



## Language Learning Strategies of Future Graduates for Future Employment: Family Influences

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**Abstract:** English language fluency among graduates is becoming an important capability that graduates need for employment. The industry has noted the declining level of English among Malaysian graduates thus strategies and policies need to be implemented. Thus, how could teachers of non-English languages assist in increasing English language proficiency? This study looks at the issue of English language proficiency of business major students from the perspective of business lecturers, focusing on impact of family on student learning strategies. This study uses a qualitative method through interviews with two focus groups consisting of nine business major students. The students were interviewed on the importance of English language proficiency for future employment and the influence of family on their strategies to improve their English fluency. Family have important impact on the students' strategies in improving their English fluency. The findings of this paper suggest that students with families with teachers or family members using English, may not necessarily have high awareness of importance of using English and suggest that self-motivation strategies play an important role, particularly when students are in their final year.

**Keywords:** language learning strategies, graduates, English, employment

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The English language competency has grown to be one of the top three requirements for fresh graduates to be hired by Malaysian organisations (Jobstreet.com, 2015). Employers do not have issues with the academic credentials of the fresh graduates, but rather with the poor attitude and lack of communication skills of the graduates, particularly in English language. In fact, the low level of English language capability scored higher at 64% compared to the overall communication skills factor (60%) as top 5 reasons graduates are *not* hired by Malaysian employers (Jobstreet.com 2015). One reason for this important emphasis is that English

is the main language for communications and thus employers are seriously hiring only candidates with excellent level of English (Jobstreet.com, 2015). This suggest that future graduates need to ensure that they not only score high grade point averages in the degree transcript, but are also able to communicate well, especially in the English language.

Usually in a typical university, student will take English courses in both the first and second year of their three or four year degree. Once they are in their final year, most students will concentrate on their major programs or courses. Thus, how would teachers or lecturers of non-English courses could assist them? One strategy would be students need to have language learning strategies on their own and thus other teachers or lecturers could assist in this process. The literature on language learning strategies focus on the relationship between the students and the language teachers, and in this particular study would be the English language lecturers. However, few studies have looked at how non-English language teachers or lecturers could assist in the students' language learning strategies. As these non-English language teachers do not have the required specific skill to teach English language, thus it is expected that students would rely on their own language learning strategies. The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of family influences on the language learning strategies of these students.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Competencies and Graduate Employability**

Countries, such as the US and Australia, as well as Malaysia, have implemented changes in their education policy in order to ensure that generic skills would lead to competencies development and lead to growth, competitiveness and productivity (Marthandan, Jayashree, & Yelwa, 2013). Language competencies is one of the many competencies that need to be developed as government policies, like in Malaysia, have set in place that the nation would achieve developed country status by 2020 as had been set out in the Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020) (Sarji, 1993). One of the key goals is to ensure that the population has achieved certain competencies that are needed. In the last decade, concerns of ensuring the quality of education would be improved have led to several initiatives by the government. In 2012, the Malaysian Education Blueprint had been presented to enable a revamped educational policy, including strategies to arrest the declining trend through reports and comments within mass media. The declining level of English among graduates was considered one of the factors for the existence of unemployability among some of the graduates. As previously noted in the Jobstreet.com report, the low level of English among graduates is still a concern currently. In addition, in a 2017 SME Corporation presentation, the prospect of Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR 4.0), it is expected that Malaysian SMEs will have opportunities dealing with global organisations such as Alibaba, Lazada and Google (SME Corp Malaysia, June 2017). Thus, the capability of English language capability is important in dealing with business opportunities with these global corporations for Malaysian SMEs and its staff. In addition, language fluency is a basis for human resource competency. For organisations, qualified personnel enable it to address market needs and human resource could become a source of competitive advantage (Numan, Kaliappen & Hilman, 2017).

#### **2.1.1. English Language Program**

The level of English language fluency is not only a concern in Malaysia, but also other countries. Studies in Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Malaysia have mentioned the decrease in standards of

English and this concern has led to these countries taking active measures to improve the standards, as English is considered the language of business and technology (Sarudin, Mohd Noor, Zubairi, Tunku Ahmad, & Nordin, 2013).

In the Middle East, the focus on English language fluency is growing. One example is Oman. The English language is very important in Oman, especially when someone is seeking a job in the private sector. For example, many foreign workers in Oman, who form 44.2% of the total population (National Centre for Statistics and Information, 2017) do not speak the local language (Arabic) and speak English. Also, most business owners prefer a worker who could speak English as their organisations do business globally and has branches in foreign countries. Thus a graduate from Oman need to ensure that they have the capability in the English language to ensure future employment, particularly in the private sector.

In Oman, English is taught in schools in both the government and private schools, from grade one. However, the government's English program in schools is not strong. Thus, most students when they start studying in colleges, find they need to study English language again in intensive programs. For this reason, most college programs and courses are in English. Thus the higher education play an important role in ensuring English language capability of graduates in countries such as Oman.

### **2.1.2. Usage of English in the industry**

The importance of English language capability is not only important for graduates to get employment, but also in order to build a career within an industry and to flourish. Some industries focus on the usage of English language as it plays an important role in understanding of scientific terms and ensuring the right methods and solutions are implemented.

The understanding and fluency of English language is very important in the pharmaceutical industry in Malaysia as most of the medical terms especially regarding disease and complications are in English. If the medical personnel such as doctors, pharmacists and paramedics are unable to understand the meaning of terms or diseases, it would be difficult for them to prescribe a specific medication to their patients.

All the manuals such as pamphlets about medicine such as action, contra indication and side effects of the medicine are written in English. If the pharmacy officer is unable to master the English language, it is hard for him/her to understand those meaning accurately. Although there are manuals or pamphlets written in Bahasa Malaysia or other mother tongue, the meaning is vague and ambiguous because the correct medical terms are only in English and all terms are standardised and used worldwide.

For example, the term *tachycardia*, *syncope*, *bradycardia* are more accurate if explained or described in English rather than other languages. Thus, there is a need for individuals who work in the pharmaceutical industry to understand and master English, especially graduates who will start their career in this industry or other industries similar to this. This suggest that, academics in all areas need to ensure that their students are fluent in the English language, not only for students to gain employment, but also, in certain industries, to ensure the quality of the program is ensured when graduates join the workforce.

### **2.1.2. Responsibility of Universities**

As industries begin to expect fresh graduates to have the standards expected of them, particularly in language fluency, universities are feeling the pressure to ensure fresh graduates are able to find jobs when

they graduate. As mentioned in the previous section, the Ministry of Higher Education has commenced various programs to ensure that graduates have the skills needed. Graduates themselves when they select universities for their studies, have several expectations from their universities. Among factors that postgraduate students look for in their potential universities are personal factors, parental support, financial aids and job opportunity, while quality and cost of program are less significant factors (Sulaiman & Rahman, 2016).

The literature on language learning strategies is abundant and for this paper, the focus is on the strategies employed by the students themselves and the relevant factors that have an impact on these strategies. In a paper on students in China, the research focused on improving the low level of fluency by focusing on self-efficacy beliefs (Liu, 2013). The author noted that historically, several factors could explain the low level of competency, among them is the focus of more on reading compared with listening and speaking skills (Liu, 2013). The author focuses on self-efficacy beliefs in the study in analyzing students' own strategies to achieve improvement in English speaking fluency. The area of research on self-efficacy beliefs and language learning is established based on the belief that self-efficacy has an impact on language learning capability. Researchers noted that Bandura (1997) stated that self-efficacy refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments" (as cited in Liu, 2013).

Liu (2013) noted several studies that have reported the positive relationship between self-efficacy and achievement (Tilfarliođlu & Ciftci, 2011), reading capability (Mills, Pajares and Herron, 2006) as well as listening (Rahimi & Abedini, 2009). Liu's study (2013) reveal that students with higher self-efficacy tend to visit the English Bar (a place which had non-alcoholic refreshments within University campus) to practice English more often than those who had lower levels. Liu (2013) noted that a possible fact that compel students of all levels of proficiency to visit the English Bar to improve their English was that in China, graduates with fluency in English tended to have a higher probability of getting a job in a competitive environment. Liu (2013) concluded that the success of the English Bar suggest that activities outside the classroom could improve proficiency in English as some students might be unwilling to talk in class, or intimidated by the formalness of the classroom. In addition, students also had access to native speakers to practice with, in an informal environment.

## **2.2. Family Background and Friends Influences**

This study focuses on final year students and thus, these students have finished their English courses and concentrate on their business major courses. Therefore, it is essential for non-English language teachers/lecturers to rely on students' self-efficacy and students' perspectives for language learning strategies in ensuring that the English capability, particularly English speaking and writing is further developed and more importantly, reaches the target expected by future employers. This is as the expectation of the industry on students' English speaking and writing capability is important, particularly in a more global setting that industries face. In addition, as non-English language lecturers do not have the technical skills to teach English, the expectation is on the students' own effort in improving their capabilities in English.

Language learning strategies for second or foreign language could be divided into eight major themes (Oxford, 2011). These are effectiveness, models and theories, instruction, assessment, language-area strategies,

factors, technology and caveats (cautions or warnings). This study focuses on the factors' themes, looking at family and friends influences.

Family influences could have an impact on students' development in their capability in English. A study by Wang (2015) suggest that parent educational level as well as the students' self-efficacy and parent educational expectation have an impact on Chinese eighth grade students' English capability. While, in another study, family influences was identified as a factor on English development (Yang et al, 2013). However, most of the research studies on English development has focused on strategies within the classroom (e.g. Oxford, 2011) while less have focused on the individual students' strategy themselves. Thus this study could contribute to literature review on factors such as family as well as friends' influences on the English capability development of students.

The 'Buddy System' based on the Boy Scouts of America shows that peers could help where the experienced 'buddy' could help those who were less experienced (Naidoo & Chellapan, 2017). Using this system in schools, Lim et al (2003) suggest that this could be used in the school system for teachers to develop their competency in using ICT. For students, peer groups could assist other students through support when they work in groups, through a 'buddy system' which help motivate students and this include those enhancing learning skills for students (Bojuwoye et al, 2013) as well as to enhance English speaking skills (Naidoo & Chellapan, 2017). Thus, this suggests that peers/friends could be an important influence on learning skills, including learning English. As English learning typically occur in school settings for many students, thus it is probable that peers that have influence on students would be more towards their classmates rather than their friends outside.

Thus, in sum, the language learning strategies of the students' and the influences of the family is the focus in this study. The aim of this study is to investigate the influences of family background on the students' capability, focusing on how they impact and why. This study also looks at friends' influence, if any.

Based on the above literature review, the research question for this study is as follows: How does family background impact the development of the students' capability and Why?

### **3. METHODS**

For this study, qualitative research using multiple-case study approach was used. Interviews were conducted with business major students through two focus groups. Some studies have suggested qualitative studies to assist in collecting data. For example, Manoli and Bekiari (2015) suggest qualitative interviews of students could enhance data through triangulation rather than just based on students' self-reports. In addition to the interviews, the students answered a short questionnaire related to their backgrounds and perception of their capability in English. A total of nine students were interviewed with five in the first focus group and four in the second focus group. These students were selected as they were in their final semester of their studies and would be doing their internship the next semester. Interviews focused on students' awareness of the importance of English language fluency on future employment. In addition, students were also asked on the influence of their family as they try to improve their language capability.

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1  
Case Profile

	Student	Group	STATES*	Perception of own level of English**	Major	MUET
1	Leven	May	Negeri Sembilan - Medium	Medium	Accounting	3
2	Jess	May	Negeri Sembilan-Medium	High	Accounting	3
3	Jake	May	Selangor-High	Medium	International Business	3
4	Florence	May	Johor-Medium	Medium	Accounting	4
5	Sim	May	Penang-High	Medium	International Business	3
6	Malai	June	Perak-Medium	Medium	HRM	3
7	Aimi	June	Perak-Medium	Medium	HRM	3
8	Fan	June	Perak-Medium	High	HRM	3
9	Ira	June	Kelantan-Low	Medium	HRM	2

\*Urbanisation Levels based on Census Malaysia 2010

\*\*Respondent own words on ability: Broadly categorized as follows:

Low: "Bad", "very bad", "poor" Medium: "need to be improved", "medium", "average" High: "Good"

### 4.1. Case Profile

All of the student respondents had MUET (Malaysia University English Test) scores of Band 3 except one student which had Band 4 and another student with a Band 2. The highest MUET score is a Band 6 which is identified as a 'Very Good User' while the lowest score is a Band 1 'Extremely limited user'. Students are required to take MUET for university admissions and there is a proposal for a minimum Band level to be acquired before graduation (Malaysia Budget 2015). Overall, the results suggest that the students were mostly in the average group of between Band 3 to 4 (with the exception of 1 student) out of a range of Band 1 to 6. Based on a brief question on their perception of their own capability in English in the questionnaire, answers from students were categorized into levels of Low, Medium and High. Most of the students perceived their levels of English capability as "Medium" (seven out of nine) while two perceived their capability as 'High'.

### 4.2. Family Background and Family Influences

The research question for this paper focus on how family background and family influences have impact on the students' capability of learning English. This study also investigates the reason why.

The study investigated the students' family background and environment with regard to English language. The focus was on the support and importance that the family has on English fluency, and less on the income level of the family themselves. In addition, the students were asked if close family members were English teachers or university lecturers, which might have an impact on the students' fluency.



**Table 2**

<i>Student</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Family regularly converse in English and mother tongue</i>	<i>Family English educated and/or teachers/ lecturers at university</i>	<i>Family not aware of importance of English</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1	Leven	May		✓	Parents do not understand the importance of English, only focus on content
2	Jess	May			
3	Jake	May		✓	Jake's uncle, a lecturer, forced him to do revisions books in English, the books came from Singapore
4	Florence	May	✓	✓	Felt that her English is not good, she is only able to maintain. She felt lucky because her family is English educated BUT seldom speak English at home. However, they do speak English outside the home, thus there is some influence
5	Sim	May			
6	Malar	June	✓		Family use mix of language- English and mother tongue (Indian dialect) and Malay. However, student mentioned an incident where in schools, strict policies actually help them to improve on their English and when she complained to her parents, her parents told her to follow the rules.
7	Aimi	June		✓	Some students depend on family, culture, background for confidence in English though Facebook helps. Mother is a teacher and the family has little conversation in English.
8	Fan	June		✓	Even though Grandparents and parents have good English, student had failed in English before. Student mentioned he was sent to a tuition centre
9	Ira	June		✓	Family not exposed to English- possibly contributed to low confidence in English

Family members which had English-education background or worked as university lecturers were grouped in one category. This category had interesting remarks made by the participants. One of the students, Jake, had an uncle who took particular interest in Jake and made him work on workbooks to improve his English. Jake's uncle is a university lecturer and thus might be aware on the importance of English for Jake's future. Jake's uncle is a mathematics lecturer.

For Florence, in another interesting environment, though she has family with links in the teacher/university category, she feels that her English could be better, and is only able to maintain her level of competence currently. Her family, even though is in the teacher/university category, surprisingly rarely speaks English at home. They only speak English outside the home.

Aimi is another student who had family links in the teacher/university category as her mother is a teacher and the family speaks a little English. Aimi also mentioned that having social media, such as Facebook also helps her with her English fluency. She also feels that family, culture as well as the background of a student has an impact on the fluency of English usage.

Fan is an example of an extreme case. Though his close family have good English with some having been educated in the English stream, he was unable to take advantage of that as he had failed in an English

subject. Thus he had to take tuition in that subject to help him get good grades in English. This suggest that family's background in English, might not helped much with student's capability in English fluency.

Interestingly, 4 out of 9 students had relatives in this category. However, as mentioned in the case profile, awareness of the importance of English was High, also for 4 students. However, only 1 of these student has both High awareness of importance of English and family with English education or are university lecturers. The other 3 students who had these family links instead had only medium level of awareness on importance of English.

This suggest that though one might have family with teachers/lecturers or with English education background, does not mean that necessarily the students will have high awareness of importance of English.

The first column is data on students whose family conversed both in English and their native language. Only 2 students out of 9 mentioned this, thus suggesting that other students had family members who would rather converse in one language, i.e. their native language. Both Florence and Malar had families that would converse in two languages, one of which is English. However, they were the only 2 students from the 9 students who said this. Malar elaborated that though her family conversed in more than I language (English, her native language as well as Malay), she felt what helped her the most was mixing around with her friends and talking in English. This was partly due to her wanting to be able to have friends who could not speak her native tongue. Thus, in order to fit in, she also read the fiction novels that her friends were interested in. These fiction novels were in English, thus not only was she able to converse in English with her new friends, she was also introduced to English novels and able to improve her English through reading.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated the influences of family background on developing English capability among students and also looked at friends' influences, if any. This paper can conclude the finding is mixed. Having relatives or parents as teachers or even English teachers does not guarantee that students would be able to develop their English capability better than others. This is in contrast to studies by Wang (2015) and Yang *et al.* (2013) which suggest that family influences play a major role on English development of students.

Interestingly, the family influences was more in ensuring that students understand that speaking and developing their capability in English as important. The onus, or self-efficacy on the students becomes important in the example of one student, who though had relatives good in English, still had to take tuition in English. However, though the family background might not guarantee that students would automatically master English language, it seemed to help instill self-confidence. Students who did not have family background in English tend to have Medium level of perception on ability in English (see Table 1). While the student with family background in English stated a High level of perception in ability [Note – another student did not mention any data on family background in the focus group discussion].

The influences of friends have been mentioned as possible influences on developing their capability, however, only 1 respondent mentioned this. This suggests that friends could either be a positive or a negative influencer. For example, if their friends did not want to speak in English, this could be a deterrent towards the capability of developing English skills. Thus, teachers might find building an avenue for students to develop their capability for speaking in English during classes as well as outside classes would be helpful,



for example an English club, like the study by Liu (2013) which focused on an English bar. This study also suggests that peers influence could enhance English speaking skills (Bojuwoye et al, 2013, Naidoo & Chellapan, 2017). Thus, a future research could look at the impact of peers' influence on language learning skills of future graduates.

The practical implication of this research suggest that industry or employers might pursue a program to help build the self-efficacy on employees to help build up their English skills. Using outside venues (i.e. English bar) or restricted environment (English language only allowed) might benefit employees as they build up their English skills and develop their competency as part of the human resource component of an organisation.

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