

# A Preliminary Study on the Curriculum Review of the English Language Courses at Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM

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## ABSTRACT

Curriculum is defined as an articulation of knowledge, skills and attitudes in the context of intentional and organized programmes of study. The content of curriculum may be organised through learning areas and subjects, as well as through activities or tasks. This study focuses on the needs analysis of a curriculum review of English language courses offered by Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM, with consideration to Education 5.0, Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The objectives of the curriculum review and the needs assessment are to validate the curriculum with the contemporary developments in the world. Twenty-four stakeholders from various faculties and industries, as well as representatives of UiTM alumni were invited to a two-day pre-workshop on how the future of language curriculum should be. Their opinions and feedback on the current language skills and courses were recorded and analysed. Thus, common themes were identified. Amongst the suggestions given were to increase opportunities to speak, to build character and image, and to bridge courses based on new media needs. This also includes the need to focus on the ability to discuss and express ideas clearly in group discussions. The implications of this exercise serve as the guideline of a framework for relevant and future language skills and courses, which will fulfil the needs of the 21st century communication skillsets.

**Keywords:** Curriculum review, Curriculum development, Needs analysis, Language curriculum, Tertiary, English language.

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### Highlights of this paper

- This study conducted a comprehensive review on the English language courses of the present curriculum and its implementation through a needs analysis from various stakeholders.
- Twenty-four panelists from the industry and 80 lecturers representing three clusters of Business and Management, Science and Technology, and Social Science and Humanities participated in the study.
- Overall, individual language skills focusing on oral communication skills and speaking fluency were identified as the most common need to be addressed in current English language courses.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is an articulation of knowledge, skills and attitudes in the context of intentional and organized programmes of study. The content of curriculum may be organized through learning areas and subjects, as well as through activities or tasks such as project work. The intended curriculum is usually laid down in a set of documents that may comprise curriculum framework(s); subject curricula/syllabuses; textbooks and other learning resources; teacher guides; assessment guides and others.

One of the main components of any curriculum is the integration of a review to keep the content of the curriculum relevant and abreast with current industrial needs and expectations. This has become especially important at the start of the Industrial 4.0 revolution that has begun to affect the Malaysian industry, requiring future graduates to be competent and capable of keeping up with the changes that will happen in the future.

In the Malaysian context, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) outlined in its ([Programme Standards: Language, 2018](#)) that higher education providers (HEPs) such as UiTM have the obligation to conduct regular curriculum reviews (at least once every two to five years). This should be done through engaging professional bodies, government agencies and the industry ([PSL, 2018](#)).

Thus, in order to address the development in this new era, Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (APB), also known as the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), conducted a comprehensive review on the English language courses of the present curriculum and its implementation through a needs analysis from various stakeholders.

### 1.1. Background of the Study

According to the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) through its Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation (COPPA), advancements in science and technology merged with the growth in knowledge has led the society to make greater demands to higher education institutions. Additionally, the United Nations with its introduction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stated 17 goals focusing on building economic growth and addressing a range social needs including education among others ([www.un.org](http://www.un.org)).

One of the goals identified in the fourth SDG of quality education stated that by 2030, there should be an increase in the number of youth and adults equipped with the required technical and vocational skills needed for employment. This highlights the importance of engaging the industry to identify issues related to workplace skills, specifically in terms of communicative abilities.

The changes proposed by the SDGs together with the changes occurring in relation to Industry 4.0 have led to the need for universities to adapt by becoming dynamic learning organizations that continually reviews its curriculum to stay relevant to the constant changes in the industry ([Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation \(COPPA\), 2008](#)). To address the changes that will occur in Industry 4.0, there have been talks on the implementation of Education 4.0, which aims to equip students with the necessary skills to apply new technology and adapt to the changes in society ([Meylinda et al., 2018](#)). However, UiTM took an additional step by introducing

its own Education 5.0 plan that focused on being human-driven rather than technology-driven to keep ahead of current changes (Nor, 2019) which thus requires a review of the current curriculum to merge both industrial needs and expectations to be aligned with UiTM's plan to keep ahead of current changes.

In order to maintain continual quality improvement (CQI) in the review process for its existing curriculum, higher education providers in Malaysia typically follow the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle, otherwise known as the Deming Cycle (1950, as cited in COPPA (2008)) as detailed in the figure below.



Figure-1. Continual Quality Improvement Cycle.

Source: COPPA (2008).

According to Figure 1, there are four stages to CQI with regard to curriculum development. The first stage, “Plan”, which provides the crucial foundation behind any form of curriculum review, is the stage to set the right direction of what needs to be achieved. According to COPPA (2008) the plan for curriculum review is often influenced by information gathered from the environment through nine common methods that include (but are not limited to) government policies and direction in higher education; global and local market trends (including industry needs and expectations); feedback from internal and external stakeholders, including students; and improvement plans based on the achievement of the implementation of existing strategies or plans.

Next is the “Implement” stage, otherwise known as the “Do” stage, where the plan is implemented according to the set plan. It is important to note that during this stage, continual monitoring and reviewing at the third stage also occurs concurrently with the implementation to identify areas of improvement and ensure the achievement of CQI. Based on the reviewing stage, universities then implement the fourth stage, “Improve”, to enhance the current curriculum based on the review by beginning a new cycle of planning the changes that need to be implemented.

This research in particular concerns the first stage, “Planning” to review the current curriculum of the English language courses offered to the various faculties in UiTM through a needs assessment that was conducted to identify current needs. In this study, APB focused on feedback from the industry and students in line with the requirements set by the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025), which has placed great emphasis on fostering collaboration between universities and the industry for better curriculum design and delivery.

The industry-university collaboration highlighted by the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025) is also targeted to include apprenticeships, hands-on training, real-life simulations, internships, research and specialised employer training programmes (Zulita, 2019). As a response to this, some universities have begun to include

industry experts in curriculum design and development, research and teaching and learning (Zulita, 2019). Moreover, the MQA mandates for a review of every programme with the completion of every cycle, which includes the appointment of a panel from the relevant industry to be part of the curriculum review process (Norhafezah *et al.*, 2018) in order to meet current professional bodies' needs and requirements (COPPA, 2008).

### *1.2. Statement of the Problem*

The world is moving at a fast pace and technology is also changing very rapidly. The job requirements to meet these changes have also evolved accordingly. In light of meeting this current demand, a needs analysis to obtain feedback from various stakeholders needed to be done in the form of a curriculum review.

A curriculum review is an integral part of any programme of study or academic course offered. It is needed to ensure the highest quality of graduates. Based on the needs of the learners, the faculty needs to address the discrepancies between the existing program and the ideal program to match current existing job requirements. According to COPPA (2008) a curriculum review is a comprehensive activity that involves the evaluation of the effectiveness of the program implementation and the holistic achievement of the teaching outcomes. CQI is the main activity in the evaluation. The review process involves several stages: 1) Plan and collect data of the industrial viewpoints, policy planner and alumni; 2) Compare the findings to the program learning outcomes; 3) Identify the gap between the existing and the desired curriculum, and; 4) Suggest intervention strategies to solve the gaps (Norhafezah *et al.*, 2018).

Thus, based on the observed changes in the industry and due to the requirements set by MQA to conduct a review of the curriculum, there was a need to engage with various stakeholders to assess the English language courses offered by APB, especially as the courses were highly related to language competency, professional communication, presentation skills, and a host of other skills and competencies relevant to current industrial changes. Also, the need is crucial as APB services all faculties in UiTM to equip students with these language competencies, in which APB's courses directly impact the quality of the UiTM graduates that will enter the workforce. In conducting a needs assessment, it is hoped that an improved curriculum design will be the outcome to bridge the disparities between new industry demands and the existing academic programmes taught at APB.

### *1.3. Research Objectives*

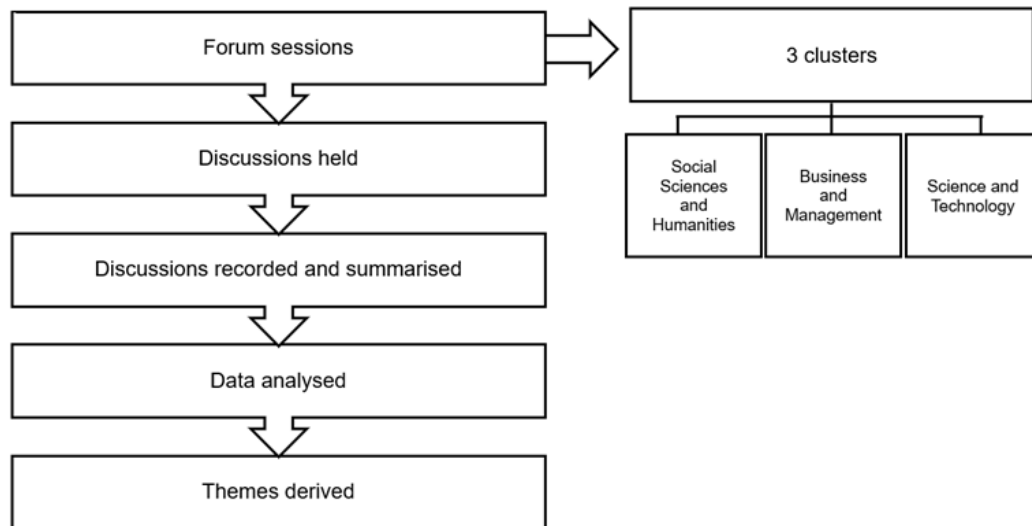
To identify the needs and suggestions of the stakeholders (industry, faculty, alumni) with regard to:

1. Language competency at the workplace; and
2. Personal attributes at the workplace.

To identify areas of improvement suggested by the stakeholders (industry, faculty, alumni) with regard to the English language courses.

## **2. METHOD**

In an effort to prepare for the curriculum review, a pre-workshop was imperative to analyse the actual language learning outcome and situation at UiTM. This pre-workshop was then materialised in the form of a forum engagement programme with three groups of stakeholders namely academics, industry, and alumni. The two-day programme was held at Intekma Resort and Convention Centre, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) in January 2019. The following diagram depicts the steps taken in conducting the research.



**Figure-2.** Research Process Flowchart.

Source: Ahmad (2019).

Based on the flow outlined in Figure 2, the pre-workshop was held by conducting eight forum sessions according to three clusters, specifically Social Sciences and Humanities, Business and Management, and Science and Technology, which represented the various faculties in UiTM. Discussions were then held through the eight forum sessions, focused on pertinent issues such as graduates' employability, expected and required skills, and future recommendations to improve language courses. Each forum discussion was conducted for 1 to 1 ½ hours, and each session consisted of one moderator, three panelists and two rapporteurs. The discussions were recorded and summarised, and were then analysed and compared to each other to derive common themes which will be explained in the results section.

The participants/audience for the workshop comprised 80 lecturers from two departments, English and third language (Arabic, Mandarin, Korean, Japanese, French, German, and Italian), which represented the group of academics. Another group of academics in attendance were deans and deputy deans of UiTM from the three clusters. Among the other important attendees were invited guests/speakers from the Curriculum Unit of UiTM's Academic Affairs division, UiTM's Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic and International), and the Deputy Director of Education Technology, Research, and Innovation, Institute of Neo Education, UiTM.

Twenty-four panelists from the industry represented various areas of specialisation, particularly in products and services. They consisted of representatives from Tenaga Nasional Berhad Fuel Services, Tenaga Switchgear, Hicom HBPO, Fujitsu Systems Global Solutions Management, Blondal Hydroguard, Medkad, Kamaruzaman, Arif, Amran & Ching Law Firm, Coca Cola Far East Limited, and Pathfinders Motivators.

Three alumni representatives, on the other hand, were from Infravera Software Engineering, Utusan Teguh, and the Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM, respectively.

### 2.1. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from the forum discussions mainly from three perspectives namely the faculties, industries and alumni. The faculties and industries were identified according to the university's study clusters which are the Science and Technology, Social Science and Humanities, and Business and Management clusters. Three representatives from each cluster participated in the study, while three alumni from all the three clusters were identified to share their views and experiences at the workplace with relevance to their university language learning. The sharing was carried out through forum sessions chaired by moderators with question-and-answer

slots ensued. Their views and suggestions were recorded by rapporteurs and analysed. The rapporteurs were then instructed to summarise the content of the discussion to produce eight reports.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following table summarises the data collected from the forum discussion reports.

**Table-1.** Summary of Data Collection.

Stakeholders	Needs Identified	Suggestions for Improvement
Faculties	Individual language skills and personality Language teaching and learning	Emphasise on speaking fluency Provide more opportunities to practise Hold remedial classes for weak students
Industries	Individual language skills Workplace personality	Carry out activities to enhance students' communication skills Participate in language clubs (e.g. Toastmasters) Give projects that require students to elaborate on products and sell ideas
Alumni	Oral communication skills Writing skills	Create parallel courses for MUET-based tests Conduct problem-solution report writing course

Source: Ahmad (2019).

Based on Table 1, the three stakeholders comprising the faculties, industries and alumni provided different needs and suggestions to APB. Generally, the faculties serviced by APB highlighted the need to focus on individual language skills and personality as well as on language teaching and learning itself. They suggested improvements to be made on emphasizing speaking fluency and providing more opportunities for students to practise their skills. They also identified the need for APB to hold remedial classes for weak students among others.

Similarly, the industry representatives highlighted the need to focus on language skills, but they also added the need to hone workplace personality in students. This was suggested to be addressed by carrying out activities to enhance students' communication skills and encouraging their participation in language clubs such as Toastmasters. The industry representatives also suggested to assign students with projects that require them to elaborate on products and sell ideas.

Finally, the alumni who attended the pre-workshop identified the need to focus on oral communication skills and writing skills. They suggested holding parallel courses for MUET-based tests and to conduct a problem-solution report writing course. The detailed needs and suggestions offered by the stakeholders are elaborated further in the next section.

#### 3.1. Needs Identified by the Stakeholders

The following section discusses the needs based on the feedback from the three stakeholders (faculties, industries and alumni).

##### 3.1.1. Faculties

Data collected from the reports of the forum sessions with the faculties can be identified into two categories: individual language skills and personality, and language teaching and learning. Most faculty representatives highlighted their students' lack communication skills, particularly the skills in presenting, justifying, defending and arguing. Students were also found to be weak in pronunciation. The representative from the Mass Communication faculty specifically pointed out students' inappropriate language use in the media. Many students from the faculty seemed to be unable to distinguish language use for different types of media. Apart from language skills, students



were also found to have low self-confidence level. The feelings of inadequacy became a barrier that inhibited their performance in class which resulted in limiting their true potential. Besides language skills and personality, the faculties were also concerned with language teaching and learning in class. Some representatives drew attention to the current syllabuses which they felt were unappealing and did not fulfil the students' needs in their fields of study. The teaching delivery was considered boring and there seemed to be a large gap between good and weak students.

### *3.1.2. Industries*

Data collected from the reports of the forum sessions with the industries were identified into two categories: individual language skills and workplace personality.

The most common issue highlighted by the industry representatives was the graduates' ineffective communication skills. They had difficulty in delivering ideas and lacked substance in their ideas. Besides that, too much emphasis was given on grammar accuracy and fluency, and the ability in making oneself understood was sidelined. Many fresh graduates were not articulate and had poor presentation skills and were particularly lacking in the ability to relate ideas or talk about products of which the industries termed as 'story-telling' ability. Finally, poor writing skills were also prevalent among the graduates. For example, their resumes were not specific, they used unsuitable tones in letters and their writing lacked depth. The graduates were also found to have low self-confidence and felt timid when asked to speak out their minds. They lacked leadership, empathy and adaptive skills. For those working in the engineering field, many of them could not distinguish or use different language styles when communicating as sales engineers, industry engineers and technical engineers.

### *3.1.3. Alumni*

Data collected from the reports of the forum sessions with the alumni were identified into two categories: oral communication skills and writing skills. For oral communication skills, the alumni firstly highlighted the need to equip students with good presentation skills. These include presentation of ideas in meetings, oral reporting of data, and the ability to effectively present a model or product. Also, emphasis was given on clear articulation of words, building trust and raising one's confidence level through the use of effective English communication.

For writing skills, the alumni raised the need for a course that is parallel to MUET-based tests as well as a course specifically catered to grammar. Finally, they highlighted the need for a problem-solution report writing course, especially for the engineering course. Lecturers should also focus on creative and innovative delivery of their classes to make the learning process more enjoyable.

## *3.2. Recommendations to Improve Current English Language Courses*

This section discusses the recommendations to improve APB's English language courses based on the overall feedback from the three stakeholders.

Firstly, the areas of improvement in teaching, learning and assessment were identified from the suggestions given by the stakeholders in the forum sessions. The faculties emphasised the importance of developing students' self-confidence. Instead of focusing on reading and writing skills, emphasis should be given on speaking fluency and increasing speaking practices to build students' confidence level. They should be provided with more opportunities to practice justifying, defending and promoting their ideas, for instance, carrying out idea-pitching lessons in class. A paradigm shift in the teaching approach is also commendable in which instructors are encouraged to teach using out-of-the-norm approaches, for example, having lessons outdoor beyond the classroom walls. To decrease the gap

in students' performance, remedial classes need to be carried out for weak students. A bridging course can also be developed to cater to the changing needs in the study fields.

Similar suggestions were also mooted by the industries to improve confidence among graduates. There should be more activities carried out either in-class or out-of-class to enhance students' communication skills, personality and self-image. This can help them overcome shyness and improve low self-esteem. Participating in Toastmasters can be a good platform to increase self-confidence. Students should also be given projects that require them to elaborate about products, sell ideas and convince clients. This can help to increase their ability to deliver thought processes. Projects that require students to practise leadership and adaptive skills are also essential as these kinds of programmes help to increase students' Emotional Intelligence (EQ) which they need at the workplace.

The overall findings of the reports indicate three areas which require crucial attention in the curriculum review which are communication skills, writing skills and workplace attributes. The importance of communication skills has consistently been emphasised in job advertisements over the years (Messum *et al.*, 2016) while numerous studies have also shown that effective communication skills are highly valued by employers (Abdul *et al.*, 2013; Hamid *et al.*, 2014; Thomas *et al.*, 2016; Shiao *et al.*, 2018). In a recent study by Lin and Laswad (2017) it was found that interpersonal skills which consist of the ability to present, discuss and defend views was ranked second among the top 13 skills mentioned in Australian and New Zealand job advertisements. This suggests that interpersonal skills were highly demanded by employers which corroborates the faculties and industries' concerns over UiTM graduates' ability to deliver ideas and train of thoughts. Besides, 45.5% of the students and 52.5% of the employers felt that speech clarity is vital in intrapersonal communication, resulting in successful business (Lenard and Pintaric, 2018). Besides communication skills, all three stakeholders believed that there is a need to improve graduates' writing skills with regard to job application letters and resumes. This is in contrast with a study by Bharathi (2016) who discovered even basic problems in writing skills among the graduates. Out of 618 respondents, 96% experienced difficulty with written academic communication. Of this number, 69% indicated grammatical errors as the most common problem, 49% had difficulty in word choice, while the rest had problems with sentence construction, using correct spellings and proper punctuation and capitalization.

The graduates' lack of EQ at the workplace is also a grave concern among the engineering organisations in Nigerian universities. Interviews among fresh engineering graduates and engineer managers in organisations revealed that while the graduates felt that engineering skills were more critical, the managers, however, believed that EQ was more critical to employability, job performance and effective leadership (Elegbe, 2015).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the needs analysis conducted in this study, the most important skills highlighted by all three stakeholders were on the improvement of speaking skills, especially communicative abilities, and more in-depth writing skills (the new workforce were identified to have difficulty in elaborating their ideas). Critical areas in writing also included skills in analysing and synthesising information.

Thus, it is imperative that a curriculum review be conducted to align the English language courses at Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (APB) to the needs of the industry. However, it must be recognized that curriculum review is not a one-time process but is a continuous effort to meet the changing demands of the industry towards the sustainable growth of the country. There is also a need for future research to investigate the challenges faced by the millennials and how APB can reduce the gap (the expectations from both industry and the millennials and younger generation entering the workforce) between these two stakeholders.



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