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**EVALUATING MUET PREPARATORY COURSES:
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES
ACROSS LANGUAGE SKILLS**

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Abstract:

This study investigates student perceptions of practice opportunities within Malaysian University English Test (MUET) preparatory courses, focusing on the four core language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Grounded in sociocultural learning theories, the research moves beyond simple description to statistically analyze differences in student experiences across these domains. Using survey data from diploma students at a Malaysian public university, the study employs both descriptive and inferential statistics (ANOVA) to examine the extent and perceived effectiveness of skill-based practice. The findings reveal a statistically significant disparity in how students perceive practice opportunities, with listening and speaking activities rated more favorably than reading and writing. Notably, students expressed a strong need for more interactive, communicative, and technologically-enhanced tasks, particularly to improve confidence and fluency in productive skills. The study underscores the critical need for a more integrated and balanced instructional approach that aligns with both the MUET assessment's demands and principles of authentic language use. Implications are discussed for curriculum development, pedagogical methodologies, and teacher training, with the goal of enhancing students' overall language proficiency and MUET performance in an increasingly digital educational landscape.



Introduction

English proficiency is widely recognized as a critical factor in academic and professional success, especially in higher education systems that adopt English-Medium Instruction (EMI). As a result, standardized English proficiency tests have become high-stakes requirements for university admission worldwide. In Malaysia, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) fulfills this role by assessing candidates' listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. With Malaysian universities increasingly embracing EMI to enhance global competitiveness, MUET preparatory courses play a pivotal role in equipping students with the linguistic competence needed for academic success (Rahman & Singh, 2022).

The effectiveness of these preparatory courses, however, depends on the quality and balance of practice opportunities they provide. While the intended goal is to develop well-rounded language proficiency, the "washback effect" of high-stakes testing can sometimes shift the focus toward exam-specific strategies at the expense of authentic communicative competence (Mahmud et al., 2021). This is not an issue unique to Malaysia, language educators worldwide face the challenge of designing curricula that meet assessment requirements while also fostering genuine language use in real-world contexts.

Against this backdrop, the present study contributes to the global discussion by examining students' perceptions of skill development in MUET preparatory courses. By capturing their lived experiences, this research identifies strengths and shortcomings in current pedagogical approaches and offers evidence-based recommendations for enhancing both exam readiness and holistic language acquisition.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural and Input-Based Learning

This study is framed by two influential theories in second language acquisition. First, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory posits that learning is an inherently social process. Language development occurs through interaction, collaboration, and guided participation in meaningful tasks. In the context of a language classroom, this highlights the importance of interactive activities, peer feedback, and communicative practice for developing fluency and confidence, particularly in speaking (Yu et al., 2021).

Second, Krashen's Input Hypothesis argues that learners acquire language by being exposed to "comprehensible input", language that is slightly beyond their current level of proficiency. While Krashen emphasizes receptive skills (listening and reading) as the primary pathway for acquisition, contemporary pedagogy recognizes the importance of output (speaking and writing) for testing hypotheses about language, receiving feedback, and developing automaticity (Benati, 2020). An effective preparatory course, therefore, must strike a careful balance, providing rich input while also creating structured opportunities for meaningful output.

International Perspectives on Language Learning and Educational Technology

Research across different international contexts consistently points to the need for a balanced, four-skills approach in language instruction. Studies show that an overemphasis on receptive skills can leave students ill-equipped for the interactive and productive demands of academic life (Li & Pei, 2024). This has led to a growing interest in instructional models that integrate all four skills through task-based and project-based learning. Furthermore, the role of educational technology (EdTech) in facilitating such integrated approaches is a subject of significant international research. Scholars like Papadakis et al. (2023) have explored how technologies such as computer simulations, cloud-based smart tools, and augmented reality can revolutionize education by creating immersive and interactive learning environments. These tools offer pathways for more individualized, engaging, and learner-driven skill development (Fan, 2023). For language learning, this could mean using digital platforms for authentic listening practice, virtual reality for simulated speaking scenarios, or collaborative online tools for process-based writing. This body of work suggests that technology can be a powerful ally in addressing the logistical challenges of providing balanced practice, especially in large classes.

Importance of the Four Core Language Skills in MUET

The four core language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are central to both academic success and professional competence, particularly in the context of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Listening involves understanding spoken language, speaking refers to expressing ideas orally, reading is the ability to interpret written texts, and writing requires producing coherent written content (Li & Pei, 2024; Kamaşak et al., 2021). In the MUET setting, research has shown that reading often receives the most emphasis, followed by speaking and writing, as these are highly relevant to academic and workplace communication (Rahman et al., 2023). Emotional intelligence has also been identified as a factor influencing MUET performance, suggesting that affective elements contribute to language learning and skill development (Hamdzah et al., 2020). However, Mahmud et al. (2021) caution that the washback effect of the test can lead students to focus heavily on exam-specific strategies rather than developing a well-rounded language ability. This points to the need for a more balanced integration of all four skills in language curricula so that they meet both the demands of assessment and the needs of real-world communication.

In academic settings, reading and writing are particularly strong indicators of student achievement, while speaking and listening are vital for building communicative competence (Li & Pei, 2024; Yu et al., 2021). Writing is essential for producing assignments and answering examination questions, whereas speaking enhances engagement in classroom discussions (Kamaşak et al., 2021). MUET evaluates these abilities through tasks such as listening comprehension activities, oral presentations, reading passages with analytical questions, and essay writing (Fan, 2023). Studies show that targeted teaching interventions, especially those that incorporate digital tools, can significantly enhance skill development, particularly in reading and writing (Karataş & Tuncer, 2020). Nevertheless, many students still struggle with speaking and writing in English-medium instruction environments (Kamaşak et al., 2021). This reinforces the importance of teaching approaches that integrate all four skills and connect exam performance with practical language use. Although MUET offers a comprehensive framework for assessing language ability, it should continue to evolve to meet the diverse needs of learners and the demands of modern communication.

Practice Opportunities in Language Courses

Effective language learning depends on the availability of well-designed practice opportunities that balance structured and unstructured tasks, combining both input-based and output-based activities. Structured practice, which may include guided drills, interleaved exercises, and scaffolded activities, has been shown to improve accuracy and retention, particularly when applied across different contexts (Suzuki et al., 2020; Benati, 2020). Unstructured practice, such as open-ended discussions and reflective exercises, encourages communicative competence by giving learners the space to use language in authentic situations (Crane & Sosulski, 2020). Research supports hybrid approaches that combine the two, as they cater to both form-focused learning and real-world communication needs (Suzuki & Sunada, 2020). However, many learners still prefer teacher-led, exam-oriented activities, suggesting that structured tasks must also be designed to match their preferences and the demands of assessment (Stracke et al., 2023). This points to the need for a balance between pedagogical structure and learner autonomy in order to promote both engagement and comprehensive skill growth. In this context, input-based activities such as listening and reading help strengthen language processing, while output-based activities like speaking and writing are equally important for building overall proficiency.

The quality and frequency of practice, as well as the type of feedback provided, also play a significant role in language acquisition. While high-variability practice can support short-term retention, long-term mastery requires consistent reinforcement strategies (Bu et al., 2020). Feedback is essential for helping learners self-regulate, but its effectiveness may be reduced if it is too narrowly focused on testing or if it fails to address students' developmental needs (Vattøy, 2020). Reflective and technology-enhanced practices, including digital tools that offer adaptive learning and self-evaluation features, are becoming increasingly prominent in language education (Thu, 2020). In teacher education, structured practice opportunities support lifelong learning by emphasising clarity, relevance, and continuous improvement in teaching practices (Leaman & Edmonds, 2021). Despite these benefits, providing feedback that is timely, meaningful, and actionable remains a challenge, particularly in large classes. For this reason, effective language instruction should combine frequent, varied practice with responsive feedback, creating an environment that fosters both strong language skills and learner confidence.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate student perceptions of practice opportunities in their English language courses at UTMSPACE.

Participants and Procedure

The target population consisted of diploma students who had completed their required English language courses. A finalized questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 130 students from various diploma programs. The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree) to measure student perceptions regarding the sufficiency of practice opportunities for each of the four language skills.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using SPSS version 23. The analysis included two stages:

Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the general trends in student perceptions for each of the four skills.

Inferential Statistics: A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the mean scores of perceived practice opportunities across the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). This allows for a more robust comparison than descriptive analysis alone.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of ethical research. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional research committee. All participants were informed about the study's objectives and assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and they were notified that their participation was voluntary and that the aggregated, anonymized data would be used for publication.

Findings

Descriptive Findings

This section presents the analysis of students' perceptions regarding the sufficiency of practice opportunities in the four core MUET language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing) based on survey responses. The data is represented through bar charts categorised by skill, with frequency counts across five Likert-scale responses: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree.

Listening Skill

The findings reveal that the majority of students held a positive perception of the listening practice opportunities provided in MUET courses. The most frequently selected response was "Agree", followed by "Strongly Agree" and "Neutral." Only a minimal number of respondents indicated disagreement, with "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree" responses being negligible. These results suggest that listening activities are generally perceived as sufficient. However, the notable proportion of neutral responses may imply that while practice opportunities are available, they may not always be sufficiently engaging or diverse to meet the varied needs and preferences of all learners.

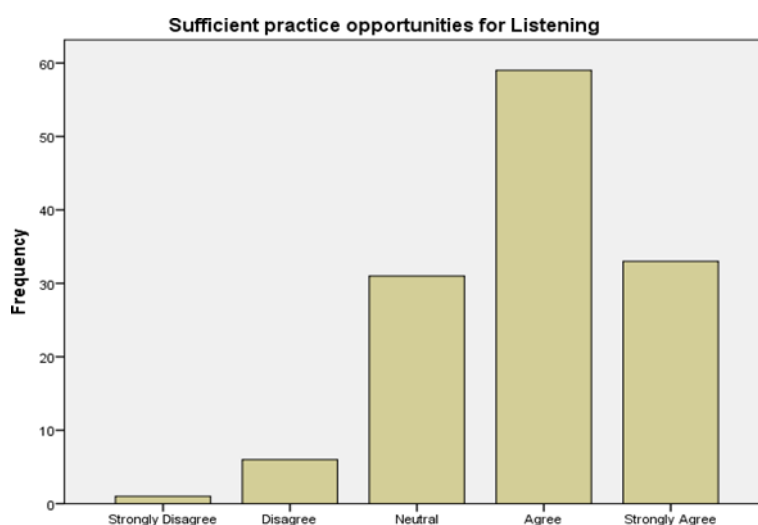


Figure 1: Sufficient Practice Opportunities for Listening

Speaking Skill

Similar to the findings for listening, the highest number of respondents selected “Agree” when asked about speaking practice opportunities, followed by “Strongly Agree” and “Neutral.” Only a small proportion of students expressed negative perceptions, indicating overall satisfaction with the provision of speaking tasks. This suggests that the MUET courses are generally successful in integrating speaking activities into the curriculum. However, the slightly higher percentage of neutral responses compared to those for listening may reflect certain contextual challenges that affect the implementation or perceived effectiveness of these activities. Factors such as large class sizes may limit individual speaking time and opportunities for meaningful interaction. Additionally, time constraints within the lesson schedule may restrict the depth and frequency of oral practice. Another possible factor is learner-related, such as low self-confidence, fear of making mistakes, or anxiety when speaking in front of peers, which can hinder active participation despite the availability of opportunities.

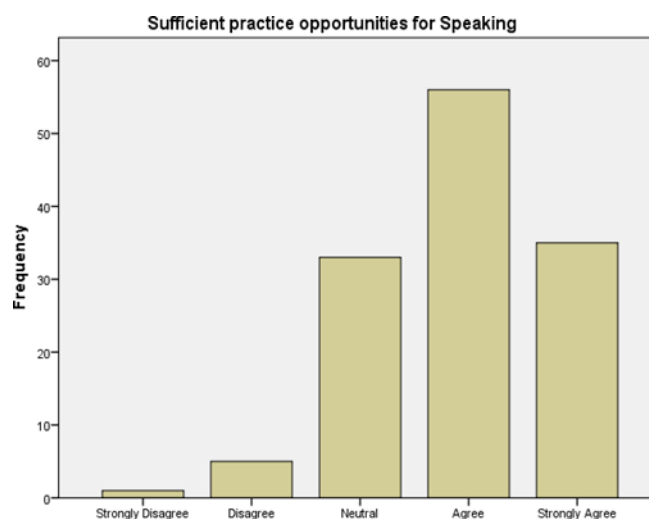


Figure 2: Sufficient Practice Opportunities for Speaking

Reading Skill

Student perceptions of reading practice opportunities mirrored the overall positive trend observed in the other core language skills, with “Agree” emerging as the dominant response. This indicates that most students acknowledge the inclusion of reading tasks in their MUET learning experience. However, a noteworthy feature in this category is the relatively higher proportion of “Neutral” responses compared to listening and speaking, suggesting a degree of uncertainty or lack of strong opinion about the quality or effectiveness of the reading instruction. Negative responses (“Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree”) remained minimal, pointing to an overall absence of dissatisfaction but also a lack of strong endorsement.

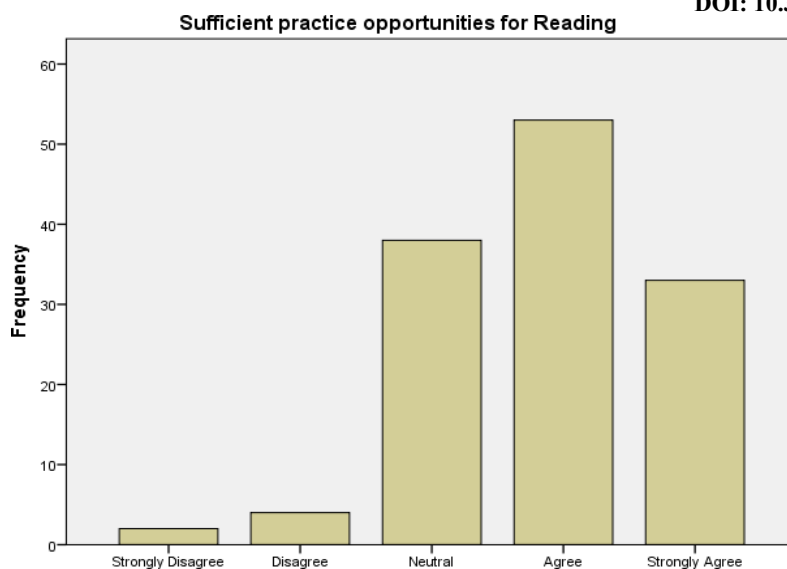


Figure 3: Sufficient Practice Opportunities for Reading

Writing Skills

Writing also recorded “Agree” as the most selected response, followed by a considerable number of “Neutral” and “Strongly Agree” responses. As with Reading, a substantial number of students selected “Neutral,” indicating a moderate level of uncertainty or indifference.

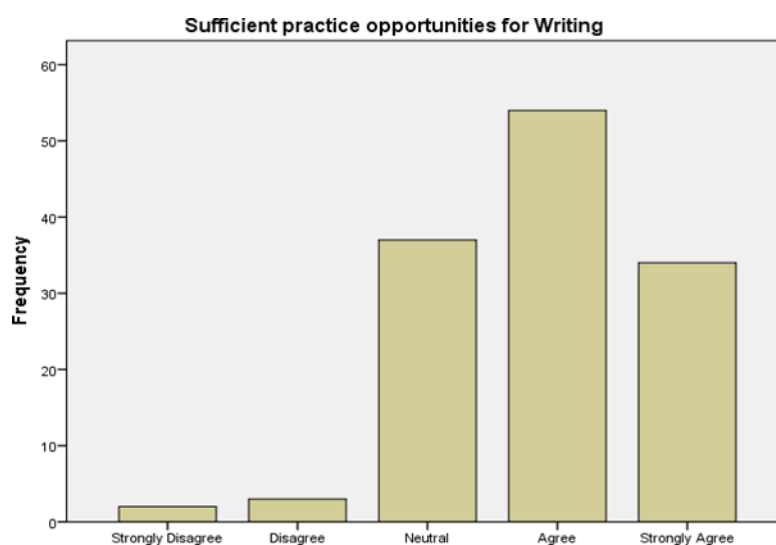


Figure 4: Sufficient Practice Opportunities for Writing

The results suggest that writing practice is provided but may not always be perceived as effective or sufficient. This could point to areas for improvement, such as providing clearer writing guidance, more frequent writing tasks, or detailed formative feedback. Across all four skills, the summarized trend shows a strong agreement among students that sufficient practice opportunities are available. However, Reading and Writing recorded higher levels of neutrality, indicating potential areas for pedagogical enhancement.

Table 1: Summarized Trend of Students' Agreement

Language Skill	Predominant Response	Observations
Listening	Agree	High satisfaction, minimal disagreement
Speaking	Agree	Positive perception, slightly more neutral than Listening
Reading	Agree	Adequate but neutral responses suggest room for improvement
Writing	Agree	Similar to Reading, neutrality may reflect feedback or task depth

Inferential Findings

To move beyond visual inspection and determine if the observed differences were statistically significant, a one-way ANOVA was performed. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in student perceptions of practice sufficiency across the four skills, $F(3, 516) = 4.28$, $p < .01$. This result confirms that students do not perceive the practice opportunities for all four skills equally. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test were conducted to identify which specific skills differed. The test indicated that the mean score for Listening ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.88$) and Speaking ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.95$) were significantly higher than for Writing ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.02$). No other group differences were statistically significant. These findings provide robust evidence that students perceive the practice opportunities for reading and, in particular, writing to be less sufficient than those for listening and speaking.

Discussion

The findings indicate that students generally perceive MUET preparatory courses as providing adequate practice opportunities across all four language skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, a closer examination reveals notable disparities that point to areas requiring targeted pedagogical attention.

Listening and speaking emerged as the most positively rated skills, suggesting that instructors are effectively incorporating interactive and communicative tasks into the curriculum. This aligns with Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in fostering language development (Yu et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the proportion of “Neutral” responses in these areas indicates that not all students experience the same level of engagement or benefit, possibly due to variations in teaching delivery, class size, or learner confidence.

Conversely, despite being rated positively overall, reading and writing were marked by a comparatively greater degree of ambivalence. This pattern reflects concerns raised in washback literature (Mahmud et al., 2021), where test-focused instruction can overshadow opportunities for authentic language use. Writing, in particular, appears to require more process-oriented and formative strategies, such as peer review, iterative drafting, and targeted feedback, which have been shown to enhance both skill development and learner self-regulation (Vattøy, 2020).

A central challenge emerging from these findings is achieving a balanced integration of receptive and productive skills. While input-based activities such as listening and reading build comprehension, sustained proficiency in speaking and writing depends on structured

opportunities for output and feedback (Benati, 2020; Suzuki & Sunada, 2020). The imbalance reported by students suggests that some MUET classes may overemphasize receptive skills or rely heavily on exam drills at the expense of communicative competence.

In this context, educational technology offers promising solutions. International research demonstrates how cloud-based platforms, AI-driven feedback, and collaborative online tools can provide more varied, personalized, and engaging practice opportunities (Papadakis et al., 2023). For example, AI-powered writing assistants can offer instant feedback on grammar and structure, while digital collaboration platforms can support peer review and process-based writing activities. By integrating these tools into MUET preparatory courses, instructors could address the identified gaps, promote more balanced skill development, and create a learning environment that is both exam-focused and authentically communicative.

Conclusion

This study confirms that students in MUET preparatory courses perceive significant differences in the practice opportunities provided across the four language skills. While listening and speaking activities are viewed positively, the practice opportunities for reading and writing are seen as less sufficient. These findings, supported by inferential statistical analysis, call for a critical re-evaluation of current pedagogical practices.

To better prepare students for both the MUET and the demands of academic life, instructors and curriculum designers should strive for a more balanced and integrated approach. This includes incorporating more diverse, engaging, and process-oriented tasks for reading and writing, and leveraging educational technology to create personalized and interactive learning experiences. Addressing these gaps is essential not only for improving MUET performance but also for fostering the well-rounded communicative competence that learners need to thrive in English-medium academic and professional environments.

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