

Sphere Of English Usage And Fluency Of ESL Speakers

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Abstract

The study examined ESL speakers' fluency in spoken English and the main languages used in main domains of interaction in their daily life. The study involved 42 participants enrolled in a university English course focusing on use of English for oral communication. Data on domains of English usage were obtained by means of a questionnaire. The participants' fluency was measured in terms of MUET speaking scores and hesitation scores in five simulated social interactions. The results showed that half of the participants reported use of English with lecturers in the university but the family and friendship domains were characterised by the use of their mother tongue. The participants' fluency was found to increase during the duration of the semester under study. However, the link between the extensiveness of English usage in their daily life and the spoken English fluency was not as clear. The implications of the findings on adequacy of language practice and oral proficiency are discussed.

Introduction

In the era of globalisation in the twenty-first century, English language is a means of global communication as it is the international language, a major language in the world. English language is used dominantly worldwide for Information Communication Technology (ICT), science, diplomacy, mass media and global business communications ("Language of the Global Economy", 2003). Its use for occupational purposes is becoming more and more obvious. The British Council stated that "English is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, diplomacy, sport, international competitions, pop music and advertising" (as cited in Dieu & Pauster, 2005).

Thus, English is the major window for us to explore and get in touch with the outside world. Clearly, a good command of English is the key to social and economic advancement.

Competency in English is important for effective communication as one stands a better chance of being understood when one conveys information accurately and unambiguously. However, to achieve the purpose of effective communication, a native or non-native speaker has to possess a certain degree of competence (Gao, 2001). Thus, this highlights the notion of communicative competence. In communicative competence (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980), there is a great deal of emphasis on sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competence, yet linguistic competence still has its weighty impact in communication. Linguistic competence is the keystone to effective communication because one needs to have a sufficient mastery of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation for successful communication to take place (Byrne, 1991; Canale & Swain, 1980; Edge, 1989; Nunan, 1991).

In spoken language, linguistic competence is associated with both accuracy and fluency. Accuracy refers to the accuracy of the language content: grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Fluency can be defined as “the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably accurately and without too much hesitation; otherwise communication may break down because the listener loses interest or gets impatient” (Byrne, 1991, p. 9). Fluency is developed as the learner learns to automatise knowledge through the use of language chunks (Thornbury, 1999). Pawley and Syder (1983), Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), and Lewis (1997) stated that language chunks contribute extensively to native speaker’s fluency (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 38). Fluency is the main goal in teaching the productive skill of speaking (Byrne, 1991). Thus, the ability to speak English accurately and fluently is essential for effective communication.

However, in a non-native English-speaking environment, it is difficult for non-native speakers of the target language to be able to speak as accurately and fluently as native speakers. Gao (2001) stated that “native speakers acquire their first language at an early age by picking up naturally in the rich cultural and linguistic environment they were born or grew up in”, but not for the non-

native speakers. This is because non-native speakers, who may be either children or adult learners, are selective in the kind of input they take since they have already learnt their first language (Gao, 2001). Thus, non-native speakers “cannot feasibly learn a second language as they did in acquiring their first language” (Gao, 2001). Moreover, Davies (2003) stated that non-native speakers are normally “exposed to a limited set of encounters and has little or no exposure to the cultural beliefs and knowledge which the target language bears” (p. 115). In addition, there is lack of exposure to good models of English and opportunity to use English, particularly in a non-native English-speaking environment. Therefore, the only success that these non-native speakers have is “through learning the knowledge, learning like a book” (Davies, 2003, p. 115). Davies stated that the language problem is compounded when learners learn the linguistic knowledge like learning a book, as the four skills in the target language may not be well developed, especially the speaking and listening skills because learners have less opportunity to use the language in a non-native English-speaking environment.

In second language acquisition, there are a large number of people who never acquire a second language to a high level of proficiency (Brumfit, 1984). This is evident in the Malaysian context, a non-native English-speaking environment where English may not have an institutional or social role for some members of the community. According to Schuetze (2002), when learning English in a foreign language environment, the target language plays no major role in the community and it is usually learnt in the classroom formally. For some quarters of the Malaysian population, learning English may be like learning a foreign language, and they have limited need for the language in daily life. For others, English may be their first language and they spend a majority of their time communicating in English. However, for many English has become the second language (Jamaliah Mohd Ali, 2000) after Malaysia achieved her independence and the Malay language is widely used because of its status as the national and official language of the country.

In Malaysia, studies have shown that proficiency in English is much lacking especially in speaking (see Lim, 1994). Moreover, Fauziah Hassan and Nita Fauzee Selamat (2002) found that the low proficiency in English could be due to the great focus on written skills in major examinations in the country and lack of emphasis on listening and speaking in the classroom.

Therefore, this draws attention to an important issue in the country where the low level of graduates' proficiency in spoken English has caused them to perform poorly in job interviews. Their poor command in English and weak communication skills have prevented them from being employed, especially in the private sectors and international institutions ("Language of the Global Economy", 2003). English proficiency in the country has declined in spite of English being made the compulsory subject in all primary and secondary schools curriculum where "the syllabus aims to extend learners' English language proficiency in order to meet their needs to use English in certain situations in everyday life, for knowledge acquisition, and for future workplace needs" (Ministry of Education, 2000, pp. 1-2). To address this, the Ministry of Education has taken radical measures in requiring Year 1, Form 1 and Lower Six students to learn Mathematics and Science in English from 2003 onwards (Fauziah Hassan & Nita Fauzee Selamat, 2002). In addition, local institutions of higher learning were urged to introduce many language proficiency courses and public speaking in order to train students on speaking and oral communication skills ("Language of the Global Economy", 2003). However, they have largely failed to produce graduates with good command in English and communication skills ("Language of the Global Economy", 2003).

Although the problems resulting from poor proficiency in English is much discussed, there is not much research on the problems of accuracy and fluency in spoken English. One such study examined the English errors of Chinese learners (Abdul Rashid Mohamed, Goh & Wan Rose Eliza, 2004). Another was an error analysis of written English (Haja Mohideen bin Mohamed Ali, 1996). Besides these studies, the attention was on factors contributing to the low proficiency of English in the country (see Fauziah Hassan & Nita Fauzee Selamat, 2002; Lim, 1994) or the characteristics of Malaysian English such as question tag (Kow, 1995; Norrizan Razali, 1995). The exact nature of Malaysians' oral English proficiency, particularly, what is lacking in accuracy and fluency, has not received much research attention.

Purpose of Study

The study examined the ESL speakers' fluency in spoken English in relation to the prevalence of English language use in main domains of interaction in their university student life. The specific objectives of the study were:

1. to identify the prevalence of English use in main domains of interaction in their university student life;
2. to determine the changes in ESL speakers' fluency in five simulated social interactions over the course of one semester using hesitation scores; and
3. to find out whether prevalence of English use in main domains of interaction in their university student life influence the ESL speakers' fluency.

The Study

A case study on the nature of fluency and English language use of a group of ESL speakers was carried out to find out how their oral proficiency in English was influenced by contextual factors which included the formal learning in the English course and their informal use of English outside the course. The ESL speakers' demographic information also provided input on the contextual factors contributing to the level of their oral English proficiency. Different data sources were obtained for oral proficiency (MUET speaking scores and hesitation scores) to obtain greater insight into their oral proficiency in English.

Participants

The participants in this study were 42 English language speakers with low proficiency in English enrolled in a foundation English course at a Malaysian tertiary institution. Low proficiency in English is defined in this institution as those scoring Bands 1 to 3 in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). These English speakers were weak in either oral or written forms, and are considered social users of the English language. See Appendix 1 for a description of the English language proficiency according to the three bands in MUET (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2001).

The participants were aged between 19 and 34, with more female (25) than male (17) ESL speakers. They had completed their matriculation, form six or diploma prior to entering university. At the university, they were taking their bachelor's degree in the sciences as well as the arts and humanities. The medical students were not included as participants as they were located in a different campus away from the main campus. The 42 participants were from different states in Malaysia (Table 1) and from different ethnic backgrounds including Malay, Chinese, Iban, Melanau, Kenyah, Bisaya, Berawan, Kadazan and Kedayan (Table 2).

Table 1

Ethnic background of the ESL speakers

Ethnic Background	Frequency
Malay	25
Chinese	7
Iban	3
Melanau	2
Others (Kenyah, Bisaya, Berawan, Kadazan, Kedayan)	5
Total	42

Table 2

State of origin of the ESL speakers

State	Frequency
Peninsular (Kuala Lumpur, Perak, Kelantan, Selangor, Johor, Pahang, Terengganu, Kedah)	25
Sarawak	17
Sabah	2
Total	42

At the time of the study, the participants were enrolled in a foundation English course focusing on the use of spoken English for social communication, that is, the Preparatory English 1. The participants were required to pass this course before they could proceed to the second level foundation English course (Preparatory English 2) which emphasised the written aspects of social communication.

The participants were selected from two classes taught by the same instructor in the same semester to ensure uniformity in teaching method and teacher-student dynamics. Since there was no streaming of students into different classes for this course, the participants from the two

classes were assumed to be similar in characteristics due to the random placement of students in the classes.

In the 14-week semester, 4-hours per week course, the participants' social communicative ability were developed through modules on various social situations in the life of a university student, for example, self-introduction, interacting with lecturers, extending and responding to invitations, making apologies, ordering food and drinks, and giving directions). Each module began with three listening dialogues to develop the participants' listening skills, and proceeded to focus on selected language features relevant to the communicative purpose (e.g. adjectives for describing people), and the module usually ended with role play situations to give students oral practice. See Ting, Kamil, Ho, Tuah and Campbell (2007).

As part of the oral assessment of the course, the participants were required to participate in five role play situations, and the oral data were recorded for this study to find out the changes (if any) in their fluency. The first role play was a one-to-one interaction with the course instructor involving the description of people. The second and third role plays consisted of two paired interactions each, with the participants swapping roles of Persons A and B. Situations for the second role play included making and responding to apologies, extending and responding to invitations, and making and responding to offer. The third role play required students to play the role of a seller and a customer in the business transactions. See Appendix 2 for a detailed description of the role play.

Data Collection Procedures

Permission was sought from the coordinator of the Preparatory English 1 course to collect data for the study. Following this, an instructor qualified and experienced in teaching English was approached for permission to distribute a questionnaire to her students and to audio-record the three oral assessments during the semester. Data collection at three points in time was chosen over a one-off data collection to obtain a better understanding of the nature of the participants' spoken English, particularly fluency and hesitation.

Then a questionnaire was distributed to the participants to seek their consent in participating in this study and to obtain their demographic particulars which included name, faculty, age, race, gender, place of origin, father's race, mother's race, MUET achievement, main language and other languages used at home, with friends, and lecturers. The participants' demographic particulars were sought to find out more about the contextual factors that might influence their oral proficiency in English. A week prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, the instructor was requested to inform the participants to bring along their MUET statement slips to obtain an accurate report of their MUET speaking scores. On the day of the questionnaire distribution, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study. Learners were also told that they could ask for clarification for any uncertainty or confusion but there were none.

To collect the oral interaction data, the third co-author of this paper kept in touch with the instructor in order to make arrangements on the date, time and venue for the audio-recording of the role-play assessments. She attended every session of the oral assessments for the whole semester and audio-recorded the role-plays using a digital mp3 recorder: one for the first role play; and two each for the second and third role plays. This yielded a total of 126 interactions from the 42 participants. During the audio-recordings, the researcher took brief field notes which turned out to be very useful to deal with unclear recordings during the transcription.

Subsequently, the mp3 files were transferred into the computer and Adobe Audition Version 2.0 was used to enhance the clarity of the audio-recorded language data to ease transcription of the simulated oral interaction data. The transcription key system used was that of Eggins and Slade (1997). See Appendix 3 for the transcription conventions. In addition to these, hyphen (-) was used to indicate a natural stop to differentiate it from hesitations and pauses indicative of speakers' uncertainty, as shown in this interaction.

Assessment 2 - Situation 3 (Student 1 = F; Student 2 = M)

- F:** Hi, Mel. We're (planning that) - to watch a movie together right?
- M:** Yes.
- F:** Umm - I would like to apologise because - we must cancel - the plan.
- M:** Why?
- F:** I - It's because I - have not finished my assignment. Can we - go - next week?
- M:** Oh, it's all right. May I know why you cannot - turn up watch movie?
- F:** 'cause I have a lot of assignment - to do - and I must submit - in - this week.
- M:** It's ok. I understand your situation. Okay. = =
- F:** = = Thank you.
- M:** Bye.

Fluency Analysis Using Hesitation Score

In this study, hesitation is taken as an inverse indicator of fluency on the basis that fluent speakers of English are less likely to hesitate during their speech. Hesitations such as “um”, “er”, “you know” and “well” typical of natural speech are usually used to slow down output and create planning time resulting in utterances which are smooth and fluent (see Bygate, 2001). However, too much of hesitation may decrease fluency (Byrne, 1991). This is particularly applicable for unusual long silent pauses which occur at places that are not supposed to have halts – indicative of the speaker being uncertain of what to say or is at a loss for words. Hence, in this study pauses longer than three seconds were considered as unnatural hesitations and they were counted to obtain the frequency of hesitations. Hesitation markers such as “um”, “er”, “you know” and “well” were also counted. Incidents of giggling and coughing longer than three seconds were considered unnatural hesitations. To compute the hesitation score, the number of hesitations in each role-play was divided by the total word count for each individual interaction. The hesitation score ranged from 0 to 1, with 0 for very fluent in speech, and 1 for terribly hesitant in speech.

Results and Discussion

In this section, the results from the analysis of 126 simulated social interactions are presented to show that the fluency of the 42 participants increased during the semester-long course but the prevalence of English usage in main domains of interaction did not seem to have much bearing on their oral proficiency in English.

1. Prevalence of English usage in main domains of interaction in university student life

Table 3 showed that the main languages the participants used with family and friends was not English, but other languages which included Bahasa Melayu (BM), Melanau, Iban, Mandarin, Foochow, Kenyah, and Berawan. English only came in when they were interacting with lecturers (see shaded areas in Table 3). In communicating with lecturers, 22 participants (52.38%) reported speaking BM while 19 (45.24%) reported using English, and one did not state the language used. Only one participant (S30) reported speaking English with his friends but used BM with his lecturers. An analysis based on the ethnic background of the learners showed that the Chinese participants were more inclined towards speaking English with their lecturers (6 out of 7) compared to the Malay participants (10 out of 25) and indigenous participants (4 out of 10).

Table 3

Main languages used with family, friends and lecturers by ESL speakers of different ethnic and geographical background

L	Race	Place of Origin	Main language used		
			Family	Friends	Lecturers
S1	Malay	Mersing, Johor	BM	BM	BM
S2	Malay	Kuala Lumpur	BM	BM	English
S3	Malay	Perak	BM	BM	BM
S4	Malay	Kelantan	BM	-	English
S5	Malay	Kedah	BM	BM	BM
S8	Malay	Sarawak	BM	BM	English
S10	Malay	Johor	BM	BM	BM
S13	Malay	Selangor	BM	BM	BM

S14	Malay	Sarawak	Sarawak Malay	Sarawak Malay	BM
S16	Malay	Kuching	BM	BM	BM
S21	Malay	Pahang	BM	BM	English
S22	Malay	Kuala Terengganu	BM	BM	English
S23	Malay	Kota Samarahan	BM	BM	English
S25	Malay	Johor	BM	BM	BM
S26	Malay	Taiping, Perak	BM	BM	BM
S27	Malay	Kuching, Sarawak	BM	BM	BM
S28	Malay	Kelantan	BM	BM	BM
S29	Malay	Kuala Lumpur	BM	BM	BM
S30	Malay	Perak	BM	BM, English	BM
S31	Malay	Terengganu	BM	BM	BM
S32	Malay	Kelantan	BM	BM	BM
S33	Malay	P.J. Selangor	BM	BM	English
S34	Malay	Kelantan	BM	BM	BM
S35	Malay	Selangor	BM	BM	English
S42	Malay	Sarawak	BM	BM	English
S6	Melanau	Kuching	Melanau	BM	BM
S7	Iban	Simunjan, Sarawak	Iban	BM	BM
S9	Bisaya	Kota Kinabalu, Sabah	BM	BM	BM
S24	Kenyah	Miri, Sarawak	Kenyah	BM	English
S36	Melanau	Bintulu, Sarawak	Malay	Sarawak Malay	English
S37	Iban	Kuching, Sarawak	Iban	BM	English
S38	Berawan	Marudi, Sarawak	Berawan	BM	BM
S39	Iban	KD Ng. Maong, Julau, Sarawak	Iban	BM	English
S40	Kadazan	Sabah	Malay	BM, Kadazan	BM
S41	Kedayan	Bintulu, Sarawak	Melanau	BM	BM
S11	Chinese	Taiping, Perak	Mandarin	Cantonese	-
S12	Chinese	Pahang	Chinese	Chinese	English
S15	Chinese	Kota Samarahan	Mandarin	BM	English
S17	Chinese	Sibu, Sarawak	Mandarin	Mandarin	English
S18	Chinese	Kuala Lumpur	Mandarin	Mandarin	English
S19	Chinese	Bintulu, Sarawak	Foochow	Mandarin	English
S20	Chinese	Kuala Lumpur	Mandarin	Mandarin	English

In general, these results indicated that English did not play a major role in participants' communication in their university student life as English was used by less than fifty percent of them (20 out of 42). Hence, these English users are classified into the third group of English users described by Jamaliah Mohd Ali (2000) and Schuetze (2002) where both stated that English plays no major role in the community and it merely serves as a second language but functions as a foreign language where it is usually learnt in the classroom formally.

2. ESL speakers' oral English proficiency as measured by MUET Speaking scores

The questionnaire data on the participants' MUET Speaking scores showed that 39 have sat for MUET while three participants (S5, S9, and S10) who have not yet sat for MUET (see Table 4).

Table 4

ESL speakers' MUET speaking scores

Category	MUET Speaking Score Range	Participants
Above average	23 – 35	13 (S2, S4, S6, S7, S11, S12, S15, S17, S18, S21, S24, S35, and S42)
Below average	10 – 22	26 (S1, S3, S8, S13, S14, S16, S19, S20, S22, S23, S25, S26, S27, S28, S29, S30, S31, S32, S33, S34, S36, S37, S38, S39, S40, and S41)
	(have not sat for MUET)	3 (S5, S9, and S10)
	Total	42

As the total score for the speaking skill is 45 and the average 22.5, participants who scored 23 and above were categorised as above average and those below 22 were categorised as below average in their oral skills. Table 4 showed that only 13 out of 42 participants were in the above average category (23-35 points) and 26 were in the below average category (10-22 points).

Within these two categories, the data were analysed to find out if the participants' oral proficiency in English was linked to prevalence of English usage in selected domains of university student life. In Table 4, the participants who reported speaking English with either their lecturers or friends are shaded. In the above average category, nine were those who reported speaking English with their lecturers or friends (69.23%) but only 11 out of 26 did so in the below average category (42.30%). Based on these percentages, it can be surmised that the participants with better oral skills in English were also those who spoke English in their daily life.

3. ESL speakers' fluency as measured by hesitation scores in role play situations

Table 5 showed the hesitation scores for each participant in each role play and their average hesitation score. In addition to the hesitation score, number of hesitations (rounded off) is given for ease of reference in depicting the fluency of the participants. S3 had the highest hesitation score of 0.321 (1 hesitation in 3 words) in Situation A1. S3's speech contained frequent pauses and hesitations, and the delivery had a choppy effect. Meanwhile, S2, S16, S23, S35 and S40 did not hesitate at all (0 hesitation over word count) in one of their five role plays (see figures in bold). In this section, the word "hesitation" refers to unnaturally long pauses, and hesitation markers such as "um", "er", "you know" and "well".

Table 5

ESL speakers' hesitation scores in five role play situations

Participants	Situation 1	Situation 2a	Situation 2b	Situation 3a	Situation 3b	Average
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S1	0.213	0.018	0.067	0.107	0.101	0.1012
S2	0.057	0	0.077	0.036	0.011	0.0363
S3	0.321	0.156	0.115	0.149	0.122	0.1725
S4	0.129	0.071	0.067	0.157	0.163	0.1175
S5	0.164	0.058	0.070	0.051	0.029	0.0743
S6	0.077	0.114	0.088	0.214	0.025	0.1038
S7	0.181	0.071	0.058	0.025	0.051	0.0771
S8	0.277	0.137	0.125	0.077	0.075	0.1383
S9	0.091	0.101	0.063	0.069	0.073	0.0793
S10	0.160	0.101	0.109	0.081	0.090	0.1082
S11	0.096	0.048	0.021	0.086	0.101	0.0704
S12	0.141	0.059	0.093	0.061	0.046	0.0799
S13	0.084	0.086	0.029	0.058	0.045	0.0605
S14	0.230	0.032	0.041	0.111	0.093	0.1014
S15	0.089	0.062	0.118	0.095	0.073	0.0873
S16	0.092	0.025	0	0.054	0.046	0.0434
S17	0.245	0.072	0.069	0.078	0.041	0.1010
S18	0.114	0.056	0.073	0.064	0.029	0.0671
S19	0.160	0.186	0.080	0.089	0.129	0.1290
S20	0.140	0.063	0.063	0.064	0.067	0.0792
S21	0.136	0.038	0.104	0.092	0.079	0.0898
S22	0.136	0.159	0.096	0.141	0.113	0.1290
S23	0.182	0.070	0	0.115	0.146	0.1026
S24	0.091	0.053	0.025	0.021	0.056	0.0491
S25	0.181	0.054	0.074	0.082	0.051	0.0882
S26	0.215	0.055	0.053	0.104	0.150	0.1154
S27	0.233	0.159	0.185	0.161	0.105	0.1687
S28	0.188	0.123	0.167	0.252	0.218	0.1896
S29	0.156	0.128	0.146	0.083	0.130	0.1289
S30	0.298	0.041	0.056	0.066	0.094	0.1109

S31	0.243	0.169	0.145	0.113	0.153	0.1645
S32	0.303	0.172	0.096	0.218	0.162	0.1903
S33	0.163	0.051	0.150	0.162	0.130	0.1310
S34	0.143	0.207	0.151	0.074	0.072	0.1293
S35	0.126	0.074	0.140	0	0.047	0.0772
S36	0.037	0.098	0.062	0.157	0.098	0.0902
S37	0.098	0.050	0.043	0.090	0.102	0.0765
S38	0.262	0.049	0.050	0.146	0.102	0.1219
S39	0.243	0.133	0.037	0.186	0.115	0.1431
S40	0.060	0.014	0	0.071	0.062	0.0415
S41	0.179	0.151	0.072	0.105	0.082	0.1179
S42	0.067	0.099	0.042	0.115	0.087	0.0822

Table 5 showed that the participants' hesitation score ranged from 0.0363 to 0.1903, with the most hesitant speaker making one unnaturally long pause in every five words (hesitation score of 0.1903) and the most fluent speaker hesitating once in 27.5 words on average (hesitation score of 0.0363). With one hesitation every five words, the speech of the less fluent participants tended to test the patience of the listener who had to cope with the slow pace of the delivery.

When analysed by situation, the results on the range of hesitation scores showed there were the most hesitations when the participants were role playing Situation 1 and the least for Situation 3b:

Situation 1: 0.037 – 0.321 (1 hesitation/27 words – 1 hesitation/3 words)

Situation 2a: 0 – 0.207 (0– 1 hesitation/5 words)

Situation 2b: 0 – 0.185 (0 – 1 hesitation/5.5 words)

Situation 3a: 0 – 0.218 (0 – 1 hesitation/4.5 words)

Situation 3b: 0.011 – 0.162 (1 hesitation/91 words – 1 hesitation/6 words)

Taking only the upper limit of the range, there was a steady decrease in the hesitation score from Situation 1 to Situation 3b, with the exception of Situation 3a. On the basis of the hesitation

scores, it is evident that most participants have become less hesitant and more fluent by the end of the semester. As a conclusion, there is improvement in fluency for most of the participants by the end of the course.

Next the hesitation scores of the above average and below average groups of participants were examined (see Table 4 for categorisation based on MUET Speaking scores). The results showed that the majority of the 13 participants with above average MUET Speaking scores had hesitation scores ranging from 0.057 to 0.141 in Situation 1, except for S7 and S17. For the last situation (3b), most participants obtained hesitation scores ranging from 0.011 to 0.101 except for S4. These two ranges of hesitation scores showed little improvement, from 0.046 to 0.040 or from one hesitation every 22 words to one hesitation every 25 words, because the participants were rather fluent to start with. In contrast, the majority of the 26 learners in the below average group obtained hesitation scores ranging from 0.136 to 0.303 in Situation 1, except for S13, S16, S36, S37 and S38. Meanwhile, for the last situation, most participants were less hesitant, as indicated by their hesitation scores ranging from 0.045 to 0.162, except for S28. The improvement of 0.141 to 0.091 (from one hesitation in 7 words to one hesitation in 11 words) for the below average group was more obvious than the above average group. This denotes that the below average participants improved more than the above average participants during the semester.

4. ESL speakers' fluency and prevalence of English use in main domains of interaction

The hesitation scores of the participants were analysed based on their reports of the prevalence of English usage with family, friends and lecturers. The 20 participants who reported speaking English with their lecturers (19) and friends (only one) are indicated by shading in Table 5. The other 22 participants did not report any use of English for communication in the family, friendship and educational domains. Averages of the hesitation scores were computed for these two groups and shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Average of hesitation scores in five role play situations for ESL speakers based prevalence of English usage in main domains of interaction in university student life

	Average hesitation score for participants who speak English with lecturers or friends (n=20)	Average hesitation score for participants who do not speak English with family, friendship or lecturers (n=22)
Situation 1	0.1561 1 hesitation/6.5 words	0.1673 1 hesitation/6 words
Situation 2a	0.0829 1 hesitation/12 words	0.0912 1 hesitation/11 words
Situation 2b	0.0784 1 hesitation/13 words	0.0796 1 hesitation/12.5 words
Situation 3a	0.0929 1 hesitation/11 words	0.1101 1 hesitation/9 words
Situation 3b	0.0830 1 hesitation/12 words	0.0956 1 hesitation/10.5 words
Average	0.0986 1 hesitation/10 words	0.1088 1 hesitation/9 words

Table 6 showed that there was not much difference in the average hesitation scores for the participants who spoke English with lecturers and friends, and those who used other languages in these contexts of communication. Prevalence of English use in the domains selected for this study does not seem to have any bearing on the participants' fluency, measured using hesitation scores, in the five role play situations. The assumption that more frequent use of English in daily life being linked to less hesitant speech is not supported by the results of this study.

This is contrary to the results using MUET Speaking scores as a measure of fluency in speaking English whereby it was found that participants with above average scores also tended to be those

who spoke English with lecturers and friends. These are the participants who are already comfortable speaking English and chose to speak English with their lecturers, instead of using BM.

The apparent contradiction in the results can be explained by viewing the interactions of the participants with their lecturers in the larger context of their interactions with peers in their university life. In general, university students do not interact frequently and at length with their lecturers unless it is for consultations on their final year research project. Since the participants in this study were first year students, their interactions with their lecturers probably took the form of brief enquiries about their assignments and assessments. Thus, even though 19 reported speaking English with their lecturers, the oral practice they gained from these interactions is likely to be minimal. If the participants reported using English extensively with their peers, this might give them the opportunity to develop fluency in their oral skills but only one participant reported using English with his friends. Thus, in effect whether the participants reported speaking English or other languages with their lecturers may not indicate the prevalence of English use in their daily lives as university students.

Conclusion

The study showed that ESL speakers have become more fluent by the end of the English for social purposes course, and that the group with below average oral skills in English improved more in fluency than the above average group. Their fluency was not linked to whether they spoke English with their family, friends and lecturers although those with better oral proficiency in English tended to speak English with their lecturers. The findings showed that the English language plays no major role in their daily communication as they communicated mostly in BM and their mother tongue. Considering that most interactions in the university can be conducted without using English, an average Malaysian university student does not have many opportunities to speak English beyond the walls of the English classroom. In view of this, the findings on the greater benefit derived by university students with below average English proficiency from the English course points to a need to design the type of oral practice and the

difficulty level of tasks to bring about enhancement of fluency for students with different levels of English proficiency, particularly the above average group. Having said that, some limits on the pedagogical implications of the findings need to be set. Hesitation score used as a measure of fluency in this study, although good in showing improvement in fluency across five simulated social interactions during the semester, were taken under testing conditions where learner anxiety is high. So the hesitation patterns may not be reflective of those in natural speech in everyday conversations, an aspect worth noting in studies on fluency. Furthermore, according to Lundberg (2002), some people have difficulties in reaching fluent command of a second language due to individual differences in learning rate. From a research angle, the study has shown that it is not possible to find simple indicators of fluency such as prevalence of English use in selected domains as this may not be reflective of the extent of English usage in daily life – putting aside straightforward conditions such as use of English as the first language at home. A more comprehensive sociolinguistic profiling of the ESL speakers may get one closer to understanding the background variables affecting the fluency aspect of oral proficiency.

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Appendix 1

MUET bands from Malaysian Examination Council (2001)

Band	3	2	1
Aggregated Score	179 - 140	139 - 100	Below 100
User	Modest user	Limited user	Extremely limited user
Command of Language	Fair command of the language	Limited command of the language	Poor command of the language
Communicative Ability	Fairly expressive, usually appropriate but with noticeable inaccuracies	Lacks expressiveness and appropriacy: inaccurate use of the language resulting in frequent breakdowns in communication	Inexpressive and inaccurate use of the language resulting in very frequent breakdowns in communication
Understanding	Able to understand	Limited understanding of	Poor understanding of

	but with some misinterpretation	the language	the language
Task	Able to function but	Limited ability to function	Hardly able to function
Performance	with some effort	in the language	in the language

Appendix 2

Description of Preparatory English 1 Role Play Assessments

Assessment	Description (How it is carried out?)
1 (Individual)	<p>The role-play is on a one-to-one basis between a student and the instructor. The instructor plays a role as the interlocutor who interacts with the student.</p> <p>Sample Situation:</p> <p><u>Situation 1</u></p> <p>You want to register for a weekend course on public speaking at the Centre for Language Studies. Walk into the office, introduce yourself to the person in charge and explain the purpose of your enquiry.</p>
2 (Paired)	<p>The assessment assesses students' ability to express and respond to hospitality, invitations and apologies. It is carried out in pairs where students pre-arrange who their role-play partners are. There are two sessions for each pair where by Student A played the part of Person A in the first session will take the part as Person B in the second session. The instructor does not participate in the role-plays but acts as an outsider, listening to the student-student role-plays.</p> <p>Sample Situation:</p> <p><u>Student A</u></p> <p>Your coursemate asked for your help to photocopy some books for him/her. You are very busy doing an assignment which is due the next day. Apologise to your friend for not being able to help.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Apologise• Give reason for not helping

Student B

You borrowed some books from your instructor who asked you to return them to him/her in two days' time. You know your coursemate has a car. Ask for his/her help to photocopy the books.

- Request help
- Explain reason

3 The same condition in Assessment 2 is applied in Assessment 3
(Paired) and the same pairs of students as in Assessment 2 are assessed.

Appendix 3

Transcription key adopted from Eggins and Slade (1997)

Symbols	Meaning
.	Full-stop This marks termination (whether grammatically complete or not), or certainty, which is usually realized by falling intonation. By implication, the absence of any turn-final punctuation indicates speaker incompleteness, either through interruption or trailing off.
,	Comma This signals speaker parcellings of non-final talk. Thus, commas are used to make long utterances readable, and usually correspond to silent beats in the rhythm (but not breaks or pauses, which are marked with ...).
? mark	Question This is used to indicate questions or to mark uncertainty (typically corresponding to rising intonation or WH-questions).
! mark	Exclamation This marks the expression of counter-expectation (e.g. surprise, shock, amazement, etc.).
OH	Words in capital letters These are used conservatively to show emphatic syllables.
“ ” marks	Quotation These capture the marked change in voice quality that occurs when speakers directly quote (or repeat) another's speech.
()	<u>Non-transcribable segments of talk</u> These are indicated by empty parentheses ().
(happy)	<u>Uncertain transcription</u> Words within parentheses indicate the transcriber's guess.

[nod]	Square brackets	<p><u>Paralinguistic and non-verbal information</u></p> <p>Information about relevant non-verbal behaviour is given within [square brackets]. Such information is only included where it is judged important in making sense of the interaction. Inferred non-verbal behaviour (i.e. “clues” which the transcriber assumes happened in order for the situation to make sense) are shown with the addition of a question mark.</p>
		<p><u>Repetitions</u></p> <p>All attempts are shown in full.</p>
		<p><u>Fillers</u></p> <p>Following established usage, the most commonly used fillers are represented orthographically as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) umm: doubt b) ah: staller c) mmm, mhm: agreement d) eh: query e) oh: reaction – what Schiffrin (1987) describes as “information management” marker. f) ohh: an exclamative particle, suggesting surprise, shock, disappointment, etc. g) Other quasi-linguistics particles are represented phonemically: e.g. ahh! (exclamation of pain).
...	Three dots	<p><u>Intervals within and between utterances (i.e. hesitations)</u></p> <p>Hesitations are defined as brief pauses within turns, as opposed to those between turns. They are transcribed by three dots ...</p>
[]		<p><u>Intervals between turns (i.e. pauses)</u></p> <p>Significant pauses or lulls in the conversation are marked between square brackets []. For pauses</p>

exceeding three seconds in length, the length of pause is specified in seconds.

For example: [5 seconds]

= = A double Overlap phenomena

equals sign The symbol of a double equals sign, = = is used in the transcript to represent four types of overlap as follows:

- a) Simultaneous/concurrent utterances: when two entire turns occur simultaneously, the symbol = = is placed before each of the simultaneous turns/utterances. For example:

Speaker 1: I think we should get him an iPod.

Speaker 2: = = I thought of that too.

Speaker 3: = = That's a great idea.

Here we are indicating that both Speaker 2 and 3 produced their turns at the same time (began speaking together). Exact moments at which the overlap ended are not shown.

- b) Overlapping utterances: the point at which the second speaker begins talking is shown by = = preceding the point in the first speaker's turn. For example:

Speaker 1: Have you seen my book? I = = put it on
this table a few minutes ago.

Speaker 2: = = I have no idea.

Here we are indicating that Speaker 2 began saying *I have no idea* just as Speaker 1 was saying *put*.

Exact moments at which overlap ended are not indicated.

- c) Contiguous utterances: when there is no interval between adjacent utterances produced by different
-

speakers, this run-on is captured by placing the = = symbol at the end of the speaker's line and at the beginning of the subsequent speaker's turn, as in:

Speaker 1: Sure = =

Speaker 2: = = Wait a moment.

Here we are indicating that Speaker 2 said "Wait" more or less exactly when Speaker 1 said "Sure" – i.e. there was no perceptible hesitation.

Biodata

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