

# Guiding Students on English in a Non-English Class: An Experience

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**Abstract:** English has been the medium for many higher education institutions in which their courses will be taught using the language. Students who are not widely exposed to using English in their secondary school years will find it extremely difficult when confronted with the new challenge of being taught in English. Their main problems range from the ability to have correct pronunciations, usage of one identical word but for different meanings, applications of the right words for the right situations, and vocabulary inadequacy. An observational study over the semester period of seventeen weeks, on a class of 36 semester-five Diploma in nursing students in a private university college, signified the problems on a more pertinent scale. Among the 36 students, 7 were Indians while the rest were Malays. During the first week of the semester, 30 students were seen to pronounce most of the words they read or verbalized wrongly. 2 students used the words that gave opposite meanings in their test one which indirectly affected the marks they scored. 12 students interpreted the meaning of a given word in the wrong situational applications. Only 7 students were seen to have good vocabulary capabilities. With continuous guidance in the language alongside being taught the subject of Obstetrics and Gynaecology for the next eight weeks, some improvements were seen in all areas mentioned above. By the fourteenth week, tremendous improvement was seen and the students were seen to be more confident with their English interactions.

**Keywords:** English, pronunciations, application, vocabulary inadequacy, guided, improvements, English interactions, all lecturers.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bahasa Malaysia (Malaysian Language) has been the sole official language for Malaysia. In 1986 it was actually known as Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language) in compliance to the constitutional Act 152 stating that the National Language for Malaysia was Bahasa Melayu, but on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2007 the term was changed by the Cabinet to Bahasa Malaysia which denotes a better view in term of the general unity of Malaysian multi-racial population as a whole. Nevertheless, English is still very much being used in the professional and commercial field including in many higher education set ups. Thus there are many higher education institutions, either colleges or universities that opt for English as their medium of instruction in delivering their teaching and learning materials.

The use of English as the medium of instruction in the Higher Education institutions may be easily acceptable by students who have been widely exposed to the language during the course of their studies in the secondary schools or those who have been using the language as the mean of communication in their everyday life either within their family circles or among peer members. However it is regarded as a great challenge for those who were seldom in contact with the language in their earlier days, let alone to be verbalizing the language among friends.

Similarly it also gives great impact to the lecturers who are to take up classes especially in the earlier semesters of the students' commencement into the higher education enrolment. Subject slides will be fully prepared in English. Likewise, delivery of the subject contents will also be in English. Lecturer and student Interactions are also expected to be in English. In other words, the greatest challenge is actually very much dependent on the capability of the lecturer in bringing up the students especially those with almost zero base knowledge in English to be able to follow through the

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teaching-learning sessions with ample degree of understanding so as to encompass the knowledge rendered. In addition, the next important step is to ensure that students should also be able to understand the examination questions correctly so as to enable them to deliver the right answers in order to score good marks. It is very important therefore that even by using the English language, students should still be able to absorb what is being taught with full understanding for learning to take place and at the same time are capable to answer the examination questions using the language in full capacity. What if they have the knowledge but are unable to express what they know just because of their inefficiency in the language?

Foreseeing the inevitable problem that may arise, a private University College (like most other higher education institutions) has included English as a mandatory subject in the curriculum for the students, arranged to be in their third semester. However, the English they are to learn in the allocated classes is more about the correct usage of the language in relation to the grammatical coherence. In the scenario where they are in they need to know more than that, the new terminologies, the application of the right words for the right subject matter and the formulation of sentences effective enough to put forth their views and rationalization. The English classes are given intensively for one short semester period of seven weeks. Through students' feedback, although they agreed that they do learn a good percentage of English in these classes, it still does not equip them enough to go through with the other core or major subjects. Moreover, this University College caters programmes that belong to the Health as well as the Therapeutic Science groups such as Diploma in Nursing, Diploma in Paramedic, Diploma in Physiotherapy, Diploma in Environmental Health and other health related programmes. Needless to say, there are many terminologies and words pertaining to the specialized area of concern in their chosen programmes that they have to deal with.

Realizing the problems which the students had to endure, a lady lecturer for the Obstetrics and Gynaecology (O&G) subject had decided to guide them further with their English during her classes and alongside it an observational study would also be done to determine the effectiveness of the effort made. Thus with the proposed guidance being strategized in the 4 credit hours of O&G classes, an observational study was also done over the semester period of seventeen weeks (fourteen weeks of classroom activities, one week of revision and two weeks of examination). This involved thirty six students who were in their semester-five of Diploma in Nursing. Out of the thirty six students, seven were Indians while the remaining twenty nine students were all Malay.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Students were guided to strengthen their capability in English through the following activities:

- i. Giving individual students the opportunity to read from the slides during class sessions.
- ii. Self-Interpreting the meaning of sentences they had read.
- iii. Class interactions in English
- iv. Performing individual and group presentations in English
- v. Immediate rectification of newly introduced words/sentences.
- vi. Providing relevant glossaries.
- vii. Enrichment of vocabulary input
- viii. Guided towards answering Modified Essay Questions (MEQ)

### *i. Giving individual students the opportunity to read from the slides during class sessions:*

During the teaching and learning sessions of the O&G classes, individual students will be asked to read some sentences from the slides. In the initial phase, the aim of this activity is to signify their ability in making out the words from the spellings as they read along, especially those new words which they came across for the first time, and to ensure the right pronunciations were being observed. However, in the more progressive phase the aim is inclined towards the enhancement of the students' fluency and the degree of understanding in what they were reading. Guidance on the correct pronunciations and the meaning of related words were continuously given. Students were also encouraged to apply the knowledge they had gained in their English classes which they had earlier attended (during their semester three).

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### *ii. Self-Interpreting the meaning of sentences they had read:*

In the first few classes when the students had finished reading the slides, the lecturer will explain what exactly is meant by what was read and furnishing the details with examples. In subsequent classes, students themselves were expected to explain what they have read. This was to encourage them to do the reading with understanding.

### *iii. Class interactions in English:*

In order to successfully achieve the goal for the implementation of the strategy to assist the students to improve their English via the guidance in the non-English classes, interactions either between students and the lecturer or between students and other students during the O&G classes had to be in English. Of course there were times when the use of Bahasa Kebangsaan had to be sought for in interim cases where it acted as the only possible way to instil the exact meaning the lecturer wanted to pass across to the students. This applied not only to the Malay students but also to the seven Indian students as they were knowledgeable in the language too. However, as much as possible English was the language used to communicate between them. Surprisingly, students also chose to communicate in English when interacting with the lecturer, via mobile messages outside class hours.

### *iv. Performing individual and group presentations in English:*

To comply with the coursework requirement for their assessment, students had to do related activities which ultimately contributed to the forty percent of course-work marks in addition to the sixty percent of final written examination marks which together would form the total marks for the subject in that particular semester. In order to boost up their skills to verbalize in English, two assignments on O&G issues in the form of presentations were given to the students. One was a ten minutes individual presentation while the other one was a twenty minutes group presentation where group members took turn to do their presentations. The question and answer sessions were also done in English.

### *v. Immediate rectification of newly introduced words/sentences:*

Students were made to look up the meanings of new words they came across using the dictionaries or their mobile search. They were encouraged to share their new findings with their peer members. For further clarification and understanding it would then be discussed together with the lecturer towards the end of each class sessions.

### *vi. Providing relevant glossaries:*

From time to time relevant glossaries were given to the students. Words that entailed some forms of confusion were given particular attention. For example the words of greet and great, all together and altogether, alleviate and elevate, content (contained in something) and content (satisfy) and many others. It was important for them to know how to use those words appropriately so as to ensure the messages they were trying to pass on, convey the exact meanings as what they should be.

### *vii. enrichment of vocabulary input:*

It was also very important for the students to increase their vocabulary input as days went by because they might just need to use any of those words during the course of their study especially those pertaining to their O&G subject. The practice of sharing new information among them was an effective way to enrich their vocabulary bank.

### *viii. Guided towards answering Modified Essay Questions (MEQ):*

Answering multiple choice questions (MCQ) might not need much effort as compared to answering modified essay questions (MEQ), where one had to roll out ideas in its proper perspectives so as to be in line with what was asked for. Throughout the fourteen weeks of the O&G classes, exercises were given for the students to practice and be guided on answering such questions.

The observational study done on the students was mainly focusing on the following five main criteria:

1. Wrong pronunciation of words when reading or verbalizing
2. Fluency in verbalizing
3. Inability in using the right words with the right intended meanings

4. Inability in applying the right words to situational descriptions
5. Inability to express correctly
6. Intensity of vocabulary gained

For “wrong pronunciations of words when reading or verbalizing” (criteria 1) and “Fluency in verbalizing” (criteria 2) assessment was to be done during their reading activities. As for the inability to use the right words with the right intended meaning (criteria 3), the inability to apply the right words to situational descriptions (criteria 4) and the inability to express correctly (criteria 5), would be assessed through observations when the students were answering given verbal questions, during their individual and group presentations as well as through their test/examinations’ answer scripts. For intensity of vocabulary gained (criteria 6), the actual number of new words added to their vocabulary would be taken into account.

All the data obtained from the observations would be compiled into a table (as in Table 1) on a weekly basis, so as to encompass the progress made by the students.

**Table 1: Observation on Student’s performance**

| Criteria | Student’s Performance  | Week 1 | Week 2  | Week 3 | Week 4 | Week 5 | Week 6 | Week 7 | Week 8 | Week 9 | Week 10 | Week 11 | Week 12 | Week 13 | Week 14 | Week 15 | Week 16 | Week 17 |
|----------|--|--------|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
|          |  | 1.     | Wrong pronunciations of words when reading or verbalizing |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 2.       | Fluency in verbalizing   |        |   |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 3.       | Inability to use the right word for the right intended meaning |        |   |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 4.       | Inability to apply the right words to situational descriptions |        |   |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 5.       | Inability to express correctly                                 |        |   |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| 6.       | Intensity of vocabulary gained                                 |        |   |        |        |        |        |        |        |        |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |

To specify further on their English through their reading ability, a likert scale format ranging from very poor, poor, moderate, good and very good to rate individual performances (as in Table 2) was also used in this study. The rate of “very poor” would be allotted for them if they had almost all words wrongly pronounced in the sentences they read. When they pronounced seven words wrongly they were regarded as “poor”, three wrong words would made them to be considered as “moderate”, reading without any mistake would qualify them to be considered as “good” and if they managed to read fluently and with good pronunciations they would be regarded as “very good”.

**Table 2: Observation on Individual Student’s Reading Ability**

| No. | Student’s Performance                               | Very Poor | Poor | Moderate | Good | Very Good |
|-----|---|-----------|------|----------|------|-----------|
| 1.  | Pronunciations of words when reading or verbalizing |           |      |          |      |           |
| 2.  | Fluency in verbalizing                              |           |      |          |      |           |

### 3. DISCUSSION

During the first day of the O&G class, students had been briefed that at any point of time during their class sessions, they would be asked to read the slides being presented on the screen. This individual reading would enable the lecturer to directly assess the students’ level of knowledge and their reading ability in the English Language.

Most of the students claimed that during their previous classes in the earlier semesters, they had never been asked to read the power point slides because their lecturers were the one to read and explain throughout those classes. Initially some seemed to be panic-stricken and nervous when asked to read but as time went by they seemed to enjoy the reading and took it as part of the class teaching/learning activity. Since the period of time allocated for each class was two hours, only nine to ten students would have the opportunity to read out from the slides in each of the scheduled classes. By the end of the week, through the four running classes in a week, all students had the opportunity to read at least once. In many occasions, the weak students would volunteer themselves to do the reading in every O&G class they attended. Although the observations had to be for all class members and equal opportunity should be given to each and every one of them, their requests were usually entertained and the opportunity given to them was through the consensus from all their peer members.

During the first week of the semester, 6 students were rated as very poor for their reading, 16 were poor, 11 moderate and 3 good. None were rated as very good. For the three students who were rated as good (all were Indian students), although they could make out all the words correctly, they were lacking in the correct pronunciations of the words they read, for example for the word “subjected” they read them as “subject” without the “ed” added to it and likewise with “symptoms” where the “s” was not pronounced at all as they only pronounced it as “symptom”. However with the continuous guidance given, improvements were seen from all students from week to week but of course at different level of individual achievements. Finally the gradual improvement turned to be remarkable towards the end of the fourteen weeks, when 3 students were considered to be moderate, twenty were good and thirteen were very good. For the overall general performance in the reading activity, 30 students pronounced words wrongly during the first week of the semester compared to only 3 students in the fourteenth week of the semester, which shows tremendous improvement had taken place in their reading ability under the guiding and coaching from the lecturer alongside their O&G classes.

It was noticed that fluency in reading was closely knitted with the students’ ability in making out the words while they read and the ability to pronounce the words correctly and confidently. The better they were in their reading ability, the more fluent they were seen not only in performing the reading tasks but also in their interactions during other activities. That was the reality, their fluency in the language raised to a much better grading as they were reaching towards the final weeks of the semester.

To determine that students were able to use the right words with the right intended meaning, lists of glossaries were constantly given to them, especially those with multiple meaning words. It is important that they use or pronounce the words rightfully to suit the intended meaning of what they are presenting or aligning them to the correct situational adaptations. For example, in Assignment one which was given to students on the fourth week, the use of the word ‘sterilization’ where it is supposed to mean any process that eliminates (removes) or kills (deactivates) all forms of life and other biological agents, was wrongly used by a student who had inferred such that the meaning became the “permanent method of contraception”. So, when all his other colleagues wrote their assignments on sterilization pertaining to the methods of how to eliminate organism from the instruments, this particular student elaborated in his assignment the family planning sterilization method of male vasectomy instead. Both the “Sterilization” has the same spelling and the same pronunciation but it carries different meaning based on what they were supposed to describe. This clearly shows the fact that using the incorrect meaning for the words one intended to describe a situation, will affect the performance of the student as his assignment had completely run out of topic and he obtained a very poor mark. He claimed that despite of the briefing being given by the lecturer prior to doing the assignment, he had hurriedly captured the information from the internet and without much thinking, proceeded with the writing of his assignment based on the first “sterilization” that popped out on the internet without realizing that he had wrongly chosen the wrong path for its meaning. Overall in the first seven weeks of observing them, 12 students interpreted the meaning of given words in the wrong situational applications. Despite of being given the glossaries, 5 students used the word “great” instead of “greet” when performing the practical session in one of the O&G classes. Instead of saying “I greet the patient”, they used the words “I great the patient”. In another occasion when the lecturer mentioned that “screening for patients must be done” 4 students had the inclination to think that it was to shield the patients from other patients by using the so-called screen-cloth, when the actual meaning was to do the evaluation or investigation on the patient. Students had also to be continuously guided in the pronunciation of words with multiple meaning. The word tears (ti-ers) which implied that someone was crying was wrongly used during the individual presentation session held in the sixth week, when it was

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used in saying that “the condom tears (ti-ers)’ which had caused an uproar in the O&G class as most of the students themselves were laughing over the condom that could cry. Having the same spelling, but rightfully it should be pronounced as “tears (te-rrs)” to denote some form of breakage that had occurred in the condom. In their Test 1 which was conducted in the fourth week, 2 students had used the word “elevated” instead of “alleviated” in answering one of the given questions and which had indirectly contradicted the actual meaning of what they had planned to put forth.

At the start of the semester, only 7 students were seen to have good vocabulary capabilities. Amicably, 6 of them were the Indian students and only 1 Malay student who were seen to have a good range of vocabulary input that had helped them tremendously in doing their assignments, presentations and tests/examinations. However by the seventh week, 16 more students were seen to have improved in the usage of more English words as they have enriched their vocabulary status but the earlier seven students were still seen to be dominating in the use of the language. Towards the fourteenth week, 29 from the 36 students had widened their vocabulary capabilities while 7 more students (6 Malays and 1 Indian) were still seen to be struggling in their attempts to add on more words into their daily vocabulary usage.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth week, no recording of data was done as students were more confined to doing their revision and final examinations. However even though the seventeenth week was also supposed to be their second week of final examination, findings from the observation on their answer scripts (correction of papers was done during the two weeks after the final examinations) were recorded in this column. Generally, there was an improvement on the students’ performance in the final examination which was conducted in the sixteenth week compared to the midterm examination conducted in the eighth week of the semester. During the mid-term examination, 3 students were seen to have left a question each unanswered (different questions for the three different students) with the reason that they could not express and elaborate well their intended points of answers in English. However for the final examination, all questions were attempted by the students and no wrong usage of words seen. Although grammatically there were some irrelevant errors, students somehow answered all given questions and were able to portray the facts which they wanted to present in answering those questions. Only 1 student was seen to put a Malay word in a bracket against an English word for fear that she might not be understood by whoever was going to mark her paper. Another was seen to put a phrase containing four Malay words in inverted comas besides her English sentence to replace the missing English words which she could not come up with, even until the examination session was over.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In general, the effort made by the Obstetrics and Gynaecology subject’s lecturer in guiding the student with the English language, not in an English Language class but in her own Obstetrics and Gynaecology class, has shown fruitful result. Although students were guided with words more related to the subject she was teaching, nevertheless her effort in making the students understood the applicability of the words in the right perspective context had made the students more knowledgeable in using them appropriately. In addition students had gained a wider scope of vocabulary and thus enable them to communicate better and produce better assignment tasks and examination results. Knowing the right pronunciations for the words they newly came across and the polishing up of their fluency in reading and verbalizing had made the students gained more confidence in their interactions not only with their class members but also with the other students and lecturers.

Since doing it in a single class had shown a promising result, a better result will be expected if lecturers from the other classes also did the same effort of guiding the students with regards to the English language but in association with their own teaching classes. However a major setback to such an effort is when the lecturers are not competent in the English Language themselves. So, it should be an area of concern for the institution to ensure that the lecturers they employed should be knowledgeable enough in the English language, since its medium of instruction is English. Although it is a great challenge to be guiding students in English while at the same time one is teaching another major subject, the study has shown that it is worth the effort. Once the students have been equipped with the necessary knowledge on the language, they can face the rest of their student years in the institution in a better atmosphere while trying to cope up with many more future subjects. Hopefully there are other lecturers who will help to lead them on with further guidance in English even though it is not in an English class.

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