

# Improving Students' Proficiency In English

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## Abstract

The Ministry of Education in Malaysia introduced the Malaysian University English Tests (MUET) in 2000 with the objective of consolidating and enhancing the English language ability of the pre-university (upper secondary and matriculation) students so that at the tertiary level these students are able to communicate with ease in the language. And in 2003, the Ministry of Education implemented the teaching of science and mathematics in English in the primary and secondary schools. By the time these students enter universities, they should be proficient in English and have a better edge in the job market and better prepared to meet the challenges of globalization.

The situation is not as expected, and this triggers the urgency on the need for students to improve their proficiency in English. They will face difficulties in their studies because science and mathematics courses at the tertiary levels are being taught in English, and also most of the reference books are in English. Thus the students will lose out if they cannot operate with ease in the language.

This researcher carried out two tests using the format of the Malaysian University English Tests (MUET) on the first year students, first at the beginning and then at the end of the first semester at a university in Malaysia, to gain insights on the students' proficiency level.

This paper will present findings on the current English language proficiency level of the first year students in relation to the MUET format and also provide recommendations on improving students' proficiency in the language.

## Introduction

The Ministry of Education in Malaysia introduced the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) in 2000 with the objective of consolidating and enhancing the English language ability of pre-university students so that at the tertiary level these students would be able to communicate with ease in the language. This led the language centers at universities to revamp their syllabus to be in continuation with the MUET syllabus.

Not stopping at that, in 2003, the Ministry of Education implemented the teaching of science and mathematics in English to the secondary schools. The idea behind this new development was to prepare the students who were taking science and mathematics to be proficient in English by the time they enter universities.

With the implementation of teaching of science and mathematics subjects in English, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia foresees that the students will have a better edge in the job markets, and better prepared to meet the challenges of globalization. In tandem, it is necessary for teachers teaching these two subjects and students entering the universities to be proficient in English. However, down the road, after five years of MUET and three years of teaching in English, what we have is a situation where there is an urgency on the need for students to be proficient in English.

Looking at in microcosm, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has come up with many learning strategies. The emphasis now is on proficiency in the language. Unless and until the students are proficient in English, they will face difficulties in their studies because the science and mathematics courses at the tertiary levels are being taught in English. Students will lose out if they cannot operate with ease because most of the reference books are in English and in order to excel in their studies they need to be proficient in the language.

## Statement of problem

Six years after the introduction of MUET and three years after the implementation of teaching of science and mathematics in English, the problem of students' proficiency in the language is still debatable. Lecturers at Universities were being asked to teach their subjects in English gradually, only 30% of all the courses were taught in English, because of uncertainty in proficiency of the students. This shows that students at tertiary levels are not ready for courses to be taught in English especially at the public universities.

## Purpose

The research starts from the premise that the decision to introduce English as a second language for the teaching of science and mathematics at a tertiary institution raises the issues of students' proficiency in the language as addressed in the following questions:

- i What is the students' level of proficiency in relation to the MUET score?
- ii To what extent do the students improve their proficiency at university?
- iii What are the views in terms of appropriateness of the language used?

## Significance of the Study

The findings of this research will provide insights on the university students' proficiency level. In order to improve their proficiency, new learning and teaching techniques should be adopted at the pre-university level so that the students can attain good user level (term used in MUET) before they enter universities.

## Limitations of Study

The participants are students from the matriculation programme, who are in their first year, first semester at a university. They are science and mathematics students.

It is difficult for the researcher to have direct access to the participants and is restricted to choices made by their English language teachers. If the researcher could have access to the participants directly, the data collected would have achieved greater depth in identifying the students' proficiency level.

The researcher feels that unless he can select the participants, the information gathered may be tainted with biases. The choices could be those participants who are proficient in English and may not reflect their language proficiency level.

## Review of related literature

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point that curriculum developer is interested in the gap between the target proficiency and the present proficiency of the learners. The question is what the learner lacks rather than needs that come to determine improving proficiency in English. It shows the gap in language proficiency will provide a better understanding of what are the learner's weaknesses that need to be addressed in order to improve proficiency.

Sysoyev P (1999) uses the term students' analysis to reflect learners' 'possession' or proficiency that is their current L2 level and secondly looks at what the learners want to achieve, their needs. A comparison in learner's proficiency at the beginning and after attending an ESL course, will represent a more realistic response to the abilities of students in relation to the second language.

In the S. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) or better known as  $i + 1$  Hypothesis,  $i$  connotes the students' current L2 competence, and  $+ 1$  is a level of proficiency beyond their present level. The students' proficiency L2 will improve with proper techniques in language teaching.

Sysoyev mentions that S. Krashen's theory is similar to L. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of Zone of Proximal Development. It covers two stages of proficiency level, in the first stage what the learner can do by himself and in the second stage, what he can achieve with the help of another, more competent person. The distance between the two stages is called Zone of Proximal Development. So the competency of the teacher is important for the learner's proficiency progress.

From the review of related literature, the researcher gains information on improving students' proficiency in English.

## Methodology

The proficiency test that the researcher carries out is based on the framework set by the Ministry of Education Malaysia for upper secondary and matriculation students and in this case it is MUET. The format is shown below. For reliability (measures consistency of the test), the researcher uses MUET questions prepared by the Ministry of Education Malaysia.

### WEIGHTED AND AGGREGATED SCORE

PAPER	SKILL	TIME	WEIGHT	MODE OF TEST	SCORE
1	Listening	30 mins	15%	Centralised 15 MCQ	45
2	Speaking	30 mins	15%	Centralised In groups of 4 Two level assessment	45
3	Reading Comprehension	2 hours	45%	Centralised 50 MCQ	135
4	Writing	1 hour 30 mins	25%	Centralised Two essays	75
AGGREGATED SCORE			100%		300

For validity, the researcher uses the aggregated score table provided for MUET. It shows scores that students received can be interpreted by using the description given below.

### DESCRIPTION OF AGGREGATED SCORE

AGGREGATED SCORE	BAND	USER	COMMAND OF LANGUAGE	COMMUNICATIVE ABILITY	UNDERSTANDING	TASK PERFORMANCE
260-300	6	Very good user	Very good command of the language	Very fluent, accurate and appropriate, hardly any inaccuracies	High level of understanding of the language	Functions extremely well in the language
220-259	5	Good user	Good command of the language	Fluent appropriate but with minor inaccuracies	Good level of understanding of the language	Functions well in the language
180-219	4	Competent user	Satisfactory command of the language	Generally fluent, appropriate but with occasional inaccuracies	Satisfactory level of understanding of the language	Functions reasonably well in the language
140-179	3	Modest user	Fair command of the language	Fairly fluent, usually appropriate but with noticeable inaccuracies	Able to understand but with some misinterpretation	Able to function but with some effort
100-139	2	Limited user	Limited command of the language	Lacks fluency and appropriateness, inaccurate use of the language resulting in frequent breakdowns in communication	Limited understanding of the language	Limited ability to function in the language
0 -99	1	Extremely limited user	Poor command of the language	Inappropriate and inaccurate use of the language resulting in very frequent breakdowns	Poor understanding of the language	Hardly able to function in the language

## Procedure

Two tests were administered on the first year, first semester students at a university in Malaysia. The first test was carried out at the beginning of the first semester and the second at the end of the semester.

## Subjects

120 first year, first semester university students from the matriculation programme were randomly selected. They were science and mathematics students. Out of the selected students, 106 completed the test 1. At the end of the first semester, the same number of students who completed test 1 (106) were selected again for test 2 but only 89 completed the test.

## Findings

**Table 1 - Analysis Based On Students Participation**

	No of Students		Answers	
	Selected	Attended	Incomplete	Complete
Main Campus	120	107	1 (S)	106

**Table 2 - % Per Band**

Band	No of Students	%
6	0	0
5	7	6.6
4	23	21.7
3	48	45.3
2	26	24.5
1	2	1.9
Total	106	100

From table 2, it can be seen that out of 120 students who are selected only 106 students are able to complete the four tested skills. The highest concentration of students is found in band 3 (45.3%) and followed by band 2 (24.5%). And for band 6, highly proficient, there is 0%. Based on the description of the aggregated score, it can be deduced that the majority of the students coming to the university from the matriculation programme are modest users of English.

**Table 3 - Analysis Based On Students Participation**

	No of Students		Answers	
	Selected	Attended	Incomplete	Complete
Main Campus	106	98	9 (S)	89

**Table 4 - % Per Band**

Band	No of Students	%
6	0	0
5	3	3.4
4	35	39.3
3	45	50.6
2	6	6.7
1	0	0
Total	89	100

Table 4 shows that after undergoing 18 weeks of an EL course, the students' proficiency level has improved tremendously when compared with the result tabulated in table 2. Two significant changes that can be seen are for band 2 and band 4. In band 2, we see a significant reduction of 17.8%, from 24.5% (Table 2) to 6.7% (Table 4) and for band 4, there is a significant increase of 17.6% from 21.7% (Table 2) to 39.3% (Table 4). However, the highest concentration of students still remain in band 3, 50.6% (Table 4) and 45.3% (Table 2) which means the students are modest speakers of English.

Information elucidated from both tests shows that there is no student in band 6. We can deduce that the matriculation students selected for this study could not achieve very good user proficiency level.

### **Discussions and recommendations**

This section will provide insights into the findings and put forth recommendations on improving the students' proficiency in English.

From Table 2, it can be seen that the concentration of students are in the lower bands, band 1-1.9%, band 2 - 24.5%, band 3 -45.5% and band 4 -21.7%. This shows that the one year EL course that the students took before coming to the university is not sufficient to turn them into good users of English if one is to use the description of aggregated score interpretation of English proficiency. Although the medium of instruction for teaching science and mathematics at the pre-university level is in English, the students remain as limited and modest users of English.

Table 2 also shows Band 5-6.6% and band 6 -0% and it indicates that there are a few good users but none very good user. It has been highlighted by Veloo and Haroon (2004) that, 'What has emerged very clearly from the observation to be the stumbling block is the teacher's apparent lack of proficiency in English'. Thus it can also be deduced that teachers who are teaching the two subjects (science and mathematics) could not contribute towards the enhancement of students' English proficiency.

After undergoing 18 weeks of ESL course, the total percentage for bands 1 and 2 have dropped tremendously from 26.4% (Table 2) to 6.7% (Table 4). This improvement in students' proficiency is due to the effectiveness of learning and teaching programmes at the language centre. The researcher found out that when MUET was first introduced in 2000, the language centre immediately revamped its ESL programmes and introduced content based instructions in its syllabus. Thus the result shows an improvement in students' proficiency.

Further discussion on the decline in competent and good users of English (the terms borrowed from Description of Aggregated Score) are not hard to find. These include a lack of trained and experienced teachers (Hirvel and Law, 1991) especially at the primary school level (year one to year six). That is why we have a situation of teachers whose options are not English, are being asked to teach English, science and mathematics subjects in English. Haroon & Veloo (2005) point out that the current training provision for teachers to teach in English is not sufficient.

The Ministry of Education in Malaysia has to address this problem immediately because teachers being role models and front liners in teaching and learning need to improve their communicative skill so that students will benefit tremendously at the tertiary levels.

Research by Lai (1993) as highlighted by Balla & Pennington (1995) in their paper 'Bilingualism in Microcosm,' shows that students' low confidence (low self-esteem) in relation to English language use is most obvious. The students experience what is termed 'language anxiety'. The situation is similar in Malaysia. Teachers often complain students' low frequency of using English in the secondary school level and it leads to students' low self-esteem because they seldom use English outside the classrooms. They feel at ease speaking in their first language so when it comes to using English for communication they experience language anxiety (Lai, 1993).

On top of this is the influence of the highly transmission-based and product-oriented model of teaching which is widely employed at both primary and secondary levels (Balla J and Pennington M C, 1995). Teachers are being pressured to finish their syllabus and they take the expedient route of covering what are important for the examinations. Thus speaking which is neither a main activity nor a focus of assessment, is being neglected.

The Ministry of Education's effort to improve students' proficiency by having science and mathematics courses taught in English in primary and secondary schools is a move in the right direction. Bradley K S and Bradley J A (2005) cite, "The overriding drive in current changes occurring in second language teaching is the need to teach language through something essential and meaningful to the student. When the goal is to prepare students for academic success in classes taught in English, then ESL is best taught through lessons that teach meaningful mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts concepts simultaneously with second language objectives" (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003, p. 310). However, in tandem with this development in the educational policy is the need for teachers to improve their proficiency too.

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