When blinkers come off: Undergraduate students’ performance at simulated job interviews

Abstract: The interest in examining the use of English among Malaysian undergraduates arose as a result of much media talk about the poor language skills that these students display upon gaining their first jobs in the work place. This study analyses simulated job interview sessions at a public university involving a group of final year students and a human resource manager. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and analysed to determine the language and strategies used by participants while responding to interview questions. Micro analysis of the interview discourse, and matching it against the macro perspective of the nation’s vision to produce competent users of English for the workforce, revealed that a huge gap exists between the two “worlds”. On the one hand, the university gets students who lack language competency while, on the other, government policy is to have these students trained and ready to communicate effectively at the workplace within a period of three to four years. This is indeed a high call. The data analysed provides a glimpse into the students’ deficiencies. The article proposes that there are more issues that need to be tackled regarding the matter at hand.

Keywords: Malaysian English, communicative competence, spoken data, language policy

1 Introduction

It has been claimed that some Malaysian graduates have difficulty in seeking employment due to their poor command of English (Mohamad Idham et al.
The problem is said to be more acute for graduates from Malaysian public universities. This scenario is unsurprising as the status of English in Malaysian schools was changed from being the language of instruction to merely a compulsory subject in the curriculum in the 1970s. While the purpose of this article is not to debate the issue of the status of English in Malaysia, it should be noted that the delicate balance between national interest, ethnic sensitivities and politics in Malaysia has always made the formation and implementation of language policies in the country challenging. This difficulty is reflected in the reversals in language policy seen in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the reality is that meeting the demands of the workforce is a constant struggle, especially for graduates from Malaysian public universities, due to the gap between what employers are looking for and what these new graduates can offer. It has been reported that many employers in the private sector list proficiency in spoken and written English as a requirement in their recruitment advertisements (Ministry of Higher Education 2010: 9).

While much has been written in the newspapers regarding the poor command of English amongst graduates of local universities, there is a paucity of research on the communicative competence of Malaysian university students in a formal context. The aim of this study is to ascertain if the students who are the participants of the study do have the communicative competence to perform satisfactorily in simulated job interviews.

To investigate this, the actual spoken language used in simulated job interviews by six final-year university students who were on the verge of entering the job market was analysed and compared with the perspectives of two human resource managers. Thus, this research was driven by the following questions:

- To what extent do undergraduate students demonstrate communicative competence in simulated job interviews?
- How do human resource managers assess undergraduate students’ performance using the same data?

To achieve the above aims, the data was examined at the structure and discourse levels to ascertain the participants’ communicative competence. Comparisons were made with the feedback from the human resource managers to gain further insight into the communicative competence of the candidates.

We draw upon Bachman’s model of communicative language ability (CLA) in communicative language use (Bachman 1990) as the framework to determine communicative competence. Communicative language ability is described as
“consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing, or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualised communicative language use” (Bachman 1990: 84).

Competent speakers, thus, would be able to convey, interpret and negotiate meanings in specific contexts. For communication to take place, speakers need to draw upon their knowledge of the world and knowledge of the language to communicate their intent appropriately in specific contexts. Thus, successful communication is the result of the combination of language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms (Bachman 1990: 84). Language competence is the knowledge of the forms of the language used in communication through language, while strategic competence is the metalinguistic ability to manipulate the language competencies appropriately to solve problems of communication in different contexts. Psychophysiological mechanisms, on the other hand, refer to the “neurological and psychological processes” involved in the realization of the language. Bachman’s model recognizes that the use of accurate spoken linguistic form alone, especially in a second or foreign language context, does not necessarily result in meaningful interactions. As such, judgments of speakers’ communicative skills would need to be based on speakers’ overall performance in communicative situations. Bachman also suggests that language competence consists of organisational competence, which is made up of textual competence and grammatical competence, as well as pragmatic competence, which consists of illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. See Figures 1 and 2.

According to the Salary Survey for Executives 2010, the main attribute that employers look for in their employees is good communication skills (68 percent) (Hariati and Lee 2011). This has resulted in an increased demand for a workforce that is proficient in English, yet surveys reveal that locally trained Malaysian graduates do not always meet this requirement (World Bank Report 2005: vii). Graduates need to have more than just basic proficiency in English to be competitive in the global economic market and to keep abreast of technological developments. Malaysian employers have highlighted that competency in English is the most critical skill that is lacking among graduates of institutes of higher learning (Ministry of Higher Education 2012a: 9). However, local graduates have yet to grasp the importance of having a strong command of English. While studies have shown that much of the oral communication in Malaysian organisations involving lower-level workers is conducted in Malay, most of the communication that takes place at the management level, which in fact is the level that university graduates should be aspiring to, is conducted in English. This problem has already been recognised by the government and some
Figure 1: Components of communicative language ability in communicative language use (Bachman 1990: 85).

Figure 2: Components of language competence (Bachman 1990: 87).
remedial measures have been planned to increase students’ mastery of English beyond what is needed for general communication.

In dealing with the problem of poor English language skills among students, the University of Malaya (UM) made it mandatory for all undergraduate students to have six credits of English beginning from the 2011 academic session. This English requirement applies to all faculties with the exception of the Law and Medical Faculties, which offer English for specific discipline courses.

While it is recognised that students would need to have more time for English in order to improve their proficiency levels, the university is constrained by the number of university courses students need to take. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency has also imposed certain compulsory university courses for all university undergraduates. This has meant that fewer credits are available for faculty courses as well as English classes. Increasing the minimum number of credits required for first degrees conferred by the university to allow for more courses like English courses to be included is not favoured as it increases the duration of the undergraduate degree programme. As it is, the minimum duration of most undergraduate degrees at UM is seven semesters, while the minimum duration of professional degrees like Engineering and Law is eight semesters. The grades achieved for the English courses are added to the students’ overall grade point average unlike previously when the transcripts would just indicate that the students had passed or failed their English courses.

The participants of this study were undergraduate students at the Faculty of Business and Accountancy, UM. The issue to be considered was whether these students, who had gone through the system, were competent in their oral communication. Students’ communicative competence in English at simulated job interviews is the focus of the study as job interviews are the gateway to employment, which is the general goal of a university education.

2 The study

2.1 The research design

Students from Communication for Employment classes were invited to take part in simulated job interviews with a human resource manager (henceforth IR) who had more than 16 years of work experience in the field. The students had to select job advertisements that were appropriate for new graduates in their fields of study and compose letters of application in response to those advertisements. The simulated job interviews were based on the students’ submissions.
The questions put to the students were common interview questions for entry-
level jobs such as:
- What is your career aspiration?
- What do you think you will need to achieve your ambition?
- What did you do during your internship and what did you learn from your
  experience?
- Tell me about your strengths.

2.2 The participants

The recordings of the six simulated interviews were drawn from a larger
corpus of data that was collected for an earlier study on identifying problems
faced by students at job interviews so that the feedback could be used to
improve a course. The students interviewed had attended government run
public schools in Malaysia, thus it can be concluded that their English
language proficiency was a reflection of the level attained by students in
the Malaysian school system.

The six candidates, identified (C1–C6), were accounting students with a Band
3 or Band 4 language proficiency level based on the Malaysian University English
Test (MUET), which tests listening, speaking, reading and writing. Hence, they
were considered to have at least a fair level of communicative ability in English.1
These students were selected as their MUET scores showed that they were from the
largest group of users of English, who are at least “fairly fluent”, who had sat for
the said examinations. In the November 2012 sitting of the MUET examinations,
out of a total number of 75,000 candidates, 36 percent achieved band 3, and 8
percent attained band 4 (Hazlinda 2013).

The six participants consisted of three Malays and three Chinese. One of the
Malays and one of the Chinese were male. It is unfortunate that there were no
Indians and that none of the Malays were Austroasiatic speakers because this
does not represent the population of the country. However, as Malays and
Chinese represent 72.9 percent of the population (Department of Statistics
Malaysia 2013) the participants of the study did represent a large portion of
the population. The details of the six participants are listed in Table 1.

1 According to the Malaysian Examinations Council (2006: 11), a student with a Band 3 MUET
score is considered a “modest user” – one who is fairly fluent but with many grammatical errors
yet is fairly able to understand and function in the language. A student with a Band 4 MUET
score is considered a “satisfactory user” – one who is generally fluent with only some gram-
matical errors, and has a satisfactory understanding and ability to function in the language.
As the data in this study was collected in the context of simulated job interviews, the expected language produced should have been more formal, with less deviation from Standard English. All candidates were interviewed individually in a meeting room and audio recordings were made. Prior to the interviews, the participants were asked to submit to their instructor, the letters of application they had written in response to the advertised positions. The recordings allowed for a closer examination of the actual language used, which would be of interest to language planners since the language observed was to some extent the direct product of the curriculum for English in the Malaysian educational system. This was particularly important in view of the government’s concern about the lack of employability of new graduates from Malaysian public universities, which to some extent has been linked to students’ proficiency level in English (Ministry of Higher Education 2012b: 9).

### 2.3 Methods

Analysis of the students’ performance was carried out and the results compared with the views of the language instructors and the human resource managers. The language instructors provided judgment from a linguistic perspective while the human resource managers provided the industry perspective. Five experienced language instructors and two human resource managers listened to the audio recordings of the simulated interviews. The language instructors had an average of 24.8 years teaching experience while the managers had an average of 13 years work experience in human resource. Audio recordings of the interviews were made available to the language instructors, who listened to them in their own time. A rating schedule to score language competence, adapted from Pillar (2011) (listed in the Appendices) was used by the instructors. The candidates were rated for accuracy, fluency, range, appropriacy and comprehension.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>MUET Band</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 1 (C1)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 2 (C2)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 3 (C3)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 4 (C4)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 5 (C5)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate 6 (C6)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: aSuccessful candidates selected by HR1 bSuccessful candidates selected by HR2.
The human resource managers assessed the candidates’ performance based on their professional expertise and they were also interviewed to gain additional insights into their opinions.

Further analysis of the data in terms of language structures and discourse strategies used by the participants was performed to gain better insight into the actual language used by the candidates.

3 Results

3.1 Ratings done by the language instructors

The scores of the top three candidates were quite close. C5 was perceived to be the best candidate as he was deemed to be the most accurate and fluent speaker. He was also considered to have the best range in terms of vocabulary and structures used. C3 had the lowest scores. C1 and C2 were seen to be more accurate than C3, but their scores for fluency were a lot lower than the top three candidates. See Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Accuracy</th>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Comprehension</th>
<th>Appropriacy</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>48.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>50.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 The language structures used by the participants

C5 committed the least number of grammatical errors while Candidates 1 and 6 had the most errors. Proportionately, there were more errors with verb phrases compared to noun phrases. Among the anomalies noticed in the participants’ use of noun phrases were ellipsis of articles and plural markings on nouns. While for the verb phrases, the most common problem was with the marking of tenses. Prepositions were also another problematic area for the candidates. See Table 3.
3.2.1 Article

There were a number of instances where the article was left out. Some examples of ellipsis of articles can be seen in (1a) and (1b). It has been noted that articles tend to be left out especially before abstract nouns or concrete nouns that are used as generic nouns in predicate position (Azirah and Tan 2012: 62). Ellipsis of this kind has been attributed to the influence of Malay, which has no article system.

(1)  a. C2: Ya ah accounting involves the process to summarise and col.. collect and..ah.. ah..present the financial..ah.. information..ah.. to..to provide the information to third parties or inter.. interested parties who..who want to..who want to know about..ah. Ø financial position of companies.

b. C1: I have involve in a battle of the band competition organised by Ø Universiti Malaya

At times the definite and indefinite articles were used interchangeably as can be seen in (1b). It has been pointed out that the absence of the article system in Malay could have influenced this (Baskran 2008: 612).

3.2.2 Plural marking on nouns

Researchers in the past have pointed out that Malaysians do not always make distinctions between count and non-count nouns in English, unlike the distinctions made in some other varieties of English. Words like furnitures, staffs, lingeries, accomodations have been claimed to exist in Malaysia. This can be
due to the influence of either Malay or Mandarin where both have a system of classifiers, but it is not carried over into English (Baskaran 2008: 613). Some examples of this lack of distinction between count and non-count nouns can be seen in (2a) and (2b).

(2)  

a. C5: ...bring into the team would bring I mean uh some **leadership**

     I would try to lead ...

b. C6: ...new business I must have many friends, many networking.

In (2a) the lexical item “leadership” is considered a count noun by candidate C5. He used the quantifier “some” with “leadership” to denote plurality while in (2b) “networking” is also treated as a count noun by candidate C6 with the presence of “many”. Both “networking”, which is a gerund, and “leadership”, which is a non-count noun, do not exist in the plural form. This lack of distinction between count and non-count nouns has also been highlighted in other varieties of English. As interviews are considered to be very formal events, to demonstrate professionalism, fewer variations like these would be expected.

There were instances of missing -s suffixes when the noun referred to a plural entity as seen in (3a) and (3b) or the -s suffix was used for a singular noun as seen in (3c). The incorrect markings for plurality and singularity in English can be attributed to the influence of the local languages, as the concept of plurality is not marked by affixing “s”, “z” or “iz” sound to the noun in Malay, the Indian languages or the Chinese dialects. As mentioned earlier, singularity and plurality are marked by classifiers in these languages.

(3)  

a. C6: And besides that I also need to prepare **some letter**,  

b. C1: ...enhance my skill because I took this uh uh these two uh **course** involve...  

c. C5: because uh as a **newcomers** in the industry

### 3.2.3 Tenses

It is not possible to be always certain about the use of the past tense form for regular verbs in spoken data, especially when it involves just a final –d or –t. However, there were many instances in the recordings where the use of tenses was inconsistent. There were a number of occasions when there was zero marking for the past tense form as seen in (4a) – (4b), where the past tense
would have been expected when the different candidates were talking about their experiences during internship.

(4)  
   a. C2: Ok uh during my internship, uh I assist uh an auditor in preparing the auditor report
   b. C5: ...so I checked most of their source documents I go through ...with the clients to clarify...

Switching between past tense and present tense was often seen in the data. In (5a), C4 switched between present and past tense when she was relating how she was spotted by her squash coach. Perhaps she used the present tense when referring to the coach teaching her because it was still happening. However, this is not very clear from the context. In (5b), the subject's answer was in response to the interviewer's question “What are some of the things that you specifically did in the Entrepreneur's club?” In her response, C1 moved between the continuous and present tense.

(5)  
   a. C4: Uh My friend.. my friend::: uh:::: always ask me to play squash but then one day uh I felt uh train is is what ? Mm my trainee ah eh trainer ah Sh|- uh he found me, and then he said I have the potential to play squash that's why he teach me a lot
   b. C1: Ok in the Entrepreneur Club I'll do: uh: some activity uh: involve business for example like uh:: we are we are selling uh: uh: we are selling fruits in the:: Pesta some uh one of the Pesta organised by Universiti Malaya and also we uh we have I have involve in a:: activity: uh uh acti - activity by going to: by going to: some of the.. factory...

The lack of differentiation between the past and perfect tense could be due to the influence of Malay or Mandarin, where there is no marking for aspect.

3.2.4 Use of prepositions

Preposition usage is one of the most problematic aspects of English grammar as prepositions are difficult to learn and equally difficult to be mastered by non-native speakers of the language (Baldwin et al. 2009; Cerce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999). The data from this study show that the problem is also prevalent in Malaysia. The participants in the study faced difficulty in using prepositions' as errors in the use of prepositions made up 19.4 percent of all the errors that
they made. Another study (Ting et al. 2010) involving 42 students at another university in Malaysia revealed that errors in prepositions had the highest frequency in terms of grammatical errors found in spoken English.

One reason for this difficulty is that while the number of prepositions used in English is limited, they have to serve a variety of relational meanings (Quirk et al. 1985), like showing the relationships of time, position, direction and degrees of mental and emotional states between two words in a sentence. Trying to relate the use and meanings of English prepositions to their first language prepositional system (Loke et al. 2013: 128) is another reason why most ESL or EFL learners face problems in using prepositions in their writing and speaking.

Some common errors identified in this study with regard to the use of prepositions concern incorrect choice of preposition, omission of preposition when use is obligatory and insertion of preposition when there should not be any. Examples of such errors are:

(6)  

a. C1: ...and at the academic day, I’ll (incorrect preposition)  
b. C4: And then when I go to the audit year? Adrian, Yeo and Co... (missing preposition)  
c. C1: ...and at there they show us the strategy... (inserting preposition when not required)  
d. C6: ...audit is good but I prefer on tax more than audit... (inserting preposition when not necessary)

The source of error in (6a) can be due to mother tongue influence, that is Malay. In Malay, the preposition pada ‘at’ can be used to denote time, similar to “at” in English. However, “at” in English is used when referring to a point in time like at 8 pm, not when referring to days as periods of time like in (6a) “the academic day” (Quirk et al. 1985) where “on” should have been used instead. In (6b), the preposition “at” should have been inserted before the name of the company to indicate place of internship while in (6c) “at” should not have been used. The error in (6c) is another example of first language interference. In (6c), “at there”, when translated to Malay, is di sana, which is acceptable for use in Malay when referring to a location, whereas in English, “there” does not require a preposition to precede it. In (6d) there should not have been any preposition after “prefer”. In the English language, some verbs do not need to collocate with any preposition while some verbs collocate with certain prepositions. This is discussed further in the following paragraph.
The form of the preposition as described by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: 42) is the co-occurrence of prepositions with verbs and adjectives. This means that users of the language need to be aware of which words in the category of nouns, verbs and adjectives can be used with which prepositions. The lack of this awareness can result in errors in using the correct preposition. Examples of such errors evident from the data of this study are:

(7)  
e. C2: ...this issue is has direct impact to the preparation of financial statement.  
(noun + incorrect preposition) 
f. C3: ...don’t be angry to me...  
(adjective + incorrect preposition) 
g. C6: I have to always take care about anything problem.  
(verb + incorrect preposition)

In (7e), the noun “impact” does not collocate with “to” but with “on” and neither does the adjective “angry” collocate with “to” as used by C3 in (7f), as the correct preposition should have been “with”. The verb “take care” in (7g) needs to collocate with “of” instead of with “about”, which was used by C6. Evidently, the acquisition of the correct usage of prepositions in terms of their forms and meanings can be rather difficult and, thus, poses problems for learners of the English language.

3.2.5 First language interference: Syntax and vocabulary

First language interference is also evident especially in the sentence structure used by the Malay candidates, C1 and C2. The following are some of the structures found in the data.

(8)  
a. C1: ..and at at there they show us the strategy the plans how to how to plans uh for a business.  
b. C2: ...my ambition is want to be an accountant ...  
c. C1: ...we were selling fruits in the pesta some uh one of the pesta organised by the university.

In (8a), “at there” is translated in Malay as di sana which is acceptable for use in Malay when referring to a location and in (8b), “is want to be” means adalah hendak menjadi, which is also a correct structure in the Malay language.
First language interference also resulted in code-switching as seen in (8c) when candidate C1 used *pesta*, a Malay word; instead of “festival” when describing involvement in university activities.

With regards to the Chinese candidates, there was a tendency to use the structure “can know” in their utterances, as evident in (8d). Although there were only two instances of “can know” found in the language of the Chinese speakers in the study, this phrase is a typical linguistic feature of Chinese speakers.

(8) d. C5: ...some things that I which I don’t know now can already know how they work

The grammatical errors found in the simulated interview data are characteristic of the lower sociolects of Malaysian English and confirm claims by earlier researchers (Baskaran 2008; Azirah and Tan 2012). The next section will focus on the students’ performance at the discourse level.

### 3.3 The discourse of the participants

Besides language competence, lack of confidence, not being able to think on the spot and the inability to express themselves are some of the other reasons cited as contributing to the failure of new Malaysian graduates at job interviews. Language competence, as posited by Bachman (1990: 87), consists of structural competence and pragmatic competence. Thus, speakers who exhibit pragmatic competence, may be seen to be competent even if some structural errors can be detected in their utterances. Consequently, speakers who need little prompting and respond appropriately to interlocutors without hesitation can appear to be fluent, despite having some structural errors. On the other hand, lack of accuracy can be counteractive, as these speakers would have difficulty expressing their ideas and sharing knowledge, and this affects the ideational function of language. This was seen in C3’s attempt to answer IR’s question, “What are some of the things you have learnt from the interactions you had in working life?”

(9) C3 → oh the:: promoter is uh:: from: (0.3) uh Burger King is: uh to attract uh customer to:: choose the me:nu =
    IR = mm hmm =
    C3 = some customer um did not familiar about the our menu new menu =

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The pauses, as seen in the highlighted turns, show that the candidate tried hard to talk about the interactions she had while working at Burger King. The instances of back channel “uh” at every turn showed that C3 had difficulty conveying what she had actually learnt and so resorted to merely reporting her experience.

When candidates are handicapped by their limited language ability, they appear less confident, and this affects their chances of being successful at interviews. This point was raised by both HR managers. This can be seen in the following extracts. The many pauses indicate that candidate C2 had difficulty expressing himself well and thus was not effective in engaging with IR in their conversation. After IR tried to prompt him, in the highlighted turn, there was a noticeable pause before the affirmative answer, “Ya”. When no further answer was forthcoming, IR had to change the topic as no further elaboration was given. The following are responses from candidates C2 and C4 with regards to their internship experience.

(10) C2’s response on his internship experience
IR ... I also noticed that you had some:: (0.2) intern::: experience::: with Alan Yoon Associates...tell me what did you do there::: ? (0.8)
C2 During my::: internship? (. ) [uh:::]
IR Yes::: ] (0.6)
C2 Ok uh during my internship:::, uh::: I assist uh::: an auditor::: in preparing the::: (0.3) auditor report::: (0.5) and I also handle::: a tax audit::: (0.8) and also::: um::: (0.5) besides uh::: preparation of::: statutory audit:::, (0.4) uh::: (.) I also::: uh::: read::: (0.5) make a company visit::: °hh (0.3) to::: (0.2) do some (.) inspection of documents::: (.) related to::: uh::: (0.4) °hh some uh::: allowable item or::: non-a|- non-allowable item related to tax::: (0.3)
IR → Mm hmm:::, You were doing audit. (0.5)
C2 Ya::: (0.6)
IR Ok::: (0.2) °hhhh Good. (0.3) That’s quite good...if you were to be uh:::: (0.5) employed::: or selected into this uh::: programme: (0.5) uh::: fresh management programme. (.) you are going to be::: (0.5) uh exposed::: to quite a ↑few:::↓ (.) different::::: areas of work::: (0.4)
C4’s response on her internship experience

IR  ... Tell me:: some of your experience:: when you were:: in::: (0.8) this::: uh::: companies:::. (0.2) ↑What::: what did you do:::, and what did you learn:::↓. from::: (.) that exposure that you have:::. (0.4)  
C4  Uh::: ↓initially::↑ I enter::: the PBS::: Management Consultants:::, ° hh They take me:: (0.2), teach me:: uh taught me how to::: °hh input:: the data:::; (0.6) from:: the::: (0.2) paper work:::; to (.).into:: the::: (. ) accountings:: uh::: (0.2) computerized system:::; (.)  
IR  Ok:::. (0.2)  
C4  and then::: um:::; (0.2) I::: learn::: UBS system::: in::: the::: (0.3) PBS::: Management Consultants::: =  
IR  = Ok.  
C4  And then::: uh::: when I go::: to the::: (0.3) audit::: here uh::: Adrian Yeo and Co:::; (0.4)  
IR  Ok:::. (.)  
C4  Ah:::. (0.2) The:: (0.5) the::: uh::: (0.6) ((tsk)) let me able::: to::: use the (. ) uh::: UBS::: uh::: when I learn::: in the::: (0.4)  
IR  Ah::: ok so you were starting to use::: the UBS already::: [at Adrian::: C4→ Ya:::] (0.4) Ah:::: when enter the Adrian Yeo and Co:::; I le|e- (0.3) I learn::: the::: (0.5) audit express system::: ↑when::: I::: in::: school:::↓ (0.5)  
IR  [Ok:::.  
C4→ That’s why:::] I::: know how to use::: (0.2) in::: Adrian Yeo and Co:::; (0.2) so it’s a::: advanced for me:: lah::: >actually:: <.=

The discourse between IR and C2 in comparison with that between IR and C4 differs greatly. C2 gave a short response, merely reporting his experience, and there were no further questions or prompting from IR, who appeared to be satisfied with C2’s response. However, in C4’s case, the exchange appeared to be more conversational in style, as the discourse shows the two of them engaged in short exchanges with IR acknowledging at every turn with the marker “ok”. C4’s responses also appeared to be more cohesive with the use of cohesive markers like “initially” and “then”. Candidate C2, on the other hand, responded to IR’s question by listing what he did during his internship without much elaboration. C4’s response contrasts with C3’s in that more narratives were used. She also received acknowledgement from IR at the pauses in her narratives as seen in (11).

C4 was able to use a greater range of language structures and showed herself to be a more skilful speaker as she moved between active and passive voice, producing more variation in her speaking style. At the same time, she
manipulated the exchange so that the focus of the conversation was on her or the organisation she was in at the appropriate time. IR appeared to be more in tune with her responses compared to C2's responses.

In view of the overall comments on the candidates' performance, HR1 identified C4 as one of the more successful candidates based on her ability to express herself and interact with IR, while HR2 rated C4 as the least successful candidate. In the feedback session, HR2 said that C4 was rated poorly because the HR manager felt that C4 did not sound like she was really interested, and penalised her because she used a form of sociolect normally associated with informal speech.

As can be seen in extract 11, C4 used the particle *lah* and substituted “ya” for “yes”. In the simulated interview there were four instances of *lah* produced by C4. Candidate C4 also produced 30 percent (9 out of 30 tokens) of all the “yeah” or “ya” tokens produced by the candidates. In comparison, the other candidates did not use any particles in their interviews, except for C6 who used it once. Candidate C4 also produced 30 percent of all the “ya” and “yeah” tokens found in the interview data. According to HR2, C4 used “Manglish” or colloquial English, which was deemed inappropriate for formal contexts like job interviews.

C2, on the other hand, was rated as a successful candidate by HR2 but not by HR1. Closer examination of the transcriptions of C2’s interview shows that, although C2 was able to articulate the need for keeping abreast with trends and developments in the industry, there were also occasions when he misunderstood the IR as seen in extract (12).

(12) \[ \text{IR} \rightarrow \text{C2} \] 
IR = Uh::: (0.7) what (,) do you anticipate:: (0.2) to be:: your biggest:: challenge::: (0.3) coming into the:: organisation::: ? (1.1)  
C2 $\rightarrow$ Ok um::: (0.5) ((tsk)) (0.5) uh:: I'm able:: uhh:: (0.6) I'm willing to::: relocate::: (0.5) because uh:: (0.3) "hmmm as a:: newcomers in the industry:::, (0.4) that the price I have to pay:::, (0.3)
IR Mm [hmm:::,  
C2 Ya::::] (0.7)
IR Where are you:: (,) where are you:: living at the moment. (.)  
You're from Kelantan:: =  
C2 = Uh:: Kelantan:: (0.3)  
IR Ok:: =  
C2 = But I managed to get (,) uh::: one house:: here:::. (0.3)  
IR Ok (0.4)  
C2 So:: (0.3) I::: will try to::: (0.4) get a job (0.5) in KL:::, (0.4)  
IR Ok::: (0.3)
In extract (12), C2 appeared to have misunderstood the question posed by IR. He said that the biggest challenge he would face in joining the organisation would be having to relocate. His answer, however, does not seem logical as six turns later, he claimed that he had already found a house. He seemed to realise that he had misunderstood IR’s question and so asked for the question to be repeated. After trying unsuccessfully to answer the question, he gave up and said “I don’t have any idea”.

Another contrast can also be seen in the responses of the successful and unsuccessful candidates regarding the area of specialisation they favoured.

(13) Candidate 5’s response on the area of specialisation
IR ...Now:: (0.5) between audit, (0.2) tax::: and accounting::: (0.9) which will be the area that you favour most::: =

C5→ = Uh::: (0.3) audit::: (0.6)
IR Why::: (0.2) Why audit. (0.2)
C5 °hhhh Because:: audit I think::: is::: the::: area which::: we can::: (0.2) really learn a lot (0.3) in a (0.3) in a very::: (0.8) in a very short period of time you can really learn a lot we can really::: (0.6) learn::: and grow::: from there::: (0.2) in a very short period of::: of::: time, and then our learning curve will be very::: (0.3) high::: (0.4) And then from there::: we can::: (0.3) °hhhh can::: (0.5) uh::: I mean (. ) excel::: fast::: (0.3) in that area::: (0.3) instead of (0.3) just::: (0.2) one flat line::: like that::: (0.4) No ah::: learning more::: (0.3)

(14) Candidate 3’s response on the area of specialisation
IR ...out↓ of these area which one do you think ( .) that you will probably (0.4) be your::: (0.6) uh::: ( .) your goal (0.4) your your
your career aspiration (0.6) is it tax (0.3) • h is it audit (.) or is it accounting (0.8)

C3 uh::: (0.4) I will like to go to audit first (0.3)
IR mm hmm =
C3 = um: to get experience (0.5)
IR ok =
C3 = because uh: from my lecture and: senior (.) encourage us to: uh en:: enter to audit er first because the audit is best er platform • h to know uh to know uh understand well about the all type of business =
IR = mm ok =
C3 = after that (.) uh: (0.2) I get mm: all the experience I want to go to (0.3) auditing (.) eh (.) accounting =

When responding to IR’s question regarding which area of specialisation he would like to pursue, C5 replied that he planned to move to audit as can be seen in (13). His lengthy discussion about doing audit implied that he had extended knowledge about the field, good enough to provide explanations on the advantages of starting in the audit field first. C3, on the other hand, did not appear to be as confident as candidate C5. With her limited language ability, C3 provided one-line responses when asked about her career aspirations. Her inability to expand her ideas gave the impression that her answer was simplistic and that she was not an independent thinker.

Research conducted recently by Noor Azlina (2011) revealed that soft skills, such as analytical thinking, intelligence, independence, leadership, communication and computer skills and work experience, are regarded as being equally important, and this is supported by the Graduate Employability Blueprint (Ministry of Higher Education 2012b). The analysis above exemplifies how the language ability of the candidates can help support the impression that they are confident and capable candidates.

The feedback obtained from the practitioners confirm this. Their responses on the overall performance of the candidates will be elucidated in the next section.

4 The practitioners’ perspectives

Two human resource managers, HR1 and HR2, were asked separately to listen to the recordings of the simulated interviews and provide their feedback. They mentioned that some of the candidates were more confident than others.

The first manager, HR1, selected candidates C5 and C4 because they were more confident in expressing themselves and their thoughts. He found that they
could communicate smoothly, with little hesitation. Both of the candidates
could discuss non-work related topics and were able to think on the spot
when they were asked about their aspirations. HR1 also felt that the two
candidates he selected appeared to have a better command of English compared
to the others.

The second manager, HR2, on the other hand, selected C6 because she was
seen to be confident, could elaborate in English and was clear about her desired
career path. HR2 also selected candidate C2 because of his leadership qualities
as well as his understanding of current trends and issues in the industry. The
two human resource managers’ selection did not match, possibly because of the
different requirements of their own organisations. Nevertheless, the selected
candidates, with the exception of candidate C2, were also the candidates who
were given higher ratings by the language practitioners, as shown in Table 2. It
seemed that, with a higher level of language competence, the candidates
appeared more confident and, thus, they were given a better assessment. The
unsuccessful candidates appeared to be less confident as they were less profi-
cent in English. The human resource managers felt that the time delay in the
responses, in the form of the use of back channels like “erm” and “ah” as well as
pauses, signalled that the candidates had difficulty articulating and expressing
their thoughts. This could be due to the candidates’ strategy of translating what
they wished to say in their minds before verbalizing their responses. HR1 noted
that the candidates who came from the rural areas (C1–C3) struggled a lot more
to communicate their ideas compared to the candidates from the urban areas
(C4–C6). Interestingly, C4 was rated very poorly by HR2 and this contradicts the
good assessment given by HR1 as well as the average rating of her communica-
tive competence given by the language practitioners. One reason that could have
contributed to this was the greater number of colloquial forms used by C4.
Interviews can be intimidating experiences and the candidate could have been
more concerned about producing answers rather than the suitability of the forms
of the language that were used.

5 Discussion and conclusion

The examples from the recordings of the candidates’ responses are a reflection
of the difficulties some students at university face functioning in English. The
struggle that Malaysian undergraduate students have when communicating in
English is partly due to the language policies implemented in the country.
Admittedly, some fields of study at Malaysian universities require only a mini-
mal ability in English but the reality is that, after graduation, the majority of
Malaysian undergraduates will need to seek employment in the private sector where English is used widely. The overall responses from the successful participants showed that their confidence appeared to be hinged on a certain level of proficiency in English. Students with better organisational competence were able to express their ideas better, and this contributed to their illocutionary competence.

The performance of the less successful candidates shows that there is a dire need for them to improve their grammatical and textual competence so that they can communicate their ideas more clearly in English. Much more needs to be done for the candidates to improve their spoken English. The additional English classes that the students had to attend at UM does not appear to have been sufficient. The fact is, if employability is the issue, action has to be taken fast. On a positive note, the Ministry of Higher Education (which has since been merged with the Ministry of Education) recognises the problem of unemployment among Malaysian graduates and has produced the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012. While the document acknowledges that poor command of English is the most common problem faced by fresh graduates, this issue is not directly addressed in the blueprint. The policy merely advocates that institutes of higher learning develop the “communication skills” of their students. One wonders if this is sufficient. Moving beyond the institutes of higher learning, the Education Ministry acknowledges that Malaysia’s allocation of 15–20 percent of instructional time to English language in the school system is insufficient to build what they term “operational proficiency” (Ministry of Education 2012a: 110). The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 lays out a roadmap for the development of education over the next decade. Among the stated goals of the blueprint is that every child should be proficient in English. Realisation of this objective will be seen via a 100 percent basic literacy rate in English among children after three years of schooling, with 70 percent of students scoring a credit in English. Among the other actions planned to help in the achievement of the objective are improving the quality of the teaching of English through the training of teachers, and increased exposure to English through a compulsory English literature module. These proposals appear to be a step in the right direction, but one wonders if they are sufficient. As highlighted by the manager, HR1, it is the students who come from the rural areas who lag behind mainly because of lack of exposure and context for the use of English. Yet the policy makers appear to place the responsibility for setting the stage for change at the feet of the parents, as they have stated that the increased amount of time and exposure to English will only take place if parents want it (Ministry of Education 2012b: 112). If global
competitiveness is so critical to the nation’s future, it is strange that the policy makers seem to have placed such an important decision solely in the hands of the parents, and one wonders if this is wise in the light of the need to build good foundations to enable future generations of Malaysians to be competitive in the global arena.

More recently, in September 2014, the Minister of Education announced that a pass in English would be made compulsory for all students of public universities in Malaysia. Plans to implement minimum English entry requirements at public universities which range from MUET Band 2 to Band 4 depending on the nature of the course have been announced. However, at this point it is still unclear if this will be strictly implemented and, if so, when it will be implemented. Furthermore, the Education ministry has been silent about any requirement for students in private universities to pass English, even though these universities make up a large number of the institutes of higher learning in Malaysia. More pertinently, as the data has shown, it is not just language proficiency or the ability to make transactions in English that determines whether one is successful at interviews. There is a need for students to be able to communicate in English so that they are able to convey to employers that they have the qualities employers seek. At the tertiary level, there is a need to design courses where, besides learning English, students are actually taught strategies to communicate so that they can “manage” the impressions given to interviewers and thus move a step further towards getting the jobs they seek and functioning effectively at the workplace.

Appendix 1

The transcription system used here is adapted from the Gail Jefferson system (Jefferson 2004).

[ Marks overlapping utterances.
= Indicates the break and subsequent continuation of a single utterance.
( ) A short untimed pause or gap within or between utterances.
: Colons mark the extension of a sound or syllable it follows. The more colons, the longer the sound stretch.
↑ Marks a rising intonation.
↓ Marks a falling intonation.
word° Underlining marks a word or passage said with emphasis.
°word° Degree signs mark a passage that is said more quietly than surrounding talk.
hhh Audible outbreaths including laughter.
°hh Audible inhalation
Appendix 2

Rating schedule for scoring “communicative performance” at simulated job interviews.

Assessor: _________________________________ Date: __________________
Student name: __________________________

APP = Appropriacy, ACC = Accuracy, FLU = fluency, Comp = comprehension,
INTL = intelligibility, RNG = range,
1 = never
2 = infrequently
3 = frequently
4 = mostly
5 = always

<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Responds with little hesitation. (FLU)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Needs little prompting. (FLU)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Speaks in complete sentences (FLU)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Sentences are well structured. (FLU)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Uses range of vocab. and structures (RNG)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. Speaks only in English (ACC)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>g. Speech is clear and comprehensible. (FLU)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>h. Pronounces words competently (ACC)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>i. Speaks with little influence of first language (ACC)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. Gives correct response (ACC)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k. Comprehends overall sense of questions (COMP)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l. Gives appropriate response (APP).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. Gives response to questions asked (RNG).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>n. Conveys meaning with little difficulty (FLU),</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Subtotal: _________________________________

Total Score: ____________________________
## Appendix 3

### Average ratings for communicative competence by language instructors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Candidate 1</th>
<th>Candidate 2</th>
<th>Candidate 3</th>
<th>Candidate 4</th>
<th>Candidate 5</th>
<th>Candidate 6</th>
<th>Average by competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F. Responds little hesitation</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
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<td>F. Needs little prompting</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
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<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>F. Speaks in complete sentences</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>F. Sentences are well structured</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<td>4.2</td>
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<td>Range (vocab)</td>
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<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acc. Speaks only English</td>
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<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.50</td>
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<td>Acc. is clear</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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<td>F. Speaks with little L1 accent</td>
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<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
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<td>Acc. Gives correct response</td>
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<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
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<td>4.0</td>
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<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
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<td>App. Gives appropriate response</td>
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<td>3.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comp. Comprehends overall</td>
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Average score: 4.4
References


