

## Using Cross Border Collaboration Project to Encourage English Language Usage among Thai and Malaysian Undergraduate Students

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### ABSTRACT

*People often turn to a second language to communicate when the native language fails to be the medium of communication particularly in international collaboration communication. The second language of choice must be a language that is understood by the speaker and the listener. Correct language usage does leave a good impression in many circumstances but in many collaboration activities, the message matters more than the accuracy of the language use. This paper examines the English language usage among the participants from two universities during a collaborative project. Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) and Rajamangala University of Technology Srivijaya (RUTS) have conducted a collaborative project for their undergraduate students. In order to encourage the use of English language, the participants are restricted to non-Thai speaking for UniMAP students and non-Malay speaking for RUTS students; with exception for a few students who acted as mediators for emergency situations. The use of English language is reported based on the perspectives of the students which have been gathered using questionnaires. Findings show that the program is successful in encouraging the use of English in all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Findings also show that writing skill has the highest English language usage amongst the participants of this program.*

**Keywords:** Collaborative Project, Cross-Border, English Language Teaching.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

English language often emerges as the language of choice to communicate between people who do not share a common native language or a common culture. One often turns to the second language to communicate when the native language fails as the medium of communication, such as in international collaboration communication. However, it is a wonder if the speakers with neighbouring nationalities would resort to communicate in another language such as English or learn each other's language in cross-border collaborations. The use of English is uncertain mainly because the speakers share the same border which denotes similar climate, geographical environment, culture and resources (Suryani, Zubir, Ghazali, Anis & Hakimi, 2019). Such close juxtaposition suggests a ground for both communicators to learn each other's language rather than use a language that originates a thousand of miles away.

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## 2. OBJECTIVES

In Malaysia, English language is viewed as an influential language as it is being used for communication by many nations (Hassan, Angterian, & Yusop, 2017). English language is a compulsory subject in schools for all levels hence an average Malaysian spends about eleven years studying English in school (Ahmad, Adnan, Yusof, Mohd Kamal, & Mustafa Kamal, 2019) however the level of English for professional purpose is often described as unsatisfactory and inadequate (Suryani, Rashid, Hussin, Yaacob, & Hashima, 2016) with the most obvious weakness of the students lay in the area of grammar (Zubir, Ghazali, Ahmad 2011).

While learning English in formal classrooms is structured and well-regulated but it is also described as being prescriptive and implicates many error corrections. Error feedback is useful for the students' improvement but some researchers rejected the proposal for fear of promoting inhibition towards the language (Hamid, Nasri, & Ghazali, 2018). Reducing inhabitation and increasing spontaneity provides naturalness in language learning and this is easier to achieve outside the formal classroom. Harnessing the benefits of learning in a natural setting, universities in Malaysia have been conducting many activities and programs to encourage the use of English language beyond the classroom and away from assessment intent. In relation to this study, the location is in University Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) which is a focus university with more than 25 engineering degree programs that often conduct such activities. English lecturers as ESP practitioners who teach engineering students are faced with challenges originating from many unresolved issues (Ahmad, Muhammad, & Jamil, 2018). Therefore, having activities that promote English language learning in a natural setting is well received by both the students and instructors. This paper reports on the initiatives to use cross-border collaboration projects to encourage English language usage among Thai and Malaysian undergraduate students.

The role of English in Thailand is quite important as it is in many other developing countries however Thailand has always been a country with one official language, Thai. Like many countries in SouthEast Asia, Thailand also places growing emphasis on English language proficiency and language skills. English language proficiency and language skills are becoming more important requirements for recruiting staff, as most of the paper exams and applications are written in English, and the interdepartmental communication such as writing e-mails and presentations are also conducted in English (Nopaddon, 2017). Researchers on the topics of needs and wants of English in workplaces have also suggested that the English curriculum in Thai universities cannot meet the demands for English used in the workplace (Wiryachitra, 2002). In Thailand, the notion that non-native English language users have to attain the 'perfect' level of English like those spoken by native English speakers is not a primary consideration (Suryani, Desa, & Yaacob, 2010). To such an extent the key focus is more on the comprehensibility among these language users in terms of achieving particular communication goals (Rajprasit, & Hemchua, 2015). Recently, English has been described as being increasingly used in Thailand as a lingua franca; that is, a means of communication between people who do not share a mother tongue nor speak English as a native language (Jindapitak, 2019).

Similar to the Malaysian counterparts, the activity was conducted by the university to encourage soft skill practices in a natural setting beyond classroom and assessment purposes. This study examines the English language usage amongst the participants from two universities during the collaborative project. Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) and Rajamangala University of Technology Srivijaya (RUTS) have conducted a collaborative activity for their undergraduate students in the International Soft Skills & Leadership Camp (ISOL) program which is a five-day camp. It was a collaboration between the two universities for the 8th time. The students from UniMAP were from the engineering degree program and the students from RUTS were from a mix of undergraduate programs mainly from the International Business programs and Social Studies. The program was conducted in two phases where the participants spent equal amounts of time in both countries. The first phase lasted for two and a half days and was conducted in Thailand.

The participants were assigned into teams of a mix nationalities and ethnic groups. The tasks delegated required to them to communicate and work together.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Collaboration activities bring many benefits to the participants and the organizing institution. In this context, the activities are hoped to help in advancing the use of English language in the organization. Collaboration activities between nations are known to promote the use of English amongst the participants however, the studies on cross-border activity are mostly on business and entrepreneurship (Anuar, 2020, Zainuddin, Mohd Saifudin, Zalazilah, Bahaudin, & Khalid, 2019) and only a small number explores on the role of English language usage (Yao, Garcia, & Collins, 2019). In this study, twenty-five students from each university participated in the program which was aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To provide participants the opportunity to use English in real-life situations.
- ii. To facilitate activities to enhance the participants' leadership skills.
- iii. To provide international exposure to the participants.

In order to encourage the use of English language usage, the participants were restricted to non-Thai speaking for UniMAP students and non-Malay speaking for RUTS students; with exception for a few students who acted as mediators for emergency situations. The use of English language is reported based on the perspectives of the students which were gathered using a set of questionnaires.

The activities were designed to enhance the natural setting for communication, teamwork and leadership. Some of the activities required the participants to roam in the Songkhla Street Art area where the participants were instructed to find pictures of certain street arts. They were also asked to try out some of the local food. The participants also visited interesting places such as Samila Beach and the Songkhla Aquarium and the folklore museum. The third day was spent on travelling from Thailand to Malaysia.

In Perlis, Malaysia, the participants went hiking at Bukit Lagi which actually means Tamarind Hill. Teamwork and trust among the team members were tested and reinforced in the task of taking care of the team "treasure" which is a piece of cracker biscuit. The next day activity was a Mini-Explorace in Aman Central Mall. The participants were instructed to solve riddles and post the answer on the ISOL's Instagram account. The participants were instructed to capture all of the activities throughout the journey in a video format and the teams were required to present it at the end of this program.

The data was studied using quantitative methods. The analysis of the data was triangulated from observation, questionnaire and interview. The data were collected during the program and most of the data were based mostly on the participants' perceptions. Observations on the Malaysian and Thai students were made during the first day of the program in Malaysia. Both the Malaysian and Thai students were observed during the hiking trip to Bukit Sami particularly during the journey in the bus, the hill climb, and most of the students were collecting materials for their Instagram posting. The most common communication activities that occur in the cross-border collaboration project were observed and the most occurring activities were identified. The purpose was to identify the construct for the questionnaire. Based on the observations, 24 items were chosen.

Apart from the observation, the instrument used to collect the data for the study is a set of questionnaires with 24 questions. The questions used Likert scale to capture the usage of English language between the two groups. The items generated for the questionnaire also derived from a

previous study which is of similar nature cross border collaborative program. Likert scale is used to capture the preference of English variety between the two groups. The questionnaire has two sections. The first section was aimed to capture the perception on how the Thai students used the English language and the second section was aimed to capture the perception on how the Malaysian students use the English language.

The activities listed in the questionnaire were according to the four major skills which were listening, speaking, reading and writing and the participants were required to rate the variety and frequency of English language usage. Some of the activities listed under speaking skill were “Introducing themselves”, “Convincing their group member/s to accept their point of view”, “Discussing the Instagram posts with their group members” and “Interacting with the program participants at meal time”. As for writing skill, the items were on “Writing the Instagram post”, “Writing the Instagram comments”, “Writing messages using the WhatsApp application” and “Writing the video report”. Reading skills items were on “reading information related to the program”, “reading posts on the official Instagram account”, “reading information in public premises in Thailand” and “reading information in public premises in Malaysia”

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from the survey indicated that the program is successful in encouraging the use of English in all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The ratings given by the participants on the apparent language use are illustrated in Table 1. Both Thai and Malaysian participants rated “low use of other languages than English” in activities such as introducing themselves, discussing the activities, expressing themselves during the field trip in Malaysia. The participants reported that there was almost “no use of other languages than English” when they were asking clarification from the facilitators and explaining their ideas to the facilitator.

**Table 1** Language use among the participants

Language usage	Use of other language
1. Introducing themselves.	1.6
2. Discussing the activities.	2.3
3. Expressing themselves during the field trip in Malaysia.	1.8
4. Asking clarification from the facilitators.	0.9
5. Explaining their ideas to the facilitator.	0.8

Findings also showed that writing skill has the highest English language usage. Table 2 shows the ratings on the use of English language usage among the participants. Responses from the participants suggested that almost no other language than English was used when they were writing the Instagram post, writing the Instagram comments and writing the video report. However, writing Whatsapp messages indicate lower use of English language suggesting that the participants have resorted to use their first language (L1) or other languages.

**Table 2** English language use in writing skill among the participants

Language usage for writing skill	Use of English language
1. Writing the Instagram post.	4.8
2. Writing the Instagram comments.	4.8
3. Writing the video report.	4.7
4. Writing WhatsApp messages	3.6

The first language has been viewed as interference in the second language acquisition and mixing the two often leads to misunderstandings and problems in communications (Yacob, & Yunus,

2019; Suryani, Rozilawati, & Sharmini, 2008). Some educators considered resurfacing of the first language as a supporting mechanism for a more effective communication (Sari, & Sari, 2019) for the reason that L1 surfaces to make up for the shortcomings in the second language proficiency. The program is designed in a way that discourages both Malaysian students and Thai Students from using any L1 during interaction hence promoting the use of English Language. Findings from the study indicate low usage of L1 language across the skill. The lowest skill which L1 is reportedly used for is writing skill. The highest percentage reported on the use of L1 is listening skill followed by speaking skill. All in all, the use of L1 is low in this Soft-skill activity, indicating that such activities have achieved its main objectives.

**Table 3** Language usage across the four skills

Language usage across the four skills		Use of L1
1	Listening Skill	3.1
2	Reading Skill	2.1
3	Speaking Skill	2.5
4	Writing Skill	0.4

All the findings indicated that the activities in this cross-border program are successful in promoting English language usage in a natural setting and it is well received by both the students and instructors. The implication from the finding is that any cross-border project with the objective of enhancing English language usage among the participants, must take precaution on the selection of participants. It is necessary for the organizer to eliminate candidates who can speak Malay among the Thais and eliminate those who can speak Thai among the Malaysian participants. Such precaution would support the objective of the project on the use of English language.

Another implication is that direct instruction or supervision from the supervisors is absolutely necessary in securing the objective of the project. Having rules on medium of instruction for writing and presentation prompts and drives the students to use English language on more occasions. Supervision is important to ensure that the program achieves the student mobility objectives which have been well accepted as an avenue for enhancement of students' learning experience as well as character development (Norkhairi, Suryani & Hairol Azmy 2017) However, such supervision must be imparted with care as any approach to be taken during language learning should not create unnecessary stress to learners who come from a variety of linguistics background. (Badrul Hisyam Ahmad & Aznoora Osman 2018 )

Over all, the study found that the use of English language is high in these activities, indicating that the objectives of the program have been fulfilled. Even though sharing the same border denotes sharing similar culture, food, climate and skin colour, English language has emerged as a language of choice particularly when English is used as the medium of instruction, and communication.

In conclusion, the cross-border collaboration program is perceived as a good platform to encourage the use of English language amongst the participants. When conducting cross-border programs that aimed for leadership and international exposure, facilitators of English language must be mindful to encourage and create situations related to English language usage. Such awareness would provide both participants and instructors with more communication opportunities to achieve the program objectives.

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