

**The Perceptions of Students at Indera Mahkota Mara Professional College  
of English Language Proficiency and Its Role  
in Preparation for Employment**

**Nor Yazı binti Hj Khamis**

Pusat Bahasa Moden & Sains Kemanusiaan  
Universiti Malaysia Pahang, 25000  
Kuantan, Pahang  
Malaysia

Tel: 09-5492 443

Fax: 09-5492 477

[nyazi@ump.edu.my](mailto:nyazi@ump.edu.my)

# **THE PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS AT INDERA MAHKOTA MARA PROFESSIONAL COLLEGE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ITS ROLE IN PREPARATION FOR EMPLOYMENT**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to find out the perceptions of the students at Indera Mahkota MARA Professional College towards the importance of English language proficiency and its role in preparation for employment. The objectives are to identify the students' proficiencies in the aspects of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary, and the use of the skills during their studies, as well as in the work force. The study seeks to identify the correlation between the students' perceptions and its influence on their overall academic performance (CGPA). A set of questionnaire adapted from a survey by Hamidah Yamat@Ahmad et. al. (2003) was distributed to two hundred and twenty-five students of Diploma in Accountancy (DIA) and HND (Business Information Technology) (HNDBIT). Three hypotheses on finding differences in perceptions between programmes, demographic areas and gender have been tested and the score signifies no correlation between the students' perceptions and their overall academic performance. This study proposes some recommendations to the existing Ministry of Education's (KPM) English syllabi and to MARA Higher Education Department.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the 1980s and 1990s the patterns of human capitalism, which support the principles of human resource development or labour regeneration through education, have assumed a new form. It is about the connection between education and economy (Symes & McIntyre 2002). Later, a new order which associated with smaller scales of production, as compared to mass production, was introduced and known as 'Post-Fordism.' The move stresses on a student-centered style of education, and is designed to enhance the individual's opportunities for employment. The shift is particularly apparent in tertiary level institutions, which are now more student-centered, and more oriented in satisfying the market demands.

Today, to gear towards a knowledge-based economy, the competitive advantage of an educated workforce in high value-added and knowledge-intensive production is absolutely essential. While universities or colleges play an important role in producing high-level manpower to meet the market demands, the number and type of graduates they produce should also be related to national development needs and the structure of labour demand. Therefore, the curriculum and the content of higher education offered should be consistent with the needs and the structure. It has to be designed to correspond with employment opportunities so as to avoid wastage of resources, skill shortages or skills mismatch.

Simultaneously, the spread of Knowledge-based, science, information and technology, employment factors and globalisation have made the language – English

– that serves as the medium become more important than before. In facing the K-economy challenge, Malaysia should be prepared to become the platform for a rapid and sustainable growth. Human Resource Development (HRD), Science and Technology and Research and Development, infrastructure and financing are amongst our country's critical areas to be addressed.

According to Badariah bt Salleh (2004), Malaysia HRD in this era has to be structured, exploited and expanded in line with the trends and manpower needs of producing K-worker. It means equipping generations with knowledge of required skills or specifically known as K-worker Occupational Competence. It is sectioned into three types of competence that are Learning Competence, Social Competence, and Technical Competence. Each competence contributes to being K-worker who is able to work in a team, as well as proactive in anticipating needs in the job.

All these should be targeted and planned when the generations is still at the education level, mainly tertiary level. Students at universities or colleges should be molded and groomed towards fulfilling relevant occupational fields. This also includes nurturing or exposing them with appropriate proficiency or skills required so that they are marketable upon leaving the level. One of the skills is the ability to communicate in English. According to Abdul Latiff (2003), learning English language equips Malaysians [workers] to compete both within the country and globally. Through better proficiency and mastery of English, they can bring Malaysia's development internationally, and ensure that our country remains an important player in the international market place and contributes to discussions on world.

The discussion of this paper is divided into five headings. After this Introduction, the discussion moves on to the Background of Study and followed by its Methodology. It then continues with the Results of Study, and finally the Conclusion.

## **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

At present, the education system in Malaysia has not only geared towards national integration among its multiracial community and literacy, but to comply with the requirements in the economic development (Omar Mohd Hashim 1999). Starting with the New Economic Policy (NEP), and National Development Policy that emphasized on equal growth, the importance of human resource is prolonged and nowadays, the objectives towards a more market - centered education is put under greater attention. Despite the extensive use of modern technology that can replace huge number of workforce, still the transition towards the needs of high-priced capital are greater due the towering cost, the shortage of local machinery and inadequate number of expertise (H. Osman-Rani in Abdullah Rahman Embong 2000). Thus, education at large and in Malaysia has been identified to have the solution to this problem.

Further, the issue of unemployment in Malaysia in relation to the abundance of unemployed higher institution graduates (particular Malay graduate with 94 % in social science and art stream) has called upon the people involved to seek the root of the problem (Haslina Hassan 2002). It is found that amongst the factors, the low level of proficiency in English has been identified as the major reason. Indeed, “... *the decline in the standard of English (for the past few years is) a most logical*

*consequence in the light of its (shifting English to Malay as the medium of instruction) changed status (Asmah Hj Omar in Abdullah Hassan 1994).*

The evolution of market-driven education in Malaysia has urged many institutions to take up the challenge and adapt to the needs of ever-changing economic structure, technology and employment. This is done by changing not only the content of curriculum and programs but also more importantly the delivery systems. IT – enhanced teaching and learning are among the significant transformation in Malaysian educational infrastructure in order to meet the next millennium as a technologically competent and scientifically adept society. Malaysia therefore, has primed its education structures to enable the building of well educated, highly skilled and strongly motivated professionals. This has made the nation's human capital its most important economic and development resource.

Subsequently, a good proficiency in English language has been emphasised in order to produce human capital that is capable to compete in the international level due to the fact that the majority of multinational businesses and entrepreneurships are in English. Another is that, in return, proficiency in English among work force would also attract more foreign investors to Malaysia because English is widely used as the medium of communication in dealing and negotiating businesses.

In larger context, this study is about the connection between economy and education. The theoretical framework of this study is based on the economic perspectives, using the model by Valliancourt (1991) in proving the relationship between economy and language. Though it is not directly stated that English language is important, the study adapts the concept it presents. In describing the relationship, the framework lists 18 factors related to the use of languages for consumption and work and their interactions. It is commented that the listed factors change under a supply and demand model, so do the language acquisition patterns of individuals and groups.

So much of the education change has been advocated from the economic point of views and policies. One of it is the emphasis on skills and knowledge to be proficient in English language in preparation for employment. Mutually, the education sector has been identified as a way to solve economic problems – the regeneration of workforce to circumvent skill shortages, and skills mismatch. The whole collaboration or partnership is essential in bringing stability to the governing systems in a country.

Specifically, this study aims to look into students of Kolej Profesional MARA Indera Mahkota (KPMIM), Kuantan perceptions toward their proficiency in English Language in preparation for employment. The objectives are to seek their perceptions on the aspects of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary, and the use of English as students as well as in preparation for workforce. Also, three hypotheses in finding out the differences in perceptions between programmes (DIA and HND), demographic area (East and West Coast), and gender are tested. Finally, the fourth hypothesis is used to find out the correlation between the students' perceptions and their overall academic performance as measured by their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA).

The findings function as useful yardsticks of the current KPMIM English syllabuses and perhaps serve as a base to work on or propose an improved version. Also, the findings could also facilitate teachers on selecting appropriate teaching techniques and materials that specifically meet the intended language skills. More importantly, the findings could at least provide some information on the quality of graduates from KPMIM.

## METHODOLOGY

This survey involved 225 KPMIM final year students from two programmes, Diploma in Accountancy (DIA) – 145 students, and Higher National Diploma in Computing (Business Information Technology) (HNDBIT) – 80 students.

The instrument is adapted from the final research report of the survey carried out by Hamidah Yamat @ Ahmad, et.al (2003). The research is to identify the language competency in Bahasa Melayu and English Language among students of two higher institutions, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), in preparation for workforce. The questionnaire is divided into four sections: Section A (About Respondents), Section B (Aspects of English – Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing, Grammar and Vocabulary), Section C (Use of the language as Students), and Section D (English Language for employment). The instrument uses five-point scales which vary for each section.

In addition, there are four hypotheses tested in this study. The data collected through the questionnaire are then analysed using the descriptive analysis. On the other hand, two inferential analysis applications used are the t-test and The Pearson's *r* in order to identify the correlations.

## RESULTS OF STUDY

The results of the study are presented and discussed in accordance to the four sections of the instrument used.

### Section A (Respondents' Profile)

TABLE 1 presents the respondents' level of English proficiency upon admission to KPMIM. Though majority is in the average (65.8%), the high (17.3%) as well as the low level (16.9%) indicate a balance number of respondents.

TABLE 1 The Distribution of SPM English Grade according to the Programmes

|              | Programme, <i>n</i> = 225 |       |          |       | Total    |       |
|--------------|---------------------------|-------|----------|-------|----------|-------|
|              | DIA                       |       | HNDBIT   |       | <i>F</i> | %     |
|              | <i>F</i>                  | %     | <i>F</i> | %     |          |       |
| High         | 31                        | 21.3  | 8        | 10.0  | 39       | 17.3  |
| Medium       | 87                        | 60.0  | 61       | 76.3  | 148      | 65.8  |
| Low          | 27                        | 18.7  | 11       | 13.7  | 38       | 16.9  |
| <b>Total</b> | 145                       | 100.0 | 80       | 100.0 | 225      | 100.0 |

## Section B (Aspects of English Language)

Section B is intended to find out the respondents' perceptions on their proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary (TABLE 2).

TABLE 2 The Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Each Aspect

| Aspects of English Language | Mean Score, $\bar{x}$ | Standard Deviation |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Speaking                    | 3.02                  | .73                |
| Listening                   | 3.04                  | .71                |
| Reading                     | 3.60                  | .74                |
| Writing                     | 3.20                  | .74                |
| Grammar                     | 2.98                  | .84                |
| Vocabulary                  | 3.08                  | .69                |

The scores point out comparable perceptions among the respondents. Most aspects have mediocre or average scores, ranging from 2.98 to 3.60. Reading (3.60) and writing (3.20) however, point out high-average mean scores, as compared to vocabulary (3.08), listening (3.04) and speaking (3.02). This is perhaps due to the frequent requirement of reading and writing skills in English (because English language is the medium of instruction in KPMIM) during English as well as other course classes.

Grammar, on the other hand, has the lowest mean score of 2.98 which is under the scale of 2 (Weak). Most of the respondents feel they lack of competency in this aspect. This finding is somehow predictable. First, from the English syllabuses, it is found that grammar is taught as a topic on its own, whereby it is not integrated in other topics learnt. Second, knowledge in grammar is not sufficiently emphasised. It is only taught in the early weeks (one to three lessons) in each semester. Further, most of the respondents have similar perceptions towards their competency in all of the aspects (standard deviation <1.0).

## Section C (the Use of the Language as Students)

This section is to identify the English Language skills used among the students in the learning fields of their programmes specifically in Accountancy and Business IT.

TABLE 3 The Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Skills used for Studies

| Skills  | Mean Score, $\bar{x}$ | Standard Deviation |
|---|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Communicating with lecturers through          |                       |                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking             | 3.29                  | .85                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Writing              | 3.42                  | 1.04               |
| Communicating with friends for the purpose of |                       |                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Socializing          | 3.11                  | 1.00               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Learning / Academic  | 3.47                  | .96                |
| Speaking in English for the purpose of        |                       |                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Socializing          | 3.17                  | .88                |

|  |      |      |
|--|------|------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Learning / Academic                     | 3.53 | .87  |
| Listening in English for   |      |      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment / Leisure / Hobby         | 3.66 | .99  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Academic matters                        | 3.41 | .88  |
| Reading in English for   |      |      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment / Leisure / Hobby         | 3.48 | .84  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reference materials                     | 3.81 | .91  |
| Writing for  |      |      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Taking notes                            | 3.59 | .92  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Filling official letters or forms       | 3.54 | 1.01 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Answering examination questions / tasks | 3.95 | .93  |

As presented, ‘Writing for answering examination questions / tasks’ has the highest mean score ( $\bar{X}$ =3.95) above all. The respondents frequently use the skills during examination and in performing tasks (particularly for HND students-computer-typed tasks such as preparing blueprint for systems designed, notes for presentations and many more). ‘Reading in English for reference materials’ has the second highest mean score,  $\bar{X}$ =3.81. The students admit to frequently need or use the skills in reading materials for references, such as journals and Internet materials.

The findings from this section are similar with the one obtained from Section B. The respondents continually admit on the importance to be proficient in reading and writing in English. Thus, much need to be done in the selection of texts and exercises used in the syllabuses in order to correspond with this need. Another striking pattern that can be observed is that the students place the need or use of English’s skills more importantly to academic matters i.e. for learning purposes. They perceive the formal setting, which is during learning, requires them to use more English as compared when they are with peers or for socializing purposes. It also means that the respondents realize learning the language is a serious matter as it will be useful for other courses as well.

Most of the items attain the mean score of  $> 3$ . above with the standard deviation  $< 1.00$ . The values point out that as students, the respondents need and use the skills most regularly. Consequently, they are positive about the use of English language skills particularly for academic purposes.

#### **Section D (English Language for employment)**

This section is used to indicate the students’ perceptions toward the importance of English Language in employment. The data collected from this section D are analyzed using two types of analyses: descriptive and inferential.

##### ***Descriptive Analysis***

The analysis is based on the three types of opinions. The opinions are collected based on the scale, which ranges from 1 to 5 points (‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree’). The scales then are converted to three levels of responses that are ‘Negative’ (1 and 2), ‘Neutral’ (3), and ‘Positive’ (4 and 5) for the purpose of the report presentation and discussion (TABLE 4).

TABLE 4 The Distribution of the Students' Perceptions based on the Scores

| Levels of Response | Frequency | %    |
|--------------------|-----------|------|
| Negative           | 2         | .9   |
| Neutral            | 65        | 28.9 |
| Positive           | 158       | 70.2 |

Majority of the respondents find the language essential for employment. 158 (70.2%) students have positive opinions toward the importance of English Language in working field. Meanwhile, 65 (28.9 %) students have average opinions toward the language, while only two (0.9%) students do not believe the importance of the language in preparation for workforce.

TABLE 5 The Descriptive Analysis on the Importance of English in Work Force

| Item  | Mean, $\bar{x}$ | Standard Deviation |
|---|-----------------|--------------------|
| In communicating with your  |                 |                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> employees / subordinates / lower rank workers                          | 3.70            | 1.06               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> employers i.e. bosses, managers, CEOs, superiors                       | 4.00            | 1.16               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> friends at work, team members, colleagues                              | 3.67            | .90                |
| Listening to  |                 |                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> instructions   | 3.75            | .85                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> information / suggestions / comments                                   | 3.80            | .85                |
| Reading   |                 |                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> instructions from official documentations e.g. memos, manuals, reports | 3.81            | .86                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> for knowledge e.g. books, magazines                                    | 3.89            | .84                |
| Speaking in giving opinions / suggestions   | 3.43            | .89                |
| Asking questions for information  | 3.80            | .79                |
| To interact in  |                 |                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> formal occasion  | 3.81            | .93                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> informal occasion  | 3.47            | .84                |
| Delivering speech of presentations / reports / findings   | 3.84            | .95                |
| Writing formal letters / business documents   | 4.04            | .83                |

Generally, each item indicates a positive scale towards the language. In communication, the respondents have higher opinions towards the need to be proficient communicating in English with their superiors ( $\bar{x}$  = 4.00) that is, their bosses, chiefs, supervisors or people with higher rank. They need to be competent in using the language so that it portrays them as quality workers. Perhaps, they feel the need to make an impression to their superiors with added credibility, aside from the knowledge and expertise in their study fields.

Among the skills discussed in this study, the proficiency to write in English has persistently been the most required one. For item 'Writing formal letters or business documentation, it obtained the highest mean score of  $\bar{x}$  = 4.04. The result is consistent with the earlier ones gathered from Section B and C. Thus it can be

generally concluded that most of these respondents believe that competency in English language is very much required when it comes to writing. The students perceived their piece of writings in the working fields are the focus of their capability. They need to be careful in submitting written reports, formal documents either to the superior or clients.

On the other hand, for the speaking item, the mean ( $\bar{x} = 3.43$ ) is lower than the rest of the items. This perception is probably influenced by written communication. The respondents possibly believe that the nature of their jobs (as an assistant accountant or IT officer) would not require much speaking or opportunity to talk. They would relatively listen and write more to what they are assigned to do. Perhaps, they will perform more written tasks such as paperwork or deskwork, in contrast to tasks that involved oral presentations like dealing with clients or conducting meetings. Meanwhile the standard deviation gathered for each item is  $< 1$ . This leads to a stronger conclusion that the students agree on the importance of the language for employment.

### ***Inferential Analysis***

This is the part where four hypotheses in this study are tested. The first three hypotheses use *t*-test.

#### Programmes

TABLE 6 *t*-test Analysis on Mean Scores between Programmes

| <b>Programme</b> | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean, <math>\bar{x}</math></b> | <b>Standard Deviation</b> | <b><i>t</i></b> | <b><i>df</i></b> | <b>Sig.(F)</b> |
|------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------|
| DIA              | 145      | 3.62                              | .50                       | -6.410          | 218              | 0.159          |
| HND(BIT)         | 80       | 3.79                              | .41                       |                 |                  |                |

Based on the analysis in TABLE 6, the students from HND(BIT) programme obtained a higher mean score of  $\bar{x} = 3.79$  as compared to  $\bar{x} = 3.62$  for DIA students. The analysis also shows the *t* value of (218) = -6.410, F: .159 at the significant level of .05. It is found that the F value is bigger than the significant level indicated (.159  $>$  .05). The result suggests that there is no significant difference of perceptions between the students from DIA and HND(BIT).

#### Demographic Areas

TABLE 7 *t*-test Analysis on Mean Scores between East and West Coast

| <b>Demography</b> | <b>N</b> | <b>Mean, <math>\bar{x}</math></b> | <b>Standard Deviation</b> | <b><i>t</i></b> | <b><i>df</i></b> | <b>Sig.(F)</b> |
|-------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------|
| East Coast        | 124      | 3.20                              | .63                       | -2.207          | 218              | 0.099          |
| West Coast        | 101      | 3.47                              | .65                       |                 |                  |                |

The students from both demography score fairly closed mean,  $\bar{x} = 3.20$  and  $\bar{x} = 3.47$  each. However, students from the West Coast have more positive perceptions toward English as compared to those from the East Coast. The analysis also indicates the *t* value of (217) = -5.573, F: .099 at the significant level of .05. Thus, it reveals the F

value, which is bigger than the significant level indicated (.099 > .05). This also implies that there is no significant difference in perceptions from both East Coast and West Coast states.

Gender

TABLE 8 *t*-test Analysis on Mean Scores between Genders

| Gender | N   | Mean, $\bar{x}$ | Standard Deviation | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | Sig.(F) |
|--------|-----|-----------------|--------------------|----------|-----------|---------|
| Male   | 63  | 3.60            | .66                | -3.610   | 218       | 0.000*  |
| Female | 162 | 3.81            | .69                |          |           |         |

\*significance level of .05

TABLE 8 presents a higher mean score of female students as compared to the male. The male students have a lower score of  $\bar{x} = 3.60$  in contrast to the female students' score of  $\bar{x} = 3.81$ . This highlights the fact that KPMIM female students are more positive towards the importance of English Language for employment. The computed scores for this analysis point out the *t* value of (218) = -3.610, F: .000 at the significant level of .05. The F value is less than the significant level indicated (.000 < .05). It implies that there is a difference in perceptions between male and female students on the importance of English language in preparation for workforce.

Correlation between Perception and Overall Performance

The second type of inferential analysis used in this study is Pearson's Correlation *r*.

TABLE 9 Correlation Analyses on the Influence of Perceptions towards Students' Overall Academic Performance

| Variables  |                     | CGPA   | Perceptions |
|------------|---------------------|--------|-------------|
| CGPA       | Pearson Correlation | 1.000  | .008**      |
|            | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .      | .911        |
|            | N                   | 225    | 225         |
| Perception | Pearson Correlation | .008** | 1.000       |
|            | Sig. (2-tailed)     | .911   | .           |
|            | N                   | 225    | 225         |

\*significance level of .05

Based on the analysis in TABLE 9, at the significant level of .05, the value of Pearson Correlation calculated is  $r = .008$ . The value indicates a very weak positive correlation between the two variables, and smaller or less than the significant value of .911. This means that the students' perceptions toward the language have no effect to their overall academic performance ( $r = .008, .911 > .05$ ). The score signifies that there is no correlation between the students' perceptions and their overall academic performance. It means that all the perceptions gathered in the earlier discussions have no influence in their studies.

## CONCLUSION

Proficiency in an international language is a must for any country wishes to gain power and prestige (Pennycook 1994). Proficiency in the language is a key to a country's social and economic progress. Proficiency in English language, as it is until today, promises a wider opportunities and higher hope for a reasonable standard of living, due to sufficient access to a high level of scientific and technological information.

Thus, the knowledge of the language is worth to seek for, particularly for graduates who will soon enter the world of employment. Educational institutions, as the centres of "...*knowledge accumulation and dissemination, where old and new pathways of knowing have been explored, accredited, documented and institutionalized*" (Symes and McIntyre 2002), should on the other hand provide the knowledge that is relevant to the job market.

Students also need to be equipped, apart from the knowledge required in the fields, but the knowledge to communicate internationally. Once more, what is 'professional' without proficiency in English nowadays? Hence, they need to have the proficiency to achieve the level as well as to qualify the benchmark sets by the labour market. The result then would be compatible with the human resource development policies and strategies in responding to globalization and economic challenges.

Generally, KPMIM students have positive perception towards English language. They also realize on the importance of being proficient in language. They perceive the use of the language is essential as students as well as workforce. However, the perception does not influence their overall performance. The findings lead to several recommendations not only to the existing KPMIM English syllabuses, but to the current educational practices, methods, means and pedagogy.

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