DILS

DEVELOPMENT IN LANGUAGE STUDIES
e-ISSN: 2811-3845

Vol. 6 No. 1 (2026) 21-25
https://publisher.uthm.edu.my/periodicals/index.php/dils

Challenges in Teaching English at Technical Higher Education: A Literature Review of Malaysian Technical Universities

Nurul Atiqah Johar[1*], Nur Farina Azizan[2], Najwa Amanina Bizami[3]

[1, 2] *Department of English Language and Linguistics, Centre for Language Studies, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Parit Raja 86400, Johor, MALAYSIA*
[3] *Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Kampus Kuala Pilah UiTM Cawangan Negeri Sembilan, Kampus Kuala Pilah, Pekan Parit Tinggi, 72000 Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, MALAYSIA*

*Corresponding Author: atiqahj@uthm.edu.my
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30880/dils.2026.06.01.002

Article Info

Received: 30 April 2026
Accepted: 30 September 2026
Available online: 30 October 2026

Keywords

MTUN, Technical English, Speaking Anxiety, Employability, Curriculum Mismatch, Malaysia.

Abstract

English proficiency remains a critical challenge across the technical universities in Malaysia, impacting graduate employability. This literature review synthesises ten recent studies, identifies challenges, and highlights gaps in research at Malaysia's technical universities. There are three highlighted themes: (1) high student speaking anxiety paired with low confidence, (2) misalignment between academic curricula and workplace communication demands, and (3) institutional pedagogical constraints. By highlighting current research gaps, this review offers a framework for future studies to better align technical instruction with industry expectations.

1. Introduction

English proficiency is a critical challenge within Malaysia's technical higher education, particularly at the four universities in the Malaysian Technical University Network (MTUN), which are Universiti Tun Hussein Onn (UTHM), University Teknologi Melaka (UTeM), University Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), and Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah (UMPSA). These institutions are dedicated to producing highly skilled graduates who struggle to write clear reports or communicate effectively in meetings, raising serious concerns about their readiness for the job market.

This review presents ten recent studies, primarily conducted in Malaysian polytechnics, technical universities, and engineering faculties, to uncover persistent issues in English instruction in this context. Three key problems emerge as particularly concerning, which are (1) students' speaking anxiety and lack of confidence in communicating in the language, (2) the curriculum of English courses taught in the university is incompatible with workplace expectations, and (3) pedagogical and motivational challenges that hinder the effectiveness of teaching the language in the classroom. This review concludes by emphasising the need for further research to properly address these gaps and improve English teaching in technical education.

This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license.

2. Challenges in Teaching English at MTUN

Teaching English to students at MTUN presents some challenges for both teachers and students, mainly due to three main problems. First, many of the engineering and technical students experience high levels of anxiety, which often comes from fear of being evaluated by their peers and instructors during speaking activities. Research shows that simply adding more classroom hours does not reduce this anxiety (Azmi & Osman, 2024).

Moreover, there is a gap between what the university teaches and what students need in their jobs. While engineering fields require strong communication skills, students often feel unprepared for real-world tasks such as job interviews. Many do not realise how important good speaking skills are until they start looking for work.

Furthermore, the classroom environment is affected by teaching challenges and low student motivation. Teachers often have to manage administrative tasks with little support for using digital teaching tools. Meanwhile, students are more concerned with the assessment grading requirements than with improving their language skills. These three issues will be further explained and discussed in the following sections, which explain why they are among the challenges of teaching English at technical universities.

2.1 Speaking Anxiety and Low Confidence

Speaking anxiety has become one of the significant barriers among technical institutions students when it comes to learning the English language. Azmi and Osman (2024) compared students in Electrical Engineering and Digital Technology programs with varying levels of formal English education. Surprisingly, their findings revealed no substantial differences in anxiety levels or fear of judgment between the two groups. This indicates that the fear of negative evaluation is closely linked to communication apprehension and also highlights an important reality that increasing the number of English classes does not effectively reduce anxiety.

Similarly, Abdullah et al. (2024) identified a parallel trend among undergraduates struggling with public speaking. They pointed out that factors such as low self-esteem, shyness, and nervousness often play a more significant role than language proficiency alone. In addition, Taly and Paramasivam (2020) found a worrying trend among postgraduate students in which lower English competence is correlated with higher levels of speaking anxiety. Therefore, it is best to provide students with more speaking practice rather than focusing on correcting the grammatical errors alone.

Balakrishnan et al. (2025) further confirmed this concern by noting that moderate levels of speech anxiety are common among TVET undergraduates. This is due to the fear of public speaking, concentration restraint, and getting anxious about forgetting important information. Lastly, Tee et al. (2022) found that most students rely on emotion-focused coping strategies rather than effective language techniques. They assert that course structure and teaching approach should be re-evaluated to foster a supportive learning environment for students.

Hence, based on these studies, it shows that speaking anxiety and low self-esteem in using the language hinder technical students from achieving the suggested level of proficiency by the university graduates.

2.2 Mismatch Between Curriculum and Workplace Needs

The second issue to address in teaching English at technical universities is the mismatch between English courses and real-world workplace expectations. In 2011, a study by Devi and Mohd Raus, involving 326 engineering undergraduates at UTeM, found that the areas of least proficiency in English among the students were grammar and speaking (as cited in Nurdiyana et al., 2023). However, these are the very skills that are crucial for English in the workplace, such as in writing resumes, attending job interviews, and contributing in meetings. This misalignment suggests that current coursework fails to prepare students for the demands of the job market.

Likewise, Damio et al. (2022) found that chemical engineering students viewed speaking as the least important skill, despite the Board of Engineers Malaysia recognising both speaking and writing as fundamental to the profession. This indicates that the curriculum may be outdated or that students misinterpret the skills needed in their field.

Additionally, Hiew et al. (2021) noted that English proficiency alone does not effectively predict employment outcomes, with both employed and unemployed graduates demonstrating similar, moderate proficiency levels. This points to a crucial gap that how proficiency is taught and assessed may not reflect employers' real needs, underscoring the urgency of curriculum reform. Therefore, technical universities need to reform their

Development in Language Studies Vol. 6 No. 1 (2026) 21-25

standardised curricula to highlight this issue, enabling technical students to focus on achieving the level of English proficiency needed to serve in real-world contexts.

2.3 Pedagogical and Motivation Constraints

The third issue concerns how English is taught, focusing on how lecturers manage their workloads, the approach used in the classroom and how students' motivation could be a roadblock in teaching the language.

In their study, Abdullah and Majid (2013) analysed reflective journals from two lecturers at a polytechnic and discovered that the main challenges they faced were not really about teaching methods. Instead, they struggled to manage difficult student behaviour, as well as non-academic responsibilities and strict institutional rules.

Ahmad et al. (2019) examined lecturers attempting to incorporate Education 4.0 tools into their English classes. Even though they were genuinely excited about it, many ended up paying for software themselves and admitted they did not have the technical skills to create engaging digital content. On the student side, the situation was not much better.

Mohd Akhir and Mohamedd Mokhtar (2024) surveyed diploma students at UiTM using Gardner's framework and found that students were more motivated by external factors, such as grades or job opportunities, than by a genuine interest in the language. This makes it harder for them to stay engaged throughout the semester.

Therefore, these external factors could vary, as students' motivation depends on the learning environment and the classroom readiness. Hence, lecturers in technical universities should design lessons to enhance students' motivation to learn the language.

2.4 Synthesis of Challenges in Technical English Education

Based on the previous studies, these three aspects (1) students' anxiety and low confidence, (2) curriculum misalignment with workplace demands, and (3) pedagogical and motivation are the barriers to English proficiency among technical institutions students that need to be addressed seriously.

It is found in the studies that the internal factor of students-centred challenges of psychologically related issues like anxiety and motivation is what causes problems for many learners (Abdullah et al., 2024; Balakrishnan et al., 2025; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020). Next, the low English language proficiency among technical university students is due to institutional factors, such as overwhelming teaching loads and a lack of funding for essential digital resources (Abdullah & Majid, 2013; Ahmad et al., 2019).

Moreover, the misalignment between the English-language courses offered and industry demands. Today's educational frameworks often leave graduates unprepared for critical professional communication tasks in engineering, such as effectively leading meetings and navigating technical interviews (Damio et al., 2022; Devi & Mohd Raus, 2011).

Hence, to provide a clear, integrated overview of these multifaceted issues, the following table synthesises the recurring themes and subthemes identified throughout the literature to provide a comprehensive layout of these hindrances.

Theme	Specific Issues Cited	Sources (APA 7th Edition)
Student-Centered Challenges	**High Speaking Anxiety:** Fear of public speaking, stage fright, and communication apprehension.	(Abdullah et al., 2024; Balakrishnan et al., 2025; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020; Tee et al., 2022)
	Psychological Barriers: Low self-confidence, shyness, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-esteem.	(Abdullah et al., 2024; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020)
	Motivational Issues: Driven by extrinsic factors (grades/jobs) rather than intrinsic enjoyment.	(Mohd Akhir & Mohamed Mokhtar, 2024)
Curriculum & Workplace Mismatch	**Skill Prioritisation Gap:** Students perceive speaking as the "least important" skill despite its being a core professional requirement.	(Damio et al., 2022)

	Employability Mismatch: Coursework fails to prepare students for job interviews, formal meetings, and technical reports.	(Devi & Mohd Raus, 2011, as cited in Nurdiyana et al., 2023)
	Proficiency Measurement: Standard proficiency levels (MUET) do not always correlate with actual success in the job market.	(Hiew et al., 2021)
Institutional & Pedagogical Constraints	**Teacher Workload:** Lecturers are overwhelmed by non-academic tasks, clerical work, and high student-to-teacher ratios.	(Abdullah & Majid, 2013)
	Technological Barriers: Lack of financial resources for software development; limited technical knowledge to create immersive content.	(Ahmad et al., 2019)
	Classroom Environment: Large class sizes, mixed-ability groups, and a lack of conducive venues for language practice.	(Abdullah & Majid, 2013)

Table 2.1 Summary of Key Challenges in English Language Teaching and Learning

3. The Limitation in the Literature

Overall, these ten studies provide a fairly clear understanding of the situation, but some important gaps remain. Most research focuses on polytechnic schools or public universities such as UiTM, with very few studies specifically examining the four MTUN universities, except for Devi and Mohd Raus (2011), as cited in Nurdiyana et al. (2023), which examine engineering students at UTeM. This is important because MTUN students, who are preparing for specialised, industry-focused careers, might face different challenges than those in general degree programs. Additionally, there is a lack of studies that explore all three issues, which are anxiety, the mismatch between curriculum and workplace demands, and teaching challenges, in one research study, even though they likely influence each other. Finally, in the existing studies, mentioning the recent growth of AI-assisted learning, such as the effects of tools like chatbots and virtual presentation practices on MTUN to facilitate language learning among students, remains uninvestigated.

4. Conclusion

All in all, this review paper indicates that the challenges of English teaching at Malaysian technical institutions are influenced by a variety of factors rather than a single cause. Students' psychological readiness, the classroom approach that influences students' motivation, and the institutional curriculum that prepares them for the real world are issues that need to be taken seriously for cohesive progress, so they can lead to meaningful progress.

The notable gap in the research, particularly in targeting the four MTUNs and implementing AI as a language-learning assistant, should be explored by future researchers to help ensure that these institutions can produce technical graduates with a suitable level of proficiency for the real world.

Acknowledgement

The authors highly appreciate the successful collaboration and mutual cooperation that drove this research, as well as the unwavering support provided by the Centre for Language Studies, UTHM.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: ***study conception and design****: Nurul Atiqah Binti Johar and Nur Farina Binti Azizan;* ***data collection****: Nurul Atiqah Binti Johar;* ***analysis and interpretation of results****: Nurul Atiqah Binti Johar;* ***draft manuscript preparation****: Nurul Atiqah Binti Johar and Nur Farina Binti Azizan. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

References

Abdullah, A. T. H., Netra, I. M., & Hassan, I. H. (2024). Difficulties faced by undergraduate students in English public speaking at a Malaysian university. *Arab World English Journal*, 15(1), 269–282. https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol15no1.17

Abdullah, S., & Majid, F. A. (2013). English language teaching challenges in Malaysia: Polytechnic lecturers' experience. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 28(4), 540–547. https://doi.org/10.5829/idosi.wasj.2013.28.04.1723

Ahmad, M. K., Adnan, A. H. M., Azamri, N. M., Idris, K. B., Norafand, N. N., & Ishak, N. I. (2019). Education 4.0 technologies for English language teaching and learning in the Malaysian context. In MNNF Network (Ed.), *Proceedings of the International Invention, Innovative & Creative (InIIC) Conference, Series 2/2019 (pp. 6–16).* MNNF Network.

Balakrishnan, S., Abdullah, N. L., Sui, L. K. M., & Raj, J. A. T. (2025). Speaking anxiety among TVET undergraduates and its implication on graduate employability. *Asian Journal of University Education, 21(1), 15–29. https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v21i1.5467i*

Akhir, N. M., & Mokhtar, M. M. (2024). Motivation in learning English as a second language among diploma students in Malaysia. *Asian People Journal (APJ), 7(1), 89–98. https://doi.org/10.37231/apj.2024.7.1.585*.

Azmi, N. A., & Osman, N. (2024). Speaking anxiety among ESL learners: A comparative study between Electrical Engineering and Digital Technology students. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Education and Society. https://doi.org/10.55057/ijares.2024.6.2.64*

Damio, S. M., Shahril, F. I. M., & Yau, S. A. (2022). English for Specific Purposes need analysis among final year Chemical Engineering students in a Malaysian public university. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 11(4), 511–520. https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v11-i4/15874

Devi, I. S., & Mohd Raus, T. Z. H. (2011, November). A course on English for Professional Communication for engineering undergraduates in a technical university in Malaysia: A needs survey [Conference paper]. *Enhancing Learning: Teaching & Learning Conference 2011*, Curtin University, Sarawak, Malaysia.

Hiew, W., Tibok, R., Ngui, W., Gabda, D., & Suyansah, T. (2021). Science graduate employability and English language proficiency: Findings from a Malaysian public university. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 20(7), 23–43. https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.20.7.2

Nurdiyana, M. Y., Yuslin, A. N. M., & Aqilah, A. I. D. (2023). Perception of engineering undergraduates on the needs of English language in the engineering field. *Selangor Humaniora Review*. http://share.journals.unisel.edu.my/index.php/share/article/view/225

Taly, B. C., & Paramasivam, S. (2020). Speaking anxiety among postgraduate international students in the academic context of a university in Malaysia. *International Journal of Linguistics,* 12(1), 198–206.

Tee, X. T., Tan, T. A. J., & Kamarulzaman, W. (2022). Self-regulatory strategies used by Malaysian university students in reducing public speaking anxiety: A case study. In *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Social Science, Humanities, Education and Society Development* (ICONS 2021) (pp. 155–161). Atlantis Press.