CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview .

This chapter will provide insights to the role and status of the English language in the Malaysian environment. It will then proceed with a brief discussion of the teaching of English for Specific Purposes in Malaysia and its suitability to the needs of the professional world. Subsequently, it will discuss learners' performance in an ESP context followed by the discussion on learners' performance in Business English specifically. Finally, the limitations to the study will also be discussed.

It is hoped that the general discussion of the background study will give the reader a clear understanding of the purpose, statement of the problem and the significance of this study.

1.1   Background of the Study.

1.1.1 The role and status of English in the Malaysian Education System.

The role and status of the English Language in the education and administration system in Malaysia has changed over the years since the country achieved its independence in 1957. Prior to independence, the Malaysian education system was under British influence.

> " Sebelum merdeka , pendidikan di negara ini telah dikelola,
>
> dikendali, dikawal dan diletakkan di bawah kuasa penjajah
>
> Inggeris".
>
> (Hussein 1993 : 51)

English was the main medium used in administration and in schools, as cited from K. Izwan & colleagues (1993)

> "From a colonial past where it was the main medium of
> communication in both the private and public sectors and the
> medium of instructions in government and government aided
> schools..."   (1993 : 61)

English was the official language of administration in Malaysia until 1967 when the Language Act was implemented .

Nevertheless, by 1970 (Hussein 1993 : 64) , the Education Ministry had imposed the use of Malay as the main medium of instructions in all schools. Until then, all subjects except for Bahasa Melayu (the Malay language) were taught in English. The new system enacted took effect gradually from 1970 – 1982 by first changing all lower primary English schools to National Primary School and later changing the English Secondary schools to secondary schools with Malay as the main medium. Eventually , in 1983 all lectures at University level were conducted in Bahasa (the Malay language).

With the implementation of the National Education policy, Bahasa Malaysia became the National language and English became the first foreign language to be learnt and at the same time became a compulsory subject for all. A syllabus was designed to meet the objectives of teaching English as a second language to equip students to be proficient in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening.This has been the emphasis up to the present day.

English is now taught in primary and secondary schools and has become a compulsory subject in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia also known as the SPM exam (Malaysian Certificate of Education). The SPM exam is a required qualification before students can continue tertiary education.

However, the SPM grades are not affected by failure in English.Therefore, the importance of English is often ignored. This could be one possible factor that has caused the deterioration of the level of English amongst Malaysians nowadays, as the STAR (1997), cited in Leong (1998) reported that

" the government is increasingly worried about the declining standard of the language".

(September 12 : 1997 cited in Leong 1998)

1.1.2 The role and status of English in the Malaysian working sector.

There has been a growing awareness of the importance of the role of the English language in the public and private sectors specifically, in terms of business communication. In line with the expansion of the country's as well as the world's economy , English has become the main medium of communication in most firms in Malaysia . Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) stress that :

" the growth of business has resulted in the increases in a need for English as a medium of communication".   (1984 : 1)

As the growth of business is due to the expansion of international trade between foreign countries in the world, communication requires a universal language and that is English. Hussein (1993) claims that the rapid growth of the world's economy indicates great challenges faced by the economy internationally. These changes according to him have great impact on the developing countries specifically.

Malaysia is definitely one of the developing countries that is faced with the new challenges. Malaysia's own economy is seen to be rapidly growing both locally and internationally. One of the implications is the fact that a high percentage of the job market requires style and flexibility. This means that there is a need to emphasise on staff development to increase productivity.

Hussein (1993 : 408) finds that indirectly the economic growth of a country whether local or international has great influence on the expansion of a country's education system. This is because a country's workforce consists of school leavers or university graduates who had completed their education and began their career. Hence, it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education to ensure that in line with the expansion of the country's economy, the education system has to provide the necessary knowledge and skills for the

students to cope in the professional world. Therefore, higher institutions like universities are the ones directly responsible to produce the kinds of professional workforce needed by the country.

Although English language has assumed the role of a second language in Malaysia , it is still very much needed as the spoken language in the Malaysian working environment. In fact, it has become part of the working culture in the private sectors in Malaysia which is why English is a compulsory subject in the local universities.

With the growing importance of English in business communication, there has been some concern amongst many ESP practitioners to equip learners with the necessary skills to cope with the demands of the real world . One of the skills needed for businesses to grow is good communication skills.

In light of this , interestingly, it has created awareness of the way English is supposed to be taught and most importantly in the teaching of English at tertiary level. Asmah (1987) claims two reasons for the importance of the English language at tertiary level :

"One reason for this, is the lack of books in Malay for the various disciplines at tertiary level ......the general attitude, now becoming policy, which requires Malaysians, reaching the level of tertiary education to have acquired a second language. To the Malaysians, English is the logical choice for the obvious reason that this is the only language of wider diffusion that they had been most familiar with for the last two hundred years or so. Hence the teaching of English is not only compulsory at the school but also at the university".

Asmah (1987 :165)

Furthermore, K. Izwan & colleagues (1993) note that :

"....recently, English seems to have taken on a new or rather added dimension in the form of English for Specific Purposes or ESP".

(1993 : 61)

This is due to the demands of job situations that require the extensive use of English in the professional working environment especially in the business sectors. The use of English has become more specific in performing specific tasks in job situations such as in report writings, meetings, presentations , negotiations , etc.

Therefore, one must understand why there is a great concern for the teaching of English for Specific Purposes at tertiary level, as it is the final exit point before students enter the professional domain. There have been similar claims made by researchers regarding the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at higher institutions.

K. Izwan and colleagues(1993) agree that :

" the developments in the private sectors where English is an important medium of communication have had an impact on the way English is taught in Malaysia especially at tertiary level".

(1993 : 64)

They claim that at tertiary level, conditions were more favourable for the establishment of ESP courses in the need to urgently equip undergraduates with necessary reading skills to access literature in their subject areas. Another factor, which they have also affirmed, was that many firms found that their employees did not possess sufficient communication skills in their interface with English speaking clients. This may be due to the fact that all courses offered in the universities are mainly conducted in Malay, hence, the learners are more able to express themselves well in Bahasa Malaysia than in English and teachers hope that ESP will overcome this problem.

1.1.3 English for Specific Purpose (ESP)

Kennedy and Bolitho (1984) conclude that the need for the English language to be the medium of communication as the result of the growth in business has resulted in the expansion of one particular aspect of English Language Teaching (ELT) which is namely ESP (English for Specific Purpose).

As emphasised by Pritchard &. Chamberlain (1974) that :

> "....of the many changes that have taken place , the central one is probably the movement towards the teaching of English as an international ....medium of communication in such fields as commerce, industry, science and technology ....in contrast with the definition of traditional role of English which was the language of education , of colonial culture and of governmental administration".
>
> (1974: 27)

This according to them gives rise to ESL (English as a Second Language), EFL (English as a Foreign language), ESP (English for Specific Purpose) and EST (English for Science and Technology). The situation mentioned above is similar with the Malaysian environment. A similar trend as stated by Pritchard & Chamberlain (1974) can be seen in Malaysia.

1.1.3.1 ESP : Definitions.

English for Specific Purposes began to evolve at the beginning of the 1960s in response to an awareness that certain types of learners had specialised needs that were not being sufficiently met by wide spectrum EFL courses (Chin 1987: 2) . EFL or English for foreign language basically refers to the learning of English as a foreign language besides one's mother tongue. Later there was a realisation that English which is foreign and internationally accepted was needed for various and specific purposes by learners. The teaching of English as a foreign language then , was not sufficient to cater to the actual needs of the learners. This has partly contributed to the way ESP had evolved .

There are several familiar names such as Widdowson (1983), Hutchinson & Waters (1986) , Kennedy and Bolitho (1984), Strevens (1988) and Swales(1988) who have defined the ESP term English for Specific Purpose in their own way. One general interpretation made by Widdowson (1983:5) was to "distinguish between the learning of ESP (English for Specific Purpose) and GPE (General Proficiency English) in the way in which purpose is defined and the manner of its implementation".

According to him, the purpose of ESP leans towards developing learners' competence to cope with a specified task whereas GPE is more inclined towards developing learners' general capacity to use the language. This refers to the difference of utilising English for certain tasks like academic readings or writings and even the kind of job situations that require learners to perform the necessary skills needed. In contrast with the teaching of General Proficiency English (GPE), the teaching of English language generally caters more to preparing learners to be proficient in the English language to enable them to communicate generally.

Hutchinson & Waters (1986: 19) at the same time view ESP as an 'approach' and not a 'product' which refers to the way we teach learners rather than focusing on the outcome. According to them, 'an approach' refers to language learning based on learners' needs. The emphasis is on the way language is learnt and taught as compared to what is taught. They have also posed the question of why does a learner need to learn a foreign language to be the foundation of the teaching of English for Specific Purposes. One apparent reason is for these learners to be able to utilise the language to communicate in the various fields.

Brumfit (1979) , on the other hand , suggests that ESP is not necessarily a new *approach* but a new *emphasis* in teaching. He further emphasises that this new emphasis is on the learner rather than on the teacher or on education

authorities. Perhaps ,he could see that learners are the ones who are at the receiving end of the learning and teaching and they are also the ones to utilise what has been taught and learnt. In other words, they are the ones who need to learn English. This is why the researcher focuses on the learners to seek learners' perception of the effectiveness of the business negotiation task .

Kennedy and Bolitho on the other hand, (1984: 3) define ESP with the clear division of the two main types of ESP situations and they are EAP (English for Academic Purpose) and EOP (English for Occupational Purpose). They stress that each of these caters for two reasons.

EAP is for students who need English to *gain access* to knowledge and it caters to students who need English to study such as an oversea student studying for a higher degree at a British University. EOP is for students who need to *express* in English the knowledge which they have .In other words, the students need to use English in their work or profession such as medical students who need English to interact with patients and staff.

Strevens (1988) refers to ESP as a particular case of the general category of special purpose language teaching. According to him the same principle applies no matter which language is being learnt and taught. French for specific purposes (FSP), Russian for specific purposes (RSP), Chinese for specific purposes (CSP) - all of these exist and are constructed on the same basis of English for specific purposes. He continues that it is the vastly greater demand for English that makes ESP more common than FSP, RSP or CSP.

1.1.3.2 Types of ESP.

As mentioned earlier , Kennedy and Bolitho (1984 : 3) have distinguished two main divisions of ESP and they are EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) .

(i) EAP is taught generally within educational institutions to students reading English in their studies such as a student studying for a higher degree at a British University.

(ii) EOP is taught in a situation where learners need to use English as part of their work or profession .

Strevens (1988:1) distinguishes ESP between four absolute and two variable characteristics which are briefly described below:

(i) Absolute characteristics.

ESP consists of English Language Teaching which is designed to meet specified needs of the learner. It is related in content (i.e. in its theme and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations and activities. Furthermore, it centres on the language appropriate to those activities: in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc and it is in contrast with 'General English'.

(ii) Variable characteristics.

ESP is not necessarily restricted to the language skills to be learnt (e.g. : reading only or speech recognition only) or taught according to any pre ordained methodology (i.e. ESP is not restricted to any particular methodology - although communicative methodology is very often felt to be the most appropriate method).This is because the communicative methodology emphasises on communicative tasks which are similar to the tasks used in ESP courses that simulate those of the real world.

1.1.3.3 The nature of ESP course   vs. the demands of the 'professional world.

Cheung and colleagues (1993) in their study looked at the perspectives on English for professional communication where the result showed an

"...ever widening gap between professional communication courses taught in the academic environment and the actual communicative tasks required in the real world". (1993 : 247)

Take for example 'Business English', which is one of the varieties of English for Occupational Purpose (EOP) that share similar elements of ESP in terms of its needs analysis , syllabus design, course design and materials selection.

A Business English course at tertiary level often aims to train the undergraduates to become 'operationally effective' in various skills, mainly the communicative skills. Longman Business English usage (1992) identifies seven key communicative events. Five events require primarily oral language and they are:

1. telephoning

2. socialising

3. making presentations

4. taking part in meetings

5. negotiating .

There are also two written events and they are corresponding and reporting.

Learners are required to acquire these business performance skills in order to be able to perform effectively in their chosen career. In this study , the researcher will focus on negotiation as it is one of the communicative tasks required in the real world of business.

The major concern of many ESP practitioners is to bridge the gap between the teaching of ESP courses and the demands of the real world. In other words, it is to ensure that the ESP courses designed equip the students with the required skills needed in the working environment.

"Current syllabuses recognise that a business or commercial English course should aim to equip students to communicate successfully in English in business situations" . (R. Alexander 1989: 88-91).

The failure to do this may to a certain extent defeat the purpose of an ESP course. For instance, a research by AlBazzaz Abdul Ghani Amed (1994) done in the college of Business Study in Kuwait with Business English learners, investigated the 'unsatisfactory achievement' of these learners. It was found that they failed to perform effectively in their job tasks after having gone through their Business English course. This is an indication of the failure of the course.

1.1.4   Business English

Evans and John (1998) assert that Business English is currently the area of greatest activity and growth in ESP since English is widely used in business dealings either locally or internationally in line with the world's economic growth. Thus, the importance of a good communication skill has become prominent in this particular ESP course.

One of the areas that one is likely to encounter in the business world is negotiations which is seen as an important component in the teaching and learning of Business English.

As stated by Ellis & Johnson (1994):

"more important than qualifications and a background in business is the right balance of personal skills ....to be a good negotiator".

(1994 : 27)

Poor oral communication and negotiation skills could result in difficulty in interfacing with English speaking customers and thus missing trade opportunities.

Lewichi and Littener (1985) , Putnam and Rolloff (1992) in Alan Firth's *Discourse in Negotiations* (1995) agree that 'communication' is recognised to be a crucial feature of negotiations. The kind of practice learners get in their learning of 'negotiations' is important and thus the approach should be task - based and communicative. Therefore, learners are expected to perform classroom tasks that simulate those of the target situations, although one does not know for certain how each learner is likely to carry out the task. The outcome of the learners' performance in the classroom will reflect his or her capability in performing the task in the target situation. Chin (1987) claims that:

" for successful learning to take place, a learning task must be immediately meaningful to the learner....(that is) in other words we are talking of informed 'wants analysis' as being equally important".

(1987: 8)

Chin (1987) refers to 'wants' analysis as what learners actually **want** to learn besides taking into consideration what they **need** to learn.

1.1.5 Learner and ESP tasks.

ESP courses must cater to the needs of their learners specifically. Alexander (1989 : 88) believes that learners of Business English need to become involved in task-oriented activities such as those occurring in business life. Chin (1987) in her study claims that :

> "most work in ESP course design has been focused on trying to
>
> help learners achieve certain well defined but restricted goals".
>
> <div align="right">Chin (1987 : 4)</div>

Learners are required to perform a variety of tasks in the professional world which incorporates almost all the four language skills which are reading, writing , speaking and listening.

A needs analysis to design a syllabus was conducted by Cheung , Chang and Wong (1993 : 255) on Singapore's National Technology University engineering graduates who had joined the workforce. It was conducted on these practising engineers to seek the actual needs required in their work environment. Based on the findings a syllabus was designed . The syllabus focused on a specification of performance outcome. Its proportion of teaching time allocation was in terms of four skills, which were ranked in accordance to its importance. They are briefly described in the table below.

Table 1 : *The ranking of important skills in the design of a syllabus and its percentage of time allocation for teaching purposes.* (National Technology University engineering graduates)

MAIN SKILLS REQUIRED	Ranking	Time allocation
Interpersonal	1	16%
Writing	2	48%
Speaking	3	36%
Reading	4	0%.

Writing and speaking were the two dominant skills which had the longest allocation of time in the design of the syllabus. This shows that these two skills were the most required skills in the job performance of the engineering graduates. This indicates the importance of focussing on the language skills needed in the actual job performance so as to be able to equip students with these skills.

1.2   STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

"One of the most common experiences we as teachers have is to discover disparity between what learners seem to derive from a task and what we intended or hoped that the task would achieve that is

whilst the objective of the task will have been reasonably precise ,
actual learner outcomes are often diverse, sometimes unexpected
and occasionally downright disappointing"

(M.Breen 1987 : 23)

In the case of UKM (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), students who study
Business English are those who have completed their General English
Proficiency programme. These students enter the university with a range of
English grades and they are A1s (distinction), A2s (distinction) to C5s (credit
) and C6s (credit) in their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), an exam which is
equivalent to the English O level exam .

All students will have to complete their proficiency course before taking any
ESP courses which are offered at a later stage. A recent policy requires that
students complete their proficiency course at the intermediate level and it is
now being implemented .

In the case of the simulated classroom tasks in ESP classes like the
negotiation task, a question that should arise is whether learners' performance
and perception of the tasks and what they contribute to the tasks are similar to
those actual negotiations done in the target situation. It is a common
expectation amongst ESP teachers that a Business English

syllabus should help students to achieve their goals and fulfil their needs to be able to function effectively in the real world. However, it is important to note that the outcome of a task performed by the learners in the classrooms may vary between individual learners and what each learner achieves from the performance of the task may also differ.

Breen (1987) in his article *- Learner contribution to task -* explains that :

> "an alternative way of reacting to diverse outcomes from tasks is to take the view that any learning outcome is the result of a fairly unpredictable interaction between the learner , the task and the task situation".

<div align="right">(1987 : 24)</div>

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Being teachers of ESP courses, our main concern will be whether the course design has fulfilled the needs of the learners. In an ESP context , the objectives of the course often derive from the required needs of job performance skills in the real world.

Thus, teachers are often more concerned with the outcome of learners' performance of the simulated task instead of the teaching and learning processes that have taken place through the simulated task.

However, one should not only focus on the end product but should also focus on the process in which learning takes place , that is, not only should one be aware of the 'what' but the 'how ' too. Kennedy and Bolitho (1984:6) stress that it could well be that teachers, coursebook writers and programme designers have been guilty of focusing too much on the desired end-product without giving enough thought to the process of achieving it.

This means that the learning process needs to be taken into consideration and this study intends seek learners' perception of effective business negotiations through a simulated classroom task. Hence , the objectives of this study are as follows:

1. to examine learners' general understanding of business negotiations and factors which they perceive contribute to an effective business negotiation.

2. to analyse and verify teachers' perception of factors that contribute to the effectiveness of learners' performance in the negotiation task .

1.4   SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY.

"The crucial element in many ESP courses is the attention of the learner centred approach to language curriculum design ".

(Cheung , Ching & Wong 1993: 248).

This basically refers to the vital consideration of attending to learners' needs in the design of a language curriculum. Roe (1981) writes of the difficulties many teachers have had in meeting the stated and diagnosed needs of ESP learners where the potential for let down and disappointment is enormous. By finding out whether an ESP task has helped students learn about the real world task it is hoped that this study could aid language instructors and programme designers to find measures to bridge the gap between classroom tasks and the actual tasks.

More importantly, it is also hoped that the findings of this study will assist teachers to choose suitable course materials, tasks and activities as well as appropriate methodology to be used in the classrooms to enable learners to perform the task in the target situation.

This justifies Kennedy and Bolitho's(1984) argument that one development which refers to ESP is :

> "the move towards a focus on the learner as a main consideration in course design (and) .... given a learner with a specific purpose in learning English it would seem logical in a learner centred approach to base a course on that purpose and on the needs of the learner in his situation".   (1984: 3)

This means that it is appropriate to adopt the learner centred approach as the basis to design a course so as to provide the learning needs of the particular learners .

1.5 LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY

The researcher notes that there are limitations to this study and these limitations are listed below.

1. Time is one of the primary limitations to this study. The data collection could only begin after students had completed their Business English course as the evaluation week was at the end of the semester. This means that the collection of data had to be done within the limited time.The researcher had to wait till the end of the fourteenth week semester before she could collect the data.

2. The number of students involved had to be limited as this was a case study. Only 18 students were used for this study. It was not possible to interview the whole population of students taking Business English course for that semester.

3. The researcher had to select students of similar proficiency level . This was to ensure that the learners could give responses without any language barriers.

4. The teacher variable had to be controlled and thus the number of classes chosen was limited to classes with the same teacher involved. There were not many teachers teaching more than one group.

5. The number of classes that could represent the range of faculties taking Business English was limited to only two faculties and they were the Business faculty and the Economics faculty. These were the only two faculties which could be selected to represent the population of learners taking Business English course for that semester.

However, it is hoped that even though there are limitations to this study, it will be adequate to seek clarification on the factors that make 'negotiations' effective.