

AN INVESTIGATION ON THE CHALLENGES FACED BY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) UNDERGRADUATES TO SPEAK IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Hasviniy Padmanathan*¹, Zainiah Mohamed Isa²,
Pooveneswaran Nadarajan⁴

^{1,2}Fakulti Pembangunan Manusia, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris,
Tanjong Malim, Perak, MALAYSIA

⁴Pusat Bahasa dan Pengajian Umum, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Tanjong Malim,
Perak, MALAYSIA

*hasviniy@fpm.upsi.edu.my

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out specifically to identify the speaking proficiency level among the undergraduates and outline the core challenges faced by them in speaking English during their Diploma in Early Childhood Education (ECE) study period. The study adopted a quantitative approach whereby the data were acquired through a survey method that used an adapted questionnaire as the primary instrument for its data collection. Prior to the study, the average level of English proficiency of the respondents was established through the participants' language proficiency test scores. The document analysis of the undergraduates' English language test grades revealed that more than 70% of ECE undergraduates; irrespective of their semesters; had scored below average grades (C+ and below) in their language proficiency. The following finding was then used as the basis to investigate the challenges faced by ECE undergraduates to speak in English. An online survey was administered to the selected respondent from each semester followed by descriptive statistical analysis. The findings revealed that undergraduates encountered major difficulties due to no motivation to speak, lack of confidence, worried of mistakes, mixing languages, fear of criticism, limited vocabulary and other factors. In conclusion, ECE undergraduates speaking fluency were affected by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. The implication of this study is that various teaching and learning strategies should address these challenges to create future competent preschool teachers. Future research can be conducted to find possible solutions in overcoming the challenges and assist in language acquisition, specific to cater ECE undergraduates.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, English language, speaking skills, challenges, survey

INTRODUCTION

According to Malaysia's Education Blueprint (2013- 2025), every child will be, at minimum, operationally proficient in Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and language of unity, and in English as the international language of communication. This means that upon leaving school, the student should be able to work in both a Bahasa Malaysia and English language environment.

English is regarded as the second language in Malaysia and all students have to learn the language as a core subject at schools along with the national language of Bahasa Malaysia, History, Mathematics and Science. The students must learn the language for 12 years from pre-school until they finish secondary school. Improving students' skill is important to enhance the quality of English language ability and proficiency. The teaching of the English Language in Malaysian schools and institutions of higher learning is aimed at empowering the students to use the language in everyday situations, for knowledge acquisition and future needs in the workplace. In the Salary Surveys of 2016 by the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF), it is found that more than 90% of respondents indicated the need for graduates to improve their English proficiency to become more employable. This is supported by recent column published in *The Star*, Shad (2020), MEF believed that poor command of English language acts as the main reason for unemployability. Another journal published in the year 2017 had stated that employers' views on the importance of English Proficiency and communication skill for employability, the employers in the private sector would rather employ graduates from transnational private universities because of their better command of English, although graduates from Malaysian public universities were more familiar with local conditions, diligent, and have lower salary expectations (Cheong, Hill, Fernandez-Chung, & Leong, 2016).

In a column published in *The Edge*, Alias (2017) cited poor English proficiency as well as lack of experience and exposure to real-world situations as the two leading factors behind increased unemployment among graduates in the country, which had increased further over the years. This supported the notion that most tertiary level students are still struggling with their English language use even after years of learning English in schools. A vast majority of Malaysian students were still unable to gain a good mastery of the language (Jain, Sidhu & Lim, 2012). Even the former Higher Education Minister, Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh admitted that most of the current undergraduates who were enrolled in undergraduate studies mostly fall under the CEFR B1 level, which is, having the ability to use the language only with limited vocabularies and interact regarding familiar matters. (Star Online, 2017). The English competency of tertiary level students was not up to par compared to what is expected of them when they enter the universities and colleges.

Looking at the scope of Early Childhood Education (ECE), Abdul Aziz (2020) highlighted that many preschool teachers had low proficiency in English, poor self-confidence to teach English and it may be due to being non-English optioned early childhood education teacher or lack of knowledge in teaching English especially in aspects of content knowledge and pedagogy. She argued that self-confidence in teaching is very important as it can influence the effectiveness and success of teaching in classroom. Self-confidence in teaching also reduces teachers' level of anxiety teaching English. Rohaty (2013) indicated that preschool teachers had low proficiency in English, cannot speak fluently and had no self-confidence to speak in English. Early childhood teachers who were not well-trained in

teaching English will have challenges to support children to acquire English as a second language. She added that many teachers do not have the self-confidence to communicate using the English language.

Based on the study by Mazlina Che Mustafa et al. (2018), some of the major issues raised in relation to the level of teachers' proficiency in teaching English are teachers' lack of English proficiency (pronunciation, grammatical errors, lack of comprehension), limited English vocabulary, lack of interest in English, negative attitudes toward English language and lack of self-confidence using English. The findings revealed that it is significant for the early childhood teachers to be proficient in English as this will affect their confidence and attitudes in using English as an interactional tool in early childhood settings. Rohaty (2013) also argued how a preschool teacher be a model example for the children when those teachers hardly can use and speak in English without errors. Rohaty's argument corresponded to the statement by Pauline (2019) who emphasised that high-quality teaching was done through teachers who tend to possess high pedagogical competence (Blazer & Kraft, 2017; Goh, Yusuf & Wong, 2017; Goh, Canrinus & Wong, 2019; Goh & Canrinus, 2019). However, it had alluded in the literature (Butler, 2004; Mariage, Englert & Garmon, 2000; Richards, 2017) that teachers do require a certain level of language proficiency to be able to be successful in their professional practice. Evans and Cleghorn (2010) surmise "... regardless of the particular context, language is the thread that ties teacher, text, activity, use of space and learner together in the overall process of meaning-making" (p. 142).

With that in mind, Malaysia currently is taking steps to address the decline in English proficiency among undergraduates. English proficiency is needed at various levels of the education of a student and with each level, and there is a distinct emphasis. Arshad (2018) added that schools must provide necessary skills for learners to interact in the language whereas academic institutions concentrate on their academics. Undergraduates need to improve themselves on the aspect of English language competency, primarily on speaking skills. It is proven that tertiary students such as ECE graduates were indeed facing a problem in their ability to communicate (speaking) fluently when the English language is involved.

Therefore, this study was carried out to identify the ECE undergraduates' English language proficiency level and further investigate the challenges that contributed to their low English-speaking proficiency throughout their ECE study course. This study was constructed with a focus on identifying the common challenges that the Early Childhood Education (ECE) undergraduates face and their main problems in using the English language as their medium communication and learning during their study. The study would be beneficial to further researches as the findings of the study will act as a reference for future studies that focuses on finding possible solutions to overcome the challenges highlighted by this study.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the research objective, a quantitative research approach was chosen. Most studies that were reviewed; both in local and foreign context; commonly applied the quantitative method to investigate the speaking skills among undergraduates. An adapted questionnaire was chosen as the instrument to collect the data required on finding out the challenges faced by the undergraduates in speaking using the English language. Before the study, the researcher also conducted a document analysis procedure to determine the level of English

Proficiency, derived from their English subject grades. This step was carried out as an additional measure to further confirm whether the ECE Diploma undergraduates (participants of the study) are, on average, categorised as low-proficient English language users and scored below average grades (C+ and below) in their English subjects.

Methods

To obtain data to find out the level of English proficiency among ECE undergraduates, a qualitative method was used for this study. Document analysis was an efficient and effective way of gathering data for the researcher because documents were manageable and practical resources. For the purpose of this study, the researcher collected the undergraduates English Proficiency subject results from the university. These scores were taken from students' transcript of the English language subject that they were required to take and pass in their previous semester in the university. Since score sheets included a list of marks the student received for all the four skills (Speaking, Reading, Writing & Listening), and for this study, the researcher only took into consideration of students' speaking skill marks as the measure for determining students' level, to cater the requirement of the study.

The quantitative method was also used to analyse the challenges faced by undergraduates in using the English language to speak. Though the results from document analysis were proof of the undergraduates' English proficiency level, it did not give insights on why they are having low levels or why they have problems in conversing using the English language. An adapted questionnaire from similar research by Tuan and Mai (2015) titled 'Factors Affecting Students' Speaking Performance' was used to collect data for this study to reach a reliable conclusion. The questionnaire was validated by three university lecturers who teach English based subjects from the ECE Department. The questionnaire was prepared in bilingual (English language and Bahasa Malaysia) so that the undergraduates can better understand the questions and the answer options. Survey questions used for this research were close-ended questions. These questions allowed the respondents to give opinions and required them to choose from a range of predetermined responses. The Likert scale was coded numerically as follows: 1 for strongly disagree; 2 for disagree; 3 for agree and 4 for strongly agree. The responses was easily coded into relevant themes and were statistically analysed. To identify and promote efficiency, this study had undergone a pre-test for the questionnaire (performed a pilot survey). Through this questionnaire, the researcher was able to list down common factors and problems affecting the undergraduates and categorise them into the core challenges undergraduates face speaking using English.

Sampling

The research was carried out in one of the Malaysian higher education institutions (HEIs), which is an acknowledged public university (UA). The selection of this public university and its sample participants are mainly due to the factor of convenience, as the researcher of this study is currently an academic staff who is currently teaching English for Young Learners courses to the students in the university. Such factor and others such as the time limit and the feasibility of conducting this research had affected the choice of sampling method applied for this research, which was convenience sampling.

The participants (90 respondents) for this research were an entire batch of Diploma Early Childhood Education undergraduates currently in Semester 2, 4, and 5. These batch were chosen because they had already taken the English Proficiency course (compulsory subjects in the university) and also English for Young Learners subject under their major courses. Semester 2 students have taken English Proficiency 1, semester 3 students have taken English Proficiency 2 and semester 4 students who have taken English Proficiency 1 and 2.

This research chose this sample population because as mentioned earlier, undergraduates from these semesters were required to take these subjects and would have completed their English-related subjects. This showed that the group of students had undergone practice and training in four skills which are speaking, listening, reading and writing. As such, undergraduates were expected to be able to use various language forms and functions in practical situations and communicate effectively in writing and speaking using simple English structures.

Data Analysis

From the findings of document analysis, the researcher categorised and classified the level of English proficiency among undergraduates. Documents that were referred was undergraduate's previous English language scores that included SPM certificates (focusing on English Language subject) and English Proficiency classes (compulsory university subjects). The study divided the grades into 3 different range which was lowest, intermediate and highest marks. The lowest range of marks would be grade C+ and below. The middle range of marks would be grade B+, B and B-. Highest range of marks would be A+, A and A-grade. The researcher divided the grade in that way to further identify and know how many students score in each category.

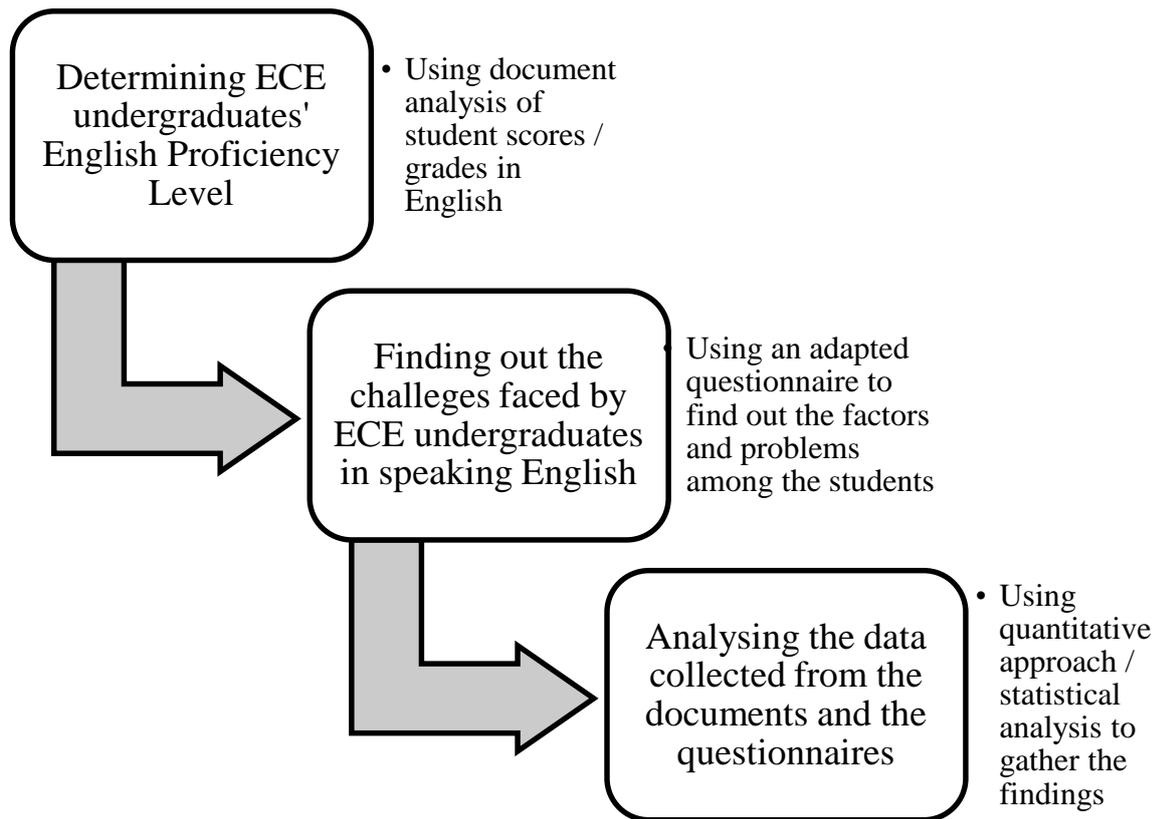
The quantitative data derived from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis of frequencies and percentages. To facilitate the assessment and interpretation of data analysis obtained, the researcher also used the mean score to categorize scales as follows: 1 for strongly disagree; 2 for disagree; 3 for agree and 4 for strongly agree (The Likert scale). The findings of the analysis include mean score and standard deviation for each factor and problems.

Data Collection Procedure

The following figure (**Figure 1**) summarises the research procedure of the study. The study was carried out by determining ECE undergraduates' English Proficiency level prior to administering of the survey to the sample participants. The data analysis were carried out as soon as the required data were collected through the document analysis and responses gathered through the adapted questionnaire.

Figure 1

Research procedures of the study



Validity and Reliability

Reliability and validity, according to Mohajan (2017), are the two main characteristics in the evaluation of any measuring instrument or tool for good research. Validity and reliability increase transparency and decrease the possibility of inserting research bias into qualitative research (Singh, 2014). Reliability refers to a measurement that provides equal values for consistent results. It measures the consistency, accuracy, repeatability and reliability of a study (Chakrabartty, 2013). It shows the extent to which it is without bias (error-free) and therefore ensures consistent cross-time measurement across the different items in the instruments.

Validation began with piloting to assess the content quality of the questionnaire and the use of peer debriefing as an external check of the data analysis process for the questionnaires. Four faculty members from the researcher's educational institution conducted the content validity. A draft version of the questionnaire was given to the lecturers who are teaching English based courses in ECE departments. They were instructed to provide feedback on the items of the questionnaires. Based on the feedback, a final version of the questionnaires was piloted with 30 ECE undergraduates who were studying at the institution at the time to ensure there were no discrepancies and misunderstanding towards the items of the questionnaire.

Only 30 ECE undergraduates agreed to participate in the pilot study. The pilot testing was carried out both face to face and online for a week. The participants also reviewed whether the instrument was clear and easy to understand. Opinions were sought from these undergraduates about whether they were able to understand the items, whether the items are

related to the title of the study and if there were any errors or confusion in the questionnaires. The candidates were also asked their comment, suggestions and corrections needed to improve the questionnaires. Minor changes were made to make the questionnaire appropriate for use.

To proper safeguards and protect the privacy of sample participants, their information in the questionnaire will be coded using number to denote each participant. The study uses the same questionnaires for all the participants as the information needed are the same. The same group of targeted participants answer the questionnaire to measure the challenges in speaking using the English language. This indicates that the questionnaire has reliability and validity as a measure of the data collected. To test the reliability and validity of the data collection tools, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used.

The following shows the result of the questionnaire's reliability or internal consistency values of the 'Factors (10 items) and Problems (10 items)' faced by undergraduates in English language speaking skills. Cronbach's alpha for the '10 factors affecting speaking skills' items and '10 problems students face when speaking' items were .96 and .81 respectively and have relatively high internal consistency respectively. The analysis revealed that the constructs have good reliability in the pilot study. Hence, the items in the questionnaire were found to be highly reliable (20 items; $\alpha = .89$).

FINDINGS

Undergraduates' English Proficiency Level

To determine the English language proficiency level (speaking skills), a document analysis method was carried by the researcher. Documents that were referred was undergraduate's previous English language scores that included SPM certificates (focusing on English Language subject) and English Proficiency classes (compulsory university subjects). Based on the university requirements, students who scored C+ and below in their SPM English are required to take English Proficiency 1 (EP1) and then proceed to take English Proficiency 2 (EP2) in the following semester. Students who score above B- and above in their SPM were exempted from taking English Proficiency 1 (EP1), but still have to take the English Proficiency 2 (EP2) subject.

The questionnaires were labelled as per respondents. There were a total of 90 respondents, whereby 30 undergraduates from each of the following semesters; semester 2, 3 and 4; had agreed to participate in the study and share the grade scores. To analyse the frequency counts and percentages of the data collected, the researcher had divided the grades into 3 different range of grades which was lowest, intermediate and highest grades. The lowest range of grades would indicate a student's result as grade C+ and below. The middle range of marks would be indicated for students with grade B+, B and B-. The highest range of marks would be indicated for students with grades of A+, A and A- grade. The researcher divided the grade in such a manner to categorise the students and carry out frequency counts of the grades in each category.

Based on the analysis of the English subject grades, the following table (**Table 1**) details the document analysis findings:

Table 1
ECE undergraduates' English proficiency level according to their semester

Semester	Average Percentages of Students With Below Average Grades (%)
2	76.7
4	80
5	90

The findings revealed that 76.7% of semester 2 participants, 80% of semester 4 and 90% of semester 5 participants had scored below average grades (C+ and below) for their English proficiency level. The researcher was able to further confirm that; on average; more than 75% of the ECE undergraduates (out of the total 90 participants) have low English proficiency level, as suggested by the percentages of students who scored below average grades. It is evident now that, in general, the majority of the ECE undergraduate's English Language proficiency is still lacking and it may be caused by various challenges that they face in using English during their study period, especially on speaking. Since a majority of them had been proven to be low-proficient in the language, this finding also acts as the basis for the researcher to investigate and find out the major challenges that these ECE undergraduates face in speaking using English.

Undergraduates' Challenges in Speaking in English

To outline the challenges faced by the ECE undergraduates in using English language to speak, a survey was conducted to collect data from the undergraduates. The questionnaire was distributed to three different semesters (semester 2, 4 and 5) of ECE undergraduates. From these three groups, only 30 students agreed to participate from each semester. So, only 90 students answered the questionnaires.

The quantitative data derived from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis of frequencies and percentages. To facilitate the assessment and interpretation of data analysis obtained, the researcher also used the mean score and standard deviation deviation for each factor and problems to breakdown the overall results. Table 2 below shows results of the questionnaires. The Likert scale was coded numerically as follows: 1 for strongly disagree; 2 for disagree; 3 for agree and 4 for strongly agree as shown below.

Table 2
Factors affecting student's speaking performance

Factors affecting student's speaking performance	Semester 2				Semester 4				Semester 5			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Time for preparation	0	5	22	3	0	5	21	4	0	5	17	8
Pressure to perform well	0	2	25	3	0	2	8	20	0	2	16	12
Listeners' support	1	2	20	7	1	1	3	25	1	2	16	11
Motivation to speak	0	0	16	14	0	0	2	28	0	0	14	16

Confidence	0	1	15	14	0	1	2	27	0	1	11	18
Anxiety	2	7	17	4	2	7	14	7	1	9	13	7
Topical knowledge	1	1	14	14	1	1	14	14	1	1	14	14
Listening ability	0	2	19	9	0	2	9	9	0	2	14	14
Time allowed to perform a speaking task	2	1	20	7	2	1	7	7	2	1	16	11
Feedback during speaking task	1	2	20	7	1	2	7	7	1	2	16	11

Table 3
Mean and standard deviation for factors affecting student's speaking performance

Variables	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Time preparation	90	3.00	.581
Pressure to perform well	90	3.32	.596
Listener's support	90	3.36	.739
Motivation to speak	90	3.64	.481
Confidence	90	3.62	.552
Anxiety	90	2.83	.811
Topical Knowledge	90	3.37	.710
Listening Abilities	90	3.29	.585
Time allowed to perform	90	3.11	.756
Feedback	90	3.14	.680

Table 3 shows that undergraduates mostly chose to agree with factors affecting student's speaking performance. The highest mean (M= 3.64; SD= .481) is for the variable motivation to speak and the lowest mean (M= 2.83; SD= .811) is for the variable anxiety. The second highest mean (M= 3.62; SD= .552) is for the variable lack of confidence among the respondents. The third mean would be lack of topical knowledge during speaking (M= 3.37; SD= .710) is higher than listener's support (M= 3.36; SD= .739). The mean for students who were also affected by factors such as the pressure to perform well (M= 3.32; SD= .596), listening abilities (M= 3.29; SD= .585), feedback given during speaking task (M= 3.14; SD= .680), time allowed to perform a speaking task (M= 3.11; SD= .756) and time for preparation for their speaking task (M= 3.00; SD= .581).

Table 4 below shows results of the questionnaires for problems students face when speaking. The Likert scale was coded numerically as follows: 1 for strongly disagree; 2 for disagree; 3 for agree and 4 for strongly agree as shown below.

Table 4
Student's speaking problem

Student's speaking problem	Semester 2				Semester 4				Semester 5			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Worried about making mistakes	0	3	21	6	0	3	18	9	0	2	17	11
Fearful of criticism or losing face	0	9	13	8	0	5	8	17	0	7	12	11
Cannot think of anything to say	0	8	20	2	0	7	10	13	0	7	17	6

No motivation to express yourselves.	2	14	12	2	2	14	7	7	2	15	10	3
Speak very little or not at all	5	16	8	1	5	15	7	3	6	15	5	4
Use first language more	3	3	18	6	3	3	9	15	1	3	17	9
Shy and embarrassed	1	9	15	5	1	9	10	10	2	6	15	7
Teased for using English	10	13	5	2	10	13	3	4	6	12	10	2
Limited vocabulary	3	8	17	2	2	8	12	8	4	7	14	5
Mix languages when speaking	2	4	18	6	2	4	11	13	2	2	17	9

Table 5
Mean and Standard Deviation for Student's Speaking Problem

Variables	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Worried about making mistakes	90	3.20	.584
Fearful of criticism	90	3.17	.783
Cannot think of anything	90	2.99	.695
No motivation to express	90	2.52	.810
Speak very little	90	2.22	.845
Use first language more	90	3.08	.864
Shy and embarrassed	90	2.89	.827
Teased for using the language	90	2.09	.920
Limited vocabulary	90	2.71	.864
Mix languages	90	3.07	.832

Table 5 above shows undergraduates student's speaking problems. The highest mean (M= 3.20; SD= .584) is for the variable worried about making mistakes and the lowest mean (M= 2.08; SD= .920) is for the variable teased for using English language. The second highest mean (M= 3.17; SD= .783) is for the variable fearful of criticism from the peers or surroundings. The third highest mean would be using the first language (not English) during speaking (M= 3.08; SD= .864) is higher than mixing language problem (M= 3.07; SD= .832). The mean for students who were having problems such as cannot think of anything to say (M= 2.99; SD= .695), shy and embarrassed (M= 2.89; SD= .827), limited vocabulary (M= 2.71; SD= .864), no motivation to speak (M= 2.52; SD= .810) and speak too little (M= 2.22; SD= .845).

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

Students' English Speaking Performance Level

Based on the analysis of data found for this study, the researcher was able to conclude that the respondents from three categories (semester 2 scored 76.7%, respondents from semester 4 scored 80% and respondents from semester 5 scored 90%) scored below average for the English language prerequisite subjects / course. Therefore, the researcher was able to further verify 75% of ECE undergraduates have proven to score below average. It is evident now that, on the whole, majority of ECE undergraduate's English Language proficiency are still deficient and may contribute to the reasons why students are unable to be proficient in this language and are still straining with their English language use even after inordinate amount of time of learning English in their primary years till in institution of higher education.

As mentioned in introduction, our graduate's incompetence to speak effectively in English is deemed to be one the factors of poor employability. Malaysian Employer Federation (2020) indicated the need for graduates to improve their English proficiency to become more employable and the government urged all the sectors to address the issue. Tertiary institutions emphasized equal importance to English language across the courses provided. Maszlee Malik (2018) stressed the importance of English and stated the eagerness to collaborate to provide English language training for teachers here. He pointed out that the reason behind Malaysian students' poor grasp of English is due to the quality of the subject's syllabus in schools. This was proven, looking back at the findings for this study. He also stated that the importance of the English language would be emphasised in Malaysian schools, while also giving equal importance to other languages. His ministry also proposed having English language and Bahasa Malaysia days across schools on a weekly basis, to encourage students to use both languages.

Jun (2019) reported that he believed that National Union of The Teaching Profession (NUTP) could help remedy the situation by stopping to blame other factors and recognise that poor proficiency among teachers was among the main problems. From the statement above, it can be established that various factors are affecting or problems faced by teachers and students in mastering the language. There should be a research or study and focuses on challenges that student's face and strategies that teachers can apply in their teaching and learning processes.

Challenges faced by ECE undergraduates in using English language

On the basis of the data analysis found for this research, there are various challenges faced by ECE undergraduates in using English language. Majority of the respondents agreed that having the motivation to speak and confidence as influencing factors. The highest mean ($M=3.64$; $SD=.481$) is for the variable motivation to speak and the second highest factor is lack of confidence ($M=3.62$; $SD=.552$).

One of the affective factors found by Lestari, H. (2018) is motivation. The study also added that to achieve the excellent goals in English speaking, students have to increase their motivation. The study meant that lecturer play important roles in stimulating support and motivation to the students. Moreover, the study added self-confidence as an important thing to encourage students' speaking ability. Haidari (2016) found that lack of confidence is at highest factors affecting undergraduates speaking using EL. This shows early childhood education teacher have a very low level of self-confidence to teach English and it may be due to non-English optioned early childhood education teacher in English or lack of knowledge in teaching English especially in aspects of content knowledge and pedagogy (Nur Nazuha Beevi Abdul Aziz & Nordin Mamat, 2017).

The findings show that the second majority of the respondents agreed that topical knowledge affected student's speaking performance ($M= 3.37$; $SD= .710$). and lack of listeners' support ($M= 3.36$; $SD= .739$). affect their speaking performances. Tuan and Mai (2016) explained that speakers play the role of both listeners and speakers, and that if they could not understand what is said, students could not respond. That is to say, speaking is connected very closely with listening.

Based on the findings, students were feeling pressured to perform well ($M= 3.32$; $SD= .596$) during their speaking task. Harmer (2015) also agrees that fluency refers to the focus on the content of speech to communicate as effectively as possible. Even with constant consideration and significance of aspect of accuracy in English language speaking, more attention is drawn to the aspect of fluency especially in achieving communicative purposes in conversations (Shahini and Shahamirian, 2017). Fluency is the use of naturally occurring language when a speaker engages and maintains meaningful communication despite limitations in one's communicative competence.

In addition, feedback given during speaking task influence their speaking performances ($M= 3.3.14$; $SD= .680$) and time allowed to perform a speaking task ($M= 3.11$; $SD= .756$). Lestari (2018) also mentioned that preparation time and time allowed to speak or start a conversation plays a part in their speaking. It were discussed that during speaking activities, the lecturer must give importance to provide feedback and some correction to the students' mistakes indirectly.

The respondents strongly believed that they lack in listening ability ($M= 3.29$; $SD= .585$). Hamad (2013) felt that student's rarely listen to any conversation or listening practices to help with listening skills and understanding the knowledge. Bozorgian (2012) investigated the relationship between listening skill and the other language skills. The results revealed that there is correlation between listening comprehension and language proficiency which concluded as the higher the listening ability, the better the speaking skills are.

Next, time for preparation given for speaking in English affected student's speaking performance ($M= 3.00$; $SD= .581$). Lestari (2018) agreed that the students who prepared their task well, were ready to talk than those who didn't. From the studies, it looked like the students did not prepare well and this affected their ability to speak directly. Derakhshan, Khalili and Beheshti (2016) agreed that most of EL learners are stressed out in class (Liu, 2006) especially when they speak in class without any or not enough preparation. Hamad (2013) stated students doesn't have enough time to prepare and to practice their speaking skills.

Most the respondents agreed that having they were worried of making mistakes and fearful of criticism as their main problem. The highest mean ($M= 3.20$; $SD= .584$) is for the variable worried of making mistakes and the second highest factor is fearful of criticism ($M= 3.17$; $SD= .783$). Tuan and Mai (2015) stated one of the problems their respondents faced were worried about making mistakes and fearful of criticism. Heriansyah (2012) discovered that student's faced being afraid of making errors. Among all the number of causes of difficulties found in this study, it can be concluded that most students stated that 'being afraid of making errors' was their main problem.

Nearly more than half undergraduates agreed that that they tend to use their first language more ($M= 3.08$; $SD= .864$) than English language and those who picked this answer showed that the first language was not English. Not only that, it was found that they mix languages ($M= 3.07$; $SD= .832$) when it comes to speaking. Haidari (2016) found that students could prepare presentation slides in English but they tend to mix languages and use their first language more when presenting. It was also observed that most students begin with EL to answer questions or to ask questions to lecturer and then end up by using their mother tongue owing to multiple hesitations. The findings also showed that students couldn't think of anything to say ($M= 2.99$; $SD= .695$) before speaking. Derakhshan, et al., (2016) saw that students become too nervous till they become tongue-tied or lost for words which affect speaking overall.

Being shy and embarrassed ($M= 2.89$; $SD= .827$) were also a part of student's problem to speak using EL. During classroom observation by Haidari (2016), student's complained about being shy using EL and Tuan and Mai (2015) stated that one of the problems is inhibition. When the students want to say something in the classroom they sometimes feel so embarrassed and shy. Huwari (2019) found that the student's major problem (91.6%) was a limited vocabulary. The mean for limited vocabulary was $M= 2.71$; $SD= .864$ for this study.

The respondents chose that they do not have the motivation to express themselves ($M= 2.52$; $SD= .810$). Haidari's study (2016) also showed that students appear reluctant to use EL because they feel uncomfortable. So, they feel unmotivated use EL deliver their thoughts. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) when given tasks to speak, students are unable to remember anything and have no motivation to express themselves.

Some respondents chose that they speak very little or not at all ($M=2.22$; $SD= .845$) and that they are teased for speaking the language which is the the lowest mean ($M= 2.09$; $SD= .920$). Haidari (2016) also found the number of respondents who are afraid of being laughed and mocked by their friends in case of mispronouncing some words. Huwari (2019) stated that 58.3% of respondents said that they do not have a chance to speak in a large group and that is why they speak very little or sometimes not at all.

Given the above, most of the undergraduate's speaking fluency were affected by linguistic and non-linguistic factors. The process of becoming fluent speaker takes time. To overcome those challenges, students must enjoy the teaching and learning process in the class. Teaching and learning strategies or approach ought to address these challenges. This is evident with Krashen's (2013) second language acquisition (SLA) theory where he mentioned that students were best equipped for second-language acquisition success with high motivation, self-confidence, good self-image, low anxiety and extroversion. He explained that in SLA, these challenges form a mental block that inhibits the acquisition of comprehensible input. Therefore, when the challenges disrupt language acquisition.

Implication of the research

A child's early years are the basis for his or her adult growth, offering a solid foundation for lifelong learning and holistic development. Well-established research tends to stress the value of early childhood education as a crucial building block for a child's potential progress. Undergraduates of Early Childhood Education must understand the importance of early learning. It should not be accepted if undergraduates who are going to teach young generation

(young language learners) to speak when they themselves are inadequate in such skills. Teaching and learning strategies that assists in overcoming those challenges must be implemented in tertiary institutions. This study proven that the undergraduates still need guidance and tutor especially in speaking skills. Just like teachers play important part in children development, lecturers too must take part in undergraduate's communication skills. Effective communication creates and promotes a healthy learning atmosphere where students can succeed, thrive and learn. Consequently, they will grow personally (advanced communication- speaking skills) and professionally (as caregiver, teacher or etc). Not only that, professional learning communities encourage teachers (undergraduates) to plan lessons together and learn from one another. Together, they are able to take a team approach when problem-solving, especially for difficult students.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasized in English language use and problems faced by undergraduates in Early Childhood Education course. The study discovered challenges that affected their speaking proficiency and performance. Steps must be taken to address and solve each of the challenges with the intention of improving ECE undergraduates speaking proficiency. Future research focusing on teaching and learning strategies should be conducted to find possible solutions in overcoming the challenges. Throughout the research, it is important to make sure that the Early Childhood Education undergraduates have better English language speaking skills in order to teach children (young language learners). It is evident that, this research needed to be conducted in the field of speaking skills and factors influencing speaking skills. Ultimately, in order for Malaysia to compete globally and to prepare the future generation for rigors required for modern workforce, children must develop the skills necessary to enhance their professional skills.

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