

An Ethnographic Study on the Use of English among Students at Kolej Universiti Islam Malaysia

HAZLEENA BAHARUN
TUN NUR AFIZAH ZAINAL ARIFF
Kolej Universiti Islam Malaysia

Abstract: This article is based on a four-week ethnographic study of a discourse community i.e. first and second year students of Kolej Universiti Islam Malaysia (KUIM). The researchers believe that the ethnographic approach could help provide valuable insights that would indirectly help them to understand the use of the English Language by the discourse community. Tools of inquiry such as non-participant observations, specialist informants, interviews, and questionnaire as well as a re-examination of relevant documents were employed for data gathering purposes. The findings of this study indicate that English Language use at KUIM is not only dependent on the conventions laid down by the university but also by the discourse community. The paper discusses the implications of the findings on producing and designing meaningful teaching-learning material for the discourse community.

INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an enterprise involving education, training and practice. It draws upon three major realms of knowledge, namely language, pedagogy and the participants' specialist areas of interest (Robinson, 1991).

According to Robinson (1991), ESP teachers would have to play a variety of simultaneous roles: as researchers, course designers, material writers, testers, evaluators as well as classroom teachers. ESP teachers, in other words, are not typical English Language teachers. They would have to be fluent in English and at the same time should be interested in the knowledge associated

with their students' world (Smith, 1983). This implies that exposure of ESP teachers to the students' specialised areas, such as professional demands, requirements and culture is necessary to help them understand the students' discourse community as well as to assist them in designing and producing teaching materials which would "tailor to the students' needs" (Lilley, 1987; p. 4). In other words, the important issue with regard to materials for ESP is the issue of authenticity.

Roe (1993; p.1) has argued that there are teachers of ESP who "have never been near the place where the target language is used." They have also been accused of "being closeted in their ivory towers" and "dispensing prescriptions to correct students' deficiency in the language, in the form of teaching-learning modules" (Ainol Haryati, 1993; p. 102), without even having the slightest knowledge of the students' specialised areas.

Therefore, for this particular study, the researchers have chosen to address the problem which Strevens (1988; p. 42) refers to as "the gap between the learner's knowledge of the special subject and the teacher's ignorance of it." The researchers believe that ESP teachers should familiarize themselves with their learners' special subject and have a better understanding of "the conventions, concerns, the intentions...the environment in which decisions are taken by expert members of the discourse community of which their learners are members or would be members" (Bhatia, 1994; p. 26).

This study was undertaken with the purpose of helping English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioners to understand the use of English at KUIM. It is also seen as a path to ESP professionalism, i.e., to enable teachers to assist undergraduates from all four faculties at the college (Faculty of *Shariah* and Judiciary, Faculty of *Quranic* and *Sunnah* Studies, Faculty of *Dakwah* and Islamic Management and Faculty of Economics and *Muamalat*) to achieve 'academic socialization' (Swales, 1994). Socialization basically means the ability not only to use the English Language for communication purposes but also to use the language appropriately for other tasks within academia.

Research Questions

Based on the above rationale and purpose, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. When is the English Language used?
2. Why should the English Language be used?
3. To what extent is the English Language being used?

Respondents

The respondents of the four-week ethnographic study were:

1. Ten (10) specialist informants, comprising deans and lecturers who conducted their classes in English.
2. First and second year students.

Kolej Universiti Islam Malaysia (KUIM) is the twelfth public higher education institution in Malaysia. The basic teaching and learning approach at KUIM is based on integration, in all its programmes, of the knowledge of *naqli* and *akli*. The concept is intended to reassert the primacy of the Islamic tradition in the pursuit of knowledge and to position KUIM as a center of excellence in education, research, publication and academic cooperation, at both the national and the international levels.

In order to realize these aims, proficiency in the Arabic and English languages, in addition to the National Language, constitute an integral part of the main agenda of helping the students achieve academic excellence and individual growth. KUIM uses Arabic and English as medium of instruction.

This ethnographic study was carried out over a four-week period on students (Malay-Muslims, previously from religious schools), and Malaysian academic staff (fluent in Malay and English or in Malay, English and Arabic) whose subjects were taught in English.

Ethnography is an approach that involves examining the “patterned interactions” and “significant symbols” of specific groups to identify the “cultural norms” that direct their behaviours, and the meanings these groups ascribe to each other’s behaviours (Frey, Botan, Friedman & Kreps, 1991). Ethnography provides rich insights into a certain discourse community. The ethnographic trend is exhorted by Swales (1985; p. 219) who has argued for thick descriptions of communication practice in particular occupations:

“...it is not only texts that we need to understand, but the roles texts have in environments; the values, congruent and conflictive, placed on them by occupational, professional and disciplinary memberships; and the expectations those memberships have of the patterning of the genres they participate in...”

An ethnographic study usually studies a discourse community’s communicative events in the discourse community’s natural setting. There are several ways to counter biased interpretation in ethnographic studies, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985; p. 109) cited in Noraini Ibrahim (1997). They include:

“...member checks (referring data and interpretations back to data sources for correction/verification/challenge); debriefings by peers (systematically talking through research experiences, findings and decisions with non involved professional peers for a variety of purposes - catharsis, challenge, design of next steps, or legitimization, for example...the use of reflexive journals (introspective journals that display the investigator’s mind processes, philosophical position, and bases of decision about inquiry)...”

Since ethnographic research is qualitative in nature, the credibility of the research is not achieved through statistical means but via specific procedures such as triangulation of data, which involves multiple data collection tools and techniques.

This study adopted the ethnographic approach to help teachers of ESP understand the use of English at KUIM so as to enable them to design authentic ESP teaching-learning materials for the students.

Related Studies

To revise and redesign the English programmes for the advanced students of Science and Technology at an Indian institute, Ramani Chacko, Singh and Glendenning (1988) employed a seven-stage research adapted from Kemp's framework for syllabus design. The second stage of the research was analyzing the needs of the learners. Information about learner needs were collected as well as analyzed by observing the students in their natural academic environment; asking the students about their communication practices, needs and problems; asking the subject specialists and asking the language specialists.

To understand the learners' needs, Ramani started by observing the learners in their natural academic setting to gain knowledge on what the learners had to go through everyday. Next, unstructured interviews were conducted with the students to find out their perceptions on their communication practices, needs and problems.

Later, he conducted unstructured interviews with the subject specialists. Through the unstructured interviews with the students as well as the subject specialists, he found out that each department had its own specific genre and that the general theory of genres needed to be revised. Lastly, he asked the language specialists to justify the items existing in the current syllabus. By using the ethnographic data, Ramani realized that there was a discrepancy between the department's actual expectations of their students and the students' needs.

Ainol Haryati (1993) also employed the ethnographic approach in her Malaysian case study of a multi-national company. The ten-week study attempted to identify the actual communicative events that graduates were likely be involved in within the manufacturing industry (i.e., the discourse community). The study

involved two stages - the Pre-field Stage and the In-field stage. Ainol, a qualified engineer, assumed the post of Trainee Assistant Supervisor. During the Pre-field Stage, Ainol negotiated with the gatekeepers of the company to gain access into the company. During the In-field Stage, she gained acceptance and established a relationship with the discourse community. She observed, took field notes and analyzed her data. To validate her findings, she resorted to data triangulation.

Ainol employed open unstructured interviews to gain additional information. Besides that, she also reviewed certain documents such as reports, memos, correspondence and files, which served as additional sources of data and insights. Through this ethnographic study, Ainol found that "groupishness" was a Japanese management feature which influenced the communicative events as well as the rules of behaviour of the discourse community.

Another Malaysian study employing the ethnographic approach in ESP is Lee (1994). To discover the reading problems of a group of Malay students, Lee used tools such as questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and an examination of relevant documents to triangulate her data.

Noraini Ibrahim (1997) has also conducted an ethnographic study to investigate the problems of law students reading legal texts in English. Besides relying on informants, this study employed tools such as observations, interviews, questionnaires and reading through relevant documents to triangulate and validate data. Noraini discovered that the students' low proficiency, their inappropriate reading strategies as well as their inability to identify legal cases as a genre contributed to their difficulties in reading legal texts in English.

Similarly, Leong (1998) analyzed the communicative needs of sales personnel in a group of trading and manufacturing companies. Besides having informants, Leong's ethnographic enquiry employed tools such as interviews, questionnaires, observations and examination of relevant documents. Leong found that English was important to sales personnel and that it was necessary to set up ESP programs for their training to equip them

with the communication skills needed for their job. She proposed the implementation of a specialized ESP program, which addressed the needs of the different levels of sales personnel.

The ethnographic approach was also used to investigate the writing of successful project proposals in a specific discourse community (Mazli Shahurain, 2000). Her study was based on the examination of documents, interviews with specialist informants and observations. This study concluded that proposal writing was a social act that must adhere to the conventions of the discourse community, and be organized in accordance to certain moves or pattern.

All the above studies attest to the valuable insights gained from an ethnographic enquiry.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design for this study was divided into two stages: Pre-fieldwork and Fieldwork.

Pre-fieldwork: Getting into the setting

The pre-field work stage was crucial for the researchers to make sense of the discourse community, of which the researchers were not members. The stage was important in two ways. Firstly, it helped the researchers prepare themselves psychologically in order to access the community. This preparation involved reading related documentation in ESP/EAP journals. Then the researchers proceeded with library searches on issues relating to the language needs and usage. Secondly, at this stage negotiations for entry were made. Access was sought from the dean who, as administrative and academic head, held 'the key to all doors'. Discussions were held on the choice of specialist informants as well as observation procedures.

Fieldwork

The in-field stage commenced when the researchers' specialist informants consented to be observed and informally interviewed at their workplace. Observing the specialists informants at work was deemed appropriate because they used English in preparing and delivering their lectures and tutorials. Therefore, the specialist informants were seen as ideal informants who matched the criteria set by Selinker (1979) and Bhatia (1993).

For this particular study, the researchers conducted non-participant observations. Observations were spread over a period of four weeks. As this was an ethnographic inquiry, the researchers did not manipulate what took place during lectures and tutorials. Instead, we observed and took copious notes. Tape recorders were also used. The observation transcriptions were later referred to the specialist informants in order to eliminate ambiguity as well as possible disputes.

The specialist informants comprised the deans and lecturers of KUIM, whose views were sought on language and education training at the university. This allowed the researchers to obtain insights into the culture of the faculties.

In order to verify the observations and the notes taken, interviews were administered to triangulate the observations. Interviews conducted with the various groups of informants were geared towards the understanding of English Language use in the discourse community, i.e., when English was being used, why English should be used, and to what extent English was being used by the students and the academic staff of KUIM.

A questionnaire was administered after the interviews were conducted. The questionnaire was employed as a tool of inquiry (a) to triangulate the researcher' observations, (b) to verify the answers given by specialist informants during the interview sessions and (c) to gain a holistic picture of the use of English at the faculty.

In addition, for a better understanding of the institutional policies and the demands of each programme, some documents were selected for examination, namely the KUIM Guidebook,

students' textbooks, course outlines, tutorial questions and assignments.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The discussions of the findings are centred on the previous outlined research questions.

Data elicited from observations

The data was collected during the busiest time of the semester, when the specialist informants were actively engaged in fulfilling their job responsibilities. Each specialist informant had two hours of lecture and one hour of tutorial. It was observed that all of the specialist informants delivered their lectures and handled their tutorials in English.

It was found that at KUIM, the lecturers from the four faculties, who were responsible for teaching certain subjects in English, used English on most academic occasions. English was used not only during lectures and tutorials, but also for the preparation of course outlines, teaching modules and materials, and for consultation purposes. In addition, the lecturers also expected their students to use English in class discussions, written assignments, tests and oral presentations. However, they tended to code-switch (English to Malay or Arabic) and code-mix (English and Malay and/or Arabic) for the purpose of explaining further certain concepts and terminologies.

On the part of the students, it was observed that all written assignments were completed in English. However, when asking for clarification from their lecturers (specialist informants), answering questions orally or carrying out oral presentations, some of the students code-mixed (English or Arabic and Malay) and code-switched (English to Malay).

In order to triangulate the above data, the researchers conducted an interview session with each specialist informant, and administered a questionnaire after the observations.

The researchers used semi-structured interviews as the starting point for the analysis. The interviews were basically face-to-face, involving interaction/communication between the researchers and the interviewees. Through the interviews, the researchers were able to gather direct responses and to clarify immediately any issues that they deemed vague. In addition, the semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers and the interviewees to further discuss related issues, which indirectly provided data that gave a better understanding of English Language use at KUIM.

Being the medium of instruction justified the widespread use of English at KUIM. According to the specialist informants, English was used because it was the language of knowledge and academic subjects; it promoted English language learning and use in social as well as academic environments, enhanced the students' language skills, and thus encouraged the students to be multilingual. Apart from that, the abundance of references in English also encouraged full use of English among lecturers when carrying out their academic duties.

The specialist informants also agreed that knowledge and use of English in the field of Islamic studies were extremely important because:

- a. People from all over the world knew and used English to communicate with each other irrespective of the race, culture or religion.
- b. With a strong knowledge of the language and its use, those involved in Islamic studies would have the advantage of being able to promote *Da'wah* and disseminate information about Islam and its teachings. They needed to be proficient in the language, which would enable them to learn effectively, and have a wider reach into local and international communities.

The responses to the questionnaire revealed that out of the ten specialist informants observed and interviewed, five were teaching College University Courses, i.e., the Malaysian Legal System, Introduction to Information Technology and Introduction to Human Communication. These courses were compulsory for first year students.

The other five specialist informants were teaching the Faculty Programme Courses which were compulsory for second year students of the Faculty of *Da'wah* and Islamic Management (FDPI), and the Faculty of *Syariah* and Judiciary (FSK). The courses were Principles and Practice of Management, and Malaysian Ethnic and Cultural Studies (for FDPI students), and Civil and Criminal Procedures in *Syariah* Courts, Comparative Constitutional and Administrative Law and Comparative Law of Evidence (for FSK students).

Data elicited from the re-examination of relevant documents

In addition to the data elicited from the above-mentioned sources, the researchers also took the initiative of reviewing the documents mentioned earlier, so as to substantiate the findings. The activity was done during the Pre-fieldwork Stage and also during the Fieldwork Stage, i.e., during interview sessions and sometimes during the observation sessions.

CONCLUSION

It was found that the selected lecturers and students were using English language during all academic occasions. In general, they used English when carrying out their responsibilities – in lectures, tutorials, assignments, question preparation and consultation sessions.

Apart from these occasions, the reason for teaching in English was because it was university policy. Furthermore, English was the language of knowledge and language of subject matter.

Thus, teaching the subjects in English promoted English language learning and use in social as well as academic environments. It enhanced the students' language skills, encouraging them to be multilingual. In addition, the abundance of references in English also encouraged the use of English among the lecturers when carrying out their academic duties.

Besides using English for lectures, tutorials, question - and - answer sessions and consultation sessions, the lecturers and students spoke or made the attempt to speak in English when they met each other in non-academic occasions, ensuring continuous reinforcement of English Language skills. This shows the extensiveness of the use of English language at KUIM.

It was evident that each faculty had different needs and objectives. However, all the specialist informants stressed that knowledge and use of English in the field of Islamic studies were extremely important, given its international status. As there are many prominent organizations in the western world that are well known for their extensive research on Islam, fluency and proficiency in English are vital in order to learn, discuss and debate on Islamic - related issues.

References on Islam, be it in electronic or printed form, are abundant in English. This is because Islamic Studies is no longer the domain of the Arab world. Therefore, it is extremely vital for the students to have firm grasp of the English language in order to gather as much information as possible, and for the purpose of rectifying any misconceptions on Islam effectively.

It was observed that code switching and code mixing were also practiced on certain occasions. According to Crystal (1987), one of the reasons for switching from one language to another is the inability of a speaker to express himself effectively and clearly in a particular language. Thus, he tries to compensate for the deficiency. It is also a strategy used to ensure that a message gets across (Morais, 1995).

It was also extremely noticeable that when the students were out of their academic setting (e.g., outside classrooms after their lecture or tutorial sessions), the tendency to use their mother

tongue, in this case Bahasa Malaysia, was very great. A majority of the students conversed extensively in Bahasa Malaysia. According to Morais (1995), the use of Malay by Malays is seen as a natural extension of the social use of their own language. It is also a signal of identification with the group. In the case of KUIM students, this is true as all of the undergraduates are Malays.

This study has demonstrated how crucial it is for students of KUIM to have firm grasp of the English language because of the bilingual language policy (English and Arabic) adopted by the university college. The lack of sufficient knowledge in English and Arabic will result in the inability to function effectively, not only in social communication and interaction but also in the process of academic socialization.

Based on the observations, it was evident that students were still struggling even with the rudiments of the English language. They were still lacking in the four major language skills, particularly reading and speaking. This was mainly due to low proficiency, poor reading strategies, as well as poor note-taking and selective listening skills.

It was also found that even though it is compulsory for lecturers to lecture in the English language, students of KUIM, after going through a number of courses in English, were still having problems with the language especially pertaining to specific genres, i.e., law, management, communication and information technology. Students had problems understanding terminology and concepts explained in the English language, hampering total understanding of the courses conducted in English.

Through the ethnographic study, the researchers have realized that there is clearly a gap between English Language course content and subject content. The English language teachers at KUIM must find ways to bridge the gap between language and the professions in order to ensure that the students are prepared to enter the world of academic socialization. Knowledge of the language alone is not adequate to assist the students to function effectively in their content-based courses. Students need to be equipped with both knowledge of the English language and its

use, and knowledge of their content-based courses. Therefore, the findings have important implications for ESP in the KUIM context, for the English Language Unit in particular and the institution in general.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The English Language Unit

The traditional approach to language content and subject content has been to treat them as separate domains. This means that during language classes, language teachers only deliver language content. The assumption is that with some knowledge of the language (vocabulary, sentence structure, etc.), the students would be able to comprehend their content-based subjects. However, it is evident that this is not sufficient preparation students for their content-based subjects.

Krashen (1982) argues that subject content-based courses can impart both subject knowledge and knowledge of the language (language competence) at the same time. Kasper (1997) supports the view that content-based English language programmes facilitate students' transition to academic mainstream university courses.

What should the English Language Unit do? The ethnographic analysis has provided a valuable and rich source of data on the linguistic needs as well as the culture and norms of the target discourse communities. It is obvious that both language content and subject content should not be treated independently. Teachers from the English Language Unit of KUIM need to integrate the four language skills to be taught to students with their content-based courses. It is therefore necessary for ESP practitioners at KUIM to possess a certain level of background knowledge of their students' academic subjects in order to meet this challenge of preparing students for academic mainstream university courses. By having the best from both worlds (knowledge of the language and subject content), the teachers can design

authentic tasks and teaching materials in relation to the communicative events the students need to be involved in. These tasks and materials will enhance students' understanding of the subject content as well as linguistic rules.

For students to be able to do selective listening and note taking successfully, background knowledge of the subject matter is necessary (Bell, 1999). In order to succeed in training students, it is necessary for English language teachers at KUIM to advise students on key words and concepts, and particularly, to guide students in identifying content words or terms that carry the central message of the subjects. The teachers would also be able to identify and anticipate likely sources of difficulty for the students. Thus, teachers would be more prepared to assist the students academically and professionally.

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It is noted that academic socialization among students of KUIM is an immediate requirement (it is compulsory for all first year students to take Malaysian Legal System and Information Technology during the first year of their studies). However, the language support needed is lacking. Although students of KUIM have to take two English Language courses (UB 1012 and UB 1022) for the first two semesters, this is not sufficient. This is because the present language courses are proficiency - based, whereby students are taught the rudiments of the English language. They are general and basic in nature. As the students lack language proficiency, these courses are tailored in such a way to compensate for their deficiency in English. As a result, the English language teachers at KUIM do not have sufficient time to integrate the four language skills with their subject content-based courses. They face time constraints as English Language courses are only offered for the first two semesters.

It would be practical and beneficial to offer ESP courses to equip students with the necessary knowledge and input for academic socialization. To be able to carry this out, English Language courses should be extended to at least six semesters.

During the first two semesters, students should be taught the rudiments of the English language to strengthen their language proficiency. In the subsequent semesters, the students should embark on the respective ESP courses (depending on the faculties they are in) to prepare them for the process of broader academic socialization.

Concluding Remarks

This preliminary study has enabled the researchers to comprehend the use of English at KUIM. The ethnographic approach has helped provide ESP practitioners with a more 'realistic' understanding of the language use by the students. With this knowledge, the English language teachers of KUIM will be able to design authentic ESP teaching-learning materials for their students. Therefore, the findings of this study will be able to contribute to the development of ESP for the specific discourse community of KUIM.

However, study's conclusions may be limited in terms of applicability, asince it has provided a macro view of a particular discourse community.

Due to the limited scope of the study and time constraints, there are other needs that have not been thoroughly investigated. Therefore, this study suggests that two issues need to be examined further. The first is whether the syllabus and course design of 'ESP for Islamic Studies' could cater for a multitude of Islamic Studies students at KUIM, as the field of Islamic Studies consists of various areas of specialization such as *Quranic* and *Sunnah*, *Syariah*, *Da'wah*, *Muamalat* etc. Secondly, this study suggests that further research on individual faculties should be carried out as each faculty represents a different discourse community with different needs.

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