

**Students' Learning Preferences of English for Academic Purposes  
- A KUiTTHO Affair**

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# STUDENTS' LEARNING PREFERENCES OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES - A KUITTHO AFFAIR

## ABSTRACT

Kolej Universiti Teknologi Tun Hussein Onn (KUiTTTHO) aims to produce graduates who are competent in English and other core skills in order to be in parallel with other established institutions. Communication and soft skills play important roles in making a graduate a success in the working world and to meet the demands of globalization especially where English is becoming more important. *English for Academic Purposes* was introduced as one of the required subjects for KUiTTTHO students. Students whose MUET results are below than Band 3 and achieved only 50% or less in the placement test are required to take this course. This subject is aimed to facilitate students to undertake MUET again so they are able to achieve at least a Band 3. The study aims to find the learner's preference in learning *English for Academic Purposes* as a new subject. Learning preferences in this case include how they want to learn, which language skills they prefer to learn and types of activities they prefer. This research will adapt the qualitative method using questionnaire and observation in gaining data. It is hoped through this research a comprehensive needs analysis can be developed to enhance the learning and the teaching of *English for Academic Purposes* later.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the requirements for Malaysian university's enrolment is the entrance examination of MUET (Malaysian University English Test). Certain courses in some universities may require the undergraduates to possess certain level of MUET band. On the other hand, there are also universities which accept students with at least band two MUET on the condition that students must get a band three in order to graduate. It is also common for some Malaysian universities to require an English placement test in order to identify students' current level of English and later stream students to the respective English courses according to the result of the placement test. One of the universities that apply this requirement is Kolej Universiti Teknologi Tun Hussein Onn (now known as Universiti Tun Hussein Onn).

It is the university's main aspiration to produce graduates who are competent in language and professional skills in order to be parallel with other established institutions and to meet the challenges of globalization. To assist students, in UTHM case, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course is recently introduced in the middle of 2006 as one of the required subjects for students of KUiTTTHO (now UTHM). Students' whose MUET results less than band three and have less than fifty percent in the placement test are required to attend the course. The placement

tests, specifically formulated, consist of questions which are related to students' course content skills and aims to find the students' level of English. This subject is aimed to facilitate students to face and cope with the university's study and the language challenges in their course, expose students to more comprehensive language skills and to help students undertake MUET again to be able to graduate with Band three. This is one of the humanistic goals of the Modern languages department to assist and support students in learning in the universities.

Even though the course is considered new, the weightage of the language skills in the syllabus is similar to the learning of MUET. Students are particularly exposed to the four language skills using the learner centered approach. Thus, it means that the EAP course in the university takes into the consideration of students' needs of learning the subjects. Learner-centeredness means active involvement of learners in their learning processes and learners are able to decide what and how to learn.

The study aims to identify the learner's preference in learning English for Academic purposes as a new subject. Learning preferences in this case include how they want to learn, which language skills they prefer to learn and types of activities they prefer. This research will adapt the qualitative method using questionnaire and observation in gaining data. It is hoped through this research a comprehensive needs analysis can be developed to enhance the learning and the teaching of English for Academic Purposes later.

## **THE STUDY**

English for Academic Purposes, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987) usually encompasses the features primarily of a common core element known as "study skills" such as academic writing, listening to lectures, note-taking, making oral presentations, which enable one to succeed in English-language academic settings. The implementation of EAP, like ESP, also necessitates the needs analysis. West (1994) propounded the ESP needs analysis of Hutchinson and Waters (1987) delineations by expanding them into a few analyses which includes strategy analysis. It mainly identifies the learners' preferred learning styles. Obviously the focus here is on methodology, but there are other related areas such as: grouping size, learning habits etc. Thus, this study aims to investigate students' learning preferences in learning EAP as the issues of students' learning preferences have long been debated in the teaching field regardless of the courses.

Most of the time, language educators have been blamed for students' weakness in language learning specifically English. Yet, Kolb (1984) revealed a different perspectives on students condition and achievement's in learning by inventing the four learning styles inventory which includes diverging (feeling and watching), assimilating (watching and thinking), converging (doing and thinking) and accommodating (doing and feeling). Kolb's (1984), Blackmore's (1996) and Kavaliauskiene's (2003) works become the reference for the study. Their studies, focus on learning styles and preferences, revealed, that by knowing students' learning preferences and styles, language educators can design, modify and improve their way of teaching as well as facilitate students in learning.

This study is hoped to germinate other studies which are relevant to students' learning style and preferences. And, to recommend the improvement and modification that can be applied in the teaching of EAP in UTHM. Kolb's (1984) believed that the learning styles inventory can assist educators to investigate and identify students' strength and weaknesses in learning. Learners learn differently, and in UTHM case, most of the students came from a technical background courses. There are about 982 students enroll in the EAP program for the past two semesters in UTHM. Students' undertaking the EAP course encompassed from the various faculties and is organized by the Modern Languages Department. For the purpose of the study, 200 students were given the questionnaires randomly. Questions formulated are based on Kenning's (2001) and modified to suit the setting of UTHM

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are students' current MUET results when they enter the university?  
The EAP course for students depends on their English placement test very semester. Students with a passed placement test and Band 3 MUET are waived from taking EAP course. However, if a student's MUET is Band 3 but failed the placement test, he/she must also enroll the course. The study will find students' current MUET result.
2. Which part of language skills that they prefer to learn?  
The course offers fair distributions of the language skills in the lessons which consist of reading, listening, speaking and writing skills. It is also fair to know what students want in order to improve the current syllabus of EAP.
3. What is students' learning style?  
Each individual learns differently and it depends on students' level of English therefore, this study aims to find students' learning style in EAP.
4. How do students learn best?  
Effective learning depends on their motivation and preferences in studying. Questions on whether they prefer learning individually to learning in large group will also be asked.
5. How many hours per week would students prefer to learn English for Academic Purposes.  
The current English for Academic purposes program takes two hours per week that consist of lecture and tutorial. However, students may prefer less or contact hours with the lecturer.
6. Which activities do you prefer in learning this course better?

Students will also be asked on the language activities that they prefer to have in learning EAP as well as enhancing their learning skills. Students have to rank the activities according to their preferences. The activities include language games, summary writing, presentation skills, essay writing, projects, listening activities, songs, grammar exercise, memorizing dialogues/conversations, reading comprehension, role play and dictionary skills.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Course**

The findings on students' course undertaken revealed that 55% of the EAP students comprises of Diploma students while the other 45% are from Degree level. Undoubtedly, this percentage revealed that students enrolled in the EAP course consist of diploma and degree level. This also signifies that students' course level is trivial in determining EAP enrolment, thus, what is important is actually their English language competence in MUET and the placement test.

### **Results**

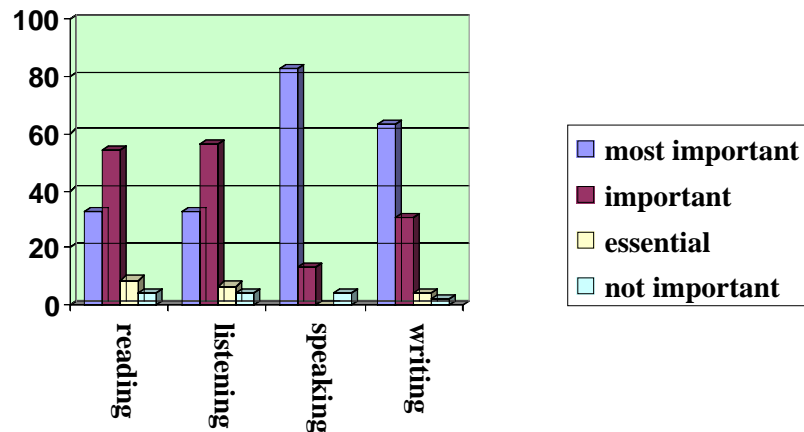
As the study aims to find the learners' preferences in learning EAP, the current MUET result is also placed in the questionnaire. This is important as the English for Academic Purposes Program is designed to enhance students' learning skills. Undeniably, MUET results also reflect students' current level of English. Therefore, table below depicts students' MUET results when they enroll for EAP program.

<b>Band</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Band 1-2	69.6 %
Band 3	28.3%
Band 4 and above	-
I have not taken MUET	2.2%

Nearly 70% of the students enroll possess MUET result below band 3 and about 28 % of the students have MUET band 3. No one has responded on MUET above band 3 and about 2.2 % has not taken any MUET. It can be concluded that students with band 4 MUET passed their English placement test and excluded from undertaking the course. It is also necessary for students with MUET less than band three to be enrolled as the main objective of the course is to enhance their learning and study skills. The result also revealed that some diploma level students had sat for MUET and passed their placement test.

### **Language skills preferences**

There have been many debates as to what students must learn to acquire the language effectively. This part also serves as a needs analysis of what the students want in learning EAP (Dudley-Evans and St.Johns, 1998). Kenning (2001) and Kavaliauskiene's (2003), on the other hand, placed the language skills preferences to attitude to proficiency rather than needs analysis. The Likert scale to frequency of attitude is adapted in the study. As shown in the graph, students prefer to learn more on the productive skills of speaking and writing than reading and listening.



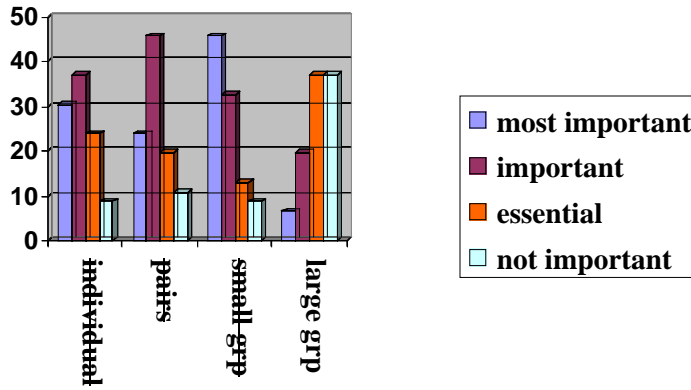
The graph above depicts students' learning preferences of the language skills in English for Academic program. Nearly 85% of the students prefer speaking as the most important learning skills and about 65% prefer writing as the most important part of language skills. On the other hand, about less than 40% of the students placed reading and listening as the most important learning language skills in EAP course. Even though the course provides equal weightage on the four language skills, students placed the productive skills of speaking and writing as the highest priorities in learning EAP.

Speaking skills involve many aspects and it is more than just pronouncing words. Verbal communications also involve speaking especially on face to face interaction, giving presentation, doing forum or speaking test. Speaking may also involve non-verbal communication such as facial expression and body language. Students, in this case, realized that they lack speaking skills when they enroll for the course.

Writing, on the other hand, is more complicated and usually regarded as the hardest of the four skills. In writing, students need to have extensive vocabulary as well as representing the developments of thoughts in a structured way. Buckmaster (2003) advocated this notions in his study and stated that learner's difficulties in reading and writing are caused by either limited vocabulary or inappropriate usage and that the most important 'skill' is a very large vocabulary. (Buckmaster, 2003: 4).

### **Students' learning style**

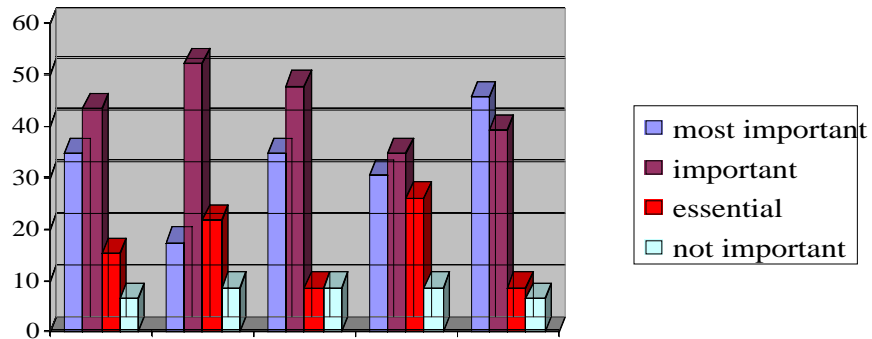
Learning style's questions were also formulated based on how they would prefer to learn the EAP course. The course is designed with individual and group assessment. Individually, students will be assessed with quizzes and test and in groups, students will do a project and present it to the class.



Based on the graph, about 47% of the students prefer to learn in small group of 3- 5 person per group. About 47% of the students thought that learning in pairs is important and nearly 40% of the students regard learning in large group as essential and not important.

Not many students prefer to learn in large groups, this is shown by less than 10% prefer learning in large group as the most important learning style. Learning in small group is the favourite of most EAP students. It can be implied that students can discuss effectively in small groups compared to large group or pairs. The implication of studying in small groups can also be referred to many theories of learning styles for EAP students for example Kolb's (1984) and Gardner's (1985). Moreover, students' learning preference should be given attention by language educators especially in improving teaching and learning later.

### Students' learning strategies



Legend:

1	Repeating what you hear
2	Copying notes during lecture
3	Solving problems
4	Getting the information yourself
5	Reading and taking notes

In this part, students were given discretion in choosing their learning strategies. The choices given are according to the activities done in the classroom. They include reading and taking notes during lectures, getting the information themselves, problem solving, copying notes and repeating what they hear during lectures. Learning strategies differ according to individuals and these strategies represent how students learn best based on the activities. About 45% of the students regarded reading and taking notes as the most important learning strategies in EAP while nearly 53% regarded copying notes during lecture is important. Reading and taking notes seem to be students' favourite learning strategies in EAP. Nevertheless, less than 20% of the students placed copying notes during lecture as the most important. The responses from the students imply that they can identify their learning strategies in EAP. It may represent how learning strategies affect students' performance in language learning especially in EAP. Further investigation should be done in order to improve language learning condition.

### Lecturing hours

2 hours ( the current lecturing time)	87%
More than two hours	13%

The results showed that more than 86% of the students are satisfied with the lecturing hours of the course. Only 13% of students would prefer to have longer duration of lecturing time for the course. Other than current contact hours, students can also access to notes and activities in e-learning. All of the notes and activities in e-learning are prepared by the language instructors of UTHM. Thus, most students are satisfied with the contact hours since they would spend more time on e-learning.

### Learner's Preferences in learning the language

Ranking	Activities according to ranking	Percentage
1	Presentation skills	22%
2	Essays	19.8%
3	Grammar	17.6%
4	Dictionary skills	15.3%
5	Listening activities	17.8%
6	Summary writing	13.3%
7	Reading	20%
8	Projects	13.3%
9	Memorizing dialogues/conversations	20%
10	Language games	11.1%
11	Role play	31.1%
12	Songs	26.7%



The data in the table is very straightforward. Students need to rank the learning activities that they prefer to learn by placing numbers next to the activity. The percentage depicts what students prefer for the activities to be placed at specific position. Surprisingly students prefer presentation skills, essays and grammar as the highest priority in learning EAP. All of these mentioned activities are productive skills which seem to be the most difficult skills in language learning. Production refers to activities that require the student to create of language, and usually involve speaking or writing. Recognition refers to activities that involve understanding language that a student is exposed to and generally center on reading and listening.

It shows students had identified their weaknesses and language educators and course designer can make improvement in teaching the students. Students had also prioritized presentation skills as number one in the ranking because students are more concerned with immediate relevance to their current circumstances. In this case, they are more concerned about getting good marks in their presentation than developing other language skills like reading and language games.

On the other hand, the high percentage of students who do not prefer to include songs as one of the highest priority in learning EAP is also high which is about 27%. Perhaps, songs and role play are considered as not a serious language activity and have been utilized in elementary language learning.

It is noteworthy that presentation skills received the highest ranking by the students. Presentation skills are applied as speaking activities for students'. It shows that there has been a growing concern from the students themselves on the importance of speaking in English. There are many elements involved in presenting in English. Other than verbal and non-verbal delivery, students have also need to prepare visual aids and practice a lot. Essay writing which fall under the category of writing is at the second place. Again, students' placed productive activities as their main priorities.

Surprisingly, students have a preference for grammar and dictionary skills more than reading activities. Learning the structure, to some, might be a boring and tedious. Students, conversely, consider grammar is crucial especially for their writing. A good dictionary usually comprises many elements such as phonetic transcription on how to pronounce words, parts of speech, examples of sentences etc. In this case, students might have realized on the importance of knowing how to use the dictionary. Based on the observations done on students' utilization of dictionary, it was found that students prefer a bilingual dictionary (usually English – Malay). On the other hand, most bilingual dictionary lack of phonetic transcriptions that helps students in pronunciation. The elimination of phonetics transcriptions in bilingual dictionary had generated most language teachers to scorn since most students will tend to mispronounce words.

## **CONCLUSION**

English for Academic Purposes in UTHM is currently introduced, hence modifications and improvement is inevitable in order to enhance students' second language competence. Language competence, in this case, English refers to a language learner's ability to communicate efficiently and affectively in the second language. Students' competence in language learning also takes into consideration the students' ability to both process input and produce output. In short, this study was conducted to investigate students' preferences in learning EAP which incorporate students' learning style and students' preferences for receptive and productive skills.

Students' learning style and strategies seem to affect their learning preferences in the EAP program. Identifying Learning Style might suggest approaches to intervention counseling of individual students. Students will become aware of their own learning preferences and strengths during orientation of learning. Increasing the range of learning experiences as an individual develops can expand the role of the student to one of active participant.

It can be concluded from the findings that, students' courses do not affect the English language competencies especially on MUET and placement test results. Next, most of the students enrolled did not possess the requirement of the university that students must achieve band three of MUET in order to graduate.

Students prefer to focus more on productive skills in language learning especially in writing and speaking. This can be clearly seen from results of the preferred language skills and language activities. Students are more concerns on particular activities such as presentation skills and writing essays. It can be concluded that EAP students prefer to learn more on productive skills as to improve their language competence.

For learning strategies, reading and copying notes are students' favourite learning strategies followed by solving problems and repeating what they hear. Next, students also favour on communicative approach to perfecting their language skills by working in small groups. Students are more confident in speaking if they are placed in small groups especially during class activities where they are free to demonstrate their ideas. The only drawback of small groups discussion is that students may communicate in the first language rather than English. This attitude is partly substantiated by the fact of being away from the target language community which is relevant in the UTHM context.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The implications of this research for language teachers is to find the ways of motivating learners to lifelong learning, to negotiate with learners on their priorities for various activities in class, and to incorporate activities that learners prefer. The issues on receptive versus productive skills should be viewed for discussion among the syllabus designers of the programme. Production skills of speaking and writing could be stressed in EAP; however, receptive skills of reading must also be emphasized. In this case, reading is receptive skills whereby writing and speaking are productive skills. As students prefer to learn more on the productive skills, in this case, more

communicative activities should be stressed for students undertaking EAP program as to encourage their speaking and writing skills.

Consequently, reading effectively can help students in gaining more vocabulary to be applied in writing. This is because writing is more complicated than it seems at first, and often seems the hardest of the skills, even for native speakers of a language.

On the other hand, it is yet has not been proven that students' learning style and strategies affect the degree of language competencies. Further investigation should be done by other researchers to investigate the correlation between learning preferences and language competence. This study may act as a platform and germinate other language studies in the field of English for Academic Purposes in UTHM and may also serve as a turning point by other researchers to probe on the students' weakness in English language especially in the Malaysian students' context.

The language educators should become familiar with the learners' learning styles in order to compare the learners' classroom behavior to their learning strategies. Also, the teacher can assist learners in adapting their learning strategies to suit the present program. Conversely, the learners may study the teaching strategy of the teacher and make comments, so adjustments can be made to suit their own needs and the goals of the program.

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