

University Social Responsibilities for English Language Education in Malaysian Higher Education: Community-based Service Learning

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Abstract

Malaysian higher institutions play an important role in producing quality employable graduates with a good command of English. A study administered by the Ministry of Higher Education, the National Blueprint of Graduate Employability 2012-2017, found that graduates' poor command of English is the highest identified by employers. The concept of 'Sustainability Education' at the tertiary level can be viewed as an important element that promotes experiential learning with community partners to improve students' communication skills and graduate employability. Service learning is the most effective method for addressing the issue of Sustainability Education, and it may be considered as lending credence to the emerging idea of University Social Responsibilities (USR) in Malaysian higher education. The purpose of this study is to explore the potential of a service learning approach as a concept of University Social Responsibility for fostering sustainable English language education at Malaysian higher education institutions

Keywords: English language education, university social responsibility, service learning, civic values, higher education, graduate employability

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Introduction

Given the importance of English communication skills in Malaysian higher education institutions, universities play an important role in producing quality employable graduates who have a strong command of the English language and the ability to communicate effectively. The National Blueprint of Graduate Employability 2012-2017, a national study administered by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), discovered that graduates' poor command of English is the most critical concern identified by employers (Don, 2015; Abdul & Abd, 2014). Other studies have found that poor English language competency, communication skills, problem-solving skills, self-confidence, personal value, and positive attitudes are all factors that contribute to graduate employability (Shafie & Nayan, 2010; Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Zainuddin et al., 2019; Krishnan et al., 2019). In order to address concerns surrounding graduate employability, it is imperative to establish a sustainable strategy for the teaching and learning of English language skills at the tertiary level. This will ensure that graduates possess not only a strong command of the language but also the requisite employability skills (Abd et

al., 2020). Hence, at the tertiary level, the concept of “Sustainability Education” can be viewed as a potential element that promotes authentic learning experiences to improve English language teaching and learning, English communication skills, and graduate employability (Srivastava, 2019; Zygmunt, 2016).

Previous research suggested that the service learning approach is best suited to addressing “Sustainable Development” issues (such as in Chika-James, 2020; Anastasiadis et al., 2020; Brower, 2011). Malaysia’s Ministry of Higher Education promotes higher education institutions to move towards a student-centred outcome-based education and encourages students’ active participation with the community (Don, 2015). Hence, service learning in higher education is “a potentially transformative pedagogical practice and theoretical orientation” that could move away from traditional practice in higher education towards a deeply engaging, local, and impactful practice (Burtin, 2005). Service learning has been widely implemented in other countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, but little is known about its application in language education (Palpacuer et al., 2017). Recently, MoHE has devised a set of national guidelines on service learning implementation in Malaysian universities known as ‘SULAM’ (Service Learning Malaysia - University for Society) (Department of Higher Education, 2019). The service learning approach is a new concept in Malaysian higher education, and research on service learning in Malaysian higher institutions is limited (Maharam et al., 2019). Moreover, there is a dearth of information on the implementation of service learning in English language courses at the tertiary level. Interpreting this gap as an opportunity to add valuable insights for service learning research in Malaysian higher institutions, and exploring the gains of service learning practices in English language teaching-learning for sustainable education at the Malaysian tertiary level is crucial.

This paper aims to explore the concept of University Social Responsibilities by incorporating a service learning approach to promote sustainable language education among young individuals at higher education institutions in Malaysia. The importance of English language teaching and learning at the higher education level lies in its potential to promote critical thinking, communication skills, and collaborative abilities among students, all of which are essential employability skills (Mtawa et al., 2019). Research suggests that in terms of the instruction and acquisition of the English language, service learning is a suitable match for the communicative approach, which prioritises a student-centered approach and utilises language in authentic contexts (Suwaed, 2018).

Literature Review

Sustainability Education at the Higher Education Level

Sustainability Education is often referred to as Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which is regarded as a concept that allows “every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary to shape a sustainable future” (UNESCO, 2023). Education is important for sustainable development, as it can lead schools towards greater excellence and change society’s minds for the betterment of the community (Yi-Chen & Li-Hsun, 2019). ESD contributes to interdisciplinary and creative educational models, such as learning by doing and teaching efficiency, aiming to attain sustainable development through education practices (ibid.). At present, higher education levels are increasingly recognised as playing an important role in the context of sustainability towards high-quality education (Salvioni et al., 2017). Hence, sustainability education at the university level can be seen as an essential key element for promoting teaching and learning approaches that focus on active, reflective, and cooperative learning (Naji, 2016). Sustainability education’s growing importance constitutes a challenging trend for higher education institutions.

However, considering a shift towards infusing sustainability education at the higher education level in the Malaysian context, ESD could contribute in many ways to quality education, not only through formal education but also via informal activities towards social and environmental challenges

(Sady, et al., 2019). Furthermore, higher education is becoming more interested in developing meaningful courses that address issues related to sustainable development (Anastasiadis et al., 2020; Brower, 2011). Research on ESD underlines the important values of critical thinking, flexibility, versatility, and experiential learning to be integrated into the classroom (Wiek et al., 2011). Higher education institutions are accountable for transforming students to be catalysts for change throughout the world, not only for equipping students with their formal degrees. It is past time for the universities to prepare students to be part of the 'energetic' community (Hajer et al., 2015) with the abilities and skills to resolve unprecedented issues, especially on SDGs (Ensign, 2017).

University Social Responsibility (USR) in Malaysia Context

In recent years, the concept of University Social Responsibility (USR) has gained significant importance. This is due to the expectation that universities should play a role in contributing to the social and economic development of their respective nations. The notion of University Social Responsibility (USR) has been garnering significant interest among policymakers, scholars, and interested parties in Malaysia. According to Biswas and Chandra (2019), universities have the potential to play a pivotal role in sustaining social responsibility practices through a variety of approaches. This is due to the perception of universities as pivotal agents in the promotion of civic values. Malaysian universities have implemented various USR initiatives, such as community engagement, environmental sustainability, and social entrepreneurship.

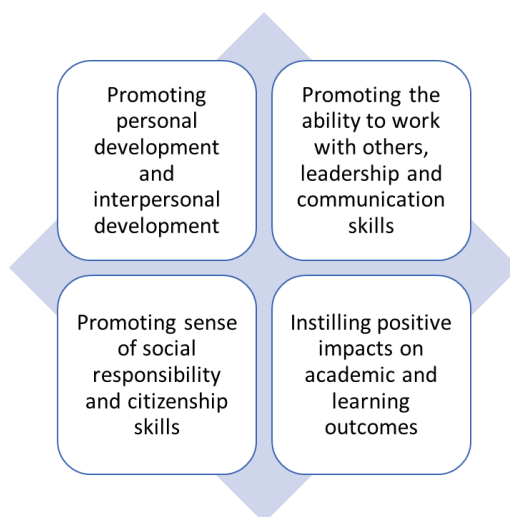
Since service learning entails incorporating community service into coursework, it can be viewed as an aspect of university social responsibility (USR). The educational philosophy known as "service learning" emphasizes practical experience, analytical reasoning, and community service. In addition to addressing social issues and problems, it gives students practice applying classroom knowledge in the actual world (Coelho & Menezes, 2021). Universities have a responsibility to the communities in which they operate, and service learning projects can help institutions meet this obligation. Through these service learning projects, the university is not only generating students with higher levels of academic achievement but also equipping them with civic awareness, social accountability (Cheung et al., 2015), good interpersonal communication skills, and the ability to establish a network of connection (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015). Students will be able to improve their social awareness and analytical skills through collaboration with either local, social institutions or non-profit, professional organisations. Service learning offers students the opportunity to relate academic theory with practical difficulties in ways that caused them to reconsider and enhance their critical thinking or problem-solving abilities (Cabiati, 2016) and hence fulfill the civic roles of creativity and effective citizenship (Chen, 2019).

Service learning in Higher Education

According to Brower (2011), the most effective means of addressing concerns surrounding "sustainable development" is through the utilisation of the service learning approach. The origins of service learning can be traced back to Kolb's (1984) early theories on experiential learning, as noted by Currie-Mueller and Littlefield (2018). Service learning is sometimes referred to as community engagement, as pointed out by McLeod (2017). Service learning and volunteer work are often perceived as similar, yet they exhibit distinct differences. The central features that distinguish service learning from volunteerism are its emphasis on reciprocity, reflective practice, and community engagement (Jacoby, 1996). Service learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes (Jacoby, 1996). The student's critical reflection on activities is a key component of the service learning experience and it is considered an ongoing process for the students to reflect on their learning experiences (Nikolova & Andersen, 2017).

Burtin (2005) suggested that service learning in higher education is “a potentially transformative pedagogical practice and theoretical orientation” that could move away from traditional practice in higher education towards a deeply engaging, local, and impactful practice. It is an educational program that combines learning outcomes and community service such as implementing skills related to the curriculum content carried out in real context (Harfitt & Chow, 2020; Ngai et al., 2019; Nikolova & Andersen, 2017; Brower, 2011). Hence, service learning is an innovative teaching method that utilises real-world experiences, beyond the classroom, that offers services to society (Schoenherr, 2015; Palpacuer et al., 2018).

The service learning method combines learning and social service objectives that could make an impact on students’ experiential learning and transformative learning at the university level and develop students’ professional skills (Martinez-Campillo et al., 2019). Moreover, service learning goes beyond than just a ‘learning by doing’ experience, it is a two-way educational relationship where students apply acquired skills in the classroom with a community, upskilling students’ work-world skills for a real-world product (McLeod, 2017). Eyler et al., (2001) posit that service learning is an effective approach that fosters student progress, and they summed their results about service learning in higher education as follows:



Integrating Community-Based Service Learning in Malaysian Higher Institutions’ English Language Education

Previous studies on employability in Malaysia highlighted that graduates’ poor command of the English Language, lack of competencies skills, for instance, the ability to communicate, resolve problems and task-related skills, lack of personal values and confidence as well as good attitudes have affected their employability (Shafie & Nayan, 2010; Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Zainuddin et al., 2019). As reported in the national study on graduate employability, it is found that graduates’ poor command of English is the highest problem identified by employers and it is imperative for universities to address the issue (Don, 2015). Hence, to address the graduate employability issues, it is crucial to enhance the English language teaching and learning practices in higher education to produce quality graduates who are competent users of English and equipped with necessary skills that meet current market demands (Fahimirad et al., 2019).

Subsequently, enhancing teaching and learning methodologies, such as the implementation of Community-Based Service learning, is imperative for promoting sustainability education through practical experiences in authentic communities (McLeod, 2017; Anderson, 2015; Yi-Chen & Li-Hsun, 2019). Service learning in higher education can be seen as an effective pedagogical approach that uses real-world learning experiences to strengthen students’ motivation and enhance meaningful learning

(McLeod, 2017). Furthermore, service learning implemented in higher education has positive impacts on students' personal values, leadership attributes, communication skills, and the ability to apply knowledge learned in the 'real world' (Eyle et al., 2001). Community-based service learning combines academic learning objectives with community involvement, which may lead to a shift away from traditional practice and toward a deeply engaging and effective teaching-learning for students to develop skills important to their future careers (Harfitt & Chow, 2020; Pearce & Manion, 2016).

Conclusion

Although service learning is relatively new in Malaysian higher education, it is consistent with the Ministry of Higher Education's initiatives to incorporate academic learning objectives, soft skills, and community service by students into the academic program. This conceptual study anticipated that the findings will provide new ideas for developing the English language teaching-learning pedagogy, which could improve the way English is taught and learned at the tertiary level, incorporate sustainable development issues into English language courses, and provide an understanding of the potential challenges in integrating community-based service learning into English language courses at the tertiary level.

This study will have an impact on the improvement of English language teaching-learning practices in Malaysian higher institutions in order to equip students with a good command of English, raise their sense of personal value, fostering civic values and social responsibility as well as prepare them for the job market. Moreover, this study may inform instructors of ways to integrate service learning values as part of their learning objectives in order to develop students' problem-solving ability, and critical thinking among other skills through close collaboration with the local community. It is crucial to empower students to apply their academic knowledge to real-life social issues in order to collaborate with community members, as well as be reflective enough to understand their civic responsibility whilst resolving those issues.

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