

**Intensive English Language Program for Overseas Students  
at Malaysian Private Tertiary Education Institutions**

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# **INTENSIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM FOR OVERSEAS STUDENTS AT MALAYSIAN PRIVATE TERTIARY EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

## **ABSTRACT**

As Malaysia is positioning itself to be a regional center of educational excellence, efforts are taken to recruit international students from other countries in the region to pursue international tertiary education, with English as the language of instruction. It is an acceptable fact that most countries within the region place English as a foreign language, thus, the majority of students coming from these countries do not possess the command of English language required to study at a tertiary level. Therefore, as an international education provider, Malaysia has to cater for this need. This paper aims to highlight the competitive advantages and limitations that Malaysia has in terms of providing the English language program that overseas students need. It also explores possible strategies to overcome the limitations. The discussion is focused on Malaysian private tertiary education institutions. It mainly stemmed from a critical analysis of Malaysian education system as well as the socio and cultural aspects of Malaysia. It also incorporates data from informal discussions with English teachers and international students.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The importance of English in this globalized world can no longer be denied. It is now the language used by people from all over the world to discuss business, science, technology and research (Tan 2005). To be a global citizen, one needs to possess the command of English language. Not surprisingly, the use of English has also penetrated the education field. Another challenge posed by globalization is the increasing importance of knowledge in fostering economic growth. For this purpose, tertiary education plays a very important role since it is a key factor in producing human resources' capacity through regeneration of research and innovation (Yahaya & Abdullah 2003). As cited in Abdullah and Chan (2003), the alarming number of graduates who had problems getting employment was attributed to their poor command of English. It is believed that a graduate who also possesses a good command of English has a competitive advantage to find his/her place in the industrial world. Thus, international tertiary education sector is now a thriving industry.

In the past, students from this region, wishing to get tertiary education in English, had to go abroad to countries that provided international education. Rudner (1997 cited in Mazzarol & Soutar 2001), for instance, listed US, France, Russia, the UK, Germany, Japan, Australia and Canada as the top eight countries that had attracted 95% of foreign students. The data from UNESCO revealed that the majority of foreign students came from Asia, making them the biggest contributors of foreign students since 1970s. Malaysia, for instance, has been known to be one of the leading contributors of

international students, particularly to English speaking countries such as USA, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Mazzarol & Soutar 2001).

The big number of market for international education, estimated to reached US \$27 billion (Rudner 1997 cited in Mazzarol & Soutar 2001), as well as the increasing demand for higher education in Malaysia, which will increase to 600,000 students in the year 2020 (Blight, Davis & Olsen 2000), prompted Malaysian government to restructure the Malaysian higher education sector in the 1990s. This is to ensure that Malaysian higher education institutions can produce a competent workforce equipped with the skills, knowledge, attitude and behavior to meet the demands of the high-technology era as well as internationally recognized qualification. Tan (2002) described this move as positioning Malaysia to be the regional centre of educational excellence.

The movement has allowed for the establishment of about 525 private colleges, 16 private universities and university-colleges and 5 foreign university branch campuses catering for both local Malaysian and international students. Newly established private colleges started to offer alternative higher education in the forms of twinning programs with private overseas institutions, credit transfer, and awards of Certificate, Diploma and Professional body qualifications. In the later stage, private universities and foreign university branch campuses were established. They were granted by the government to offer full foreign university degree programs. By the end of the year 2003, it was estimated that there were about 314,344 students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions with about 39,577 were foreign students (*The Malaysian Education System: Overview of Public and the private education 2005*). All of these programs are conducted using English as the language of instruction.

It is an acceptable fact, that the countries within this region are mostly non-English speaking countries. International students who come from the region tend not to have the required standard for English language to cope with the program. Therefore, as Malaysia is competing for students, both local and international, against the traditional host countries of international students, such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, it is necessary to develop its potential in providing English language program that can sustain the flow of international students from the region as well as to enhance the attractiveness of Malaysia as the provider of international education. This paper focuses on Malaysia's ability to provide the English language programs needed by international students to be able to cope with the international education programs offered by the private higher education institutions in Malaysia. It aims to highlight what factors are to help the institutions in this country to achieve the goal of becoming the regional center for education excellence.

## **II. COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF ENGLISH PROGRAMS OFFERED**

This paper only discusses USA, Canada, UK, and Australia as traditional providers of international education and Malaysian Private Higher Education Institutions that provide some kind of Intensive English Program for international students. The information on the programs offered by the institutions was obtained from the institutions' webpage.

In general, all the countries have similarities in terms of the content/units taught. The foci still center around the traditional four core skills: Reading, Listening, Speaking, and Writing with additional units for Academic Preparation. In general, students are given Placement Test to determine their levels of proficiency, that vary from beginner to advance.

The length and duration of the Program vary from one country to another, and even from one institution to another, but mostly the programs are offered full-time with a high number of contact hour per week. In USA and Canada, the programs are known as ESL (English as a Second Language) Programs; in Australia they are called ELICOS; and in Malaysia, they are usually referred to as IEP (Intensive English Program).

Another significant difference is in terms of method of teaching. Apart from the weekly class hours per week and completing homework and assignments, many ESL Programs in USA and Canada complement their mode of delivery by involving students to participate in extracurricular activities such as tours, cultural events, and weekly films. Most programs do not require students to sit for Final Examination at the end of the level. This is a little bit different from ELICOS in Australia that puts more stress on Exit Examination (such as TOEFL and IELTS) that will qualify students to proceed to the tertiary courses that they want to do in the institution. Some programs do offer extra curricular activities such as in the USA and Canada, but the most noticeable additional teaching and leaning mode is the use of Self Access Center, whereby students can study by themselves outside the classroom with the help of tutors or computer labs. There aren't many English Programs offered in UK. The teaching approached adopted is mainly learner-centered with Self-Access Centers and one-on-one tutorial for students outside class contact hours. In Malaysia, the method of teaching is still highly on many contact hours in class. A few institutions can afford to have Self-Access Centers and one-on-one tutorial outside class hours. In addition to that, the stress is on passing Final Examination or more importantly a Recognized Exit Examination such as TOEFL and IELTS. Little is mentioned about extracurricular activities that require students to participate in local cultural events or touring the country where the students study.

### **III. STUDYING ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA**

#### **A. Competitive Advantages**

##### **1. Proximity to Home Country**

One consideration that international students from this region may have in deciding to study English in Malaysia is the proximity to their home country. In 1994, Lawley developed a decision process model in the context of selecting a university to study in, particularly the choice of destination in international university education for students from Hong Kong. His model indicated that students would consider the legal, geographic, economics and social characteristics of the countries where the alternative universities were located. This model also indicated that the country factor had a strong influence on

the students' choice of institution. Proximity to home country can be an attractive factor since it makes it easier for students to go home during holidays. Parents would also feel much better to know that their children are not too far away and they can go home faster and cheaper in case of an emergency happening at home, or for the parents to come and visit them. Besides, the similarities of cultures between the home country and the new country will make the transition period easier for students, especially for those who leave home for the first time. Lee (2007) in his article "English Orated Here" cited one Indonesian student who confessed that he was relieved to study his tertiary education in all-English-language program in Korea as it would be easier for him to adjust to Korean culture, which can be considered similar to his own culture as they are both Asian culture, rather than to American culture.

## **2. Cheaper cost**

A number of studies have been undertaken to understand the factors influencing the selection of country to study abroad (Lawley & Perry 1998; Binsardi & Ekwulugo 2003; Stewart & Felicetti 1991). These studies reveal that factors such as the cost of education and proximity to the home country are important for making the final decision. A study by Mazzarol, Kemp and Savery (1997) supported this assumption. The study lists the following six important factors that come into students' consideration when they choose any host country:

1. Knowledge and awareness of the country
2. Recommendation from reference group
3. Cost issues
4. Environment
5. Geographical proximity
6. Social links

A Korean student, who was offered a placed both in Yosei, an all-English-class Program in Korea, and Cornell, chose to stay in his home country because he can save cost, beside the fact that he can stay close to his family (Lee 2007).

To put into Malaysian context, it is clear that Malaysia has the advantage of offering cheaper cost education compared to countries such as Australia, USA, Canada, and United Kingdom due to the differences in currency exchange.

## **B. Limitations & constraints**

### **1. The perception of native vs. non-native English**

The main argument that makes international students hesitate in studying English in Malaysia is the fact that Malaysians are not native speakers of English. Traditionally, English language was claimed by countries such as USA, UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Kachru and Nelson (1996 cited in McKay & Hornberger 1996) stated that these are the inner circle countries where 'standard' English come from. Thus, the most frequently asked question that international students put forward is "If I study in

Malaysia, what kind of English will I learn? American English, British English, or perhaps, Australian English?" This, added with the fact that the English teachers in Malaysia are mostly non-native speakers of English, creates doubts in students' mind. In sum, the opportunity to learn 'standard' English in Malaysia is being questioned.

## **2. Less exposure of English Language in the society**

The next concern is related to the fact that Malaysia is not an English speaking society. It is a country with diverse culture where the people speak various languages and dialects in public. To understand the language diversity of languages in Malaysia it is important to analyze the sociolinguistics profile of Malaysia. Malaysia is a plural society such that a comprehensive description of its sociolinguistic profile needs to be written in a separate paper. In general, it can be illustrated that there are Malay speakers, comprising the majority of the population in West Malaysia, and also the Chinese, with its various dialects and Tamil speakers, with Malayalis, Telugus, Punjabis, Bengalis, Gujeratis, and Singhalese speakers. In East Malaysia, the major languages spoken by the people are the Kadazan and the Ibans. These local languages are widely used in intra group communication. Thus, with 55% of the total population is Malay, Bahasa Malaysia (BM) can claim to be the most significant language used in the society, although for inter group communication, English is used quite freely, except in occasions where the official use of BM is required (Baskaran 2005).

Hence, to a certain extent, the claim that international students will be exposed to less English in Malaysia is true. Chinese students, for example, can come and study English in Malaysia and still use Mandarin to communicate with members of the society. Or Indonesian students can come to Malaysia and still use Indonesian to survive the day-to-day conversation in town. In other words, they have less opportunity to be exposed to and practice their English outside the classroom. These raise the question of the effectiveness of learning English in Malaysia.

## **IV. THE LIMITATIONS OF STUDYING ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA**

Nevertheless, the limitations mentioned above are not always bad. They can actually be converted into advantages.

### **A. The issue of native vs. nonnative English**

In terms of standardized English, the claim that if students learn English in Malaysia they will learn lesser standard of English is no longer true. The effect of globalization has expanded the role of English such that the center of what is considered standardized English has expanded to other countries that were considered members of the 'outer circle'. These will include countries such as India and Singapore, that now claim to have their own localized English language.

However, can Malaysia make the same claim as those two countries in terms of English language? As a former British colony, Malaysians have been exposed to English language for centuries. Even after its independence in 1958, when the government decided to use Bahasa Malaysia (BM) as its official language, English language was still considered an important second language in the country. Various government documents continued to stress the economic, international, and political value of English. The language was widely used in education, business, mass media, and social sectors throughout the country, especially in the urban areas (Pillay 1998). Nevertheless, then came the 1970s that marked the change of language policy in the country. It was suggested that the local political atmosphere prompted the decision to use BM as the sole national language. As a result, the language instruction in schools, from primary to tertiary level would be only BM and that English would only be taught as one of the school subjects, along with other indigenous languages such as Chinese and Tamil (Abdullah & Chan 2003). The consequence of this policy was felt decades later with the falling standard of English by Malaysians in all educational levels.

Tan (2005) further argued that although the use of English still can be observed in education, business, mass media, and social sectors; it is limited only within the urban areas, whereas in rural areas English is still regarded as a foreign language. Therefore, to claim that there is a new variety of English called Malaysian English still cannot be confirmed. Ridge (2004) supported Tan's view by stating that a claim that English is the pre-eminent language of all Malaysians is over-ambitious. Although he acknowledged that English has been around in Malaysia for a long time, it has not transformed itself into accepted localized norms. However, he also mentioned that there has formed a 'core' that can develop into a new type of English language in the future.

Over the years, research on Malaysian English has been done in aspects of its morpheme, phonology, lexicology, and syntax to describe its specific features as opposed to the 'native' variety (Abdullah Hassan 1972; Cox 1973; Nik Safiah Karim 1978; Mashudi 1981; Lee 1982; Su 1983; Baskaran 2004; Snhneider 2004; cited in Baskaran 2005). Thus, the potential of it transforming into a new type of English language in the future is very much possible.

As for nonnative speakers as English teachers, most research indicates that students' success in learning English has no significant correlation with the nationality of the teachers, which means whether or not the teachers are native speakers of English has little bearing on students' level of proficiency. This is because effective English teachers need to have more than just competence in English. Teaching experience, age, gender, aptitude, charisma, motivation, dedication, and professional training are also important factors to include (Kao 2007). Apart from that, non-native English teachers can be a good model of learners since they have gone through the process of learning English in the classroom as the students are doing. Thus, they can anticipate students' problems, relate to students' needs, and develop appropriate classroom activities that suit the students' needs (Maum 2002). Furthermore, some students can appreciate this quality. They consider nonnative English teachers not to have an 'accent' that they find difficult to

follow. As long as the teachers can show good command of English, the students can appreciate having them as their English teachers.

In sum, what is important for students is not which standardized English or from which native speakers they will learn. What is important is whether or not they learn proper English that can be used to communicate with people from all over the world. This is a concept that needs to be conveyed to the potential international students who wish to study English in Malaysia.

### **B. The issue of less exposure of English Language in the society**

As for the issue of not enough exposure of English language outside the classroom, this too can be turned into an advantage. For someone who cannot speak a word of English, it can be comforting to know that s/he is in the environment where when s/he cannot express himself/herself in English /she can speak his/her own language and people can still understand him/her. This can reduce the level cultural shock that students undergo when they first come to a new country, and help students adjust to their new environment. Besides, as foreigners, international students still can speak English to local people who can speak English apart from foreign students from other countries. This is the opportunity that they do not have in their own country. It is not because there is nobody they can speak English with, but in their home country, it is not socially acceptable for them to speak English with their own countrymen. It is something that the society frowns upon.

### **C. The Structure of the Program**

Another factor that is worth considering for improvement is the structure of the Program. The stress on Exit Examination might not be able to be omitted at the present for it is a basic requirement for enrolling in an international tertiary study. However, the over-stressed of sitting for exam can be neutralized a little by incorporating other types of assignments or activities into the program. Extracurricular activities that can expose students to local culture and events will be good activities to be introduced. In this way, students will get an added value of learning a new culture and customs of Malaysia, apart from the main objective of improving their English. More institutions should also consider investing in Self-Access Center whereby students can use their own free time outside classroom to improve their English. This can make up for the lack of English environment outside the class and students can improve their English on their own pace.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it can be clearly seen that Malaysia, as an international education provider cannot claim to be able to offer what traditional education providers such as USA, UK, Canada, and Australia do in terms of the recognized standardized English as well as a 24/7 English environment for students. Nonetheless, it does not mean that Malaysia cannot join the global competition in attracting international students to learn English. It still has the competitive advantages in terms of proximity to home and cost. Even the



concerns over nonnative standard of English and the lack of English environment still can be overcome and turned around to be advantages rather than disadvantages. What Malaysia needs is to identify the correct niche to attract a certain type of students who are willing to come and will benefit from learning English in Malaysia.

## **VI. LIMITATIONS OF THE PAPER**

This paper has a number of limitations. Basically, this paper is only a preliminary study on the topic of English Programs offered in Malaysian private tertiary education institutions. Firstly, the information on the programs offered is largely based on the description given in websites. It needs to be acknowledged that the information might be incomplete and maybe incorrect if the websites are not constantly updated. It should also be noted that there are thousands of tertiary educations that offered English programs that were not covered in the discussion of this paper. Furthermore, the analysis of the competitive advantages and limitations of studying in Malaysia was also based on secondary data obtained from other research done in other countries and informal discussions among English teachers and international students. Therefore, this paper cannot argue that the claims made are the general opinions of the English teachers or the international students studying in Malaysia. A more detailed and comprehensive research on this topic is needed to confirm those claims.

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