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Exploring Factors That Affect English Proficiency Level among University Students: A Case Study in Universiti Utara Malaysia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	English has become one of the important languages in the era of globalization. In order to compete well in the world demand, Malaysia has put lot of efforts to make sure that young Malaysian are prepared with the English language as medium of communication. As such, an investigation on the factors that affect the level of English proficiency among university students is being conducted in this study. Exploratory factor analysis was used to analyze the data. Our findings recommend that there are three main contributing factors that affect the English proficiency among Malaysian university students, which are Language, Cultural and Education.

1. Introduction

As the knowledge-based economy is currently in trending around the globe [1], the function of higher education has taken dramatic changes, in particular to cater the issue of globalization [2-4]. The globalization, such as in technology, opens opportunities of building knowledge-based economies [5-7]). Emerging works on assessing the role of knowledge economy in the developing country has also been observed in the recent years. We invite readers to see works by Arocena *et al.*, Tchamyou and Gupta [8-10] to mention but a few, specifically discussed on this issue.

To comply with this new demand, Malaysian higher education institutions in the current years have undergo improvements in their policies, goals and motivations to better position themselves to be a regional education hub in its vicinity. Thus, a lot of efforts involve with the internationalization and globalization movement has been carried out to support country's vision.

This commitment is shown by the introduction of Education Malaysia in the year 2008 by the Ministry of Education, which aims to attract international students from around the world. To

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prepare for the increasing amount of international students to Malaysia, most of universities in Malaysia, be it public and private university, has adopted English language as their medium of teaching and communication in campus. This step is to unsure marketability and commercialization of education products offered by the Malaysian universities.

In doing so, higher institutions in Malaysia will be able increase their visibility and competitiveness against neighboring countries, resulting to a well-recognized higher institutions to stand among the best universities in the world. Currently, higher institutions in the neighboring countries has yet to converse in English as their medium of teaching and learning activities, with exception to Singapore and Brunei, thus Malaysia has strong advantage if such effort can be capitalized. Universiti Utara Malaysia, one of public university in Malaysia with niche area in management studies, has also taken steps to prepare for the internalization and globalization by conducting most of academic classes in English medium. Students are also encouraged to communicate in English around campus.

However, if not treated with care, the aim to internalize Malaysian universities may cause fatality to the country. The academic transition among students in higher education to English-medium platform provides local students with notable problems. Such problems include understanding technical vocabulary, comprehending lectures, achieving an appropriate academic style and meeting institutional and disciplinary requirements [11]. The full use of English language as a medium may shy away local students from enrolling in universities, which use English in campus.

Current schooling system in Malaysia is still using Malay language as a medium of teaching in class for the national schools. Whereas, Chinese school and Tamil school are still adapting their mother-tongue language – the Chinese and Tamil language. Thus, the switching phenomena may lead to students to have difficulties to accommodate to the life in the university, especially for those who have less or no exposure of English language at home. It may hinder their performance in the study, as they need to recoup with their weakness in the language barrier.

Realizing this setback, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has implemented the teaching of two subjects – Science and Mathematics to be taught in English from primary school. This effort begins in the year 2003 by the then-prime minister, Mahathir Mohammad. This effort is hugely motivated by the aim to prepare Malaysian for globalization in near future. Students are being prepared to use English language from the early years and are expected to increase their proficiency in the language (Ministry of Education, 2002). However, this policy has been under heavy scrutiny from public and also scholar [12-15], resulting to the reversal of these policies in 2012 by the Deputy Prime Minister, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

The issue of adopting second language as medium of learning in higher education has been under debates in many countries, i.e. Korea, Hong Kong, and Sweden, to name just a few. Some of the work includes [16-20]. Most findings comprise both positive and skeptical view of adopting the second language of medium of interaction in their institutions.

Thus, it is very important for the university to fully aware of the level of English language proficiency among their students towards globalization [21-23]) The understanding of this issue may provide good benchmark for the university to lay out plan on their internationalization and globalization, in line with their vision. They need to ensure the globalization plan will benefit the university in attracting more international students, so as to help with the visibility of Malaysian university in the global scenario, and at the same time, ensure the quality of students produced by universities.

2. Methodology

This study is conducted to explore factors that affect the level of English proficiency among university students by using exploratory factor analysis. The sample for this research focuses on current students in one of the Higher Institution in Malaysia. Respondents for this research are selected using simple random sampling based on their residential hall. A total of 250 questionnaires are estimated to be adequate and therefore distributed in all routes. 194 questionnaires were return of which only 128 questionnaires were valid. These items were measured using a semantic scale with the following anchors: 1 = very not true to 7 = very true.

3. Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) is a variable reduction technique that identifies the number of latent constructs (factor) and the underlying factor structure of a set of variables. Additionally, EFA can be used for hypothesizes an underlying construct (a variable not measured directly), estimates factors which influence responses on observed variables, describe and identify the number of latent constructs (factors), includes unique factors, error due to unreliability in measurement and traditionally has been used to explore the possible underlying factor structure of a set of measured variables without imposing any preconceived structure on the outcome.

Before doing the exploratory factor analysis, we need to do the Kaise-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. The result should be more than 0.6 for the sample to be adequate. After doing the test, our result is 0.840, which is really good. This means that our sample is adequate, or in other words sufficient in terms of quantity. After the KMO test, we also did the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The result shows that there is enough evidence to prove that our correlation matrix is not an identity matrix, and therefore we can continue with exploratory factor analysis.

Using SPSS Statistic tools, we ran the Factor Analysis function on the data of our questionnaires. The scree plot in Fig. 1 shows that there should be four, five or six factors. However, we fixed the factors extracted to be three since we follow past research results and their questionnaires are also only for the three factors. We suppress the coefficients that are below 0.25 so that the table is much easier to look at. The factor loading Table 1 is rotated with varimax method.
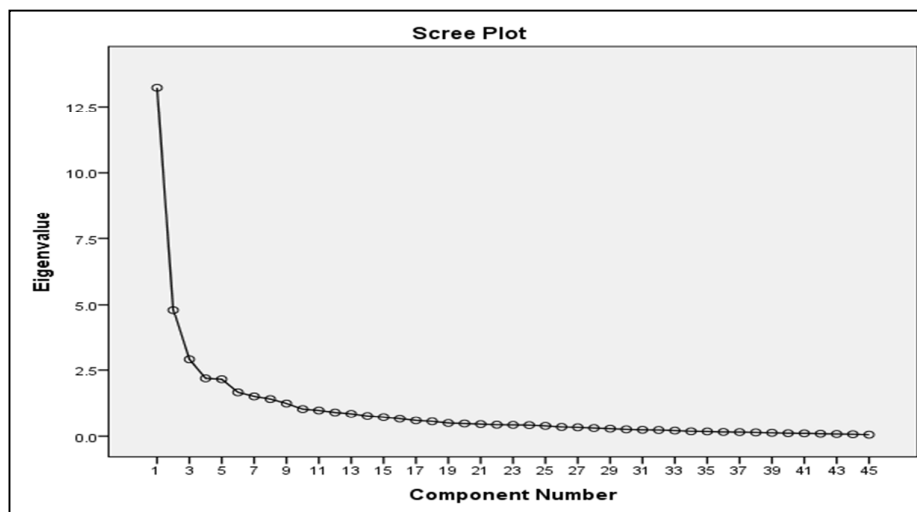

Fig. 1. Scree Plot

Table 1
Component Matrix with Varimax Rotation

	Component					Component		
	1	2	3			1	2	3
1a	.528	.386			7a			-.707
1b	.406	.603			7b			.506
1c	.315	.718			7c	.310		
1d	.498	.390			8a			-.659
1e		.493	.547		8b	.418	.341	
2a		.671			8c	.557		
2b		.703			9	.254		
2c		.745			10a	.303		
2d		.717			10b	.396		
2e		.531	.392		10c	.610		
3a		.396	.451		11a	.727		
3b		.686			11b	.782		
3c		.645			11c	.812		
3d		.377	.564		12a	.843		
3e		.301	.505		12b	.799		
4a			.479		13a	.756		
4b			-.653		13b	.408	.291	.375
4c			-.570		14a	.663	.352	
5a	.456	.479			14b	.646		
5b	.394	.553			15a	.595		
5c	.552				15b	.676		
6a		.359	.422					
6b			.752					
6c			.735					

There are 21 questions that belong to Factor 1. We named **Factor 1** as a Language Factors, since all of the questions are related to this factor. The questions are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
List of questions for Factor 1

QUESTION NUMBER	QUESTION
1a	I like the idea of being able to speak English
1d	I like to watch English movies
5c	I think learning English in a group is more fun than if I had my own tutor
7c	I want to be able to use English a wide variety of situations
8b	I would say that I'm usually very interested in what we do in English class
8c	In general, I enjoy my English classes
9	Before I begin an English assignment, I make sure I have a dictionary or other resources
10a	When I listen to people communicating in English, I recognize their grammar mistakes
10b	When someone is speaking English, I try to concentrate on what the person is saying
10c	When someone does not understand my English, I try to understand what I said wrong
11a	After I finish a conversation in English, I think about how I could say things better
11b	After I say something in English, I check whether the person I am talking to has really understood what I meant
11c	I test my knowledge of new English words by using them in new situations
12a	I try to connect what I am learning with what I already know
12b	I try to somehow organize the material in my mind
13a	I repeat words to make sure that I have understood them correctly
13b	I make written summaries of information that I hear or read in English
14a	I learn best when I am taught the rules related to words, grammars, etc.
14b	Using the grammar of my own language to help me learn the grammar rules in English
15a	Comparing grammar rules in my own language with grammar rules in English
15b	Memorizing the rules and applying them to new situations

Table 3 lists all the questions belong to **Factor 2**, where most of the questions are related to the Cultural Factor.

Table 3
List of questions for Factor 2

QUESTION NUMBER	QUESTION
1b	Learning English is very enjoyable
1c	I think English will have a great impact on my future
1e	I like to read English books or novels at public places, because people see me differently
2a	I think it will be easy if I can speak English when finding a job
2b	I think people who can speak English receive higher education
2c	People see me differently when they know I can speak English
2d	I study English because it might become one of the official languages
2e	I study English because I get on-line quite often
3b	My family members feel proud of me because I can speak English
3c	When my family members cannot understand anything written in English, they always ask me to help them
5a	I like class activity which uses English language
5b	I enjoy talking with the teacher and other students in English

All the questions in **Factor 3** are related to the Educational Factor. The questions are listed in Table 4.

Table 4
List of questions for Factor 3

QUESTION NUMBER	QUESTION
1e	I like to read English books or novels at public places, because people see me differently
3a	I study English because my parents want me to do so
3d	My parents give me reward for doing well in English tests
3e	I watch English TV programs with my family quite often
4a	I like to wait until I know exactly how to use an English word before using it
4b	I don't like trying out a difficult sentence in class
4c	I prefer to follow basic sentence models rather than risk misusing the language
6a	Based on my class experience so far, I think that one barrier to my future use of English is my discomfort when speaking
6b	At times, I feel somewhat embarrassed in class when I'm trying to speak in English
6c	I sometimes feel awkward speaking English
7a	Outside of class, I almost never think about what I'm learning in class
7b	If possible, I would like to take a second MUET class
8a	I find English class to be very boring

4. Conclusions

This study was carried out to explore the factors that affect English proficiency level among university students. We can categorize all items under three different categories, which are Language Factor, Cultural Factor and Educational Factor. The first factor (Language Factor) comprised of twenty-one items, twelve items were categorized under Factor 2 (Cultural Factor) and thirteen items were categorized under Factor 3 (Educational Factor).

These three factors can become indicators when discussing on the importance factors of English proficiency level among university students. The findings in this study will give in depth understanding to the underlying problem of student's English proficiency level, and consequently will improve their performance in the near future.

Acknowledgement

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