



Students' Perception on Malaysian University English Test (MUET): Reflections and External Factors

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is a proficiency test conducted by *Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia* (MPM) to evaluate students' level of English proficiency as a requirement for them to pursue their education at any local tertiary level institutions. This study is conducted to identify the students' perception on MUET in terms of how it reflects their language skills and the external factors contributing to the assessment of the MUET. In this descriptive survey study, 30 undergraduate students from a local university were chosen to be the participants. A survey questionnaire consisting of agree/disagree and open-ended questions was distributed to collect the data. The findings of this study showed that MUET does reflect the students' English proficiencies generally and there is evidence of external factors influencing MUET's assessment that centers on students' anxiety and the venue of the listening test (e.g., conduciveness, background noise). The open-ended section revealed the listening test as the main concern and that it needed the improvement the most. This study can benefit the test administrators to enhance the language test in ways that concern the test-takers the most.

Keywords: MUET; proficiency test; external factors; anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Various tests have been implemented in countries all over the world as requirements to enroll in academic institutions, especially at the tertiary level. Malaysia also incorporates this concept where the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is used to measure students' English proficiency in general before they are admitted into one of the local institutions (Jin, 2020). MUET measures proficiency of all the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing where the raw overall score ranges from zero to 300 (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2015). It is also created to promote English proficiency to ensure students' effective academic performance at the tertiary level (Rethinasamy & Chuah, 2011).

This small-scale study is conducted to investigate students' perception toward MUET in terms of the structure of the questions (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and the possible external factors that might affect the test-takers' answers and the scores given to them. The respondents have real first-hand experience that will contribute to the findings of the study and are required to come out with suggestions to improve MUET in the future. The questions this study intends to find out are as follows:

- 1) Does the Malaysia University English Test (MUET) reflect test-taker's proficiency?
- 2) Are there any external factors that, in their opinion, affect the test-taker's answers or the scores given?

Significance of the study

This study is conducted to find out the perception of the students themselves as the test-takers while highlighting the validity concerns of the test structure as well as the external factors affecting MUET's assessment. Based on the constructs in the questionnaire, students provided their opinions

and thoughts on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) as a proficiency test that may help for the better improvement of the test in the future.

Other than that, this study is also important for the test administrators as they need to be aware and assess the overall validity of the MUET since it is a high stakes test that will determine the students' qualification to be accepted to institutions at the tertiary level (Mahmud et al., 2021). In addition, this study can be used by the administrators to improve the quality of MUET based on the feedback from the students and can also be used for future reference and studies in the same area. The outcome of the study may also assist instructors or teachers to facilitate or help the students who will be taking MUET in the future to get higher bands as they are one of the factors that impacts the students' proficiency (Yee & Periasamy, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Assessing Students' Language Proficiency for Entry to Tertiary Institutions

English language is the second most important language in Malaysia and it is widely used in various fields as a medium of communication as well as for transferring information. Owing to this fact, our education system emphasizes the importance of acquiring the English language especially at the higher level of education. English language now has been commonly used as a medium of instruction for most of the local universities and the majority of the textbooks and reference books from different courses are presented in English. Communication, note-taking and academic writing skills can be considered as vital skills needed by the students to ensure success in their study at higher institutions (Yee & Periasamy, 2019). From this situation, students with good language skills will have no problem transitioning from secondary year into tertiary level but it will be a problem if the students possess low level of English proficiency.

McLean et al. (2013) explained that "poor language skills impacted on learners' interaction with their teachers. Lacking the confidence to approach faculty members meant that students' queries would not have been addressed" (pp. 472). This claim shows that the lack of language skills will limit the students' access to knowledge because they do not know how to approach and ask the lecturers regarding their problems. The lack of language skills will also lead to low confidence levels as students will choose to keep quiet instead of asking questions (McLean et al., 2013). That is why communications skills were identified as the main graduate attribute that the local university was committed to inculcate in its graduates (Ali, 2013) because these skills allow the students to properly voice out their ideas and opinions among peers as well as ask questions to lecturers for any information. Ali (2013) also stated that "communication skills is emphasized because poor communication skills in English have been identified as one of the causes of unemployment among local graduates" (pp.84) which again highlighted the importance of English language proficiency in tertiary level particularly in communication as it affects students' professional development in the future.

In higher institutions, the students have full accountability towards their learning process. With good language skills, the students will face few problems in taking notes during the lectures as well as comprehending and producing academic texts for assignments. If they are lacking in this part of language skills, their learning process will be difficult as explained by Rosniah



Mustaffa (2006), who felt that “undergraduate students are found not to have note-taking skills and this creates a problem for them when listening to lectures or discussion”. This situation might happen because of the low range of vocabulary or lack of reading. Tertiary level students need to realize that reading and writing academic text is the most important part of the learning process in higher institutions.

Thus, possessing a good proficiency in English when entering tertiary level is very essential and the students cannot deny how vital it is for them. The success of the learning process in higher education is highly dependent on the students themselves. Good English language skills will help the tertiary level students to survive the academic years as it assists them to communicate with peers and lecturers from different countries and also reading as well as producing academic text.

Proficiency Test

In regards to the importance of having a good competency in English language skills, Harsch (2014) in her research stated that test results for international English proficiency tests are complemented by scores on separate language skills which will then be indicated through an overall score. This will then reflect a divisible view of proficiency hence why it is safe to justify the reason students who are required to apply to tertiary level institutions need to use the result from their proficiency tests.

By the same token, university and tertiary institutions will then advertise a benchmark requirement for students to apply to their chosen program using the test scores which will rank them according to the bands. Be that as it may, O’Loughlin (2011) emphasized her findings that the overall scores given as the result from these proficiency tests are not something that can be taken as it is without further consideration or discussion. Hamp-Lyons (2000) argued that administrators need to be alerted to the impact of the decisions they make, the uncertainty inherent in the data they base decisions on, the need for them to demand better information from testing agencies, and the need to follow ethical principles of their own professions in using test scores (as cited in O’Loughlin, 2011). In other words, it is very crucial for professionals involved in the administration process to consider a wide range of criteria including the applicant’s academic background, intellectual capacity and other important aspects in ensuring that no single factor like English language proficiency scores dominates the selection process.

In general, there are a wide range of proficiency tests for different ages and groups meant to cater for different levels of proficiency skills. Different countries will also have different standardized tests meant to assess an individual’s proficiency in a language. Among them are the widely known exam tests like TOEIC, IELTS, TOEFL and Cambridge test for the purpose of pursuing study in university in English-speaking countries. These tests are usually offered at testing locations all over the world and accepted by thousands of universities and other organizations. A language proficiency test is a test intended to measure and assess students’ proficiency skills in the four fundamental aspects namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening. According to Henning (1987), a proficiency test measures general language ability or skill and is more theory-based rather than syllabus-based.



That being said, there is no specific language teaching and curriculum specifications used in teaching students on how to score these tests like TOEIC, IELTS or even MUET for Malaysian candidates but rather based on general language aspects. This particular feature in language proficiency test has been discussed by researchers like Tsai and Tsou (2009) in their research in which they agreed with William's (1996) claim that performances shown on standardized test are not actually equivalent to what students can achieve in authentic tasks. This statement highlights the concern that as a test, it didn't really measure what has been learned or taught to the students. "Standardised tests, which are commercially developed by external institutions and norm-referenced in the scoring procedures (Mehren & Lehmann, 1973), easily ignore teachers' expertise and students' learning situations owing to the concern for objectivity and relativity (McNeil, 2000; Tierney, 2005; as cited in Tsai & Tsou, 2009). Correspondingly, it is on this basis that language proficiency tests are somewhat argued to be the best assessor for students' language proficiency skills for the result of these tests will be the one major determinants for candidates' admission to the tertiary level.

It can be argued that the definition of language proficiency, as suggested by Schrank et al. (2013) study, in which the students' capability to communicate in an informal social setting as well as their ability to do so in a more formal and demanding academic setting is actually different than the proficiency showcased through an overall result of a test. This definition implies that there may be some aspects in language proficiency that are not included as one of the components in language tests like MUET for students are unable to demonstrate their speaking skills in a setting other than academic one. It is very crucial for test-makers and also test-takers specially to know if the said language test really reflects their true English proficiency.

Aside from that, it is also this study's intention to investigate the test-takers' opinions if there are any external factors that may influence their overall test results. A research conducted by Hamid et al. (2019) that examined test-takers' perception on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and its validity found that it is a fair measure of the learners' proficiency but how far it measures their actual English capabilities is still questionable. Kunnan (2010) argued that fairness should not be confined to the test itself but should be extended to the testing practice. He proposed a Test Fairness Framework in terms of five main qualities: validity, absence of bias, access, administration, and social consequences (Moghadam & Nasirzadeh, 2020). A Test Fairness Framework is constructed to collect evidence in determining the construct validity like the physical condition and the absence of bias. Findings showed that some respondents did indeed face some difficulties during the listening comprehension section. Empirical results showed that the most often-criticized administrative problem raised by test takers was the broadcast quality of the listening comprehension questions (Tran & Duong, 2020). The reason that this study is significant is due to the reason that if such evidence to measure the external factors that might affect a test are not presented, users have no way of knowing if the test correlates well with established measures of cognitive-academic language proficiency (Schrank et al., 2013). Other than that, the issue of volume systems that are too loud for some candidates, too low for others do affect their overall test-taking performance (Tran & Duong, 2020). These examples of concerns and external factors in a language proficiency test are what researchers aim to examine in relation to MUET as the official language proficiency test for Malaysian students for them to enroll in local tertiary institutions.



It is undeniable that in every test, there are deficiencies that affect candidates' true scores. These deficiencies may be caused by external factors that influence students' performance and thus, affecting their achievements in the overall test. In the MUET test itself, there are several key factors that are identified and are made as the base for the second construct for the questionnaire given to the participants of this study. The external factors are as follows:

Anxiety sources from the nature of the speaking test

The speaking test under MUET requires students to talk about contemporary issues under two tasks; a 2-minute individual presentation based on the given subtopics and group interaction that allows a 10-minute discussion between group members. The assessment covers the fluency of the speakers, accuracy, appropriacy, use of language functions, and coherence and cohesion. These elements of the speaking test may trigger the candidates' anxiety as they are expected to perform individually in a short time (Buriro & Kakepoto, 2013) and in addition, they also have to converse in English in a discussion that is participated by people they do not know. Buriro and Kakepoto (2013) also claim that candidates of the test might underperform the presentation and discussion once they let their anxiety control their mind and speech.

Conduciveness of the venue for the listening test

Fifteen percent of Malaysia University English Test (MUET) will be covered by the listening component that requires the candidates to listen to 5 oral texts and answer the questions that are in the structure of information transfer, short-answer, and multiple-choice questions. In this case, the venue of the test plays a very big role as it must be as conducive as possible to avoid any disturbance such as background noise for the candidates to listen to the recording of the oral texts. Experts believe that background noise can be a distraction and hinder concentration, attention, and the overall performance of a particular task given to the students and it makes listening harder (Chartier, 1978; Visentin & Prodi, 2017). Thus, it is a concern where the listening test is conducted as distracting noise from the surrounding might divert the candidate's focus from the recording.

Timed reading and writing test

Reading holds the biggest share of MUET score's percentage which is 40% while writing holds 30% of the overall score. This implies that both components need to be scored well by the candidates as they have big impacts on the end result. For the reading component, it consists of 10 texts ranging from 100 – 900 words each and 40 questions (e.g., MCQs, multiple matching, and gapped texts) to be answered based on the texts given and candidates will be given 75 minutes to complete all sections (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019). Lesaux et al. (2006) reported that for reading comprehension tests, extra time might be an advantage to process all the given texts. Thus, the amount of time provided to answer reading comprehension questions should be compatible with the number of texts given in the test. Meanwhile, for the writing component, candidates are required to complete two tasks in 75 minutes. The first essay (e.g., letter or email writing) should be at least 100 words and is based on a textual stimulus while the second essay should consist of 250 words and above (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019). This infers that candidates should be able to brainstorm ideas, construct the drafts, and write the full essays in the given time. According to Petersen (2009), students cannot show their full potential in writing skills in timed essay examinations. This is most probably because the test-takers are being aware of the time given and in the set time frame where they need to complete the task. However, Petersen (2009) also believes that there is always room for improvement where test-makers are encouraged to keep improving the timed writing test but at the same time considering the real purpose of the



test which is to explore candidates' writing ability. Thus, this small-scale study intends to find out the suggestions preferred by the test-takers themselves in improving the execution of MUET's reading and writing tests.

METHODOLOGY

The research design used in this small-scale study is descriptive survey study which is quantitative in nature. According to Creswell (2008), quantitative research tends to seek measurable, observable data on variables and as what is suggested by Kaliyadan and Kulkarni (2019), some of the purposes of quantitative research are to discover and establish causes, identify characteristics, and determine whether relationships exist between independent and dependent variables. This notion is aligned with the aim to investigate measurable data on students' perception on MUET. In survey research design, trends, individual opinions and attitudes can be described by the researcher. Creswell (2008) posited that survey can also be used to correlate variables, just as what researcher intends to do in this study. The focus of survey research design is directed more toward learning about a population and less on relating variables or predicting outcomes as is the focus in correlational research (Creswell, 2008).

The subjects of the study were recruited from the first-year undergraduate students enrolled in a public university who had just taken the standardized Malaysian University English Test (MUET) for the reason that it would be easier for the fresh graduates to reflect on their test performance as well as their experience. The population chosen consisted of 37 first-year university students from the same class and program. According to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table of sampling, 30 students were chosen as the sample for the study. Random sampling was used in gathering 30 respondents for the research purpose. As for the instrument that was employed in this study, a subject-completed questionnaire was used. This survey questionnaire uses a close-ended type of answer with "Agree" and "Disagree" as the options for the ten questions given. The "Agree" and "Disagree" options are chosen to avoid ambiguity and plus, close-ended questions are quicker to be answered with the exact answer options provided (Jain et al., 2016). There are two sub constructs in the questionnaire; respondents' opinions on MUET and if it reflects their proficiency while another construct investigates possible external factors that might come in the way of the test. There are five questions for each construct and the respondents are also expected to give their opinions or suggestions on how to improve the language proficiency test.

By using a directly-administered survey questionnaire with only two simple possible answers of "Agree" and "Disagree," the data analysis was reported using descriptive statistics. The data gathered from the questionnaires was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, as well as tabulated accordingly in order to interpret the data. For each closed-ended item, the calculations of both mean and percentage were done through excel calculations and tabulated to analyze the students' overall perception in terms of the negative and positive answers. For the open-ended items, data will be analyzed based on thematic analysis whereby data were examined and patterns (or themes) were recorded.

FINDINGS

Further findings and discussions will be categorized according to two constructs and one suggestion as arranged in the questionnaire. These findings were collected from 30 first year undergraduate students.

CONSTRUCT 1: Does MUET reflect English proficiencies?

Table 1
MUET Reflections on English proficiencies

No	Item/Statement	Agree	Disagree
1	The listening test measured my ability to comprehend various oral texts of varying length.	28 (93.33%)	2 (6.67%)
2	The reading passages and the questions are challenging enough to assess my reading skill.	28 (93.33%)	2 (6.67%)
3	The structure of the speaking test helps me in delivering my thoughts clearly.	24 (80%)	6 (20%)
4	The discussion among the candidates helps me to exhibit my communication skill.	30 (100%)	0 (0%)
5	I think that the first section of the writing test (graph) is significant to test my writing skill.	20 (66.67%)	10 (33.33%)

Statement 1: The listening test conducted measured my ability to comprehend various oral texts of varying length.

The first statement in Construct 1 was posed regarding the listening test conducted in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). According to the first item in the table above, majority of the participants (93.33%) agreed with the statement that the listening test conducted measures their ability to comprehend various oral texts of varying length while another 6.67% of them disagreed. This result indeed shows that the way the test is conducted during this proficiency test is effective in assessing the participants' listening skills regardless of the texts given, including the texts' length (Fleckenstein et al., 2020).

Statement 2: The reading passages and the questions are challenging enough to assess my reading skill.

According to the findings from the second statement in Construct 1, 93.33% of the participants agreed that "The reading passages and the questions are challenging enough to assess my reading skill" and only few of the participants (6.67%) disagreed. From the result, these participants had reached the decision that the reading texts provided in the MUET proficiency test have the capacity to reflect their reading skills regardless of their level of difficulties. This is in line with Crossley's (2020) study that indicates how linguistic features in writing tests can determine students' quality of writing.

Statement 3: The structure of the speaking test helps me in delivering my thoughts clearly.

When the participants were asked whether the format of the speaking test really helped them in conveying their thoughts clearly or not, 80% of the undergraduates answered "agree" while another 20% of them opposed the statement which indicates that the test did not properly represent

their level of speaking skills. Nonetheless, the majority of them believed that the way the speaking test is conducted is effective and helpful for them in demonstrating their communication skills during the proficiency test. This is supplementary to a finding of a study done by Mahmud et al. (2021) where the respondents admitted that MUET encouraged them to improve their speaking skills in English.

Statement 4: The discussion among the candidates helps me to exhibit my communication skill.

According to statement 4, the participants were asked regarding their opinions on whether the discussion task from the speaking test facilitates them in showing their communication skills. Unanimously, all of the participants (100%) agreed that the discussion assessment in the MUET speaking test did help them in contributing ideas as well as exhibit their communication skills with other candidates during the test conducted. A speaking test that requires group work usually provides better opportunities for students to speak in English.

Statement 5: I think that the first section of the writing test is significant to test my writing skill.

In the last part of Construct 1, the issue of either writing test is significant to MUET’s candidates’ writing skills or not had been put forward to the participants and 66.67% of them correspond with it, while another 33.33% believed that the first part of the writing test does not properly showcase their writing skills. This finding portrayed that almost half of the participants had shown disagreement to the writing test because it did not really test their overall writing skills.

CONSTRUCT 2 – Are there any external factors influencing MUET assessment?

Table 2
External factors influencing MUET assessment

No	Item/Statement	Agree	Disagree
1	I feel anxious during the speaking test that I cannot convey my ideas properly.	27 (90%)	3 (10%)
2	The venue for the listening test is very conducive.	15 (50%)	15 (50%)
3	The time given for each section in the writing test is sufficient.	21 (70%)	9 (30%)
4	The recording for the listening test is clear and comprehensible.	18 (60%)	12 (40%)
5	The time given for each section in the reading test is sufficient.	20 (66.67%)	10 (33.33%)

Pertaining to questions in Table 2 above, the participants were asked whether there are any external factors that influenced their MUET assessment through five statements that were constructed to answer the research question.

Statement 1: I feel anxious during the speaking test that I can’t convey my ideas properly.

When the participants were asked if they felt anxious before sitting for the speaking test as in item 1, a large majority (90%) agreed with the statement while the remaining 10% answered otherwise. It is thus safe to assume that anxiety does have an impact on students' speaking skills in MUET. This is due to the fact that they may not be able to converse smoothly in a high-stake situation to



be compared if they were to speak in a natural setting without being graded. This result is similar to the study by Mahmud et al. (2021) in which the respondents felt more anxious before the test rather than after sitting for the test.

Statement 2: The venue for the listening test is very conducive.

While for the statement asking participants if the venue for the listening test is conducive or not, 50% of them answered 'Agree' and another 50% of them answered 'Disagree'. It is interesting to note that there is an equal division of opinions suggesting there are participants who felt that the venue for the listening test was very conducive and yet at the same time there are those who felt otherwise. For half of the responses, participants felt that the venue for the listening test was not too conducive and that it may impede their performance on that particular skill. Perhaps the venue for the listening test is conducted nearby congested street or in a hall with a lot of background noise that makes an unconducive venue. This is supplementary to another study in which the respondents admitted that they could not hear the voice audio clearly during the listening test (Karnine et. al, 2022).

Statement 3: The time given for each section in the writing test is sufficient.

For this statement, 70% of the participants answered 'Agree' to the statement asking if the time is sufficient for each section in the writing test while the other 30% of the participants disagreed with the statement. For the majority of them, the time allocated (75 minutes) for the writing tasks was sufficient as they got enough time to showcase their writing skills. This shows that time limitation has no effect on the students' ability to perform the tasks.

Statement 4: The recording for the listening test is clear and comprehensible.

The fourth statement in Construct 2 addressing the issue of whether the recording for the listening test is clear and comprehensible or not, it is found that 60% of the participants answered 'Agree' while the other 40% disagreed which suggested that the recording for the listening test was unclear hence why it may affect their MUET's listening assessment. This minority response echoes a similar study whereby the participants commented that the audio recording used for the MUET listening test was too fast and they were unable to complete the task on time (Karnine et al., 2022).

Statement 5: The time given for each section in the reading test is sufficient.

Lastly, when the participants were asked if the time given for each section in the reading test was sufficient as stated in Statement 5, a majority of them (66.66%) agreed to it and this implied their satisfaction with the allocated time (75 minutes). There are 33.34% of the participants who disagreed with the allocated time and this percentage is almost similar with the response in Statement 3 with 70% of the participants disagreed. This suggests that there is indeed similar weightage, for both writing and reading tests, of the participants that expressed their dissatisfaction with the allocated time.

Open-ended question: Suggestion on how Malaysian University English Test (MUET) can be improved in the future.

Based on the suggestions received, the responses are analyzed using thematic analysis and correspondingly, the responses are reported and categorized to seven themes that are identified as follow:



Table 3
Participants' Suggestions for MUET Improvements

Suggestions	No. of students (n=30)
Clearer and louder audio (listening test)	5
More suitable venue with lesser noise (listening test)	3
Longer preparation time (speaking test)	2
Change group assessment to individual assessment; one-to-one (speaking test)	2
Extended time to complete the test (writing test)	2
Preference for no-accent audio recording (listening test)	1
Lower the fee to sit for the test (irrelevant)	2

Referring to the table above, the most recurrent suggestion proposed by the participants is for MUET administrators to provide clearer and louder audio for the listening test which echoes the result from another study (Karnine et al., 2022). One of the participants argued that the suggestion should be done especially for the candidates of the test who sit at the back of the hall. Plus, for the listening test too, another suggestion is to provide venues with lesser background noise in order for the students to be able to focus on the audio better. As the format of the listening test in MUET requires students to answer the questions during and after listening to the recording, students might miss the important points or answers of the questions with the presence of background noise (e.g., noises from the canteen, construction sites, etc.).

Two of the participants recommended a longer preparation time for the speaking test. Since the students will get the topic of the question and the point they have to elaborate right on the spot, longer preparation time might be a big help for the students to brainstorm and rearrange their ideas for a smoother oral discussion. Another two of the participants claimed that it is better to have a one-to-one speaking test where the candidates are tested individually instead of being assessed in a group. This is most probably because the test-taker might feel demotivated when they are within a group that consists of more proficient speakers. Additionally, Abas and Jaffri (2017) emphasized that teachers must prepare students for the speaking test in MUET as it tests their abilities on a wide range of skills such as conveying and explaining facts, expressing preferences, managing discussions, and even making decisions.

For the writing test in MUET, two of the participants believed that longer time should be provided for the students to complete both sections of the test. Last but not least, one of the suggestions suggests that the recording tape should not contain any accents. This is due to some of the students, especially those who are from rural areas, might have never been exposed to spoken English with thick accents before the test. Therefore, this hinders their comprehension of the recorded audio and affects their performance in the listening test. Two participants have suggested an irrelevant suggestion to lower or abolish the fee of MUET examination which is not considered as having any influence on students' performance in the examination and thus, not categorized as one of the external factors.



DISCUSSIONS

Research Question 1: “Does MUET reflect English proficiencies?”

The first construct of this paper is created based on the research question “*Does MUET reflect English proficiencies?*” which discussed and focused on the ability of the test in reflecting the students’ performance in language skills tested in the Malaysia University English Test (MUET). From overall findings of the survey that had been given to the participants, the majority of them agreed, which also covered the first research question that the MUET proficiency test which encompasses all four language skills does reflect their language skills competency.

From all five statements given in the construct, all 30 participants agree in unison that the discussion task from the speaking test definitely reflects their communication skills and also the way the task is conducted facilitates them to showcase their speaking ability. Nonetheless, this still depends on each individual as each of them might possess different levels of confidence and abilities (Karnine et al., 2022) which will be reflected in their MUET’s achievement that is not measured in this study. In the speaking test of MUET, the candidates will have to go through two types of tests which are individual and group discussion. Based on the findings, the discussion task is proven to be one of the most effective components out of four skills tested in MUET because it provides a platform for the learners to use their communication skills. It also reflects the authentic conditions for the language speaking ability to take place. According to the result, it is believed that by involving candidates from different backgrounds in a discussion, it will help them to portray their true ability in communication as it is not planned and also prepare them for the real speaking situation that they definitely will encounter in a real life situation (Abas & Jaffri, 2017). Thus, the discussion task from the speaking test provides a high authenticity in terms of the language usage, hence, it does reflect the students’ speaking ability which reflects the result of the fourth statement from Construct 1.

Research Question 2: “Are there any external factors influencing MUET’s assessment?”

Considering the findings above, the responses from the questionnaires given can indeed answer the second research question: *Are there any external factors influencing MUET’s assessment?* Before the questionnaires were distributed to gain insights from the university students who have just taken their MUET examination, it is assumed that there is evidence of external factors that may affect the credibility and validity of the said language proficiency test. Including among many is the factor of whether the listening test venue is affecting the listening test itself and also if the time allocated for the writing and reading test is sufficient enough to test students’ true ability. That being said, findings from the questionnaires do shed a light on which factor may be more distinguished than others. For a fact, it is proven from the questionnaire that the majority of students do feel anxious during their speaking test that they are not able to convey their ideas properly. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) affirmed that students are often reserved in speaking due to them being too self-conscious of making mistakes and worrying about the criticism that they might receive after. Anxiety and nervousness before speaking, although very common, is especially very taxing for students who are required to converse in an academic discussion. Especially when it is not their mother tongue, students are more likely to be more intimidated and more anxious which will result in them not being able to demonstrate their true speaking skills. This external factor is most certainly affecting students’ performance in MUET’s assessment.



Meanwhile, for the external factor of the listening test venue, it is again, worthy to note that students or participants have equal percentage of agreement as well as disagreement on its conduciveness. For them, the venue was not so conducive that it affected the recording of the listening test itself and hence, making it unfavorable for the participants who were taking the test. Venues that are located nearby a congested road or in rooms that are not equipped with good sound-proof quality may impact students in a negative way. They won't be able to listen to the recording clearly which will ultimately influence their assessment score for that particular test. This is similar to the statement made by Jin (2020) whereby across other language skills, listening is the most frustrating one as it is difficult to identify students' discomfort in going through the test. The equal distribution between participants who chose 'Agree' and 'Disagree' may imply that the conduciveness of a venue for listening test differs for each individual and the fact that half of the participants reported the unfavorable situation is quite alarming.

Be that as it may, responses from Statement 4 hinted quite a contrary finding as majority of the participants agreed that the recording for the listening test is clear and comprehensible. If half of the participants do suggest that the venue for the listening test is unconducive, it would be just reasonable for the recording to be unclear as well as these two aspects are indirectly related. If the process of listening itself is hindered by background noise from the venue, students will not be able to listen to the recording as clearly as it would if the venue were to be in someplace where it is much more conducive. Even so, findings showed otherwise which may be justified with the fact that students perhaps find the recording alone to be clear and comprehensible without associating it with the venue where the recording takes place.

That being said, another two external factors as presented in the second construct regarding time allocation has been proved to be the exception as per participants' responses. It is found that the majority of the participants have agreed that the time provided for both reading and writing tests to be sufficient. It is safe to conclude then that the external factor of time didn't play a role in influencing the assessment of MUET negatively. Participants who have just sat for MUET during the past year as per this study's sample are all satisfied with the time allocated for each section in reading as well as writing components.

Correspondingly, to answer the second research question in order to investigate if there are any external factors influencing MUET, it is with full confidence that anxiety does influence students' overall speaking skills. As a result of anxiety, they are unable to deliver their ideas and thoughts properly which will undeniably affect their scores. The best that the invigilators can do is to make the test environment to be as stress-free as possible with the hope that test-takers can reduce their anxiety level. Again, anxiety does come within oneself and it depends on him or her to try to curb that feeling so that it will not be the major factor that constrains their true ability.

Another external factor that may influence the assessment though not as dominant as the anxiety factor, is pertaining to the concern of the listening test venue. This external factor gets exactly equal distribution between two options of 'Agree' and 'Disagree' which gives an implication that while venue may be the negative factor in a particular listening test, it might not be the case in some other places. It would be best if the concerned authorities can investigate and gather more data to see if every venue for the listening test is conducive enough with little background noise before holding the MUET. With preventative measures, this external factor can



be expected to be reduced and hopefully will help students to be able to listen to the recording more clearly.

Based on the questionnaire, the participants were asked to provide one suggestion on how the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) can be improved in the future. The suggestions given by the participants mostly put their concern on MUET's listening and speaking test while the reading test receives no attention at all. Perhaps MUET developers should reevaluate the procedure of the listening test and take into account the case of the venue for the test. Since the majority of the listening tests are conducted in a big hall in schools, there are a lot of sources of background noise that might affect students' concentration who are currently sitting for the test. If this matter found no resolutions, perhaps the best MUET developers can do alternatively is to provide a clearer public address system (PA system) for a better audio sound for the listening test. Aside from the listening component, the speaking test also received some recommendations with the concerns on the time management and test method and structure. One of the possible resolutions might be that the test developers should extend the preparation time for the candidates to allow for more production of ideas. For the one-to-one oral test suggestion, perhaps the test makers can include this feature aside from the group discussion assessment. With this being mentioned, group discussion is still needed to assess students' ability in speaking skills such as interacting and turn-taking (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). However, a one-to-one oral test can be considered to be included as well for a more detailed assessment of individuals' speaking ability (i.e., flow of ideas and fluency).

Next, for the writing component, two participants believed that some candidates might be overwhelmed by the time given to complete the writings for two sections. This issue can be overcome by providing more pre-test training to the candidates for them to be familiar with the time management and the questions' structures. Another issue that received one of the participants' attention is the accent in the audio used for the listening test. Even though the ratio is only one in thirty students, some might still feel distracted by the accents of the speakers in the recording that will possibly make it harder for them to score the listening test. The same solution (i.e., more training opportunities) might be needed to familiarize students with the accents that might be out in the test. These suggestions give hints to the test developers to look into the matter and suggestions to figure out how to improve MUET's examination for a better and a more comprehensive test in the future.

CONCLUSION

This small-scale study attempts to find out whether the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is perceived to reflect the candidates' proficiency or vice versa and whether there are external factors influencing students' performance and scores for the test. To investigate the answers to these questions, 30 university students from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) were chosen to answer the questionnaire prepared. From the result, it implies that the participants agree on MUET's capability in measuring their proficiency in English. However, the result also indicates that there are several external factors that might influence their performance in the test with anxiety for the speaking test being the most agreed factor. Plus, in some places and in the perspective of some students, the venue for the listening test might also influence their achievement in MUET.



Nonetheless, it is proven through the result that MUET remains a suitable tool in reflecting participants' proficiency and future test developers or MUET developers themselves may take the suggestions into consideration in improving MUET in the future.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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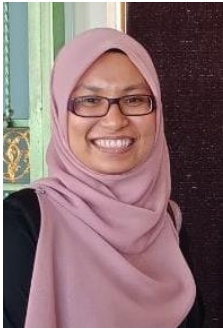

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Authors' Contributions

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