CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 OVERVIEW

For most English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses of an occupational orientation, such as Business English, language teaching is focused on preparing learners for real language use beyond the confines of the language classroom. All too often, however, there are cries of discontent concerning the inability of graduates to perform on the job due to inadequate mastery of the English language. A recent survey carried out by Azlina (1998) on characteristics Malaysian firms prefer in graduates entering the workplace revealed that comments on language skills revolved around the importance of excellent oral and written communication skills in English.

It is, however, disconcerting to note that entry-level graduates in Malaysia cannot meet with the standards required in the workplace. One employer was quoted as saying that the state of English communication (skills) among new graduates is 'deplorable', and another as saying that the command of the English language is important but lacking in graduates (Azlina, 1998: 8). In the area of writing, for
example, Azlina (1998) citing Nurahimah et.al. (1994) reported that 62% of employers were dissatisfied with the writing skills of graduates. This deficiency, according to Khairi et. al. (1993), usually results in wasted time and effort and administrative delays spent on revising the reports, letters and minutes of meetings.

To quote another example in writing, an informal discussion carried out with a gatekeeper (that is a person who possesses the decision making powers in organisations) of a business organisation revealed several problem areas in the reports handed to her for reviewing. According to her, the reports lacked focus, contained flowery language as well as structural mistakes. Another problem especially found in reports written by fresh graduates is that the reports were not original. It was also stated that some of the reports resembled those found in a textbook too closely.

All these complaints indicate that there exists a mismatch between the skills that graduates possess and those that are required by employers. Although companies have the alternative of retraining these graduates, training programmes require much funds and time which many companies that are results-driven would find undesirable. Petronas, for one, expects an employee to be able to work when s/he comes in; to perform a given task as soon as they are recruited (Editorial Board, 1993).

ESP practitioners need to take note of these reservations regarding the quality of graduates produced in our country since they are accountable to institutions, students, consumers and potential employers alike for the learners’ skills and language
achievement. Despite the existence of numerous ESP courses, little has been done to understand precisely the ‘standards’ that are expected in the language and skills of new graduates in the workplace. This is especially important because courses made to address the needs of specific areas of expertise should deliver the expected results. For example, if we say that our courses help students to communicate effectively in business-related situations, do they conform to what actual discourse community members see as ‘effective’ communication? If courses aim to help students write effective letters and reports, do the reports produced, for instance, conform to criteria of an ‘effective’ report? What are levels of acceptability in written performance expected of people in the workplace?

Answers to these questions are important because much ESP teaching, as Roe (1993) argues, has been based largely on ‘guesswork’. The ESP skills needed by a learner for a specific purpose are often based on intelligent guesswork aided by previous experience in teaching either general proficiency courses, or English for other purposes to learners who bring different variables to the learning situation (Sargunan, 1999: 17). To add to that, even when teaching is done in the most informed way, constant changes in the requirements of the workplace, attributed to rapid changes in the society and economy as a whole, may have forced teachers to draw upon knowledge of the communicative demands of a situation s/he is no longer familiar with. In many cases where feedback and assessments on student performance are necessary, the ESP teacher’s ability to make judgements on his/her students’ language proficiency in a specific occupational context, such as the business profession, may be
inadequate due to a limited knowledge of the target situations the students will be in (Lumley, 1998).

There is thus the need for ESP practitioners to reassess their courses in terms of their relevance and limitations. As King (in Williams, 1984: 41) rightly puts it, there is a need ‘now to distinguish between models and realities and try to account for correlations and discrepancies’. Basically, there is a need to explore the degree to which the language and skills training provided to learners match the skills needed in the workplace. This can be carried out by looking into the norms of acceptability and expectations currently held by members of discourse communities, specifically with regard to students’ performance in ESP.

At this point, it is necessary to indicate that what is needed is not a needs analysis, per se, as it is currently practiced (Nurahimah, 1994 as cited in Azlina, 1998; Yeo et.al. (1996); Azlina, 1998; Leong, 1998) but a rigorous examination of student outcome to diagnose their learning difficulties. The researcher views this kind of a diagnostic approach as useful in settling the tensions that exist between academia and the workplace. Perhaps this would reveal more about the gap between learner’s difficulties and expectations of their discourse community.
1.2 THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is a case study focusing on students’ written performance with regard to business reports. It is a preliminary investigation aimed at determining whether students, who have undergone basic business report writing training in an English for Business course at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), have the necessary skills required in producing reports that meet ‘acceptability’ standards of the workplace. Basically, the objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To see whether the business reports students produce meet ‘acceptability’ standards determined by gatekeepers in a business organisation, and to identify reasons for a mismatch, if any.
2. To identify areas for improvement to the reports and the Report Writing component in the English for Business course in general.

It must be stressed at this point that the study is not an actual course or language programme evaluation, although the information obtained from the investigation will provide the means for exploring the effectiveness of the Business Report Writing component in the course taken by the students (subjects) as part of their degree requirements. The study is summative in nature, focusing on student outcomes and the extent to which they meet the standards of ‘acceptability’ in the workplace. ‘Student outcome’ in this study refers to the students’ finished reports that, for the
purpose of this study, have been taken to represent ‘course exit point competence and job entry-point capabilities in writing’ (to use the term coined by Chitavelu, 1993).

The study is undertaken based on an assumption that between the inception of the course in 1991 and the present time, there may have been changes in expectations held with regard to performance at the workplace that necessitated some changes in ESP teaching and training. Thus, before a comprehensive course evaluation can be undertaken, it would be more efficient to look at student outcome as it is now and assess its impact on ‘outsiders’ (see Alderson & Scott in Alderson & Beretta, 1992). Their perspectives on the reports and students’ report writing training will provide the foundation for future formative and summative evaluations of the course in terms of its objectives, content, materials and/or methodology. In other words, the findings of this study will provide some direction that course evaluation might take.

However, it is hoped that the study places an added dimension to course evaluation by ‘interfacing’ with the workplace, using workplace specific writing tasks and gatekeepers’ perspectives as a measure of effectiveness. In other words, the criteria upon which effectiveness is judged are based on target needs. These are needs of end-user institutions that specify the necessary skills and qualities expected of learners. The gatekeepers’ most important contribution therefore ‘would be to fill in the ‘information gap’ concerning data on the appropriacy of the course vis-à-vis target situation requirements’ (Jansen, 1993: 60).
1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the criteria by which ‘acceptability’ is measured in the workplace with regard to analytical reports?

2. Do students’ reports measure up to these criteria? If not, why?

3. What are the gatekeepers’, students’, and course instructor’s opinions on measures to be taken in making the reports more acceptable to their intended audience?

4. What are the implications of the above on the Report Writing component in the course?

It is hoped that this study can establish a clear link between learners’ course of study and their future occupation by identifying the criteria by which success or ‘acceptability’ is measured with regard to written reports. Findings of this study will provide valuable insights to course improvement so that report writing training provided in future can aid students in their professional lives.
1.4 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.4.1 Report Writing in the Workplace

A business report plays various functions in businesses. Some reports present mainly facts on business activities while others include interpretations, conclusions and recommendations. It is generally understood that regardless of the variations found in a report, a business report is a written documentation that disseminates information concerning the business activities of an organisation and which serves some business purpose (Lesikar & Pettit Jr., 1995). This purpose may be to solve a problem, to present a weekly report of a salesperson’s activities, or to explain and justify reasons behind a particular project.

It is generally agreed that from a business standpoint, reports play a major role in written communications. They are referred to by business executives for information in order to make decisions. Depending on the kinds written, most reports allow people in an organisation to keep up with projects and new developments in the business community that are essential for an efficient operation of the organisation. As much planning, promotion and assessment of an organisation’s activities are recorded in its documentation (Hager, 1992), a report enables managers to communicate with one another, oftentimes drawing upon the items in the reports for the production of their own.
A few informal interviews were conducted (by the researcher) with two corporate officers in a prominent business organisation in Malaysia in early 1998 to gauge, in general, the roles which reports play in business. The investigation revealed that reports are usually written in the form of progress reports, monthly and quarterly reports and statistics reports which both senior and junior officers write. Sometimes, e-mail is used for these purposes but there is always the need for a written document which can be filed. An informant from the organisation selected for the present study reported that people there write a considerable amount of reports ranging from short periodic reports to longer special reports and proposals. At its simplest, a report is required if a department wants to change a photocopying machine! (Sha, 1998). She did however stress that the reports, if analytical, need to be brief and concise, yet informative.

According to the informant, the frequency of writing reports also depends on the department: report writing in the Business Development department in the organisation takes up 50-60 % of the time, while the Research & Development department does reports 70% of the time. Evidence gathered on the report writing practices of other departments lend further support to the importance of reports. An interview held with a business personnel working at the Marketing Department for Ericsson revealed that report writing takes up about 50% of the bulk of written communication. These reports usually take the form of market research reports such as in introducing a product. These are usually written in the form of a proposal which then is often sent to Sweden to be read and reviewed (Ungku, 1998). Overall, it can
be said that reports are important communication tools although the frequency at which they are written depends on the organisation and the department within the organisation. Thus, there is a need to ensure that students are prepared for this task.

Many research surveys have also emphasized the importance of report writing. For instance, surveys that sought to determine what business subjects were most important in training people for careers in business saw business writing, especially report writing, at or near the top (Lesikar & Pettit Jr., 1995). In a related survey, Sargunan (1999) reported that a survey conducted by the American Society for Engineering Education with responses from 4057 engineers found that technical report writing (TRW) ranked second in a list of 38 categories.

In organisations such as in the manufacturing industry where technical innovations and development are important pathways to success, and where much emphasis is given to investments in research and development (R&D), a report may take on a central role as an instrument used to display technical excellence. In her study of the TRW activities at Motorola, Kuala Lumpur (KLM), Sargunan (1999: 309) finds that in addition to functioning as a formal written document informing those in authority of normal operations within the company and job progress, as well as in providing the 'link between research and the practical utilization of its discoveries', the technical reports in KLM provide the medium or channel to show one's 'technical prowess'. In this regard, the existence of a Technical Committee responsible for evaluating the reports in competitions and conferences such as The Technical Excellence Award
Competition (TEAC) and the NEPCON show held in KLM only goes to show the importance placed upon reports in the organisation, especially in giving recognition to individual’s technical achievements.

It is in the above instances that the ability to write a report becomes a necessary quality for any individual in an organisation. Although report writing in other business organisations may not be as dynamic and competitive as that in KLM, it nonetheless has similar benefits of a professional nature. Lesikar and Pettit Jr. (1995) believe that writing is important to business and that the intellectual capacity for work can be shown through writing. The ability to communicate well, and in writing, through good reports and other business papers is ‘a requisite for advancement in business’. Failing that, one is likely to be positioned in a mediocre role in business. It is argued that even if one is capable intellectually in his field, he will be judged mainly by the intellectual capacities he is able to communicate (1995: 6).

1.4.2 The Role of English in Human Resource Development

As Malaysia shifts from an agricultural to industrial, and at present towards a technologically-driven knowledge based economy in the 21st century, the role of English as a language of communication has become increasingly important in achieving the status of a fully developed country by the year 2020. Its role is most prominent in Human Resource Development (HRD), which is one of the areas addressed in the Second Outline Perspective Plan (OPP 2) and the New Development
Policy (NDP) as frameworks for achieving the nine strategic challenges outlined in Vision 2020. The National Economic Consultative Council (NECC) II launched in 1999 to cover the nation’s plan from the year 2000-2010 will also necessitate greater HRD because a knowledge-based society requires ‘world class new talents’ to compete effectively in a technology-based global economy (The Star, 1999).

One can see why English occupies a significant role in realizing Vision 2020. Malaysia’s transition from an agricultural to industrial and knowledge-based economy has required its workforce to become effective communicators in order to be internationally competitive. English takes centrestage in this regard because it is the language of trade and commerce and of science and technology. Azlina (1998) citing Crystal (1987) writes that ‘English is the main language of books and newspapers, international business, diplomacy and advertising. Of all information in the world’s electronic retrieval systems, 80% is stored in English. It has become a global language, necessary for international intelligibility and information management’.

Roxburgh (1993) sees HRD as being a two-pronged strategy – one requiring value strengthening and another workforce development. For the purpose of the present study, discussion will mainly concentrate on the latter as this is the area where the English language comes most into play. To take on his argument as points of reference, Roxburgh (1993), in writing about Vision 2020, proposed that workforce development should take into account three areas: industry skills, general skills and work or business ethics and discipline. The second area, which is general skills, sees
communication in English (besides managerial, negotiation, entrepreneurship and public relations) as an important supporting skill that the nation’s workforce requires.

This without doubt entails a mastery in English, which is a fact that has long been given emphasis by the government.

To add to the discussion above, Chitravelu (1994) finds the development of communication skills in the English language significant towards the realization of Vision 2020. The following excerpt from the OPP 2, taken from her article clearly illustrates this point:

With increasing globalization and internationalization of the world economy, the country will face more and more competition in trade and investment. In view of the challenges ahead, Malaysians should be well equipped with a strong base in education and training, including the ability to communicate in a second language, for example, English which is an international language of commerce (The OPP 2 1991-2000 in Chitravelu, 1994: 20).

In industrial training, for instance, there has been an awareness that it is necessary to upgrade workers' ability to communicate in English. Proposals to include generic skills programme (communication, personnel effectiveness, and computer literacy, for example) and basic programme such as numeracy skills and English language proficiency in training programmes conducted by public training institutes have been forwarded in an attempt to produce better trained skilled and semi-skilled workers (Hamzah, 1994).
Other sectors of the Malaysian economy, it seems, are also taking steps to ensure that their workforces are equipped with the ability to communicate effectively. This is so because ‘attaining the status of a fully developed nation by the year 2020, of being a producer as well as a consumer of advanced technologies, is highly dependent on the nation’s ability to communicate effectively in the international arena’ (Le Vasan & Sargunan, 1992: 52). A challenge for language training industry would be to provide the necessary training that can help meet the professional communication needs of today’s and tomorrow’s workforce.

1.4.3 The Role of Education in Malaysia

In today’s technology-based, highly competitive world, education is a prime factor in the success of new employees entering the workforce (Hammond, 1996). The Malaysian government has been quick to realize this by continually expanding and re-orienting the education and training system in the country in order to improve the quality of human resources (Mahathir, 1993). Gan (1999) in her article states that education for the future should provide a ‘value-added’ benefit. Tertiary level institutions should provide individuals not only with knowledge but also multiple skills such as the ‘ability to communicate, to solve problems creatively and effectively, to venture and to lead’. To this end, it is proposed that creativity, communications skills, thinking skills, basic computer literacy and information literacy should make up important parts of the undergraduate curriculum.
Again, it can be seen that communications skills are integral educational elements in producing the required manpower of the country. One's best guess is that English communication skills training will be a necessary feature of education in view of the position the English language occupies in HRD. This in turn implies a more significant role for ESP education and training. The reason for this is quite apparent as the changing role of English from being simply a language of education and governmental administration to that of an international medium of communication in various fields such as commerce, industry, science and technology (Vatikiotis, 1993) makes it necessary to equip learners with the communication and language skills needed to function in these and other specific disciplines.

Language training is even more important at present given the state of English among Malaysians. Azlina (1998) who carried out a study looking at the challenges facing graduates entering the Malaysian corporate sector finds that in business, for instance, liberalisation of the world economy requires graduates who are highly conversant in English. This need, however, cannot be easily met due to the poor command of the English language among graduates (Azlina, 1998). Usually, retraining of these graduates or existing staff in the workplace costs money. It is reported that at the vocational level, retraining costs are usually high and could be prohibitive for public agencies (M. Hussein, 1994). The Prime Minister also pinpointed this problem in his speech when launching the NECC II, so it is important that language specialists be aware of this situation and find appropriate remedies in order to meet the challenges and demands facing education nowadays.
1.4.4 ESP in Malaysia

With the growing need for a good command of the English language among graduates and individuals in the workplace, the demand for English language training of an ESP nature will very likely increase. Tickoo (1993), in his article discussing the roles and responsibilities of ESP planners and practitioners, outlined several main areas of ESP practice. These will be taken and adapted here as a basis of discussion. The main areas of ESP in operation in Malaysia are as follows:

1. ESP forms part of undergraduate courses at many local universities and public training institutes. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), for example, offers a considerable number of ESP courses, from English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses such as Reading for the Social Sciences, English for Law and Academic Writing to English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses such as English for Nursing Science, English for IT and two English for Business courses among many others. Many of these courses are offered based on the demand from other departments in the university, which find it necessary for their undergraduate students to obtain the level of English needed to function in their subject disciplines. English for Business courses which carry job-specific training components such as negotiation, meetings, business correspondence and report writing, for instance, are made compulsory for Business Administration and Economics students.
In relation to this, the Business faculty has also set up a degree programme for executives called the BBA Executives where the Business English course forms a compulsory part of the curriculum. This reflects the faculty’s commitment in providing training opportunities for job-experienced learners, and also the Language faculty’s recognition of the need for business people to be proficient in business communication skills.

2. ESP courses are offered to private/corporate sectors under specific organisational training programmes. This demand for ESP courses is a result of an increased awareness on the importance of proficiency in the English language (Sargunan, 1999). However, there is no specific documentation of companies’ training programmes available to illustrate this trend. The few that will be included in the discussion which follows are mainly provided to show some evidence of the existing demand for language courses.

One documented language training programme is Universiti Malaya’s (UM) on-going report writing course carried out in Motorola, Kuala Lumpur (KLM) to help train the Company’s engineers and technicians to write effective technical reports in order to document and share information (Sargunan, 1994: 52). Besides the TRW programme, there had been other English programmes carried out in the company indicating that the efforts to upgrade language skills among its personnel have been in practice for quite some time. Around the time the TRW was launched
(1990), it was reported that UM also received requests from Bank Negara and Bank Rakyat for English courses, thus indicating, again, the increasing demand for such courses. It is claimed that these requests from the private and public sectors should take ESP to where it rightly belongs – the industry (Khairi et. al., 1993).

As with public training institutions at polytechnic and Industrial Training Institutes (ITI), it is reported that programmes to upgrade the skills of existing workers are to be extended to include firstly, generic skills programmes, such as communication, personnel effectiveness, problem solving, computer literacy, and secondly, basic education programme such as numeracy and English language proficiency (Hamzah, 1994).

The organisation which has been selected for this study has not been engaged in any kind of a language training programme of late. Anecdotal comments received from one or two persons there during this study, however, indicates that the organisation is interested in language training, especially for its clerical staff. Le Vasan (1994) found from her investigations into the norms, values and discourse practices of Sapura Pte. Ltd. that there is a need for an English language communication skills programme as a result of integration of office technologies. Both these examples illustrate some possible and real demand with regard to the language training that may be required by the private/corporate sectors. In both instances, ESP language specialists will be called upon or co-opted as the language and communication skills providers.
3. There have been efforts towards establishing close academia-industry cooperation in designing and developing ESP language programmes. This is characteristic of the kinds of public and private sector cooperation in sharing the burden of educating and training the human resources of the country called upon in the OPP2. A good example of this joint cooperation is the UM and Motorola MoU on English language training programmes, and in relation to that a ‘study mode negotiation’ developed at UM in the specific context of the provision of training in English writing skills to corporate clients (Le Vasan & Sargunan, 1996).

Perhaps a more common and prevalent academia-industry cooperation can be seen in the administration and development of training programmes at polytechnics. The Ministry of Education, through The Technical and Vocational Education Division (TAVED), initiates joint programmes to develop closer ties and cooperation with local industries so as to better reflect industry needs in course content, teaching and training (M. Hussein, 1994). This move is also undertaken in response to complaints of mismatch between the skills required and those possessed by graduates. A review of the curriculum has since then been necessary so that the curriculum matches the needs and expectations of the employers in the country.

As far as local universities are concerned, there may not be many direct efforts to liaise directly with the industry/ workplace in terms of designing undergraduate training programmes, except maybe in the initial course needs analyses stage. Even
then, lack of time and other practical considerations may result in courses or programmes that are offered on an ad-hoc basis. As a consequence, there may be inadequate relevance of output in terms of meeting present industrial needs or needs of the present business community. This has been the message behind the Prime Minister's views on the private sector's contribution to education and training in this country:

(It) enables the training institutions to become more relevant to the actual needs of the private sector. The contents of the training programmes must be sensitive to the technological and skill changes taking place in the economy (The OPP2 1991-2000 in Mahathir, 1993: 445).

For ESP practitioners, this means being fully responsive, current and accountable to students in providing them with the most appropriate training as preparation for the workplace. There has been evidence from complaints voiced by employers that some mismatch between academia and the workplace exist. In bridging this gap that may exist between the two institutions, the expectations and requirements of employers in the workplace should be the standards to go by because this is where students will eventually go upon graduation. The training programme or courses that students go through should be seen to meet as much as possible the needs of that target discourse community.

The present study is undertaken with that intention in mind. It investigates the expectations held by a selected business community with regard to written
performance, that is of a business report, expected of graduates at the workplace. It aims to see whether the reports measure up to those expectations. The investigation will reveal among other things, a mismatch, if there is any, that calls upon a review of the present English for Business course conducted at UKM. Most importantly, the investigation plays a part in the overall efforts of the academia in producing the communicatively able workforce needed by the country.

1.4.5 Report Writing at UKM

The Business English course offered to undergraduates at UKM is an integrated skills based course where Report Writing forms one of the major components (refer Appendix A for course outline and schedule). The objective of the Report Writing component is for students to be able to write a business report clearly and effectively. 'Clearly and effectively' as stipulated in the course description encompass both Content and Language. Briefly, a clear and effective report in the course fulfils the following criteria:

- **Content**: complete treatment of topic, relevant points, well organised and presented in sections, very logical reasoning/deductions (conclusions) and effective recommendations, evidence of writer's own words and good use of connectives.
- Language: has confident control of language, correct and appropriate use of language with very minor slips, impressive use of vocabulary and varied & accurate word choice.

- Mechanics: cover/title page, table of contents, paragraphing, spacing, numbering system etc and overall neatness.

(summarized from course report writing scale for marking)

The activity of writing an analytical report in the course provides students with the basic knowledge and skills of report writing. It also acts as a means for learners to expound upon their knowledge and apply it critically to a given situation, using language as the means of communication. In other words, writing an analytical report is experiential learning and teaching.

The process involved in a Report Writing task in the course is as follows:

Decision Making Planning

- Select and formulate topic
- Find and select materials/data
- Organize data

Execution

- Write report in stages
- Introduction
  - define a clear focus of the topic
  - select points to include, describe compare and analyze
- Findings
- Conclusion
  - make logical deductions
- Recommendation
  - propose solutions to problem

22
Completion

- Revise and produce final report
- Prepare oral presentation of report

The English for Business course has been chosen as the subject of this study because it is one of the more 'popular' courses among students from many faculties besides the Business Administration and Economic faculties. Although for many students the course is mainly a fulfillment of their language requirements, there is every need for the course coordinator and teachers to ensure that it provides these students with some of the necessary skills required to perform effectively in business related situations.

The decision to study the Report Writing component is made because it is one of the more problematical components in the course. Among the comments (gathered informally through discussions and interview) are students' poor language proficiency, uncertainties over approaches to teaching report writing and the students' needs for writing reports in the future as well as unprincipled use and selection of materials (Sulaiman, 1998). It is likely that an idea concerning the nature of reports and the standards expected in the workplace would help course providers see the problems in better perspectives and find ways for improvement.

In addition to that, the researcher is very familiar with the Report Writing component, its objectives, syllabus content, materials as well as the student and teacher population, having taught the course for many years and having served as a course committee
member for nearly three years. This allows the researcher easier access to information/data necessary in meeting the objectives of this study (see page 5).

1.5 RATIONALE OF STUDY

The study is undertaken based on the following rationale:

1. An investigation into the ‘acceptability’ standards of reports in the workplace is necessary based on a number of reasons. Firstly, a business report is an important communication tool in the workplace. Therefore, some indication on the standards expected of these reports in contributing towards an efficient business operation will be beneficial in preparing students for the task of writing a report they are likely to undertake on the job. This information is especially crucial at a time when employers are generally dissatisfied with graduates’ level of language proficiency needed to perform on the job (Azlina, 1998). Since employers are the gatekeepers who set the standards in employees’ performance, their views on the levels of acceptability expected in reports written by fresh graduates in their organisation will help ESP practitioners a long way in designing and maintaining quality education and training.

Secondly, using experts’ opinion in judging the ‘acceptability’ standards in reports is both inevitable and necessary because most ESP practitioners are
ESL specialists and thus are not *bona fide* members of the discourse community. For a course that aims to equip learners with the necessary skills to be used at a professional level, employers’ requirements should be the main criteria because they are better able to give first hand information on reports. Without such information, ESP courses will lack relevance and a mismatch will most likely occur.

Third and lastly, the ESP learner needs to be aware of the criteria upon which ‘acceptability’ is measured in the workplace because s/he must learn to operate the rules of the institutionalised speech setting of which s/he hopes to be a member (Roe, 1994: 6). For teachers of writing for a specific purpose, Roe writes that ‘we must….begin with the rules of discourse in the community for which the student writers are producing text. These rules, not the student’s own, will become the standards for teaching and evaluating writing for the class’.

2. In determining whether student reports meet with the gatekeepers’ expectations of an ‘acceptable’ report, the present study has initiated an effort towards diagnosing students’ writing difficulties/problems. The gatekeepers’ evaluation of the reports would reveal what enabling skills are lacking and thus allow the stakeholders in the study to tackle any existing problems head-on. In addition, the gatekeepers’ viewpoints can be used to determine the relevance
of the Report Writing syllabus in the course to present target situation requirements.

The evaluation activity undertaken in this study can be taken as an example of quality assurance (QA) in education. Tan (1994) argues for QA in ESP stating that 'a product or service should satisfy given requirements for quality, and where a quality gap exists, corrective action can be taken to narrow the gap'. In this case, the product in question would be 'student outcome'/report, and requirements for quality would be the criteria set for judging the 'acceptability' levels of a report. Therefore, should the student's report be of a lesser standard than expected, actions can be taken to improve upon it. For UKM, such practice in quality assurance is institutionally important because the university has invested money and manpower in language courses. This is also in tandem with the university's emphasis on Total Quality Management (TQM).

3. The English for Business course was designed based on a needs analysis study carried out in 1991 (see Ngeow, 1991). Even though the course has evolved from a strictly business writing course to an integrated English for Business course at present, the Report Writing syllabus has not changed much. In view of changing needs and expectations of the Malaysian business community, it is essential that the Report Writing component be made to better reflect these changes. By studying students' reports and discussing ways to overcome any
shortcomings based on target situation requirements, the Report Writing component can be further improved and developed. Studies such as this one could also pave the way for other evaluation studies that are pertinent to curriculum development.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

A clear significance of the study is that the findings will be valuable for the purpose of course improvement, as the gatekeepers’ evaluation of student reports will in some ways confirm the appropriateness (or otherwise) of, among other things, course objectives and content. In addition to that, the significance of this study rests upon the aspect of accountability the Language Faculty has to the other faculties at UKM. This is because the faculties believe that the English courses will help improve their students' communication skills. There is then every need to ensure that the courses meet their expectations.

Jansen (1993) sees a joint evaluation network such as the one being implemented in this study as being developmental and instrumental. ‘Developmental’ because it improves the quality of language courses and thus promotes development. It is ‘instrumental’ because collaboration with other persons not directly involved in the teaching and learning situation helps develop and improve the relationship between client and course provider. Within the context of this intended study, collaboration with gatekeepers in a corporate organisation will improve relationship between
academia and business organisations. It also helps create greater awareness of each others’ needs.

1.7 DEFINITION OF TERMS

1.7.1 Evaluation is defined as ‘the process of establishing value judgements based on evidence.’ Evaluation research measures the effectiveness of a programme, policy or ways of doing something. It can be formative i.e. looks at the programme in progress and or summative i.e looks at final programme outcome.

1.7.2 Gatekeepers persons in organisations who possess the decision-making powers.

1.7.3 Genre a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs (Bhatia, 1993: 13).
1.7.4 Triangulation

to gather data from a variety of sources and with a variety of methods in order to complement/confirm findings across methods.

1.7.5 Specialist Informant

a practising member of the disciplinary culture in which the genre is routinely used.

1.7.6 Analytical Report

a type of report that provides information on a certain company's issue as well as findings, conclusions and recommendation. Examples include sales forecast, market research report, problem solving report and feasibility report.

1.7.7 Experiential Learning

learning which takes place through involvement in some purposeful activities, which are not from a language point of view. Usually experiential strategy in classrooms creates conditions for real language use as opposed to an analytic strategy which operates through study and practice of the language itself.