

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE ABILITIES AND KNOWLEDGE OF ADULT LEARNERS IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

*Shahrier Pawanchik*

*Mohd Faiz Hilmi*

*Fatan Hamamah Yahaya*

School of Distance Education , Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

---

## Abstract

The decline in English language proficiency among students who enter public universities is still debatable. Looking at in microcosm, the majority of Malaysian students leave the school system with a poor grasp of English despite having been exposed to the language for eleven or more years. Although both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations have been given, these motivations have been unsuccessful in reaching the greater majority. This research paper will focus on the abilities and knowledge of adult learners who are doing a distance education programme at a university in Malaysia. Findings of this research will provide information for curriculum developers at public universities offering distance education programmes to decide whether they need to revamp their present English courses or design new courses in order to meet the students' needs and expectations.

---

**Keywords:** English abilities and knowledge, adult learners, distance education programme

## Introduction

The decline in English language proficiency among students entering public universities is still debatable. Looking at in microcosm, the majority of Malaysian students leave the school system with a poor grasp of English despite the language being taught from standard one through form five and form six yet the students' level of proficiency is still very low.

Although both 'intrinsic and extrinsic motivations' have been given, these motivations have been unsuccessful in reaching the greater majority.

This research paper will focus on the adult learners' abilities and knowledge in English. These adult students are working either in the public or private sector. Findings of this research will provide information for

curriculum developers to decide whether they need to revamp their present English language courses or design new courses in order to stay relevant. Unless and until public universities with distance education programmes produce graduates who are English proficient, employers especially from the private sector will look elsewhere for skilled proficient workers.

### **Problem Statement**

In 2008, this university was selected as a research university, hence the expectations of its stakeholders have also increased. It has since expanded its intake of students for the distance education programme. This leads to the question of students' abilities and knowledge to operate in English at the tertiary level. Taking the cue from here, this research starts with the premise that students entering public universities have poor proficiency in English. Their abilities and knowledge to operate in the language at the tertiary level is debatable. The following research questions will be investigated:

- i. What are the language principal attributes showed by the students?
- ii. How do the students perceive their English language abilities and knowledge?
- iii. How is the students' English language abilities and knowledge correlated to their Malaysia University English Test grades?

### **Approach**

The methodology underlying this research is guided by the protocol of Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and refined by Basturkmen (1998) model of needs analysis. The researchers use a questionnaire to elucidate information on the students' proficiency in English. It is consisted of three sections: (1) Section I—Background information. It will yield findings that relate to the participants' demographic backgrounds; (2) Section II— English language abilities and knowledge correlated to Malaysian University English Test (MUET) grades.

(3) Section III— Students' perception of their language abilities and knowledge. Findings from this section will yield insights into the participants' own assessment of their abilities and knowledge in English;

Information from the questionnaire will provide considerable insights into the students' English language abilities and knowledge. The participants in this research were second year students of the School of Distance Education in a Malaysian university. They have passed the preparatory English course and responded to this research.

## Results

### Research question 1: What are the principal language attributes showed by the students?

**Table 1:** Result of Factor Analysis on Abilities and Knowledge of English

Variables	Factor 1	Factor 2
1. Literature	<b>0.855</b>	0.022
2. Technical Vocab.	<b>0.849</b>	0.213
3. Prepositions	<b>0.843</b>	0.193
4. Grammar	<b>0.761</b>	0.235
5. General Vocabulary	<b>0.754</b>	0.291
6. Articles	<b>0.745</b>	0.347
7. Speaking	<b>0.587</b>	0.434
8. Writing	<b>0.514</b>	0.494
9. Reading	0.074	<b>0.897</b>
10. Listening	0.290	<b>0.804</b>
Eigen values	5.633	1.207
Percentage Variance Explained	45.613%	22.779%
Total Variance Explained	68.391%	
KMO	9.897	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	938.494***	

Note: \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001

Mackay and Bosquet (1981:6) define needs as either real, current needs (what the learner needs the language for now) or future, hypothetical needs (what the learner may want the language for at some unspecified time in the future). Other types of needs are considered as learner desires (what the student would like to do with the language, independent of the specific requirements of the situation) and teacher-created needs (what the teacher imagines is needed or would like to impose on the learner).

Table 1 gives the principal language attributes of English that are showed by the respondents. The results show a two factor division with Eigen values greater than 1.0 and the Total Variance explained was 68.391%. KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 9.897 which indicates sufficient inter correlations while Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2 = 938.494, p < .001$ ).

The researchers labelled factor one as Advanced English with loading between 0.514 and 0.855. The students treated these eight variables (in order of difficulties - from literature to writing) as difficult language components. They perceived that these components as advanced level.

The researchers labelled factor two (Item 9 - Reading with loading 0.897 and Item10 - Listening with loading 0.804) as Pre - Intermediate English. These two items were considered easier skills to acquire.

## Research Question 2: How do the students perceive their English language abilities and knowledge?

**Table 2:** Descriptive Statistics for Abilities and Knowledge of English

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Reading	<b>1.86</b>	0.604
2. Writing	2.20	0.488
3. Speaking	2.20	0.562
4. Listening	<b>1.98</b>	0.547
5. Grammar	2.29	0.544
6. General Vocabulary	2.28	0.553
7. Technical Vocab.	2.38	0.570
8. Articles	2.28	0.529
9. Prepositions	2.30	0.537
10. English literature	2.41	0.587

Van Ek (1975:2) mentions that an individual needs will undoubtedly vary widely, yet organized education can only cater for the individual learner if he can be regrouped with other learners to form a sufficiently large class to justify the efforts and finances required to satisfy his needs. The problem is not so much of specifying in detail the needs of an individual learner but rather the problem of identifying needs shared by a substantial number of learners. Pragmatic considerations dictate that the enthusiasm to base language programme on a prior, careful specification of communication needs ought to take into consideration the fact that not all individual needs can realistically be satisfied.

Table 2 shows a descriptive analysis (based on the 10 variables) of the students' own assessment of their abilities and knowledge of English. Using the measurement 1 = good, 2 = satisfactory, 3 = unsatisfactory, all attributes of the respondents are low (means are between 2.20 to 2.41) except for reading and listening which are rated slightly above the median (means at 1.86 and 1.98 respectively). Thus it can be deduced that the respondents find reading and listening easier language skills to acquire. The rest are difficult components to acquire.

## Research question 3: How is the students' English language abilities and knowledge correlated to their Malaysian University English Test grades?

**Table 3: English Grade**

SPM Grade for English	Frequency	(%)
A1	7	4.8
A2	5	3.5
B3	17	11.8
B4	12	8.3
C5	23	16.0
C6	23	16.0

D7	36	25.0
D8	12	8.3
F9	9	6.3

**MUET Results**

Band 1	5	6.8
Band 2	41	56.2
Band 3	21	28.8
Band 4	5	6.8
Band 5	1	1.4

**Table 4: Composite Reliabilities**

Factor Label	# of Items in Composite	Item Deleted	Reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha$ )
Advanced English	8	-	<b>0.916</b>
Pre - Intermediate English	2	-	<b>0.756</b>

**Table 5: Correlation Matrix of the Research Variables**

		1	2	3	4
1	Advanced English	1			
2	Pre - Intermediate English	0.664**	1		
3	SPM English	0.615**	0.630**	1	
4	MUET	0.110	0.204*	0.222*	1

\*  $\rho < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $\rho < 0.01$ 

Looking at in microcosm, the results of Table 5 show that proficiency in English at SPM level correlates positively with their grades of Pre - Intermediate English ( $r = 0.630$ ,  $n = 159$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and Advanced English ( $r = 0.615$ ,  $n = 159$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Proficiency in English in MUET correlates positively with proficiency of Pre - Intermediate English ( $r = 0.204$ ,  $n = 159$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and English at SPM level ( $r = 0.222$ ,  $n = 159$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus there is a continuity of proficiency from SPM, MUET and Pre - Intermediate English.

Some insights on needs analysis that are provided by Munby (1978) and Robinson (1991:3) explain students' performance in relation to the MUET grades. It touches on the need for an analysis of the learner's language abilities and knowledge before an English course is designed. Mundy considers this feature a key instrument. Also according to Robinson (1991) language learning is not due to interest on the language culture but for specific work purposes.

**Table 6: Regression Analysis**

Independent Variable	Dependent Variables	
	SPM	MUET
Advanced English	0.236***	0.194
Pre - Intermediate English	0.256***	0.106
R <sup>2</sup>	0.180	0.065
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.168	0.038
R <sup>2</sup> Change	0.180	0.065
F Change	15.463***	2.419*
D-W	2.071	2.250

\*  $\rho < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $\rho < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $\rho < 0.01$ 

Table 6 displays the results of a relationship between the variables under this research, the combination of Advanced English and Pre - Intermediate English explained 16.8% of the proficiency of English at SPM level, and 3.8% of the variance in MUET performance. Since all the F values are significant, as a group, both Advanced English and Pre - Intermediate English variables reliably predict the SPM and MUET variables. Advanced English ( $\beta = 0.236$ ,  $\rho < .01$ ) and Pre - Intermediate English ( $\beta = 0.256$ ,  $\rho < .01$ ) are found to be positively related to proficiency of English at SPM level. However, Advanced English ( $\beta = 0.194$ ,  $\rho > .01$ ) and Pre - Intermediate English ( $\beta = 0.106$ ,  $\rho > .01$ ) are found to be insignificantly related to proficiency in MUET.

The paradox is proficiency in English at MUET level exhibit no significant correlation with proficiency of Advanced English ( $r = 0.110$ ,  $n = 159$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). It means that even though the students are proficient at MUET level, it does not mean that these students will score high grades for Advanced English. The reason could be the students find all eight items of Advanced English as difficult components to acquire. Look at Table 2.

### Discussion And Conclusion

This research focused on analyzing the students' own assessment of their abilities and knowledge of English. All the SDE students are working adults either in public or private sector. The first research question looks at the students' own assessment; the score is low for the first eight items (means are between 2.20 to 2.41) except for reading and listening (means at 1.86 and 1.98). The students perceive having better achievement in these two areas. Students who are fairly fluent, use English fairly appropriately and make many grammatical errors are termed 'modest users' under MUET. So the respondents fall under this category.

The second research question tried to identify the principal attributes of English that are exhibited by the second year students. It can be seen that the abilities and knowledge of English of the students consisted of two

distinct factors/dimensions. The researchers refer to them as factors 1 and 2. Factor/dimension 1 is identified as Advanced English which consists of items 1 to 8, and factor/dimension 2 is identified as Pre - Intermediate English which consists of items 9 and 10. The students treated items of Advanced English (in order of difficulties - from literature to writing) as difficult language components and it is appropriate to place them in the advanced teaching and learning stage. However, the last two skills, reading and listening, are considered easier and placed in the pre - intermediate stage.

The third research question focused on identifying the correlation between the students' abilities and knowledge in English in MUET, Pre - Intermediate English and Advanced English. Proficiency in English at SPM level correlates positively with proficiency of MUET and Pre - Intermediate English. There is a continuity of proficiency from SPM, MUET and Pre - Intermediate English. However, Advanced English was insignificantly related to proficiency of MUET. It means that even though the students are proficient in MUET, it does not mean that these students will score higher grades for Advanced English.

### **References:**

- Basturkmen, H. (1998): *Refining Procedures. The Internet ES Journal*. Vol. 36 No.4, Oct. - Dec. 1998.
- Hutchinson, T. And Waters, A. (1987): *English for Specific Purposes. A Learning – Centred Approach*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press
- Mackay, R. and Bosquet, M (1981): *LSP Curriculum Development – From Policy to Practice in Mackay, R. and Palmer, J.D. (Eds) (1981)*. Mass. Newbury House Publication
- Mc Arthur, T. (1996): *English Today*. Cambridge University Press
- Munby, J. (1978): *Communcative Syllabus Design*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1985): *Syllabus Design*. Oxford. Oxford University Press
- Robinson, P.C. (1991). *ESP Today: A Practitioner's Guide*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Van Ek, J.A. (1975): *The Threshold Level*. Council of Europe, Strasbourg
- Widdowson, H.G. (1974): *An Approach to the Teaching of Scientific English Discourse. RELC Journal 5,1*. Singapore.
- Widdowson, H.G. (1987): *English for Specific Purposes. Criteria for Course Design* In Long and Richards (Eds). (1987).
- Wilkins, D.A. (1974): *Notional Syllabuses*. London. Oxford University Press