CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Since achieving independence in 1957, Malaysia has been progressing slowly but surely towards becoming an industrialised nation by the year 2020. Under the leadership of our present Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Malaysian economy progressed at a fast pace, achieving at least 7.5% growth rate for 10 years before the emergence of the currency crisis in 1997. But according to the Economic Report (1999) released by Bank Negara, the Malaysian economy has recorded a 5.4% growth rate in 1999 (compared with a −7.5% in 1998). It also projected a 5.8% growth rate for the year 2000 (Guang Ming Daily, 30.03.2000). This shows that our economy is clearly on the recovery track and the possibility of achieving high economic growth again for the coming years looks bright.

With the expected rapid growth in the Malaysian economy in this new millennium, it is not surprising that Malaysian polytechnics are playing a very important role in fulfilling the demand of the manpower needs of the nation, especially in the fields of engineering and commerce. Since the English language is an important second language and is still widely used in the private
sector, ESP courses conducted in polytechnics must be effective in equipping the students with the necessary language skills needed both for their studies and future working situations. As such, this study investigates the effectiveness of an ESP course conducted in a polytechnic in Malaysia. The findings will serve as a guide for course designers to improve the quality of the course.

This chapter is divided into seven sections. This first section presents a general introduction, and the second describes the background of the study. Main topics for discussion include technical and vocational education in Malaysia, a historical overview of the development of polytechnics in Malaysia, the Ungku Omar Polytechnic (PUO) and its role, a description of PUO’s engineering and commerce courses, the educational and career prospects for students undergoing the Business Studies courses at certificate and diploma levels, the importance of Business English, types of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses at PUO, and lastly, a description of the A104 Commercial English 1 (CE 1) course (the course being evaluated in this study).

The third section constitutes the purpose and objectives of the study. This will be followed by the three research questions (section 4), the significance of the study (section 5), the limitations of the study (section 6), and finally, the conclusion (section 7).
1.2 Background of the Study

1.2.1 Technical and Vocational Education in Malaysia

Like many other countries in the world today, the Malaysian education system provides a wide range of technical and vocational education to young Malaysians through various polytechnics, technical secondary schools (SMTs), vocational secondary schools (SMVs), and academic secondary schools (SMAs). The main objective of technical and vocational education in Malaysia is to equip the students with the basic knowledge and skills in the field of engineering and commerce.

In the normal academic secondary schools, students follow the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KBSM) system in which technology and vocational subjects such as Economics, Commerce, Agricultural Science, Principles of Accounts and Technical Engineering are offered. The students sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) examination held at the end of the fifth year in secondary schools. They can then proceed to other institutions of higher learning for further studies.

The vocational secondary schools offer two streams of education, namely, vocational education and skills training. Students in the former follow
vocational and academic subjects and sit for the Malaysian Vocational Certificate of Education (SPMV) examination in form five. They can continue their education in polytechnics and universities. The latter will follow skills training course and sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Skills (SKM) examination. Upon completion of study, they join the workforce because they cannot enter other institutions of higher learning.

In technical secondary schools, form four and five students also follow the KBSM system. Besides taking basic academic subjects such as those offered in SMAs, students in SMTs will take up technical and vocational subjects such as Civil Engineering Studies, Mechanical Engineering Studies and Electrical Engineering Studies (except Technical Engineering which is offered to students in SMAs only). They also sit for the SPM examination and can further their studies in polytechnics and other institutions of higher learning.

Polytechnics are institutions of higher learning for SPM and SPMV holders. Various courses in the field of engineering and commerce are offered at the certificate and diploma levels in these institutions. Graduates of polytechnics can join the workforce after completing their courses of study or proceed to other institutions of higher learning for further studies.
According to a working paper of the Ministry of Education (National Planning and Development Committee, 1994), there were 6 polytechnics, 9 SMTs, 69 SMVs and 1174 SMAs in 1994. But according to one ministry official, at the end of 1999 the number of polytechnics had doubled, and SMTs had increased to 80. Due to the rapid economic development in the country, Malaysia is expected to face a shortage of 9,100 engineers and 17,930 technicians in the year 2000 (that is, this year). If the trend is left unchanged, it will definitely affect the achievement of Vision 2020 (a vision which sees Malaysia as an industrialized country in the year 2020).

Realizing the urgent need to increase technical manpower both in the field of engineering and commerce, the Ministry of Education has taken serious steps to improve the situation. The Educational Planning Committee of the Ministry of Education made a decision in September 1993 that all SMVs must provide higher level education rather than just providing skills training. In 1994, the Ministry of Education restuctured all 69 SMVs into 51 SMTs, 12 Institutes of Higher Technology (ITTs), and 6 branch campuses of polytechnics. ITTs are another type of institutions of higher learning which offer a mixture of some of the programmes provided in SMTs and polytechnics. The aim of this restructuring exercise was to provide more opportunities for students to take up courses in science and technology to meet the increasing demand for technical manpower needed under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996 – 2000).
Under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996 – 2000), 3 new polytechnics and 4 SMTs are being built: this will increase the number of polytechnics and SMTs to 13 and 82 respectively. The Ministry of Education hopes that by the year 2002, polytechnics will produce enough manpower to meet the needs of the nation in the new millennium.

1.2.2 Historical Overview of the Development of Polytechnics

In its efforts to prepare young Malaysians to meet new challenges, a polytechnic system of education was set up by the Ministry of Education. Polytechnics were set up with several primary objectives:

a) To provide broad-based education to upper secondary school leavers to enable them to acquire the necessary skills to become technicians and technical assistants in various engineering fields; junior and middle-level executives in the commercial and services sectors; visualizers and junior designers in the design sectors.

b) To provide relevant technological or entrepreneurial education and training to upgrade the basic skills of the upper secondary school leavers.
c) To promote collaboration with the private or public sector through Time-Sector Privatisation (TSP) as well as research and development programmes.

(technical education department prospectus, 1999:2)

The year 1969 saw the emergence of the first polytechnic in Malaysia, i.e., the Ungku Omar Polytechnic (PUO). PUO occupies a 20 hectare site in Ipoh, the state capital and administrative centre of Perak Darul Ridzuan. Since then, the need to provide more technological and entrepreneurial training to young secondary school leavers saw the establishments of more polytechnics in Malaysia. (As mentioned earlier, today, there are 12 polytechnics set up by the Ministry of Education as institutions for technical and commercial training.)

Polytechnics are reputed for their ability to provide technical knowledge as well as relevant work experience to students. Quality education and training is ensured through the commitment and total involvement of a highly qualified and well-trained team of lecturers (technical education department prospectus, 1999: 4). Apart from training school leavers to be the qualified and skilled manpower needed for the nation, polytechnics are now actively involved in the Time-Sector Privatisation Programme (TSPP). TSPP is a collaborative programme that permits the private and public sectors to make use of the training facilities available at the polytechnics. It is carried out after normal teaching hours and also during semester breaks.
The growing demand for more skilled manpower in the country has led to the development of various projects for polytechnics. The training capacity of the existing polytechnics is being upgraded to accommodate 5000 students each. The polytechnic system has also been expanded through the establishment of 4 new polytechnics which opened their doors to students in 1998. Four new polytechnics are under construction. In addition, three more polytechnics are in the planning process. Since the present research is carried out at Ungku Omar Polytechnic in Ipoh, further discussions in this chapter will focus on this polytechnic.

1.2.3 Ungku Omar Polytechnic and Its Role

As stated earlier, Ungku Omar Polytechnic (PUO) was the first polytechnic to be set up in Malaysia. (It was set up in 1969 in Ipoh.) From the initial plan of just producing semi-skilled manpower at certificate level (in 1969), PUO has to date, successfully produced thousands of skilled and semi-skilled manpower. The 1980's saw major expansions, both in the form of teaching staff and buildings, to cater for the increased number of students. According to one ministry official, at the end of 1999, there were a total of 6,409 students, of which 42% were doing certificate level courses, while the remaining 58% were undergoing diploma level courses.
PUO offers most of the engineering and commerce courses at certificate and diploma levels. In fact, it is the only polytechnic in Malaysia offering a Diploma in Marine Engineering today. Other engineering courses available at PUO include Civil Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Electronic Engineering, Land Survey, Architecture and Information Technology. As for commerce courses, PUO is only offering Accountancy, Banking & Finance and Business Studies at diploma level. Business Studies is also offered at certificate level. New courses such as Tourism Management, Hotel and Catering Management, Graphic and Industrial Design are still not available at PUO. (They are offered in other new polytechnics).

With 30 years of experience in the field of technical and commerce education, PUO has established a strong tradition of providing professional and semi-professional education and has also established an international reputation for the high quality and wide range of courses it offers. In this new millennium, it will continue its role of producing middle-class manpower by offering more courses for young school leavers. (Middle-class manpower are those mentioned earlier under primary objective (a) in section 1.2.2). In addition, it will promote the Time-Sector Privatisation Programme (TSPP) to cater to the needs of providing cost-effective means of training for the private and public sectors. (As mentioned earlier, this is a collaborative programme that permits the private and public sectors to make use of the training facilities available at the polytechnics.)
Categories of training include technical skills, computer-related skills, management skills and communication skills.

Since it is a non-profit making institution and comes directly under the management of the Technical Education Department in the Ministry of Education, PUO has and will continue to play an important role in providing quality technical education for young Malaysians of all ethnic origins. In fact, PUO has just recently started the MS ISO 9002 programme (18 June, 1999) which aims to ensure quality and effectiveness in the teaching and learning processes in each and every field of study at the polytechnic. This programme was officially launched on 1 March, 2000. According to Ir. Cheong See Leong, the principal of PUO, by achieving MS ISO 9002, PUO hopes to provide satisfaction to its main customers: parents, the job sector, and the government (Berita Harian, 17.12.1999).

1.2.4 Description of PUO Courses

In its effort to prepare Malaysians to meet new challenges in the new millennium, PUO offers a variety of engineering and commerce courses to SPM / SPMV holders every year. Some polytechnic certificate holders can also apply for admission into certain diploma courses at PUO. The minimum entry
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requirements set by the Ministry of Education for SPM / SPVM holders are as follows:

(A) Certificate level courses

Pass SPM / SPMV and

i) pass in Bahasa Melayu;

ii) pass in Maths / Add. Maths;

iii) credit in one other subject.

(B) Diploma level courses

Pass SPM / SPMV and

i) pass in Bahasa Melayu;

ii) pass in English;

iii) credit in Maths / Add. Maths;

iv) credit in 2 other subjects.

(Source: Prospectus 1999 / 2000)

Most of the courses offered are full-time courses in the field of engineering and commerce. Admission into PUO and other polytechnics is usually done twice a year, in January and July. The duration of all certificate level courses is 2 years or 4 semesters. For most diploma level courses, the duration is 3 years or 6 semesters, (with the exception of the Diploma in Marine Engineering [4 years] and Diploma in Secretarial Science [2 years]).

Industrial training for a period of one semester is a requirement for all the courses. The training exposes students to the realities and demands of the private and public sectors. It allows students to experience the working conditions and exposes them to the real world of the industrial and commercial
sectors. For certificate level courses, the training is carried out in the third semester, while diploma level students will go out for training in the fourth semester. Since the student sample selected for this study consists of students currently doing the Certificate in Business Studies (CBS) and Diploma in Business Studies (DBS) courses, discussion about educational and career prospects in the next section will focus on them.

1.2.5 Educational and Career Prospects

The Certificate in Business Studies course is conducted over two years (four semesters). The objective of this course is to produce personnel with basic competencies for the business sector. It is designed to provide students with knowledge in Basic Accounting, Economics, Statistics, Marketing, Management and Computing. The programme will introduce the students to various aspects of the business environment and organization. All students have to undergo a mandatory six-month industrial training in the third semester to enable them to gain work experience in the business sector.

Students undergoing this course will be trained and equipped with basic theoretical and practical knowledge and skills in various aspects of business studies for employment in a wide range of business organizations engaging in
manufacturing, trading, finance and services activities.

Graduates of Certificate in Business Studies will be able to find employment in various business organizations. They can work in the production, marketing, finance and personnel departments of any commercial organizations as accounts assistants, clerks or assistant administrative officers. For those who are interested to further their studies, the knowledge and skills obtained will form the platform for further professional education, either at diploma or degree levels.

The Diploma in Business Studies programme is conducted over three years (six semesters). This programme aims to help students develop and acquire a wide knowledge and competence in accounting, business administration, marketing, management and computing specialization required by Malaysian employers to support and promote rapid development in the business environment in line with Vision 2020. Like the certificate level students, these diploma students also have to undergo a mandatory six-month industrial training, but in the fourth semester.

Graduates of Diploma in Business Studies will find worthwhile careers in the expanding Malaysian economy both in the private and public sectors. They can be employed as administrative officers, bank officers and sales
executives in such fields as marketing, production and management. They can also pursue an honours degree or other professional qualifications in the universities.

1.2.6 Importance of Business or Commercial English

Even though the language policy in Malaysia places Bahasa Melayu as the national and official language, the English language is still an important second language, especially in the private sector (Asmah Hj. Omar, 1994). English is still very much in use in various professions such as medicine, law, information technology and business.

With the increasing globalization and internationalization of the world economy, many Malaysian companies, big and small, are doing business with companies in Europe, America and others. Malaysian businessmen should be well-equipped with the ability to communicate in English as it is the international language of commerce (Second Outline Perspective Plan, 1991 – 2000). They need English to communicate with their counterparts in foreign countries. Therefore, the need for more specialized English courses are in great demand. Realizing this urgency, new ESP courses are introduced in polytechnics to meet the needs of the students. This is in line with calls from our far-sighted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, who emphasizes the need to
have a good command of skills in English as one of the pre-requisites for achieving Vision 2020 (Mahathir Mohamad, 1991).

Since the English language is the accepted norm for international business transactions today, the demand for Business English has expanded in recent years. In fact, the growth of this branch of English has outstripped EAP and EST and is seen as a major area of the ESP market (John, 1996). Business English itself has become an umbrella term encompassing EGBP (English for General Business Purposes) and ESBP (English for Specific Business Purposes). However, most Business English courses are clearly ESBP courses since they require the careful research and design of pedagogical materials and activities for an identifiable group of adult learners within a specific learning context (Johns and Dudley-Evans, 1991), and are designed to meet the specified needs of the learners (Strevens, 1988).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the term ‘Commerce / Commercial’ dominated and primarily referred to written communication relating to import – export and trade. Since then, there has been a major shift from written to spoken communication. A needs analysis (in 1994) for secretarial science and commercial students in Malaysian polytechnics showed that while all four basic language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing were necessary, the need for spoken communication was dominant (Technical Education
Department, 1994). Thus, the Commercial English courses designed for Malaysian polytechnics have, in general, given more emphasis to spoken communication. This study provides empirical evidence on whether polytechnic students and teachers still regard the need for spoken communication as the most important skill six years later (i.e., from 1994 to 2000).

1.2.7 ESP Courses at PUO

At PUO, there are a number of departments such as General Studies, Science & Computer, Engineering, and Commerce. The General Studies Department comprises three units – The English Language Unit, The Moral Education Unit and The Islamic Education Unit. The English Language Unit concentrates on providing all PUO students with a sound command of the language, both in the oral and written skills.

Generally there are three types of ESP courses offered at Malaysian polytechnics. They include the Technical English courses, the Commercial English courses and the Secretarial English courses. At PUO, only the first two types are offered. These two types of ESP courses can be further divided into four levels (see Table 1). (The A104 Commercial English I course is the course selected for evaluation. More details about this course will be provided in the next section).
Table 1: Types of ESP courses offered at PUO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical English Courses</th>
<th>Commercial English Courses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A 103  Technical English 1</td>
<td>A104  Commercial English 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 203  Technical English 2</td>
<td>A 204  Commercial English 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 401  Technical English 3</td>
<td>A 402  Commercial English 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>A 501  Technical English 4</td>
<td>A 502  Commercial English 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For all certificate level courses at PUO and other polytechnics, students are required to sit for and pass either the Technical English 1 and 2 courses, or the Commercial English 1 and 2 courses, depending on their course of study. Engineering students will be taking the Technical English courses while commerce students take the Commercial English courses. These courses are normally offered to first year students in the first and second semesters.

For all diploma level courses, students are required to take all the Technical English courses or the Commercial English courses. This means they will proceed with either the Technical English 3 and 4 courses or the Commercial English 3 and 4 courses. These courses are offered to second and third year students before and after the industrial training.
1.2.8 Description of the A104 Commercial English 1 Course

The A104 Commercial English 1 course is a compulsory course to be taken by all the commerce students at PUO and other polytechnics in Malaysia. It is normally offered to first year students in the first semester of their study, regardless of whether they are at the certificate or diploma level. For the purpose of this study, both the certificate and diploma groups have been selected.

The course under study is specially designed to equip the students with the necessary skills and knowledge required to function effectively in the commercial working environment they are likely to venture into. It is also intended to develop the students’ ability to cope with their academic study needs and future professional development. The course emphasizes three main skills, that is, Study Skills, Social English Skills and Oral Communication Skills at the Workplace. The duration of the course is 72 periods (45 minutes each) for the whole semester. Students will have to attend 4 periods of lessons a week, of which 2 are double periods. Assessment is based on coursework and a final written examination at the end of the semester.

The syllabus for this course is divided into three main areas of study. Each area of study has a number of sub-skills to be learnt (refer to Appendix G for details of the syllabus content). It is hoped that by mastering these skills, the
goals and objectives of the CE 1 course can be achieved. A summary of the syllabus content is given below.

**A ) Study Skills (SS)**

1. Dictionary skills
2. Library skills
3. Note-taking skills
4. Making summary
5. General reading skills

**B ) Social English Skills (SES)**

1. Introducing and greetings
2. Conversational strategies

**C ) Oral Communication Skills (OCS)**

1. Instructions
2. Interpreting from Malay to English and vice versa

### 1.3 Purpose and Objectives of the Study

New Commercial English courses were introduced to all commerce students in PUO and other polytechnics in 1995. They were introduced after a needs analysis in 1994 had shown that the previous English courses were found to be ineffective in meeting the needs of polytechnic students.
Since the introduction of the new Commercial English courses in Malaysian polytechnics in 1995, no research has been done to investigate the perception of the students regarding the A104 Commercial English 1 course. Nobody knows for sure how effective this course is. To complicate matters, both the certificate level and diploma level students may have different English proficiency levels due to the different entry requirements mentioned earlier. It is possible that the proficiency level of certificate level students (CBS students in this study) is lower than diploma level students (DBS students in this study). It is also possible that the former will face more difficulties in following the course.

Since no research has been conducted to determine the effectiveness of the CE 1 course for these students, it is necessary to carry out an evaluation to ascertain the suitability of the course so that modifications can be made to suit the actual needs of the students. It will be better to carry out an evaluation for all the Commercial English courses in polytechnics but due to time and financial constraints, only the Commercial English 1 course is selected in this study. It is highly probable that the success or failure of these first year students will determine and reflect the effectiveness of other Commercial English courses to a certain degree. It is hoped that similar research can be carried out on other Commercial English courses to confirm this.
Besides the students, the perceptions of the language teachers about the suitability of the course under study for both groups of students will also be studied. Their perceptions are also important because they are directly involved in teaching this course or have experience in teaching this course.

A comparison of the perceptions of the teachers and the students would shed some light on the strengths and weaknesses of the course. Their suggestions for improving the quality of the course would be most useful for course designers to prepare better ESP courses in future. It should be made clear that this research does not call for a total revamp of the course under study, but just attempts to provide valuable information for improvement, if necessary. A summary of the objectives of this study is as follows:

1. To study the perceptions of the students and the teachers regarding the Commercial English 1 course.
2. To see the suitability of the course for the students.
3. To recommend improvements to the course.

1.4 Research Questions

In line with the objectives of the study mentioned above, the following research questions have been drawn up.
1. What are the perceptions of the students and the teachers regarding the CE 1 course, in relation to the following aspects:
   a) students' needs
   b) course objectives
   c) syllabus / curriculum
   d) materials used
   e) methods of teaching
   f) evaluation system
   g) time allocation
   h) problems faced
   i) overall perceptions

2. How did the two groups of students (CBSS and DBSS) perform in the CE 1 course?
   a) What are their overall evaluation results?
   b) What are the implications of these results?

3. What are the recommendations made by the respondents to improve the quality of the CE 1 course in terms of:
   a) students' needs
   b) course objectives
   c) syllabus / curriculum
   d) materials used
   e) methods of teaching
   f) evaluation system
   g) time allocation
   h) problems faced
   i) overall perceptions
1.5 Significance of the Study

ESP courses in polytechnics play an important role in producing graduates who are competent in using English at the workplace. These courses are designed and reviewed from time to time by course designers based on needs analysis. It has been six years since the introduction of the Commercial English courses in 1995 and no feedback has been obtained from the students and teachers to date. The only relevant feedback was a research carried out by Munisamy in 1997 to determine the effectiveness of the whole English for Commercial Purposes (ECP) syllabus for polytechnic students. The present study is more specific. It is necessary as it provides empirical evidence on what the students and the teachers think about the Commercial English 1 course.

As opposed to common belief that course evaluation is something to be afraid of, it is indeed very useful for course designers as it helps them to identify areas of weaknesses that need improvement. This study provides valuable information for course designers to design better courses, not just based on what they think should be included in the syllabus, but also based on what the students and the teachers think about the course.

Data collected and analysed in this study also serves as useful information for the officials of the Ministry of Education, particularly the
Technical Education Department, to gauge the effectiveness of ESP courses conducted at polytechnics. This is considered necessary since the Ministry of Education is a direct stakeholder in PUO and other polytechnics in Malaysia. It has the responsibility and the right to get first hand information on the effectiveness of all ESP courses currently being taught at Malaysian polytechnics.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

Due to time and financial constraints, this study concentrates only on two groups of students who are taking the Commercial English 1 course at PUO, and the teachers who are currently teaching this course. The results of this study would have been more reliable and valid if the students and the teachers in all polytechnics are involved. Therefore, this study cannot claim to be an exhaustive and extensive one, nor one that is representative of polytechnics in general. It is hoped that future research will cover more samples in a broader scope of study.

Since this small-scale study looks only at the perceptions of the students and the teachers about the course content and the strengths and weaknesses of the course under study, it cannot claim to be a conclusive one. There are various
factors which can determine the effectiveness of a course such as the environmental factors, the learning styles, the testing procedures and the administrative arrangements. All these factors are beyond the scope of this study.

Evaluation can be carried out in many ways, but for the purpose of this study, only questionnaires, interviews and discussions were used to collect data. It would be better if other instruments such as classroom observations, and pre-test and post-test procedures are conducted to provide more accurate results for this study. Since these instruments are very time-consuming and the researcher is an outsider, it will not be convenient to employ them in this study, given its scope and function. In addition, evaluating a course by testing the students has its own limitations. Sharp (1990: 132) has given four main shortcomings of testing procedures:

1) No explanation is supplied for any disparity in results.

2) Little help is offered in deciding which parts of a course have been working successfully and which have not.

3) Some of the objectives of a course cannot be easily measured by testing.

4) The percentage mark achieved by a student after an exam provides only limited information about whether his needs have been met.
1.7 Conclusion

For the past 30 years (from 1969–1999), PUO has contributed a lot towards nation building by producing thousands of skilled and semi-skilled technical manpower for the public and private sectors. Graduates of PUO and other polytechnics who are competent in the English language were highly sought after especially in the private sector (PUO Annual Report, 1998). Therefore, it is important for polytechnic students to master the necessary language skills throughout their courses of study. This evaluation exercise is indeed necessary and timely as it provides an insight into the present needs of the learners so that areas of weaknesses of the course under study can be improved.

The next chapter will review the related literature where relevant topics such as the definitions and developments of ESP, ESP in Malaysia, features and issues in ESP course development, and ESP course evaluation will be looked into in depth.