



Perception of Undergraduates on Their Language Competence Based on English Language National Examination Results

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the perception of undergraduate students on their language competence in meeting the requirement to take English for Specific purpose course at tertiary level. The investigation was conducted using survey questionnaire on 250 undergraduate students to obtain their perception on their actual language competence based on the national language examination results as preparatory to register for Professional & Communication skills course (English for Specific Purpose subject). The findings indicated that despite obtaining excellent grade in English Language, a majority of them perceived lack in language competence to sit for the university language course. About 42.3% (n=92) of the respondents perceived that their results over rated their actual oral skills, while 48.2% (n=105) of the respondents perceived that their results matched their actual writing skills. The findings could implicate the reliability of the national examination to be used as benchmarking criteria in accepting students in universities. The findings could also motivate the Ministry of Education in improving the method of language assessment to give equivalent weightage to all language skills to not heavily focusing on reading or writing skills.

Keywords: Language competence, undergraduate perceptions, English for Specific purposes

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INTRODUCTION

The lack of English Language proficiency has been identified as a major factor in graduate unemployment (Menon & Patel, 2012). Various studies have been conducted on whether English Language competency among graduates meets the

industry's needs but unfortunately, similar results across the studies have reported the lack of communication skills among them (Ambigapathy & Aniswal, 2005; Roshid & Chowdhury, 2013). Other findings have lamented on poor English competency among graduates on productive skills which hinders them from presenting ideas in group discussions and meetings, report writing on project papers or proposals, or negotiation of ideas, especially in impromptu situations (Ambigapathy & Aniswal, 2005; Sirat *et al.*, 2008).

The language discipline is distinctive from other subjects in the curriculum as language learning involves integration and fluent application between the explicit learning of vocabulary and language rules with unconscious skills development (Milton, 2006). This implies that language learners need to master not only grammar knowledge but fluent language use, too. However, as it is usually more feasible to learn grammar in the formal classroom, it would be more difficult to acquire fluent language use or proficiency (Steve & Hiroshi, 2013). The factor of large class-size in a language classroom further limits individual students' contact hours with their lecturer which in turn affects learning (Carbone & Greenberg, 1998; Jones, 2007, p. 4). However, this does not mean that a reduction of class size alone will significantly increase students' grades (Kokkelenberg, Dhillon, & Christy, 2005; Cho, Glewwe, & Whitler, 2012).

Other factors that influence students' language learning, which need to be

considered also, rely on how the teacher chose to give his or her instructions. As suggested by Iran-Nejad *et al.*, (1990), suitable teaching methods play an important role in students' learning, thus method needs to vary according to class size, subject matter and students' level. However, in language teaching, most language instruction is still based on traditional drill and exercise principles on language structures, pronunciation and intonation, sometimes in separate learning units, either with artificial context or even worse, without context (Fang, Baptista, Nunes, & de Bruijn, 2012).

Besides the students' language skills, further aspects such as prior knowledge of the students and their attitude towards language learning also play important roles as these aspects are part of the building blocks of the development of the students' language competency and proficiency. Awang, Kasuma, and Akma, (2010), in their study on second language learners' perception of learning English Literature, found that students' who had higher prior knowledge of the literature texts showed a more positive attitude in learning.

In the research of language needs, most studies are largely based on classroom settings mainly to improve classroom tasks (Maros *et al.*, 2012). However, Zhu and Flaitz (2005) observed that experiences outside the classroom affect students' overall academic performances where their interactions in a larger institutional context influence their in-class performance. Thus, it is necessary

to investigate the needs of language skills required for the students to perform beyond the classroom settings.

In the area of English for Specific purposes, the literature has revealed at least two important aspects in the conduct of an effective language course or programme: 1) the language course or programme needs to accommodate not only the target needs but also the students' learning needs (Vifansi, 2002; Momtazur Rahman *et al.*, 2009). Target needs refer to the skills expected to be achieved as stated in the course outcomes and learning needs refer to students' difficulties in attaining the goals of the course or programme; and 2) the language course or programme ought to consider both skills needed by students to fulfil academic tasks and perform job related activities after graduation (Bacha, 2003).

In short, as students are end receivers of teaching and learning, their views and needs have to be considered in the design of a successful language course or programme. Instructors, policy makers or curriculum designers should not rely on the assumption that they have prior knowledge of students' perception and needs on learning. For instance, through needs analysis, Bacha and Bahous (2008), in their studies on writing needs and language proficiency levels of students in business studies at the tertiary level, revealed that students have higher satisfaction level on how they perceive their writing skills compared to their instructors' perception. In another needs analysis study on

undergraduate petroleum engineering students, Al-Tamimi and Munir Shuib (2010) found out that the students perceived that their current English course did not meet their needs and they could not use English effectively. They perceived that all language skills are important and they need continuous instruction and training to improve their proficiency. These studies indicate the importance of considering not only the institutional needs but the students' learning needs, as well in the conduct of an effective course or programme.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Based on past studies, students' language learning and language proficiency are affected by a number of factors as discussed in the previous section. At the tertiary level, this poses a problem especially among undergraduate students with low English Language proficiency who register for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses such as Business English, Academic writing, English for Tourism, English for Health Care, English for Engineering, Professional and Communicational Skills, and others. These courses are usually offered to students who choose to do their major in engineering, medicine, business, science, law, philosophy, psychology, and other non-language fields. The courses generally aimed for professional conduct of students to prepare for future job environment in their respective fields.

The main ESP skills would largely be focused on specific language skills based on learners' needs to conduct appropriately

in specific vocation. For example, an ESP course may emphasise on development of writing skills for news reporters or spoken skills for tourist guides. Undergraduate students are assumed to be proficient in the written and spoken language as the nature of ESP concentrates more on language in context although grammar and structures are occasionally instructed indirectly and integrated in their subject matter, unlike General English which focuses more on mechanics, language rules, pronunciation and structures (Friorito, 2005; Mihai *et al.*, 2012).

Thus, in Malaysia, to ensure that universities will not have to face students with low language competence to follow the language professional courses offered, students intakes, especially in public universities, are based on their achievements in national examinations such as Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (equivalent to Cambridge O' Level) or Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (equivalent to Cambridge A' level). Reputable public universities and some private universities traditionally prefer students who have achieved the highest grade in the examinations to be successfully enrolled in the institutions. Hence, generally, a university English language lecturer of these institutions should expect a majority of his or her fresh undergraduate students to possess exceptional level of language competence ranging from intermediate high to advanced levels in their competence (based on ACTFL proficiency guidelines). However, students' excellent achievements

in English Language in both national examinations may not necessarily reflect their actual practical language competence. Thus, an investigation is needed to verify whether undergraduates with excellent results in their national language assessment do have the equivalent language competency as reflected by the results. In other words, their language learning needs need to be assessed as it would implicate the success of the students to meet the tertiary level language course outcomes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Based on the background of the study and statement of the problem, this study aimed to investigate the students' perceptions on their language competence to cope with the Professional and Communication Skills course. The specific objectives to aid the investigation are as follows:

1. To elicit the students' perception on how accurate their SPM English Language results reflect their actual language competence.
2. To elicit the students' perception on how accurate their SPM English Language results reflect their language output skills (oral and writing skills).
3. To elicit the students' perception on how accurate their SPM English Language results reflect their perceived language proficiency.
4. To elicit the students' perception on their language use.

Findings to these objectives become the basis of students' overall perception

on their language competence to cope with their English for Specific Course - Professional Communication Skills course.

LIMITATIONS

In the scope of English Language learning, the study chose 'Professional and Communication Skills course' (an undergraduate English for Specific Purpose course) offered in a private higher institution as the focus of the study. Hence, the findings of the study are context specific (Richey, Klien, & Nelson, 2004; Driscoll & Burner, 2005; Wang & Hanafin, 2005), where it was investigated for a specific group of undergraduates of a specific tertiary institution for a specific language course subject.

In terms of the methodology, this study relied on the students' opinions in determining their perception on their language competence mapping against their SPM English Language results to seek readiness in taking their Professional and Communication Skills course.

METHOD

The study was conducted via survey technique to assess the language competence among the undergraduates based on their views. This study involved 250 undergraduate students of a Malaysian private university who were undergoing an English communication course. Based on Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), a sample number of 30 and above are suitable for research study employing

statistical analysis. The students were either doing a major course in engineering or information technology field. The students were selected randomly from the whole population of students who took the course subject 'HAB 2033/HBB 2033 - Professional and Communication Skills Course' (PCS) an undergraduate English communication skills course of the private tertiary institution to accommodate soft skills to students to be more competitive in the job market. The participants of the study were given a set of survey questionnaires to respond to, in order to solicit their perception on their own language competence. The instrument used for this phase was a set of survey questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted 24 questions divided into two parts: 1) Students demographic details and their perceived level of language proficiency; 2) Students' perception on self-language competence. Reliability test was conducted on the survey questionnaire for all items, and a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.867 was registered.

The findings would indicate the general level of students' language competence and whether they found it inadequate to sit for the undergraduate language communication course (PCS) and whether their language competence poses a hindrance to them to cope with the course outcomes of the language course subject. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics via Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 20 software.

FINDINGS

The survey questionnaire was distributed to 250 students and received a high response rate of 220 out of the total number. The sample finally consisted of 146 male

students and 74 female students, whereby 194 were Malaysian students and the remaining 26 were international students (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Nationality of the Participants

| | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Malaysian | 194 | 88.2 | 88.2 | 88.2 |
| Valid International | 26 | 11.8 | 11.8 | 100.0 |
| Total | 220 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

As for the main findings to suffice the aim of the study in investigating the students’ perceptions on their language competence to cope with the Professional and Communication Skills course, the findings are presented accordingly in response to the research objectives.

Students’ Perception on their language competence

Question 1: To seek the students’ perception on how accurate their SPM English Language results reflect their overall language competence.

Since the students’ individual needs differ from one another, it is necessary to investigate it through their perception towards their own language competence. To begin with the investigation, the students’ background academic

achievement in English language was required to form a better understanding on their perceptions later. Their academic English Language achievements were based on Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or its equivalent (for international students) results for English Language subject, and English 2, a pre-university preparatory language examination. Fig.1 shows the students’ Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or its equivalent (for international students) results for English Language subject. SPM is the national examination in Malaysia, which was generally used by the private higher institution in selecting students as entrance qualification and as English Language requirement to register in the undergraduate language courses (for example, PCS course subject).

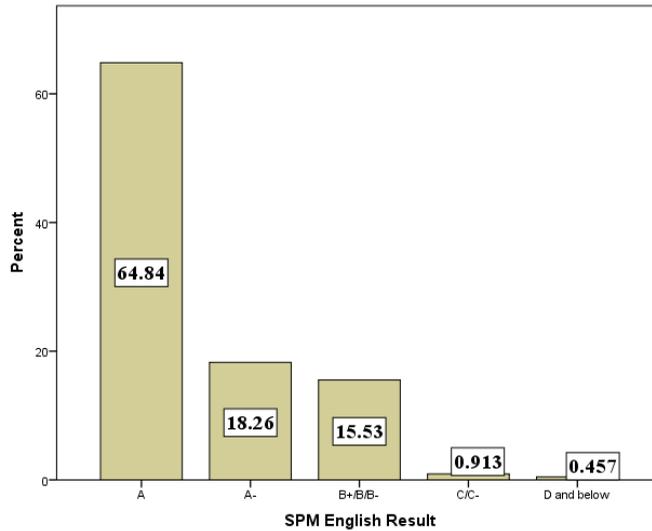


Fig.1: Students' SPM (or equivalent) Results for English Language

Fig.1 shows that overall, the students possess high achievement in English SPM or respective state English Language examination (for international students) with 83.1% (n=182) obtained A grades (A- to A). This was expected because the private higher institution, which offered the PCS course, only accepted students with excellent grades including the

English Language subject in the national examination as the entrance requirement. This is the university's policy and requirement partly because the medium of instruction is in English. A minority 15.5% (n=34) of the respondents obtained B grades (B+, B, and B-), 0.9% (n=2) obtained C grades (C and C-) and only one obtained D grade and below.

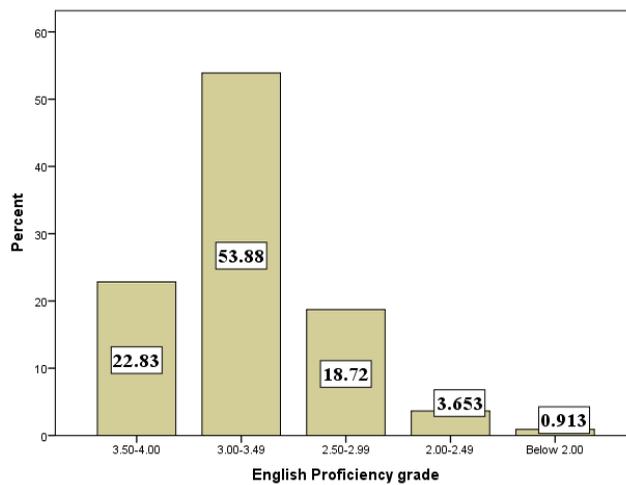


Fig.2: English 2 (English Language Proficiency Course) Results

In comparison, Fig.2 shows the students' results for English 2, which is an undergraduate English Language foundation course. The majority of the respondents (53.9%, n=118) achieved B- to B grades, and only 22.8% (n=50) of the respondents obtained A grades (A- to A). Around 22.4% (n=49) of the respondents achieved only D- to C+ grades, which indicated weak to highly moderate level of language competence among them. Two of them (0.9%) even failed the English Language preparatory course. When cross tabulated between students' achievement

in SPM (Fig.1) and their undergraduate English 2 results from Fig.2, Table 2 shows that only 46 students out of 182 students (25.3%) who had achieved A grades in SPM English subject or equivalent, obtained excellent grade of 3.50-4.00 in their English 2, which is equivalent of A- to A grade (for PCS). A majority of them or 96 students (52.7%) who had achieved A grades in SPM English obtained grade 3.00 and below, which is equivalent to B+ grade and below. A staggering 22% (n=40) SPM A grades students achieved only C+ (conditional passes) to F (fail grade).

TABLE 2
Students' English 2 Results Plotted against SPM Grade

| A | SPM GRADE | | | | | Total |
|---------------------------|-----------|---------|------|-------------|---|-------|
| | A- | B+/B/B- | C/C- | D and below | | |
| 3.50-4.00 (A- to A) | 36 | 10 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 50 |
| 3.00-3.49 (B- to B) | 73 | 23 | 22 | 0 | 0 | 118 |
| CGPA 2.50-2.99 (C- to C+) | 26 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 41 |
| 2.00-2.49 (D- to D+) | 5 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8 |
| Below 2.00 (F) | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Total | 142 | 40 | 34 | 2 | 1 | 219 |

Note: A- to A= Good to Excellent; B- to B+ = Somewhat good to Fair; C/C- = Highly Moderate to Low moderate; D- to D= Weak; F= Fail.

Question 2: To seek the students' perception on how accurate their SPM English Language results reflect their language output skills (oral and writing skills).

As mentioned earlier in this section, students' perception on their actual language competence would aid in determining their language learning needs. Based on Fig.3, only 23.5% (n=51) of the

total number of the respondents agreed that their English Language SPM or equivalent results accurately reflected their actual language competence for both language output skills (oral and writing skills). This means that that the rest (76.5%; n=166) of the respondents perceived that their language national examination results did not equate to their actual language competence; this was either overrated or

down rated their actual language skills. If a student obtained an A grade in English Language SPM, by the standard, he would be assumed to be highly competent in all language skills. However, if the student was only competent in writing skills but

weak in oral skills, then the A grade had overrated the student's oral competence in the language. If the student obtained a C grade in the language examination but he perceived that he was competent in oral skills, the result would down rate this skill.

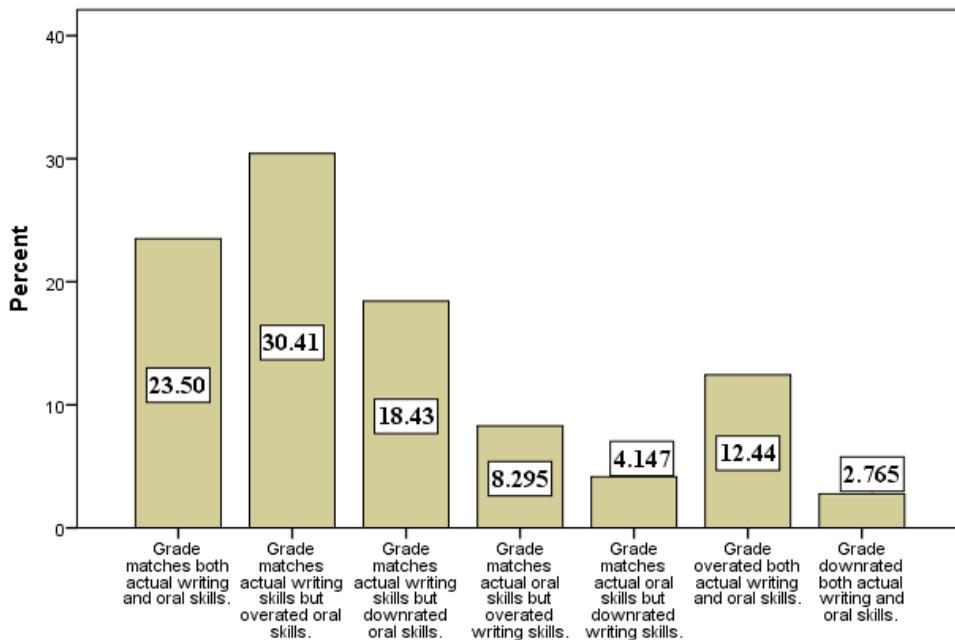


Fig.3: Students' Perception on their Actual Language Competence based on their SPM English Language results

Fig.3 also indicates that from the 76.5% respondents who perceived that the SPM result did not reflect accurately on their actual language skills, 30.4% (n=66) of the respondents perceived that their results matched their writing skills but over-rated their oral skills, whereas 18.4% (n=40) perceived that the results matched their actual writing skills but down-rated their oral skills, and 8.3% (n=18) perceived that their

results matched their actual oral skills but over-rated their writing skills. Meanwhile, 4.1% (n=9) of the students perceived that their results matched their actual oral skills but down-rated their writing skills, and a further 12.4% (n=27) perceived that their results over-rated both their writing and oral skills. Only 2.8% (n=6) of the respondents perceived that their grades down-rated both their actual writing and oral skills.

This means that 42.3% (n=92) of the respondents perceived that their results over-rated their actual oral skills and 48.2% (n=105) of the respondents perceived that their results matched their actual writing skills. This result is an effect due to the format of the English Language SPM examination which allots 100% marks for writing skills. Thus, the examination format may influence the students to place more importance in writing skills, and this explains the reason to why the respondents perceived that their results reflect most accurately in their writing skills as compared to oral skills. However, the study suggests that the results of assessment on students' writing skills do not necessarily reflect accurately their oral communication skills.

Question 3: To seek the students' perception on how accurate their SPM English Language results reflect their perceived language proficiency.

As further support to the above findings, when the data on students' perception of their English SPM result (from Fig.3) were cross tabulated against their SPM results (from Fig.1), 135 out of 183 respondents (73.8%) who had obtained A grades in English Language SPM perceived that their excellent results did not match their actual language competence especially in the oral communication skills or in both skills, as shown in Table 3. This is evident as 84 out of 183 (45.9%) 'A' grade respondents perceived that their results overrated their oral communication skills whether they matched or overrated their actual writing skills. Only 26.2% (n=47) of the respondents who had obtained A grades perceived that their results matched their actual language skills.

TABLE 3
Students' SPM Grades and Students' Perception on their Actual Language Competence Cross tabulation Count

| | GRADE PERCEPTION | | | | | | | Total |
|-------------|--|--|---|--|---|--|---|-------|
| | Grade matched both actual writing and oral skills. | Grade matched actual writing skills but overrated oral skills. | Grade matched actual writing skills but down rated oral skills. | Grade matched actual oral skills but overrated writing skills. | Grade matched actual oral skills but down rated writing skills. | Grade overrated both actual writing and oral skills. | Grade down rated both actual writing and oral skills. | |
| A | 37 | 49 | 25 | 10 | 3 | 16 | 2 | 142 |
| A- | 9 | 10 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 9 | 1 | 39 |
| B+/B- | 4 | 7 | 9 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 33 |
| C/C- | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| D and below | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 51 | 66 | 40 | 18 | 9 | 27 | 6 | 217 |

Note: A- to A= Good to Excellent; B- to B+ = Somewhat good to Fair; C/C- = Highly Moderate to Low moderate; D- to D= Weak; F= Fail.

In short, these findings revealed that the students not only perceived the national assessment (English SPM) as not reflecting their actual language skills but

most of them perceived that they lack the competence in certain language skills such as oral communication skills. This finding is further supported by the data shown in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4
Cross Tabulation Between SPM Grade And Perceived Language Proficiency

| | | LANG PROF | | | | | Total | |
|-------|-------------|-----------|----|-----|-------|------|-------|-----|
| | | B | E | INT | U.INT | ADV. | | M. |
| SPM | A | 0 | 5 | 54 | 61 | 18 | 3 | 141 |
| GRADE | A- | 2 | 1 | 23 | 9 | 5 | 0 | 40 |
| | B+/B/B- | 0 | 2 | 20 | 6 | 6 | 0 | 34 |
| | C/C- | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| | D and below | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | | 2 | 10 | 97 | 77 | 29 | 3 | 218 |

Note: B- Beginner; E- Elementary; INT- Intermediate; U.INT-Upper Intermediate; ADV- Advanced; M-Mastery

For example, based on Table 4, 71.1% (n=155) of the total respondents felt that though they have A grades in SPM English Language subject, they perceived that their language proficiency as equivalent to beginner to upper intermediate level. Only 11.9% (n=23) of the respondents confidently perceived that they were at least advanced users. The majority of the respondents felt that they perceived their language proficiency at the intermediate (44.5%, n=97) and the upper intermediate level (35.3%, n=77). However, the requirement as stipulated in the PCS course pro-forma (refer to Appendix C) indicated that students should be at least at the advanced level of language competence. Thus, only 14.7% (n=32) of the students confidently perceived that they are at least at the advanced level of language use. A reference for the language proficiency levels is indicated in Table 4:

- (a) Beginner level – Students can use basic expression to introduce self, ask address, likes/dislikes, has/have. They can interact in a simple way if the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.
- (b) Elementary level – Students can describe basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, jobs, etc.
- (c) Intermediate level – Students can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans especially familiar matters encountered in work, school, and leisure.
- (d) Upper intermediate level – Students interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity with native speakers. They can give clear viewpoint on a wide range of topical issues giving the advantages and disadvantages.

- (e) Advanced level – Students can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes.
- (f) Mastery level – Students can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. They can express himself or herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely differentiating finer shades of meaning even in the most complex situations.

(Professional Communication Skills – HCB 2033 course Pro-forma)

In short, the findings presented in Table 4 reveal that although most of the students possessed excellent grade in their English Language SPM national assessment, most

of them lacked the required competence to register for the PCS course though the private higher institution assumed that they had at least advanced level of language competence based on their results.

Question 4: To seek the students’ perception on their language use.

When probed further into their language use, majority (67.7%, n=149) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they used mostly grammatically incorrect spoken English Language especially in informal setting and among peers, as indicated in Fig.4. Only 11.8% (n=26) of the respondents claimed that they use grammatically correct English all the time with their peers, while 20.5% (n=45) of them were not sure whether their English Language use was grammatically correct or otherwise.

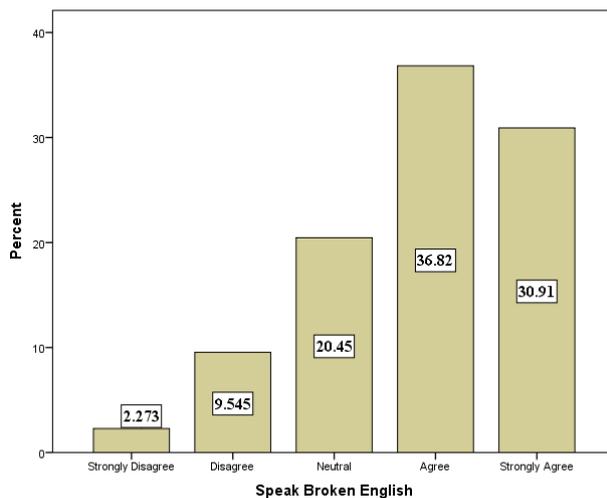


Fig.4: Speak grammatically incorrect English

However, majority of the respondents (65.9%, n=145 students) either agreed or strongly agreed that other people could

understand what they intend to say (as indicated in Fig.). However, in future professional conduct for example at

workplace, grammatically correct English is important in formal presentations to exert credibility. Out of the remaining 34.1% (n=75) respondents, 12.7% (n=28) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that other people could understand their English Language and 21.4% (n=47) of them were in actual fact not sure whether other people could understand them when they use English. In the use of language in formal settings, 66.7% (n=146) of the respondents

(as indicated in Fig.6) would form sentences in their mind before uttering their message aloud as doing so would help them to construct formal and grammatically correct sentences. This shows that the respondents have problems in impromptu construction of grammatically correct sentences especially in formal settings. Only 16.4% (n=36) of them could utter English words effortlessly and naturally while communicating with others orally in the language.

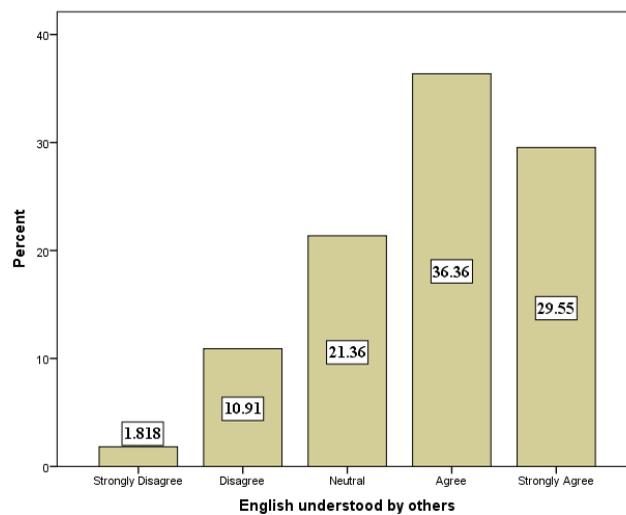


Fig.5: English understood by others

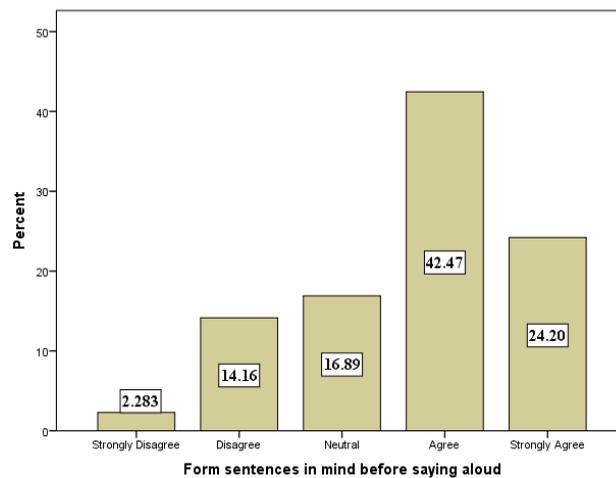


Fig.6: Form sentences in mind before saying them aloud

Majority of the respondents (65.9%, n=145) also indicated that they had the tendency to use short phrases and sentences when communicating in formal settings, as shown in Fig.7. Only 13.2% (n=29) of the

respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had the tendency to use short sentences or phrases in formal communication.

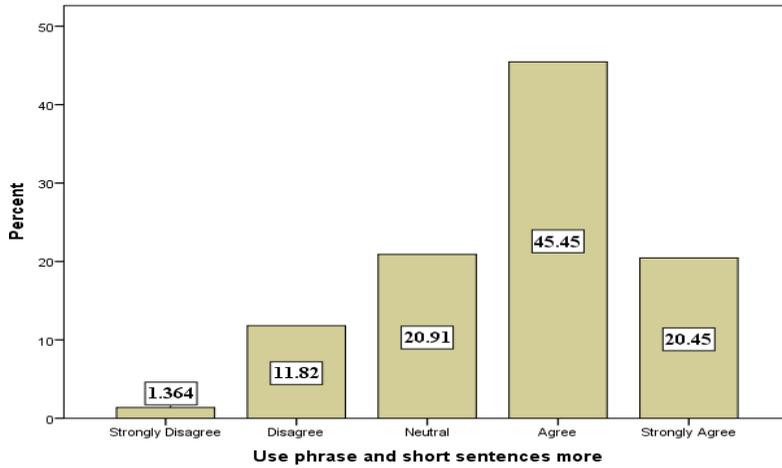


Fig.7: Tendency to use phrases and short sentences

In compensating their lack of competency, nearly half of the total respondents (45.9%, n=101) would resort to memorising speech in oral presentations,

as indicated in Fig.8. However, 35.5% (n=78) of them disagreed that they used memorised speech when delivering their presentations.

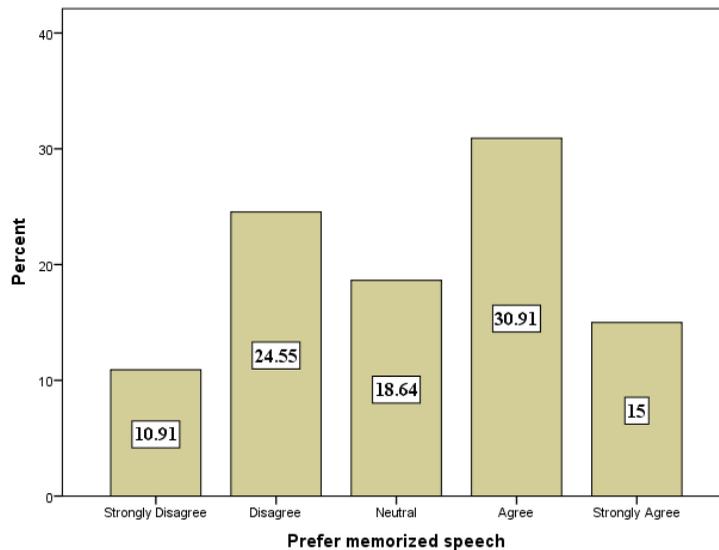


Fig.8: Prefer memorised speech

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings revealed the students' perception of their actual language competence, i.e. whether they had sufficient language competence to register and complete their undergraduate Professional and Communication Skills course. The overall findings indicated that majority of the students perceived that they lacked the required competency to follow the PCS undergraduate course despite achieving excellent results in the national language examination. For example, we could observe that the high grade achieved by the students in the national assessment (SPM) does not necessarily reflect their proportionate language competence when the result was plotted against the students' achievement for English 2. The university assumes that for PCS course, it is expected that students have reached a certain level of language competence to take the course based on their achievement in English SPM.

However, these findings contradicted the assumption. This could potentially become a language learning issue. The findings indicated that the students were still struggling to reach the certain minimum level of language competence while acquiring the skills aimed by PCS course although they had achieved the highest grade in their national examination for English subject (SPM). This claim is further supported by the students' non-confidence with the SPM English result in grading their actual language competence based on their own perception of SPM

English result plotted against their actual competence, as shown in Fig.3 and Table 6. About 42.3% (n=92) of the respondents perceived that their results overrated their actual oral skills and 48.2% (n=105) of the respondents perceived that their results matched their actual writing skills. This result is an effect may largely due to the format of the English Language SPM examination which allots 100% marks for writing skills.

Thus, the examination format could influence the students to place more importance on writing skills, which explains the reason the respondents perceived that their results reflect most accurately in their writing skills as compared to oral skills. The lack of competency among the students needs to be addressed prior or during their learning process in PCS course. Overall, this suggests that the high grade achieved by students in the national assessment (SPM) does not necessarily reflect the proportionate language competence and these finding supports the results of past studies (e.g., Wolf, Kao, Griffin, Herman, Bachman, Chang, & Farnsworth, 2008). Wolf *et al.* argued that some pertinent validity issues on the use of assessments remain unchecked and they proposed that a comprehensive set of validation criteria needed to be considered to evaluate the technical adequacy of assessment tools and assessment systems.

Another main finding of this study is that the compensation strategies used by the students in compensating their shortcomings in using English Language

in oral presentations and communications. For instance, based on the findings presented in Fig.7, majority of the respondents resorted to using phrases and short sentences, especially in formal setting. In formal oral presentations or assessments, nearly half of the respondents resorted to memorised speech to compensate their lack of proficiency to do so. Vidal (2012) argued that there is a correlation among the frequency uses of compensation strategy, types of the strategies and the context of tasks given demonstrated by the low competent language users.

The findings of this study could implicate the reliability of the national examination to be used as benchmarking criteria in accepting students in universities. The findings would also motivate the Ministry of Education to improve the method of language assessment to give equal weightage to all language skills and to not heavily focus on merely reading or writing skills. The findings could also inform language instructors or lecturers in opting additional screening exercise in assessing their students, especially at the beginning of their classes. Through the results of the screening, instructors could redesign their instructional strategies in aiding the students better in coping with the subject. The compensation strategies opted widely by students with low competency could also inform the instructors better in identifying students who are not competent in the English Language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future studies could be conducted on a wider scale of respondents of a wider geographical area at tertiary level in investigating the consistency of the outcome of this study. Studies could also be elaborated in the more valid and practical ways to assess students' language competency and proficiency. Research into teaching and learning strategies could also be conducted to aid students with low proficiency to improve their language command, as well as achieve the target goals of their ESP language subject, such as peer tutoring and learning via eLearning or mobile learning using social media.

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