

Linguistic Competence of Malaysian Medical Students in the United Kingdom from the Context of the Organic Grammar Framework

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Abstract – *The case study examined the linguistic competence of Malaysian medical students in the United Kingdom from the perspective of the Organic Grammar framework. A case study was conducted with seven Malaysians enrolled in a medical or dentistry degree programme. Picture description tasks were used to elicit constructions of questions and sentences, which were analysed for complexity and grammaticality using the Organic Grammar framework. The participants produced 573 questions (90% simple and 10% complex), and errors were found in one-third of the simple questions and half of the complex questions. They relied on Wh-questions (53%) more than Yes/No questions (38%) and other types of questions (9%). The analysis of the morpho-syntactic level of sentences using Young-Scholten, Ijuin, and Vainikka's (2005) Organic Grammar framework, showed that the participants were mostly at Stage 4. Although medical students are known to have the best English proficiency, the study showed that their linguistic competence resembles the target language but does not show the morphological range of native speakers and the subordination constructions tend to be simple. Copyright © 2016 Penerbit Akademia Baru - All rights reserved.*

Keywords: linguistic competence, international students, organic grammar

1.0 INTRODUCTION

International students constitute a huge portion of the student population in countries like Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. The enrolment of international students has been steadily increasing over the years [1]. Universities which experience funding cuts take in more full fee-paying international students but they have to contend with particular problems associated with international students and their different backgrounds. One main area of concern is the English language proficiency of international students who further their studies in English-speaking countries because inadequate proficiency affects the students' ability to study successfully, acculturate to the new environment, and seek employment upon graduation. For example, there is a significant relationship between overall TOEFL score and GPA for 1,095 international students studying at the New York State University at Albany [2]. Because of this, researchers have been studying the English language proficiency of international students and effects on various aspects of the students' life, even in Malaysia which is increasing intake of international students because of the push for university ranking [3,4,5].

Researchers have found that the English language proficiency of international students is not adequate. For example, some university lecturers even engaged in soft marking to increase the marks of international students in Australia because they were not on par with the local students [6]. Even though the undergraduate students have to meet the minimum entry IELTS score of 6.0 to 6.5 for entry into undergraduate programmes and 6.5 for entry into postgraduate programmes in Australia, these are barely adequate for them to cope with their studies. The results of a study based on interviews with Australian academics showed that some problems arising from the inadequate English language skills of international students are plagiarism and the pressure to pass fee-paying students which compromises academic standards [7].

Studies on Malaysian university students have shown that they have problems in linguistic competence, even for simple subject-verb agreement when writing narrative and argument essays [8]. However, this is not surprising because English majors in Thailand also make mistakes in subject-verb agreement and other grammatical features such as articles, verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, preposition and modal/auxiliaries when writing descriptions and narratives [9]. If linguistic incompetence is evident in writing tasks where there is time to correct grammatical errors, then errors are more likely to appear in spoken English. Graduating UiTM students in accountancy and administrative science frequently omitted words, used redundant words or made inappropriate lexical choice errors [10] – evidence of inadequate linguistic competence. They also made frequent noun number errors due to the influence of Malay. The findings of another study concur on the lack of oral linguistic competence among Malaysian university students. Their common errors are in prepositions, question formation, articles, plural form of nouns, subject-verb agreement and tense [11]. The linguistic competence problems already exist among secondary school students, according to 27 English teachers teaching in Malaysian schools, and the students have more problems with speaking and writing than listening and reading [12]. Their problem with vocabulary underlies their inadequacies in language skills. In Asian countries like Indonesia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam and Japan, schools emphasise teaching of English grammar but students had few opportunities to use the language outside the classroom in their home countries [13]. Even students from China studying in the United States do not speak much English on a daily basis [14].

However, Malaysian students who pursue popular degree programmes like medicine tend to have better English language proficiency because they need to have top scores for all subjects, including English. Medicine is among the top 10 degree programmes in the United Kingdom [15], and the third most popular course in Malaysia [16]. They may obtain top grades in the English subject but the question is whether Malaysian students who are in medical degree programmes have linguistic competence comparable to that of native speakers of English. In fact, the English proficiency of some undergraduate medical students in the medical faculty of the University of Adelaide, Australia are not adequate for satisfactory academic and clinical performance [17]. Instead of using grades in the English subject to gauge English proficiency, an alternative is to view the linguistic competence of medical students in the context of the Organic Grammar framework. Hitherto, what is known about the linguistic competence of Malaysian medical students are their writing ability, for example, they write narratives with better coherence and cohesion than arguments [18].

The study examined the linguistic competence of Malaysian medical students in the United Kingdom from the perspective of the Organic Grammar framework. The specific aspects studied were:

1. structure of question formation;
2. sentence structure; and
3. linguistic competence at the morpho-syntactic level using Organic Grammar framework.

Linguistic competence in this paper is seen in the context framework of Organic Grammar (henceforth OG).

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The theoretical framework of the study is the framework of Organic Grammar for the development of morphology and syntax [19]. This framework positions the second language learner (L2) as beginning with basic native-language syntax and with non-finite verbal morphology. Such forms include the infinitive “eat” and the participle “eating”, in the following examples [20]:

- Stage 1a: L1 Japanese object-verb order
bread eat
bananas eating
- Stage 1b: L2 English verb-object order
eating banana
wash your hand

This initial stage sees the development of basic L2 word order (1b) from transferred first-language word order (1a), but at both these basic stages functional elements such as copula “is”, auxiliary “is”, modals, past tense “-ed”, and agreement “-s” are all missing, along with pronominal subjects and subordinate clauses.

An earlier stage is much like the one-word stage of children learning their first language [21], is named as Stage 0, characterised by utterances such as “Bicycle” and “One boy” [22]. Adult classroom learners particularly use longer memorised or unanalysed chunks such as My name is X [21]. According to OG, initially the learner relies on native language syntax, then the syntax and the inflectional morphology of the L2 begins to develop, following a common order for all learners of a given L2. Development is driven by internal linguistic mechanisms, in response to the linguistic input the learner receives. Table 1 illustrates developmental Stages 1 to 5 in OG [19]) but the examples used in this article are from the present study.

The Organic Grammar framework stipulates that the learner’s use of a new morphological form does not mean it is productive [19]. A learner’s use of a form in more than one context or with more than one verb (as in the case of an inflectional suffix such as past tense “-ed” or third person singular “-s” is necessary to assess productivity. The continued non-target use of some forms at later stages can be due to their absence in the learner’s first language. Adult L2 learners whose native languages lack the article system will not acquire the English article system [22].

Table 1: Criteria for stages in L2 English according to Organic Grammar

Stage	Word order in declaratives	Types of verbs	Verbal agreement; tense marking	Pronouns	Complex syntax
1	initially resembles that of the native language	main verbs only	None	pronouns absent	None
2	resembles the native language	main verbs; copula "is" appears	None	pronouns forms begin to emerge	formulaic or intonation-based questions
3	resembles the target language	main verbs, modals; copula forms beyond "is"	no agreement; some tense, some aspect, but not productive	more pronoun forms, but they can still be missing	Formulaic questions or without inversion; conjoined clauses
4	resembles the target language	main verbs, modals, copula forms beyond "is"; range of auxiliaries emerges	productive tense, aspect; agreement with "be" forms	pronouns obligatory, "there" and existential "it" emerge	productive questions, but may still lack inversion; simple subordination
5	resembles the target language	complex tense, aspect forms; passives; range of main verbs, modals, auxiliaries	forms usually correct, apart from those newly attempted	use of "there" and "it" beyond stock phrases	all questions with inversion; complex subordination

3.0 METHOD

The data for this paper were from a case study on the linguistic competence of Malaysian medical students in an English-speaking country. A case study was deemed to be a suitable research design because the phenomenon that is being investigated is bound to the contexts in which the language is used. The linguistic competence of the participants is influenced by the amount of exposure to English in their home background and school environment. Therefore, although the data were analysed and presented using numbers, the researchers took a closer look at particular participants at various points in the presentation of the results to offer a holistic analysis of the linguistic competence of the participants.

3.1 Participants

The seven participants selected for the study were Malaysians accepted into the medical and dental degree programmes, which are top ranked degree programmes, which meant that their linguistic competence in English is at the upper end of the range of competency based on

standardised English tests. The small sample size was due to the circumstances as the number of Malaysian students in the medical and dental degree programmes for Newcastle University for that cohort was small, and almost all of them had agreed to participate in the study. Although the sample cannot represent the population of Malaysian medical and dental students studying in the United Kingdom, the sample shows the diversity in age of initial exposure to English, daily English usage and exposure to English and English proficiency scores based on standardised tests.

Table 2: Participants' IELTS score

Participant	IELTS overall score	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing
1	7.5	9	7	7	7
2	7.5	8.5	8.5	6	6
3	6 (IB)				
4	7.5	8.5	7	7	8
5	9	9	9	9	9
6	8.0	9	8.5	7	7
7	7.5	7.5	7.5	7	7

*IB stands for International Baccalaureate where a 6 (IB) in English B Standard Level is highly likely to meet the criteria in the four domains of reading, writing, listening and speaking comparable with TOEFL and IELTS requirements.

Table 2 shows that the IELTS band scores of the participants were at the higher end (Bands 7.5 to 9), well above the minimal entry requirements for international students in the United Kingdom. At the time of the study, the seven participants studying at the Newcastle University in the United Kingdom for either a degree course in medicine or dentistry were aged 19 to 20. They had studied English as a second language in school for 12 to 14 years. The participants were first timers in a foreign country, except for P5 who was in Britain for a year when he was six years old. Table 3 shows the amount of exposure to English in social and school settings. Age of initial exposure to English is based on the subjects' first exposure to English and not the age of beginning formal instruction in English; the number of years learning English is based on the latter. The two are different in that a child who may be exposed to English in his/her early years would therefore receive a lot of input in it if his parents adopt English as their first language in spite of their mother tongue(s).

Table 3: Participants' exposure to English in social and school settings

Participant	Age of initial exposure	Present English usage (hours per day)	Exposure to English in social domain (hours per week)		Medium of instruction in school		
			Heard	Spoken	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
1	6	5-10	2-8	2-8	Malay	Malay	English
2	9	>10	2-8	< 2	Mandarin	Malay	English
3	6	<5	< 2	< 2	Malay	Malay	English
4	5	5-10	2-8	< 2	Malay	Malay	English
5	1	>10	> 8	< 2	Mandarin	Mandarin & Malay	English
6	3	>10	2-8	< 2	Mandarin	Malay	English
7	6	5-10	>8	2-8	Malay	Malay	English

Of the seven participants, P5 and P7 had the most amount of exposure to English whereas P3 had the least exposure. P5 had English as his first language. He was exposed to English from one year old. At age six he was brought to Britain for a year by his parents and after returning to Malaysia he was encouraged to use mainly Mandarin at home and went to a Mandarin medium primary and secondary school with English as a subject until he was fifteen years old in Form Three. After the Lower Secondary School public examination, he continued his upper secondary education in a Malay medium school. This was when he started using English again at sixteen. His tertiary education was in the United Kingdom. Most of his time in his childhood he said was spent on reading as his parents often took him to the library to borrow books.

However, the primary exposure to English for other participants is their school. For example, P3 came into contact with English when he went to kindergarten, and English was hardly used in his social domains (less than 2 hours per week). Consequently, he also did not speak more than five hours of English per day although he was in the United Kingdom at the time of the study. P3 did not feel comfortable speaking English because he had studied in Malay medium primary and secondary schools. Although P3's International Baccalaureate score was 6, his exposure to English in Malaysia was minimal before he came to the United Kingdom for his tertiary education.

3.2 Instrument

To find out the linguistic competence of the participants, their ability to formulate grammatical sentences and questions was analysed. A picture description task [19] was used to elicit data on their oral use of English. The task required the participants to look at pictures of a story presented using PowerPoint slides and describe them. The pictures showed how a boat started to move along a fast current in a river towards a bridge and then went underneath it before turning upright on the other side of the bridge. Their written descriptions were analysed for the complexity of sentence structures.

Following this, oral data were also elicited for Wh-question formation using 10 unrelated photographs which had a point of intrigue. The pictures were used to stimulate ideas for the participants to ask questions about what they saw were happening in each of the pictures. The scenes in the pictures depicted a story, for example, in one picture there was an unusual car accident in which one car flew over and landed on top of another car in a house garage. In the other pictures, the participants had to ask questions about how a child got his foot stuck in a toilet bowl which was stored in a storage room, or why there was an army tank in a secluded area with soldiers looking not quite puzzled. One picture was shown at a time and the participants were asked to pose as many questions as they could about the picture. The researcher provided minimal answers to acknowledge their responses to encourage them to ask more questions. The question formation task was not timed.

3.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

To analyse the structure of questions formed in the picture description task, the questions were categorised into Wh-questions, Yes/No questions and others, i.e. one or two word phrases in rising question intonation. Next, the complexity of the questions were analysed to identify complex (C) and simple (S) sentences. Subsequently, the questions were analysed to identify grammatical and ungrammatical (indicated with an asterisk*) structures. The frequency and

percentage of grammatical questions were calculated. Table 5 presents the results on the structure of questions formed by the participants.

To analyse the complexity of the sentence structures produced in the picture description task, the steps used by Young-Scholten, Ijuin, and Vainikka (2005) were used. Each sample was scrutinised for:

- a) coordination, simple subordination and complex subordination;
- b) purely grammatical subjects “it” and “there” – non-referential use;
- c) declarative clauses in which something other than a subject was initial;
- d) constructions that include elements other than a subject in initial position (e.g. passives)

Sentences which consist of an agent subject, a verb and an object were categorised as simple sentences. Three types of complex sentences were identified from the analysis. Firstly, structures with relative clauses that omit the relative pronouns. For instance, “Across the river is a bridge, built of metal (P6)” and “Observed a series of pictures on a boat magically making its way through a bridge (P5)”. Secondly, sentences that contain existential subjects “it” and “there” are more complex syntactically as these are used to fill up positions as required in English for syntactic reasons [19]. Thirdly, sentence initials that are filled by non-subject words such as a prepositional phrase or an adverb – displacement of an element and a syntactic substitution for that element. The frequencies of sentence types, verb forms, initial non-subject sentences and “There/It” sentences were calculated.

Table 4: Guide for analysing morpho-syntax level of sentences produced in picture description task

Stage of organic grammar	Definition	Example
Stage 1-type utterances	None, simple	Boat hit bridge
Stage 2-type utterances	None; simple; formulaic or intonation-based Qs	Boat go fast. It hit bridge.
Stage 3-type utterances	Limited morphology; co-ordination	Boat hit the bridge and fall down and people looked that boat.
Stage 4-type utterances	Some morphology; simple subordination	First we saw the white ship goes to hit the bridge. I see a ship which was down to the river and pass the bridge and come out to other side river.
Stage 5-type utterances	Morphological range; complex subordination	I am so happy that I found my grandfather and grandmother in their store. I was in the river contoured with beautiful green trees.

To assess the morpho-syntactic level of the participants' language, the Organic Grammar framework was used [19] (Table 1). From this framework, a guide for analysing morpho-syntactic level in the questions and sentences produced in the picture description task, as shown in Table 4. Based on the morpho-syntax features shown in the participants' constructions, percentages were calculated and the participants were categorised as Stage 1 to Stage 5 accordingly. As the picture could be described in both the past and present tenses, sentences containing either one of these tenses were considered grammatical. However, constructions with a mixture of both tenses were considered ungrammatical.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Structure of Question Formation

A complex question in this particular analysis is a question that has subordination with a complementizer phrase or an adjunct. Table 5 shows that the seven participants did not produce many complex questions. Out of 573 constructions, 10.3% were complex questions and 89.7% of simple constructions. Almost half (4.5%) of the complex questions were ungrammatical and 5.8% were grammatical. As for the simple questions, only one third (23.4%) were ungrammatical (66.3% were grammatical). In this task, ungrammaticality constitutes errors in tense, agreement, singular/plural, missing auxiliaries, missing copula, articles, wrong question markers, wrong question tags and also subject-verb inversion – but not ones that seem to violate Universal Grammar (UG) constraints if these were to be considered Subjacency and Empty Category Principle [23]. In this study, the purpose was to determine whether their participants were able to identify grammaticality and whether they knew that Wh-movement is allowed out of embedded clauses and noun phrases in English. The ungrammatical sentences were aimed at testing knowledge of restrictions on Wh-movement in English.

The frequency and percentage for questions will now be analysed according to the types of questions. Out of the total of 573 questions, 53.1% (or 304) were Wh-questions, of which a majority was grammatical (69.1% or 210). To provide a better idea of the Wh-questions produced by the participants, some examples of complex and grammatical questions from P5 are given:

1. Why is the other car there if it's an accident?
2. If it's a set up, then how did they get this whole thing 'cause they don't look like really horrible?
3. How far away are they from help do you think?

When the complexity of the Wh-questions was analysed, the results showed that the participants produced mostly simple Wh-questions (277 or 91.1%). For simple Wh-questions, the participants produced more grammatical questions (195) than ungrammatical questions (82). For complex questions, they produced equally as many grammatical (15) and ungrammatical (12) Wh-questions. These results indicate that although the participants were capable of forming Wh-questions using the correct grammar, these were mostly simple questions and they had some problems with complex questions.

The major errors in Wh-questions produced during the picture description task were subject-verb inversion (Example 4), subject-verb agreement (Example 5) and Wh-question word (Example 6).

4. *Why he's looking up if his eyes open?(P3)
 5. *What kind of method have he used to ask for help when he was stuck there? (P6)
- *What are the family members around him that can help him out? (P6)

Table 5: Frequency and percentage for types of questions produced in picture description task

Particip- pant	Sentence complexity	Types of questions formed						Fre- quency
		Wh- Questions		Yes-No Questions		Others		
		Gram (%)	Ungram (%)	Gram (%)	Ungra m (%)	Gram (%)	Ungram (%)	
1	Complex	7 (7.3)	3 (4.1)	2 (2.1)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	96
	Simple	28 (28.2)	11 (11.5)	27 (28.1)	11 (11.4)	6 (6.3)	1 (1.0)	
2	Complex	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.1)	4 (4.4)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	91
	Simple	36 (39.6)	30 (32.9)	15 (16.5)	4 (4.4)	1 (1.1)	0 (0.0)	
3	Complex	0 (0.0)	2 (2.6)	3 (3.8)	5 (6.4)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	78
	Simple	20 (25.6)	10 (12.8)	14 (18.0)	12 (15.4)	10 (12.8)	2 (2.6)	
4	Complex	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (3.2)	3 (4.8)	3 (4.8)	0 (0.0)	63
	Simple	11 (17.4)	4 (6.3)	22 (34.9)	9 (14.3)	8 (12.7)	1 (1.6)	
5	Complex	6 (5.2)	1 (1.0)	7 (6.1)	2 (1.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	115
	Simple	37 (32.2)	2 (1.7)	48 (41.7)	5 (4.3)	7 (6.1)	0 (0.0)	
6	Complex	1 (2.5)	4 (10.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	40
	Simple	22 (55.0)	8 (20.0)	1 (2.5)	3 (7.5)	1 (2.5)	0 (0.0)	
7	Complex	1 (1.1)	2 (2.2)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	90
	Simple	41 (45.6)	17 (18.9)	15 (16.7)	4 (4.4)	10 (11.1)	0 (0.0)	
Total	Complex	15 (2.6)	12 (2.1)	15 (2.6)	14 (2.4)	3 (0.5)	0 (0.0)	573
	Simple	195 (34.0)	82 (14.3)	142 (24.8)	48 (8.4)	43 (7.5)	4 (0.7)	
Overall total		304 (53.1)		219 (38.2)		50 (8.7)		573 (100.0)

Note: "Gram" refers to grammatical sentences and "Ungram" refers to ungrammatical sentences

In Example 4, the participant posed a Wh-question by attaching a Wh-word in front of a declarative sentence without inverting the subject and verb. Example 5 shows a subject-verb agreement error in that the plural form of the verb “have” was used instead of its singular form “has” with the singular subject “he”. In Example 6, “who” would be appropriate in this context rather than “what”.

Results for the Wh-question response type are also reflected in the Yes/No type questions with the same kind of errors where ungrammaticality is concerned. Altogether, 219 Yes/No questions were produced by the participants, which is 38.2% of the total 573 questions. For Yes/No type questions, the participants produced more of the simple Yes/No question type (170) than the complex type (29), which accounts for 33.2% and 5.0% of the total number of questions produced respectively. For simple Yes/No questions, two thirds were grammatical (24.8%) and one third was not grammatical (8.4%). For complex Yes/No questions, the participants also produced equally as many grammatical and ungrammatical questions, like in the case of the Wh-questions.

Examples 7 and 8 show that the participants can produce complex and grammatical Yes/No questions and they were usually questions to ask for opinions:

1. Don't you think that it's gross or something? (P7)
2. So was it because you think the car was so frozen that it couldn't do it? (P5)

As with the Wh-questions, the participants produced more or less similar kind of errors for Yes/No questions and these were mainly were subject-verb inversion (Example 9), subject-verb agreement (Example 10) and Wh-question word (Example 11). Example 12 shows that the participant produced the past tense form of the main verb instead of its base form as required in constructing a question with an auxiliary verb.

3. *Do you have an idea where is this place? (P4)
4. Do you think it hurt? (P7)
5. Mm... what do you think people would feel when they pass by and see him sleeping there? (P4)
6. *Did he wanted to do so? (P6)

Questions other than Wh- and Yes/No questions account for only 8.7% of 573 questions produced by the seven participants in the picture description task. These include, “Too fast?” “What race?” and “You think real or not?”

What is difficult to say at this point is why the test subjects did not produce as many complex questions or sentences. “Avoidance” strategy could have been deployed by the test subjects perhaps they just did not see the purpose to ask complex questions or formulate complex sentences, perhaps the stimuli that were utilized did not invoke much curiosity in them. So it could be that they have the linguistic competence to form complex questions and sentences, but they just did not use it – a matter of usage. On the other hand, it may be that they are not competent enough to form such complex questions thus almost always resorting to simple ones.

4.2 Sentence Structure

Table 6 shows that altogether 75 sentences were produced by the participants to describe the pictures. Of these 18 were simple sentences, five were coordination sentences and 18 were complex sentences. The other 34 were incomplete sentences and not included in Table 6. These tertiary students showed that they were able to produce complex and grammatical sentences. This can be substantiated by their ability to produce initial non-subject sentences (41) and “There/It” (17) sentences (Table 6). They also made few errors in all the verb types they produced: 16 errors out of 122 clauses with main verbs; three errors out of 34 clauses with copula verbs; four errors out of 29 clauses with auxiliary verbs. On average, the participants made one error in 10 instances of using verbs, regardless of the type of verb.

From Table 6, P3 can be singled out as one who has little morphology and yet with errors (of missing auxiliaries) and no existential subjects. About 42% (8 out of 19) of his main verbs contained tense and agreement errors. His sentence structures were mostly simple (4 sentences) with one coordination sentence and no complex sentence type at all. His attempt to produce a complex sentence failed when he did not make the necessary verb inflection as shown in the Examples 13 and 14.

13. But the strange thing is, the immersed boat then starts to surface again, return back to its initial position.
14. Return back to its initial position, it sails away back to remain undecided destination again.

Table 6: Frequency of sentence constructs in picture description task

Partic- -pant	No. of sentences	Sentence types			Main verb s	Copul a verbs	Auxiliar y verbs	There / It	Initial non- subjec t
		Simple	Coordinatio n	Comple x					
1	12	1	2	2	18 (1)	4 (0)	10 (1)	1	9
2	12	2	1	5	14 (0)	6 (1)	6 (1)	5	8
3	11	4	1	0	19 (8)	3 (1)	1 (1)	0	4
4	12	4	0	1	13 (0)	8 (0)	2 (0)	5	7
5	7	2	0	5	20 (1)	4 (0)	3 (1)	1	3
6	12	1	1	3	18 (1)	3 (1)	3 (0)	1	6
7	9	4	0	2	22 (5)	6 (0)	4 (0)	4	4
Total	75	18	5	18	122 (16)	34 (3)	29 (4)	17	41

Note: For verbs, the number of errors is indicated in brackets.

P4 made only one complex sentence. She produced some morphology with no errors indicating that she was quite productive in tense use. But her use of copula is limited to “is” and “are”-modals or use of other auxiliaries were not evident in her short piece of writing. She used a lot of “there” in her sentences and she produced a reasonable number of initial-non subject

sentences. It must be said though that P4 tended to produce simpler sentences and henceforth reducing the chance of making errors.

Both P1 and P7 produced two counts of complex sentences respectively. P7 had more simple sentences (4) than complex ones while P1 has only one simple sentence. The latter also has fewer use of existentials. Their morphological range is relatively good and although P1 had one error in the use of auxiliary, it is due to an omission error. P7, however, had some errors in his use of main verbs particularly in the use of tense (present tense), progressive, where the main verbs were not inflected as in Example 15:

15. Anyway, there was this one huge boat, suddenly run out of control, and just bending towards one side like almost sink

Both P1 and P7 attempted to produce complex subordinate sentences but they ran the risk of making more mistakes when compared with P4.

The results concur with findings of studies conducted on oral English language skills of Malaysian students studying in Malaysian universities. For example, Hassan et al. (2009) reported that noun number errors, missing words, redundant word and lexical choice were the most frequent errors produced by UiTM students in oral interactions. Similarly, the less proficient university students frequently produced errors in prepositions, question formation, articles, plural form of nouns, subject-verb agreement and tense in their oral interactions [11]. The findings also revealed that the common modification of target forms were misinformation and omission, whereas addition of elements or misordering were less frequent. It can be argued that these subject-verb agreement and other errors are due to speech and not due to faulty grammatical knowledge. However, other studies on grammatical errors in written English have shown that subject-verb agreement is a common mistake in academic writing done by university students in Malaysia [8] and Thailand [9]. Besides subject-verb agreement, the other grammatical errors found in the narrative and descriptive writing of Thai university students majoring in English, and therefore considered more proficient than Thai students in other degree programmes, were articles, verb tense, word choice, sentence structure, preposition, modal/auxiliaries. This is similar to the errors in spoken interactions made by the Malaysian students studying in medical and dentistry degree programmes in the United Kingdom. To find out whether grammatical errors are similar in spoken and written use of English, further studies eliciting both types of data from the same individual are needed to attain a more holistic understanding of linguistic competence of university students in English.

4.3 Linguistic Competence at the Morpho-SyntacticL using Organic Grammar Framework

Based on the Organic Grammar criteria for stages in L2 English, only P5 was at Stage 5 and P3 was at Upper 3/Lower 4. The other participants were at Stage 4. P5 is placed at Stage 5 as he is very much advanced if compared to the others. Placing P1, P2, P4, P6 and P7 on the OG stages was not easy. They appeared to be in Stage 4, but each of them was actually at different levels for the different items they had produced. Having sub-levels in some of the stages would make assessing learners linguistic competence more definitive.

P5's placement at OG level 5 appeared to correspond with his IELTS results of 9. The rest of the participants, whose English test scores ranged from 7.5 to 8 and one with a 6 in IB, can be

interpreted as in congruent with their OG placements. However, there are some reservations about their performance. It is difficult to tell whether these participants were not producing complex syntax because they were not able to or because they chose to avoid doing so. The tasks set upon them were not extensive enough to their use of other auxiliaries apart from “be”. Their written samples were too short or were just one offs to examine their use of aspects and passives. Repeated measures of the test would be able to produce more profound results.

All the same, these participants were mostly at Stage 4 of OG with only one of them at the upper level of Stage 3/lower Stage 4 and the other at Stage 5, which appear compatible with their English test results. Although IELTS or IB, generally assesses the four domains (reading, writing, listening and speaking) while the core of OG is morpho-syntax, the results show that the participants are at quite competent in English. The results challenge stereotypes of international students which are said to have inadequate English language proficiency to cope with university studies in English-speaking countries [2,6,7].

5.0 CONCLUSION

The case study on linguistic competence of international students from Malaysia studying in medical and dentistry degree programmes in the United Kingdom indicates that they were competent in English – challenging the stereotype of international students who have inadequate English language skills. Based on the Organic Grammar framework, the participants were mostly at Stage 4, with one at Stage 5 and another between Stages 3 and 4. Their linguistic competence resembles the target language but does not show the morphological range of native speakers and the subordination constructions tend to be simple rather than complex. Most of the questions they constructed were simple questions, and the percentage of Wh-questions was higher than that for Yes/No questions. As for sentences, the participants produced more simple and complex sentences than coordination sentences. Their clauses were constructed with main verbs rather than copula and auxiliary verbs. There was some use of There/It and non-subject initial sentences. This shows that the Malaysian medical and dental students focused on the main semantic content when they used main verbs, but were not as skilled in conveying meanings of tense, aspect and modality using copula and auxiliary verbs. The errors they made were mainly subject-verb inversion, subject-verb agreement and Wh-question word, which are obvious grammatical errors. However, these types of errors in the participants’ questions and sentences may not affect meaning to the point of incomprehensibility because of contextual cues in the oral interaction. The medical and dentistry university students in this study may not necessarily fall within the stereotype of international students with low English proficiency but they also do not attain the highest stage in L2 English when seen in the framework of Organic Grammar. It is arguable that the findings are based on spoken data, and grammatical structures are not strictly followed in speech. The data were also from a small number of Malaysian students. Further studies can investigate the linguistic competence of international students in a range of degree programmes in various English-speaking countries to find out whether English language proficiency is still an issue despite minimum English entry requirements.

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