

## **Investigating Learning Difficulties in Economics English-Medium Classes among Malay Students**

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**Abstract** English language is spoken globally where many people in the world purposely learn it as a second language. In order to prepare students to venture into this global world and be part of the growing society, many universities are using English as the medium of instruction in lectures or tutorials. For most Malay students whose mother tongue is not English, the level of English proficiency might influence their capability in comprehending the courses taught. A very minimal ability in English would lead to learning difficulties. This will definitely disturb the learning process. As such, the main objective of the paper is to investigate the learning difficulties faced by the Malay students in comprehending the subject with English as the medium of instruction. 100 questionnaires were distributed among Malay students who enrolled for Economics courses. The selection of sample was based on simple random technique. The findings showed that the overall degree of students' comprehension in their Economics English-medium classes is at the average level and that the comprehension level will improve if the lecturers re-explain in their mother tongue language which is Malay (M=4.14). About half of the respondents were found to respond that the difficulties in understanding Economics were due to either solely to the difficulty they had with English language or at least part of the difficulty was due to English.

**Keywords** Economics courses; English-medium instruction; learning difficulties; Malay students.

## 1 Introduction

English is used in many countries to serve as the international lingua franca where its role is recognizable in many fields such as business, education, politics, media and entertainment industry. English is highly used as the mediator in these fields as the need to be connected with people from across the world is increasing. As the communication technologies developed and improved, the need of getting in touch with each other has led to the establishment of numerous international co-operations in different fields. However, the prerequisite for the functioning of global communication is a common language understood by everyone (Haagen-Schützenhöfer & Mathelitsch, 2001). Due to this fact, English is no longer known as the language of the elite class; instead, it has become rather common for people to purposely learn it as a second language. The fact that English language is used globally nowadays has set an alarming call in education field where it can be seen that nowadays, English is no longer taught as a foreign language, instead, it has been used as the medium of instruction in teaching other courses. This notion of using English as the medium of instruction is due to the fact that demand for this language is rapidly increasing. As stated by Gill (2004) in Gill (2006),

“...the private sector became the main employment choice for graduates, but here the most important linguistic proficiency was in English...Graduates from the private universities were more sought after by the companies in the private sector, largely because of their competency in English. This situation would have led to serious social and economic problems for the nation”.

Therefore, students need to be equipped with this language in order to prepare them to venture into this global world. However, for most of the students whose mother tongue is not English, they are going to face lots of difficulties in comprehending this language into the courses. Their proficiency in English might hinder them from understanding the courses taught. As such, this paper aims to investigate the learning difficulties faced by the Malay students in comprehending the subject with English as the medium of instruction. Four specific objectives of the paper are (1) to identify students' English proficiency level, (2) to investigate students' degree of

comprehension in Economics English-medium lectures, (3) to examine the learning difficulties in Economics subject faced by Malay students learning in English language and (4) to identify the perceived difficulties in understanding Economics subject.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 English as a medium of instruction in higher learning institutions**

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is a developed bilingual teaching method where its main idea is to combine the conventional instruction of content-area subjects with foreign language-learning (Haagen-Schützenhöfer & Mathelitsch, 2001). In this case, a foreign language is used as a tool to communicate instead of the mother tongue. As stated in Haagen-Schützenhöfer and Mathelitsch (2001), the concept of EMI was promoted by the Austrian Ministry of Education in order to improve and intensify foreign language education at schools.

Starting from that, most higher learning institutions are using this language as the medium of instruction in order to promote their students' mastery of English. Coleman (2006) as cited in Chang (2010) stated that while comprehensive statistical data are still lacking, there is universal recognition of an accelerating trend towards English-medium instruction in higher education. This notion is supported by The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (2007) where in order to limit the number of students enrolling in top institutions abroad and increase their international competitiveness, a growing number of top East Asian universities have started to offer many, and in some cases even the majority of their courses in English. Additionally, this development has been followed by other countries such as Europe, notably in the Netherlands and Scandinavia. The most recent who followed this notion is Germany and France. While in South East Asia, the national universities of Hong Kong and Singapore have long been considered good alternatives to US and UK institutions due to their intensive use of English. However, several non-English speaking countries in the region, including China, Japan, South Korea and Malaysia have also recently introduced programmes taught in English.

As cited by Byun et al. (2011) in Manh (2012), the adoption of English as medium of instruction in higher learning education in Asia is considered as policy fashion in order to attract foreign students, better equip domestic students for careers, and curb the high number of talented domestic students studying abroad in the era of internationalization. This shows that the use of English as the medium of instruction in higher learning institutions has become a trend and is no longer considered as something new. However, regarding policy, English as a medium of instruction in higher learning institutions in Asia is seen to be a top-down approach, with directives issued from higher levels to those who implement them (Gill, 2006 cited in Manh, 2012). As stated by Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) and Baldauf and Kaplan (2005) in Manh (2012), it is contradicting with their proposal which stated that successful language in education policies rely greatly on efforts from the bottom up. Other than that, the belief that using English as the medium of instruction in higher learning institutions can promote students' interest and motivation in learning English language, and hence improve their proficiency, while at the same time facilitating their academic performance and increasing their competitiveness in the job market has made the implementation of this policy become solid (Chang, 2010).

## **2.2 Non-native speakers and learning difficulties**

Students who are not proficient in English language will be facing difficulties in comprehending courses taught using the language. If previously students only need to focus on understanding the courses taught, now they have to focus on two things; the language used in teaching the course and the course itself. As non-native speakers of the language of instruction, the learning process will be difficult for the students. This will hinder students' capability of learning the courses taught. If this happens, the use of English as medium of instruction cannot be considered as an effective approach in promoting the English language.

According to Manh (2012), English as the medium of instruction in higher learning institutions in Vietnam is likely to cause socioeconomic inequality, since English as a medium of instruction seemingly benefits only the well-off minority of students with access to English. This policy marginalizes most students from rural areas because of their low level of proficiency in English. The technological and professional knowledge taught in English will be

inaccessible to these linguistically disadvantaged students, who will subsequently be unable to compete for jobs on an equal basis with students who are fluent in English. In addition, they may not have the same opportunities for professional development and career advancement. Socioeconomic inequality may promote socioeconomic and political instability.

Din et al. (2003) found that low levels of English proficiency handicapped the science learning of English-medium students. The students that received instruction in English were found to perform much more poorly than those learning science in their mother tongue, Chinese. The weaknesses were found to be particularly in terms of understanding abstract concepts, the scientific terms and to apply scientific knowledge in realistic situations.

A research conducted by Chang (2010) showed that most of the students believed that the difficulties that they were facing when learning the subject taught in English were due to the language of instruction itself. The main problem that these students faced was towards the English used by the lecturer and their lack of proficiency in the language itself which mainly focused on the limited vocabulary. Other than that, he also found that the overall degree of comprehension of undergraduate students was not high for all English-medium instruction lectures. Thus, he concluded that the level of English lecture comprehension was so much influenced by students' current English language proficiency especially listening proficiency.

### **3 Methodology**

The population of the study was Malay students who enrolled for Economics courses during the June-October 2013 semester from one of the universities in Pahang. Economics subject was chosen as it is one of the subjects taught in English language in the university. For sampling purpose, the simple random technique was used in this study. From a total of 100 questionnaires that had been distributed, the researchers managed to collect back 90 questionnaires.

The questionnaire used in the study was adopted and adapted from Chang (2010). The adapted version of the questionnaire was designed to capture some demographic information in Part A, English proficiency level in Part B and learning difficulties in Part C.

Bahasa Melayu was fully used in the questionnaire to eliminate language difficulty. In part B students were required to self-evaluate their English proficiency level based on 1-“Very Poor” to 5-“Very Good”. While in Part C five-point Likert Scale items were used to measure learning difficulties where students were asked to rate each statement ranging from 1-‘Totally Disagree’ to 5-‘Totally Agree’. The data were then tabulated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.0 for descriptive statistics.

## 4 Results and Findings

### 4.1 Reliability Analysis

The Cronbach’s Alpha score which reflects the internal consistency of the questionnaire used in this study is shown in Table 1 below. Five items on learning difficulties were tested and the result showed that the questionnaire was good and reliable. The coefficient of 0.8 fulfills the minimum reliability requirement of 0.6 as stated by Sekaran (2003).

Table 1: Reliability Analysis (n=90)

	Number of items	Cronbach’s Alpha
Learning difficulties	5	.800

### 4.2 Demographic Analysis

The profile of respondents for the study is shown in Table 2. Information of three personal variables gathered in the questionnaire includes gender, age and programs of study.

More than half of the respondents (58.9%) were female students, while only 41.1% were male students. Majority of the respondents (91.1%) were aged between 18 to 20 years old. In terms of program of study, 33.3% came from Diploma in Banking, 22.2% from Diploma in Accountancy, another 22.2% from Diploma in Business Administration and 11.1% each from Diploma in Office Management and Diploma in Sport Science study programmes.

Table 2: Demographic Analysis of the Respondents

Personal variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender:</b>		
Male	37	41.1
Female	53	58.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Age:</b>		
18-20	82	91.1
21-23	7	7.8
24-26	1	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Program of study:</b>		
Diploma of Accountancy	20	22.2
Diploma of Business Administration	20	22.2
Diploma of Banking	30	33.3
Diploma of Office Management	10	11.1
Diploma of Sport Science	10	11.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### 4.3 English Proficiency Level

Respondents' English proficiency level was investigated based on a self-evaluation of four main skills of English; listening, speaking, writing and reading. The result is shown in Table 3. In general, majority (50.8%) of the students were found to rate themselves as 'okay'.

Looking at the specific results based on the four main skills, more than half of the students rated themselves only as 'okay' in terms of speaking and writing, with 62.2% and 61.1% respectively. Majority of the students also rated 'okay' for listening skill (45.6%).

However they were found to be a bit more confident in terms of reading skill where 46.7% of them rated themselves as 'good'. There were also about 4% to 15% of the students who rated themselves as poor to very poor in all four skills.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of English Proficiency Level

Items	Mean	SD	Percentage (%)				
			Very poor	Poor	OK	Good	Very good
Listening	3.31	.788	1.1	12.2	45.6	36.7	4.4
Speaking	3.06	.693	3.3	11.1	62.2	23.3	0.0
Writing	3.14	.663	1.1	11.1	61.1	25.6	1.1
Reading	3.71	.768	0.0	4.4	34.4	46.7	14.4
Overall Mean	3.31	.562	1.4	9.7	50.8	33.1	5.0

#### 4.4 Comprehension Level and Learning Difficulties

This section discusses the findings on students' comprehension level and learning difficulties in their Economics English-medium classes. The degree of comprehension in Economics courses with English as the medium of instruction is shown in Table 4. It was found that very few of the respondents (10%) were able to understand more than 90% of the Economics lecture. Only 28.9% of them were able to grasp from 75% to 89%. Half of the respondents were found to be able to comprehend around 50% to 74% of the lectures, while more than 10% of them were found to comprehend 49% and below.

Table 4: Degree of Comprehension

Percentage of comprehension	Frequency	Percentage (%)
90 and above	9	10.0
75 – 89	26	28.9
50 – 74	45	50.0
25 – 49	9	10.0
24 and below	1	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>

In order to have a better picture of the learning difficulties faced by the Malay students in their Economics English-medium classes, further investigation was carried out based on five learning difficulties items. The results are presented in Tables 5 and 6. The mean score of more than 3.00 ( $M > 3$ ) would reflect the tendency to agree with the items measured.



Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Learning Difficulties

	Items	Percentage (%)				
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Un-certain	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	I would understand Economics better if lecturers re-explain in Malay.	0	2.2	13.3	52.2	32.2
2.	Economics become harder due to English.	2.2	26.7	33.3	26.7	11.1
3.	I will be able to learn Economics better if my English is better.	2.2	8.9	16.7	45.6	26.7
4.	I sometimes give wrong answers in Economics tests due to some English words that I don't understand.	1.1	18.9	26.7	34.4	18.9
5.	I have to refer to the dictionary when I read English Economics reference books.	1.1	20.0	21.1	41.1	16.7

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics for Learning Difficulties

	Items	Mean	SD
1.	I would understand Economics better if lecturers re-explain in Malay.	4.14	.728
2.	Economics become harder due to English.	3.18	1.023
3.	I will be able to learn Economics better if my English is better.	3.86	.989
4.	I sometimes give wrong answers in Economics tests due to some English words that I don't understand.	3.51	1.041
5.	I have to refer to the dictionary when I read English Economics reference books.	3.52	1.030
Overall mean score for Learning Difficulties		3.64	.722

*\*A higher score of mean ( $M > 3$ ) indicates a higher agreement*

As shown in Table 6, the overall mean score for learning difficulties is quite high at 3.64 which means that students tend to agree that they had learning difficulties in their Economics English-medium classes. A closer look at all items revealed that all mean scores are higher than 3.00, ranging from 3.18 to 4.14. The high mean scores simply reflect that students tend to agree with all the learning difficulties items. The highest mean score is 4.14 for item 1 which measure 'I would understand Economics better if lecturers re-explain in Malay'. More than 80% of the students agreed and strongly agreed with the statement. The second highest mean score is 3.86 for item 3. The item measures 'I will be able to learn Economics better if my English is better' where more than 70% of the students responded agreed and strongly agreed.

Students were also found to highly agree on statement 4 and 5 which measure 'I sometimes give wrong answers in Economics tests due to some English words that I don't understand' and 'I have to refer to the dictionary when I read English Economics reference/textbook'. The mean scores for both items are 3.51 and 3.52 respectively. Students somehow were found to be quite uncertain with item 2 (Economics become harder due to English). The mean score of 3.18 reflects the uncertainty to either agree or disagree. 33.3% responded as uncertain, while 26.7% responded to both agree and disagree.

Perceived difficulties in understanding Economics lecture were also investigated in order to have clearer picture on the source of learning difficulties faced by the Malay students in Economics courses. The result is shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Perceived Difficulties in Understanding Economics Lecture

	Frequency	Percentage
English language difficulties	29	32.2
Economics subject difficulties	41	45.6
Both	20	22.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The findings basically showed that a higher percentage of students tend to perceive that the difficulties in understanding Economics were due to the subject itself rather than the medium of instruction being used. Even though 32.2% of the respondents perceived that the difficulties in understanding Economics were due

solely to the difficulty they had with the English language, and higher percentage of students ( $32.2\% + 22.2\% = 54.4\%$ ) were found to respond that the difficulties were due to either solely on the use of English or at least partly due to English; around 46% of the respondents perceived that the difficulties in understanding Economics were due to the subject itself. And 67.8% ( $45.6\% + 22.2\%$ ) of the students perceived that the difficulties were due to either solely due to the Economics itself or at least partly due to the Economics subject itself.

## 5 Conclusion

The medium of instruction plays an important role in the learning process. The inability to understand the instruction would handicap the ability to learn. As English has become a globally accepted language, most educational institutions choose to use English as the medium of instruction. Apart from being with the main streams it is also seen as one of the means to prepare students for the real world. Thus, a very minimal ability in English would lead to learning difficulties.

The study reveals four important findings. The first finding is that most of the students were found to be at the average level of English proficiency. Only about 38% of the students were good or very good with the English language and about 11% of the students were poor and very poor in the language. Second important finding is that the overall degree of student comprehension is also at the average level. Very few (10%) of the students were able to understand more than 90% of the Economics English-medium classes. Most of them were only able to capture around 50 to 75% of the lectures. However, the comprehension level will improve if the lecturers re-explain in their mother tongue language which is Malay ( $M=4.14$ ). The next important finding is students tend to agree that they had learning difficulties in their Economics English-medium classes ( $M=3.64$ ). More than 50% of the students tend to agree that they sometimes give wrong answers in Economics tests or exams due to some of the English words that they don't understand. They also thought that they would be able to learn Economics better if their English is better. And the last important finding is, about half of the respondents were found to respond that the difficulties in understanding Economics were due either solely to the difficulty they had with English language or at least part of the difficulty was due to

English. However, higher percentage of students was found to perceive that the difficulties were either solely or partly due to the Economics subject itself.

In conclusion, even though the nature of subjects learnt would definitely influence students' comprehension level, the medium of instruction used somehow plays a major role in enhancing students' ability to comprehend the courses taught. As Chang (2010) stated, the level of comprehension seems to be closely related to the level of English language proficiency. For Malay students whose mother tongue is not English, a minimal ability in English did disturb their learning process. They gave wrong answers in exams due to some of the English words that they didn't understand; and they had to refer to the dictionary whenever they read the textbooks.

Thus, in order to minimize learning difficulties it is essential for the students to improve their English. Limited vocabulary is seen as one of the major problems in understanding Economics English-medium classes. Reading more books in English language, be it academic books, articles or fictions, could actually help to expand and enrich students' vocabulary. Students should also be encouraged to use the language more often. All four main skills in English language: listening, speaking, reading and writing, could only be mastered through constant practice and usage. But looking at the bigger picture, since most universities are using English as the medium of instruction, students should be prepared with the language as early as possible. Creative ways of teaching and learning English should be adopted as early as in their childhood and schooling years so that they will be fully ready in terms of language when furthering their studies to a higher level.

For future researches, it is recommended that the research is extended to different subjects of study, where comparisons could be made on the effects of English-medium instruction on different nature of subjects. Another important element that is also suggested to be taken into consideration is the lecturers' English proficiency level, as they also determine the extent of the students' understanding of the subject taught.

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