Second year	116/126	26.1 (92%)
Third year	113/139	25.4 (81%)
Fourth year	105/160	23.6 (66%)
Mode of Entry into Undergraduate Program		
Matriculation	377	84.7
STPM	54	12.1
Others	14	3.2
Pre Admission MUET scores		
Band 1	1	0.2
Band 2	3	0.7
Band 3	187	42.0
Band 4	192	43.1
Band 5	58	13.1
Band 6	4	0.9

Self perceived English language proficiency

English literacy and oracy

More than half (n=232, 52.1%) of the students agreed that they can communicate confidently with others in the English language. Race, language of preference, current year of study, mode of entry and MUET scores were significantly associated with this confidence in English language ($p<0.001$). A higher proportion of Chinese students agreed with the statement with a moderately positive association ($\phi_c=0.275$). In addition, respondents who entered the undergraduate program through STPM and scored a Band 4 in MUET were also positively associated with the statement ($\phi_c=0.241$ and 0.259 respectively). On the other hand, association among other variables was negligible.

The majority of study respondents (n=350, 78.7%) felt that they possessed good English language listening skills. Significant associations were observed among race, MUET scores, preferred language, year of study and mode of entry ($p<0.001$). Respondents with MUET scores of 4 reported moderate positive association with the statement ($\phi_c=0.252$). Although the associations for other variables were positive, they were too weak to have a considerable effect on the study.

Where the reading capability of the study respondents was concerned, most claimed no problem in reading English material. Statistically significant relationships were observed among race, MUET scores, language spoken at home and year of study ($p<0.001$). All Indian respondents (100%; n=12) agreed with this statement and the association was positive and moderate ($\phi_c=0.298$). In addition, respondents with

MUET score of 4 also reported moderately positive association with the reading capabilities ($\phi_c=0.299$). Weak positive effects were found among the other variables.

Approximately half (n=205, 46.1%) of the study respondents remained neutral towards their capability to write in the English language. Race, MUET scores, year of study and preferred language were significantly associated with the statement ($p<0.001$). However, the effect size for all variables was positive but too weak to impinge on the study results.

English language and educational concerns

Results from the present study highlighted that most (72.9%) of the study respondents believed that their current English language proficiency is enough to understand the academic materials, with a significant association observed when compared with MUET scores ($p<0.001$). Furthermore, the majority (86.1%) felt that with their current English proficiency, they could obtain their bachelors degree. MUET scores were again reported to associate significantly with the statement with effect size of $\phi_c=0.205$ and 0.255 respectively.

The respondents were asked about their interaction with non-Malaysian faculty members within the University. Two hundred and twenty eight (51.2%) agreed that they faced no problem while having interaction with foreign faculty members. In addition, most (74.2%) respondents claimed no problem in presenting assignments and case studies with their current English language proficiency. Race, MUET scores and preferred language of communication had significant association ($p<0.001$) with these two questions. No significant association was reported among other study variables.

English language and professional concerns

The respondents were questioned about English proficiency while interacting with patients in community and hospital attachment. Two hundred and thirty (53.7%) respondents felt that their current English language was good enough to communicate with patients and community members. Moreover, 196 (44.0%) stated that they are not shy to communicate their intellectual thoughts effectively in English among their peers and faculty. Race, MUET scores and preferred language were significantly associated with both statements. Respondents with band scores above four felt capable of expressing their thoughts in English. A positive moderate association was observed among professional concerns (*i.e* interaction with patients, peers and faculty) and MUET scores with $\phi_c=0.244$. No considerable association was however reported among other study variables (Table II).

Barriers towards English language proficiency

Personal barriers

Students were asked about potential barriers towards English language proficiency, with 224 (50.1%) mentioning lack of time as contributing factor. There was a statistically significant association between responses to this question and MUET scores ($p<0.001$). No significant association was reported among other study variables (Table III).

Table II: Self perceived English language proficiency

Questions						<i>p</i> value					
	SD n (%)	D n (%)	N n (%)	A n (%)	SA n (%)	Gender	Race	MUET	Language	Year of Study	Mode of Entry
I can communicate fluently in English	2 (0.4)	24 (5.4)	187 (42.0)	211 (47.4)	21 (4.7)	0.330	<0.001*	<0.001*	<0.001*	0.003*	0.025*
I can listen well in English	0 (0.0)	3 (0.7)	92 (20.7)	298 (66.9)	52 (11.7)	0.518	0.001*	<0.001*	0.039*	0.005*	0.004*
I do not have any problem in reading English materials	0 (0.0)	24 (5.4)	111 (24.9)	250 (56.2)	60 (13.5)	0.154	<0.001*	<0.001*	0.004*	0.038*	0.954
I can write effectively in English	0 (0.0)	35 (7.9)	205 (46.1)	184 (41.3)	21 (4.7)	0.675	<0.001*	<0.001*	0.003*	0.010*	0.145
My English language proficiency is good enough for me to understand academic books and lectures in my course	1 (0.2)	10 (2.2)	65 (14.6)	307 (69.0)	62 (13.9)	0.568	0.095	<0.001*	0.009*	0.805	0.130
My English language proficiency is not good enough for me to interact with patients during community and hospital attachment	36 (8.1)	203 (45.6)	146 (32.8)	56 (12.6)	4 (0.9)	0.627	<0.001*	<0.001*	<0.001*	0.073	0.066
My English language proficiency is adequate for me to pass my overall examinations	1 (0.2)	10 (2.2)	51 (11.5)	314 (70.6)	69 (15.5)	0.940	0.080	<0.001*	0.121	0.220	0.072
My English language proficiency is good enough for me to present individual assignments and case studies to the class	0 (0.0)	12 (2.7)	103 (23.1)	279 (62.7)	51 (11.5)	0.589	<0.001*	<0.001*	<0.001*	0.298	0.205
My English language proficiency makes me shy to express my intellectual thoughts with my peers and lecturers	25 (5.6)	171 (38.4)	141 (31.7)	100 (22.5)	8 (1.8)	0.439	<0.001*	<0.001*	<0.001*	0.233	0.089
My English language proficiency makes me more confident to interact academically with foreign lecturers in the school	0 (0.0)	43 (9.7)	174 (39.1)	200 (44.9)	28 (6.3)	0.189	<0.001*	<0.001*	<0.001*	0.220	0.181

Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neutral, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree
**p*<0.05

More than half of the respondents (262, 58.9%) felt they were confident in their ability to write and speak English. Race, MUET scores and the first language spoken at home were statistically associated with this statement. The ability to express thoughts and opinion in English was spread broadly among the study respondents, with 145 (32.6%) who were confident (agreed) while 164 (32.6%) who were not confident (disagreed). Statistically significant associations were observed among gender (*p*=0.015), race (*p*<0.001), MUET scores (*p*<0.001), first language spoken at home (*p*<0.001) and year of study (*p*=0.045). A higher percentage of female students (132, 41.3%) gave a positive response to this statement compared to their male counterparts (32, 25.6%). Almost all Malay respondents (107, 45%) agreed to the statement as compare to other races. Most of the respondents with MUET Band 2 and 3 agreed with statement.

Professional barriers

The respondents seemed satisfied with faculty members as 226 (50.8%) disagreed that there is a lack of good teachers to help them improve their English language. A statistical association was noted in response to this question with gender (*p*=0.043). A higher percentage of female respondents (*n*=176, 55%) disagreed with the statement as compared to male respondents, however the effect size was negligible ($\phi_c=0.149$).

Two hundred and twelve (47.7%) respondents agreed that faculty members of the University helps them to improve English language, hence their presence shapes as role model for the students. Statically significant associations were observed in both gender (*p*=0.007) and MUET level (*p*=0.034) in response to this question. Female respondents once again had a higher percentage (168, 52.6%) who disagreed with this statement.

Social barriers

One hundred and ninety eight (44.8%) respondents reported a conducive and friendly environment supporting the use of English language. Race (*p*=0.01), MUET scores (*p*=0.013) and spoken language at home (*p*=0.018) were found statistically associated with the proposed statement. The reported effect size was, however, too small to affect the associated variables.

More than two thirds (*n*=330, 73.2%) of the study respondents disagreed that role of family and university acts as a potential barrier in attaining English language proficiency. Gender was found to be significantly associated with the statement regarding family and university (*p*<0.001, *p*=0.036 respectively). A larger proportion of females disagreed with the statements as compare to male respondents with a moderate positive effect $\phi_c=0.250$ among gender and support from family.

Table III: Barriers towards English language proficiency

Questions						p value					
	SD n (%)	D n (%)	N n (%)	A n (%)	SA n (%)	Gender	Race	MUET	Language	Year of Study	Mode of Entry
I have no confidence in my ability to speak and write fluent English	40 (9)	222 (49.9)	109 (24.5)	67 (15.1)	7 (1.6)	0.424	<0.001*	<0.001*	<0.001*	0.057	0.948
I do not have time to take up extra classes to improve my English language	6 (1.3)	83 (18.7)	133 (29.9)	196 (44)	27 (6.1)	0.528	0.201	0.007*	0.461	0.321	0.212
I do not have enough resources to help improve my English language	33 (7.4)	226 (50.8)	120 (27)	64 (14.4)	2 (0.4)	0.224	0.591	0.096	0.185	0.851	0.281
I cannot afford to attend private classes to improve my English language proficiency	17 (3.8)	156 (35.1)	126 (38.3)	123 (27.6)	23 (5.2)	0.121	0.086	0.092	0.36	0.057	0.062
Difficulty in expressing my thoughts and opinion in English is one of the barriers for me that affects my improvement in English language	22 (4.9)	164 (36.9)	102 (22.9)	145 (32.6)	12 (2.7)	0.015*	<0.001*	<0.001*	<0.001*	0.045*	0.525
There is a lack of good teachers in helping me improve my English language	28 (6.3)	198 (44.5)	132 (29.7)	81 (18.2)	6 (1.3)	0.043*	0.078	0.265	0.119	0.541	0.508
I have no English speaking role models to help me improve my English language	31 (7.0)	181 (40.7)	125 (28.1)	103 (23.1)	5 (1.1)	0.007*	0.415	0.034*	0.517	0.118	0.609
My social environment does not support the use of English	36 (8.1)	162 (36.7)	103 (23.3)	122 (27.6)	19 (4.3)	0.306	0.01*	0.013*	0.008*	0.149	0.549
My family does not support me in improving my English language	133 (29.9)	197 (44.3)	76 (17.1)	35 (7.9)	4 (0.9)	<0.001*	0.877	0.001*	0.509	0.431	0.237
There is a lack of support from my university for me to improve English language skills.	60 (13.5)	207 (46.5)	129 (29.0)	43 (9.7)	6 (1.3)	0.036*	0.022*	0.836	0.012*	0.06	0.623

SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neutral, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree

* $p < 0.05$

Discussion

The present study revealed that most of the respondents felt that they could read, write or speak confidently in the English language. On the other hand, the majority of the respondents either disagreed or stayed neutral about being shy in expressing intellectual thoughts due to their English proficiency. In contrast to a study reported by Teh which states that non-native English students are shy to communicate with peers using English because they might feel uncomfortable to be involved in the conversation process (Teh, 2011). Teachers have a significant influence on students' English proficiency and play an important role in helping students to build their confidence and to improve their English language proficiency (Lai, 1994; Yahaya et al., 2011).

The current study found that respondents with higher MUET Band scores were positive towards English language and faced least problems during studies, similar to Ming who highlighted that students who have good English proficiency face fewer academic difficulties compared to those who are having low proficiency (Xu, 1991). In addition, a Malaysian study by Rashid & Hashim among Malaysian undergraduates also reported that students with high English proficiency possessed much better critical thinking abilities (Rashid & Hashim, 2008).

This study also revealed that, pharmacy students at USM believed that their English language proficiency was sufficient for their academic needs. This may be due to the rigorous process of student selection involved before entering the pharmacy course at USM which is the pioneer university to offer a pharmacy programme in Malaysia. As well as the need for attaining excellent pre-university exam scores, potential students have to go through a Malaysian University

Selection Inventory (MUnSyI) test. Furthermore, for the past four years, oral interviews have become a prerequisite for pharmacy student selection at USM and most of the students need to be able to communicate proficiently in both BM and English. In contrast to the current study findings, Holder reported in his study that in an Australian institution, the non-native English speaking pharmacy students do not enter university well equipped with good communication skills although they have good academic grades (Holder et al., 1999).

The study also revealed that one of the main factors that demonstrate English language proficiency is the level of confidence to express thought and opinions. A case study in Malaysia revealed that a number of students faced problems in putting their thoughts into words (Sayadi, 2007). In addition, students who were good in the language had more confidence contributing to the class discussions. Besides, as reported by Hiew, respondents did experience difficulty in speaking fluently (Hiew, 2012). Thus they choose other local languages and dialects with English to incorporate and ensure their meanings or thoughts are clear. During group work, low confidence students are more likely to refrain from expressing opinions, and explaining their responses (Lai, 1994).

Students reported that they do not have time to take up extra classes to improve their English language as a major barrier possibly due to the overwhelming number of lectures and assignments given to pharmacy undergraduates. Lack of free time, especially among the non-native English speaking students, is one of the major barriers towards improving English language proficiency reported by Behnke et al. (2004). Therefore, availability of additional learning time in the current pharmacy syllabus can be used by students to register for extra classes in English offered by the university.

Conclusion

The current study reported that English language proficiency among pharmacy students is affected by lack of confidence in expressing their thoughts and opinions in English as well as lack of time in attending extra classes. The present study identified some areas of concerns among the pharmacy students for improving their English language proficiency that need to be addressed by both language and pharmacy educators in order to improve current English proficiency level for pharmacy students at USM.

Limitations

The current respondents only represent pharmacy students from School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, USM. In the light of present study findings, it can only be generalized to USM students and for further research, it is recommended that all pharmacy students in Malaysia be included to get more representative findings. The objectives of the present study did not explore in-depth language learning styles and self-motivation strategies towards improving language proficiency. In order to explore these two issues, a more in-depth study by adopting both qualitative and quantitative research methodology is needed. Furthermore, there were no open-ended questions in the questionnaire, which is also a limitation of the study.

Disclosure

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare. No funding was received for the study.

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