

## English-Medium Instruction and Learning Difficulties in Economics Courses among Malay Students

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### ABSTRACT

*English language is used globally nowadays. In order to prepare students to venture into this global world and be part of the growing society, students are exposed to the language where most universities are using English as a medium of instruction in lectures or tutorials. Therefore, for students to be able to learn in English they have to understand the language in the first place. 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 Economics is one of the courses learnt in English in UiTM Pahang, researchers aim 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 Economics students. The selection of sample was based on simple random technique. The findings showed that the overall degree of students' comprehension is not high 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:** *English-medium instruction, learning difficulties, Economics courses*

### Introduction

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). Therefore, 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, politic, 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. 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 be in touched with this 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 is 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 (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 in the courses learnt. 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 Economics 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, (3) to examine the learning difficulties faced by students and (4) to identify the perceived difficulties in understanding Economics subject.

### **English as a Medium of Instruction in Higher Learning Institutions**

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is a recently 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 (English) 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) 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, Chu, Kim, Park, Kim and Jung (2011), the adoption of English as medium of instruction at 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 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). As stated by Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) and Baldauf and Kaplan (2005), 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 becomes solid (Chang, 2010).

### **Non-native Speakers and Learning Difficulties**

Students who are not proficient in English language will be facing lots of 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 English language.

According to Manh (2012), English as the medium of instruction in higher learning institutions in Vietnam are 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.

Other than that, 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 is due to the language of instruction itself. The main problem that these students are facing is towards the English used by the lecturer and their lack of proficiency in the language itself which mainly focuses on the limited vocabulary. 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.

## Research Methodology

The population of the study was Malay students that enroll for Economics courses in UiTM Pahang in semester June-October 2013. There are four courses of Economics offered in this university which consist of Principle of Economics, Microeconomics, Macroeconomics and Malaysian Economy. For the sampling purpose, all groups of students which enroll for Economics courses in June-October 2013 semester were listed down based on the four main courses mentioned earlier. Cluster sampling was first conducted where two to three groups of students were randomly selected in each course which totaled up to ten groups. Due to time and budget constraints, from each group, ten students were then randomly selected to be the sample of the study. 90 questionnaires were returned from a total of 100 questionnaires distributed. 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 evaluate their English proficiency level based on 1-“Very Poor” to 5-“Very Good”. In Part C a five-point Likert Scale items was used where students were asked to rate each statement based on 1-‘Totally Disagree’ to 5-‘Totally Agree’. The data was then tabulated using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20.0 for descriptive statistics.

## Findings and Discussions

### Reliability Analysis

Table 1 below shows the Cronbach's Alpha score which reflects the internal consistency of the questionnaire used in this study. Five items of 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

### Demographic Analysis

The profile of respondents for the study is shown in Table 2. Information of four personal variables gathered in the questionnaire includes gender, age, programs and parts 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 between 18 to 20 years old. In terms of program of study, 33.3% were students from Diploma in Banking (BM112), 22.2% from Diploma in Accountancy (AC110), another 22.2% from Diploma in Business

Administration (BM111) and 11.1% each from Diploma in Office Management (BM118) and Diploma in Sport Science (SR113). 33.3% of them were in part 4 of study, 22.2% in part 5 and 18.9% in part 3. Only 11.1% each in part 1 and 2, while only 3.3% from part 6.

Table 2: Demographic Analysis of the Respondents

Personal variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender:		
Male	37	41.1
Female	53	58.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Age:		
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>
Program:		
AC110	20	22.2
BM111	20	22.2
BM112	30	33.3
BM118	10	11.1
SR113	10	11.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Part:		
Part 1	10	11.1
Part 2	10	11.1
Part 3	17	18.9
Part 4	30	33.3
Part 5	20	22.2
Part 6	3	3.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### English Proficiency Level

Respondents' English proficiency level was investigated in two time frames. One was based on respondents' Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English grade and for the current one was based on a self-evaluation of four main skills of English. In order to match the proficiency level between the two time frames, researchers have categorized the SPM grade in terms of very poor (for grade E and G), poor (for grade C and D), satisfactory (for grade B and C+), good (for grade A- and B+) and very good (for grade A+ and A). Table 3 below shows the result of respondents' English proficiency level from both time frames. Based from SPM grade, it was found that most of the respondents (38.9%) were found to be satisfactory; which reflects the grades of B and C+. Only 18.9% of them were poor (grades C and D) and none were very poor. There were 33.3% good (A- and B+) and another 8.9% were very good (grades A+ and A).

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Self-Evaluation of English Proficiency Level

Items	N	Mean	SD	Percentage (%)				
				Very poor	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Very good
English proficiency based on SPM grade	90	3.32	.885	0.0	18.9	38.9	33.3	8.9
English proficiency based on current self-evaluation of four main skills:								
Listening	90	3.31	.788	1.1	12.2	45.6	36.7	4.4
Speaking	90	3.06	.693	3.3	11.1	62.2	23.3	0.0
Writing	90	3.14	.663	1.1	11.1	61.1	25.6	1.1
Reading	90	3.71	.768	0.0	4.4	34.4	46.7	14.4
Overall current English proficiency	90	3.31	.562	1.4	9.7	50.8	33.1	5.0

From current self-evaluation of English proficiency based on four main skills, it was found that more than half of the students rated themselves as satisfactory in terms of speaking and writing, with 62.2% and 61.1% respectively, as compared to listening (45.6%) and reading (34.4%). The result contradicted with previous study by Chang (2010) where he found that students tend to be more confident in their receptive skills (reading and listening) as compared to productive skills (speaking and writing).

However, a closer examination of the data revealed that higher percentage of students rated themselves as 'good' and 'very good' for reading skill (46.7% and 14.4% respectively) which explains the earlier finding. More than 40% of the students also rated themselves as good to very good in terms of listening skill, which is one of the important skills in supporting English-medium instruction learning. Only about 4% to 15% of the students rated themselves as poor to very poor in all four skills.

### Comprehension Level and Learning Difficulties

This section discusses the findings on students' comprehension level and learning difficulties in their Economics English-medium lectures. 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 below 24%.

Table 4: Degree of Comprehension

Percentage of comprehension	Frequency	Percentage (%)
90 and above	9	10.0
89 – 75	26	28.9
74 – 50	45	50.0
49 – 25	9	10.
24 and below	1	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>

In order to have better picture of the learning difficulties faced by students, further investigation were carried out based on five learning difficulties items. The results are presented in Table 5. 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	N	Mean	SD	Percentage (%)				
				Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I would understand Economics better if lecturers re-explain in Malay.	90	4.14	.728	0	2.2	13.3	52.2	32.2
2. Economics become harder due to English.	90	3.18	1.023	2.2	26.7	33.3	26.7	11.1
3. I will be able to learn Economics better if my English is better.	90	3.86	.989	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.	90	3.51	1.041	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.	90	3.52	1.030	1.1	20.0	21.1	41.1	16.7

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

As shown in Table 5, all mean scores are higher than 3.00, ranging from 3.18 to 4.14. The high mean scores 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 agree and strongly agree 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 agree and strongly agree.

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.

Table 6: 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 result of perceived difficulties in understanding Economics lecture is shown in Table 6. There were 32.2% of the respondents who perceived that the difficulties in understanding Economics were due solely to the difficulty they had with the English language. Higher percentage of students (32.2% +22.2% = 54.4%) were found to respond that the difficulties were due to either solely to the use of English or at least part of the difficulty was due to English. Around 46% of the respondents perceived that the difficulties in understanding Economics were due to the subject itself. Further investigation was carried out by looking at the version of reference book used by the students. Table 7 reveals that most of the students (57.8%) used English reference book. There were 37.8% students responded that they reviewed Economics using both versions of English and Malay reference books, while only 4.4% of them responded to refer to only the Malay version.

Table 7: Version of Reference Book Used

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
English	52	57.8
Malay	4	4.4
Both	34	37.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, 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 globally accepted language, most educational institutions choose to use English as the medium of instruction. Apart from being in 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 the 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 with the language. Second important finding is the overall degree of student comprehension is not high. Very few (10%) of the students were able to understand more than 90% of the Economics English-medium lectures. Most of them were only able to capture around 50 to 75% of the lecture. 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 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 to either solely to the difficulty they had with English language or at least part of the difficulty was due to English.

The level of comprehension seems to be closely related to the level of English language proficiency (Chang, 2010). Thus, in order to minimize learning difficulties it is essential for the students to improve their English. As limited vocabulary is seen as one of the major problems in understanding Economics English-medium lectures. It is therefore suggested that students should improve their vocabulary by reading more books in English language, be it academic books, articles or fictions. 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, as the rate of learning is equivalent to the rate of using. Furthermore, in order to achieve better results in English medium instruction courses, universities which implemented English medium instruction policy should increase resources to support their students' English language learning. The researchers suggest that further studies on this issue should be conducted where a larger sample is taken into consideration. On the other hand, lecturers' proficiency in teaching courses which involved English as medium of instruction should be considered too.

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