

Mapping IIUM Students' English Language Writing Proficiency to CEFR

Mohd. Khairul Abu Sufi* and Engku Haliza Engku Ibrahim

*English Language Division, Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development,
International Islamic University Malaysia, Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

The goal of this research was to determine the English language writing skills of the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) graduating undergraduates based on two linguistic levels; the IIUM English Proficiency Test (EPT) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), based on two descriptors: IIUM's EPT descriptor, and CEFR's 'General linguistic range' descriptor (Council of Europe, 2001, p 110). The EPT results show that the majority (48 %) of the English language writing skills of IIUM undergraduates were in Band 6, while Band 5.5, Band 5 and Band 4, respectively, ranked 31.3%, 4.9% and 0.4%. On the other hand, Band 8, Band 7 and Band 6.5 were attained by 0.2%, 2.4% and 12.2% of undergraduates. A significant proportion of IIUM undergraduates (46.3 %) were found to be at Level B2 + when assessed against the CEFR scale for the 'General linguistic range.' At the same time, 2.2%, 12.4%, 33.9 and 5.2% of students were at Level C2, C1, B2, B1 +, respectively. The results also showed that a mere 0.2% was at Level B1. This research also showed that despite some inaccuracies and improper uses, IIUM students could write effectively and understand and use reasonably

complicated language, particularly in familiar situations. Based on the CEFR scale for 'General linguistic range', the results of this study show that IIUM graduating undergraduates could clearly articulate themselves in their writing.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 16 July 2021

Accepted: 04 October 2021

Published: 30 November 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.29.S3.05>

E-mail addresses:

mohdkhairul@iium.edu.my (Mohd. Khairul Abu Sufi)

ehaliza@iium.edu.my (Engku Haliza Engku Ibrahim)

*Corresponding author

Keywords: CEFR, English placement test, second language, writing proficiency

INTRODUCTION

At institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, such as at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), being adept in the English language reassures students that they are well prepared to engage in their academic pursuits. In IIUM, entry into the faculties is often determined by students' score in a proficiency test such as the internationally acclaimed TOEFL (The Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System), or the in-house administered EPT (English Proficiency Test) (<http://www.iium.edu.my>) as students do not necessarily sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) upon entry into the institution due to the international nature of the university.

This language policy is congruent with research that state that a certain level of proficiency in the language is a requirement for effective involvement in academic studies (Deygers et al., 2017; Singh, 2016). Accordingly, remedial English classes are usually offered to those who do not meet the minimum entrance requirement in the proficiency test. In contrast, those who do would advance to their respected faculties at the International Islamic University Malaysia. The practice of offering remedial English classes for less proficient students can also be observed in other public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, such as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) (Ming & Alias, 2007) and Universiti Tun

Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) (Noor & Kadir, 2007).

In Malaysia recently, the importance of being proficient in the language has resurfaced (Ali, 2013; Mohamed, 2008; Tan & Miller, 2007). Ali (2013), in her study, exemplifies this by attesting that in the more remote parts of the country, English does not play a significant role in the daily lives of the people. The language is generally heard and spoken only in English language classes and lessons in learning institutions. Disparities in opportunity and motivation to learn and use English between urban and rural learners have affected Malaysia's educational outcome (Tan & Miller, 2007). A published MUET result analysis for the 2007/8 university intake surprisingly revealed that a large fraction (73%) of the test takers fell within the Bands of 1 (extremely limited user), 2 (limited user) and 3 (modest user), even after eight years of its introduction (MUET) into the educational system. Such revelation indicates that students admitted to Malaysian public institutions of higher learning possessed an alarmingly low level of proficiency in the English language (Mohamed, 2008).

In light of this matter, the then Malaysian Prime Minister, while tabling the country's budget in 2014, under Measure 8: Enhancing Graduate Employability, Point No. 95 (ii), announced that a certain level of English language proficiency must be met as a graduation requirement from public universities in Malaysia (Ministry of Finance, 2014). It was also asserted that

this proficiency would be measured through the results of MUET administered by the Malaysian Examination Council. A band ranging from 3 to 5 (based on disciplines) must be attained for undergraduates to be conferred their degree. This concern is well established given the growth of the Malaysian economy in the era of globalisation, and being able to use the English language fluently is deemed essential for occupational purposes in Malaysia (Shakir, 2009).

The rationale behind the implementation of the new language requirement policy is in line with the Malaysian government's strategy to enrich the English language proficiency further and to equip Malaysian undergraduates in meeting and facing the challenges of globalisation (Ganapathy, 2015; Lee, 2015; Llurda, 2013; Samuel & Bakar, 2008; Shakir, 2009; Tajuddin, 2015). The outcome of such a scheme would result in heightened confidence of graduates and at the same time, prepare them for the workforce upon successful completion of their academic programmes at institutions of higher learning. As such, all Malaysian public institutions of higher education must abide by the new English language policy set forth by the Malaysian Government documented as "English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025" by the year 2025 (Don, 2015). The roadmap also stipulates adopting the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) into the Malaysian education system in profiling students' English language proficiency.

Although the IIUM stipulates EPT Band 6 as the language requirement to commence learning, EPT results can only be comprehended by officials at the IIUM. Thus, a mapping of the EPT's writing score bands to the CEFR 'General linguistic range' illustrative descriptor will need to be established to demonstrate students' linguistic profile in writing. This will also complement the EPT results enabling parties outside the scope of IIUM to understand and decipher EPT scores on a common scale of reference providing a universal overview of the IIUM students' English language proficiency level. In so doing, a gap in research can be filled as this study attempted to examine IIUM final year students' English language writing ability and expected that an alignment of the students' EPT writing bands could be made to the internationally recognised CEFR proficiency scales.

Three (3) research questions were formulated for this research:

1. How do IIUM students perform in the scale of writing for EPT?
2. How do IIUM students perform in the scale of writing through CEFR?
3. Is there a relationship between IIUM students' writing performance in the EPT and CEFR?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) plays a vital role in language education and policy within Europe and worldwide. The

framework has become significant for language testers and examination boards worldwide as it assists language planners to define language proficiency levels and to decipher them into meaningful language credentials. For many language testers, it has become imperative for their exams to align with CEFR (Gyllstad et al., 2014; Harsch & Hartig, 2015; Nunan, 2014; Taylor & Jones, 2006). The Council of Europe has endeavoured to facilitate this by providing a toolkit of resources, including a draft pilot Manual for relating language examinations to the CEFR and a technical reference supplement (Council of Europe, 2020).

Based on theories of language competence (Finch, 2009), CEFR also aims to enhance transparency and mutual recognition of qualifications by providing an explicit set of objectives, content and methods as well as giving objective criteria for describing language proficiency (Council of Europe, 2001). It can be said that the impartial standards for describing language proficiency simplify the mutual recognition of qualifications extended in different learning contexts, ensuing the facilitation of European mobility. Furthermore, in describing levels of language proficiency, the framework intends to be user-friendly and accessible to practitioners, helping users consider the meaning of competence in their particular teaching context (Finch, 2009).

Apart from cataloguing one's language proficiency, the CEFR provides a common basis for elaborating language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, and textbooks across Europe (Finch, 2009).

It also designates what language learners have to do and what knowledge and skills they have to develop. Also stressed in the framework is the appropriate language to be used based on cultural contexts and communication. The CEFR also defines levels of proficiency, which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis. In language testing, the CEFR has gradually been adopted and is known today as an important instrument. Indeed, Little (2007) states that the impact of the CEFR on language testing by far outweighs its impact on curriculum design and pedagogy.

In the Malaysian context, the decision to utilise the CEFR as a gauge in identifying one's language fluency, according to Don (2015), lies within the fact that the framework has had careful considerations in its development and that the targets of proficiency postulated by the CEFR are somewhat realistic. Moreover, backed by numerous research, the CEFR fits into the need of Malaysia in establishing an English language standard that is universally acknowledged. Also, the nature of the framework (CEFR) is such that users are free to customise and adjust the requirements and define what one needs to achieve to be put into any one of the bands of the CEFR proficiency scale (Council of Europe, 2020).

Previous CEFR Mapping Studies

Studies in mapping CEFR to individual tests have been conducted in different contexts inside and outside the European region. An example of one such study exists in

the educational context of Thailand where an attempt to map the Chulalongkorn University Test of English (CU-TEP) to the CEFR through a standard-setting procedure (Wudthayagorn, 2018). The study reported that students were able to receive scores based on both CU-TEP and CEFR standards.

Another study outside Europe was conducted in Taiwan, where the CEFR was also adopted into the educational system. In this study, it was reported that the reading component of the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) needed an alignment to CEFR, and hence, a mapping through a standard-setting session was conducted to establish the association between GEPT and CEFR (Wu & Wu, 2007). Results of the mapping study indicated a congruency between the GEPT reading test and CEFR as the degree of abstractness of the texts increases as the GEPT level rises, as does the vocabulary used, similar to the conventions of CEFR.

In the European context, a mapping study was also conducted to contextualise the Dutch foreign language examinations to CEFR (Noijons & Kuijper, 2006). By employing various methods, including familiarisation, specification, standardisation and validation, the study revealed that it was possible to map the Dutch foreign language examination to CEFR through the prescribed methods.

Another more recent study was conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), where there was a need to map the TOEFL iBT test scores to CEFR. In response to the feedback from university

administrators, they indicated that most universities in Europe now utilised CEFR levels for admission and called for the TOEFL iBT scores to be mapped to CEFR. The study reported that a standard-setting session was also used to establish the link between TOEFL iBT scores and CEFR.

Similar to this study, many nations have conducted mapping studies to investigate the congruency of their language assessment to the stipulations of CEFR. In sum, it is safe to acknowledge that this study parallels many CEFR mapping studies that have been conducted globally, as this study aimed to establish a connection between the in-house administered EPT test scores and the CEFR.

Writing

Without a doubt, writing is reflected as a vital and the most cognitive of all language skills. Written language is viewed as totally different from spoken language both in its form and use, although its basis depends on the language's same linguistic feature (Weigle, 2002). The aim of being able to write fluently goes beyond the ability to present information in written form. Weigle (2002) affirms that the ultimate goal of being able to write, for a student, is to be able to "participate fully in many aspects of society beyond school, and for some, to pursue careers that involve extensive writing" (p. 4).

As writing is not an easy skill to learn, it is usually tested to measure one's ability and performance in a language course (Al Asmari, 2013). Ansarimoghaddam and Tan (2014) define writing as a "highly complex

and demanding task” (p. 7), while (Shah et al., 2011) affirm that writers who can write fluently are usually able to grasp the grammatical rules. On the other hand, Ivanic (2004) defines writing as a set of social practices involving different patterns based on participation, gender preferences, network of support and collaboration. In addition, Ivanic elaborates that writing and reading are interconnected to each other.

It is undeniable that tertiary level students further develop their writing skills. According to Raoofi et al. (2017), such development is crucial as writing is pertinent to students’ academic advancement. Cummings (1990) is also of the opinion that writing may result in positive outcomes for students. Cummings also believes that writing provides learners with a record of their products in which they (learners) can reflect, correct and monitor, unlike other language skills such as listening and speaking.

In becoming proficient writers, several aspects influence a student’s composing ability, such as vocabulary. Allen et al. (2016) posit that a student can compose better writing texts when the student’s vocabulary size is large and that skilled writers can write longer compositions containing fewer grammatical and spelling errors. It is also noted that skilled writers tend to utilise low-frequency lexical items. As a result, their essays are usually longer, containing elements suggestive of more refined lexical, syntactical, and rhetorical properties.

Features of Non-native English Writing

In their study, Eckstein and Ferris (2017) also found that non-native writers usually exemplified less complicated compositions, which are also shorter and less impactful than native writers. In addition, previous empirical research has also shown that the development of a student’s non-native writing skills, such as vocabulary and grammar, is observed to be uneven (Aryadoust, 2016).

Vedder and Benigno (ibid) also indicated that non-native writers tend to over employ a trivial quantity of generic verbs constructed collocations such as *be*, *have*, and *take* in addition to an overuse of lexical items that amplify, augment or extend a meaning such as *completely*, *highly*, and *very*. Also observed in the writing of non-native writers is an overextension of verbs that are non-restricted such as *make* and *do*, which usually results in incorrect combinations such as ‘*to make a favour*’. Again, these errors are induced from the native language or caused by other second languages transfer. Such findings also concur with Yoon (2016), who observes that the overuse and misuse of general verbs are prevalent in non-native writers’ writing and such over and misuse do not necessarily indicate appropriate usage of the language.

Another study reported that linguistic knowledge non-native writers’ ability to fluently write in English is usually determined by their capability to portray correct linguistic knowledge (Schoonen et al., 2003). This notion is supported by Yoon (2017) who asserts that linguistic complexity

is usually associated as variables which are dependent of second language writing and that students' educational background may contribute to their linguistic complexity.

A small amount of empirical research notes that the utilisation of cohesive devices among non-native writers signifies an increase in proficiency. Studies have also shown that the number of cohesive devices used usually correlate to the quality of anyone essay (Chiang, 2003; Jafarpur, 1991; Liu & Braine, 2005; Yang & Sun, 2012). A recent study conducted by Crossley et al. (2016) on a group of non-native students from Michigan State University finds that a high number of cohesion indices correspond to the overall essay quality of non-native writers.

IIUM EPT Writing Descriptor

At the IIUM, the EPT uses its own in house developed descriptor to assess students' writing. The analytical-type descriptor was developed to denote 12 different proficiencies of students writing (called a band), which ranges from the lowest value of zero (0), denoting an absence of mastery in writing to the highest value of nine (9) denoting an extremely strong mastery of their writing ability. Another feature of the IIUM EPT writing descriptor is that students' essays are evaluated against four categories when raters attempt to determine the writing band. These categories are as follows: (1) the students' ability to respond to the given task, (2) the students' ability to produce texts that are cohesive and coherent, (3) the students' ability to utilise a suitable

range of vocabulary in their writing task, and (4) the students' ability to utilise an appropriate range of grammatical structure accurately. Each of these categories is carefully defined at their respective levels. Students will be awarded the band where descriptions of all or most of the four stated categories above correspond to the students' writing. As the IIUM EPT writing descriptor is a confidential internal document, the authors cannot provide a more detailed description of the instrument in this article.

CEFR Illustrative Descriptor for General Linguistic Range

According to CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), research on linguistic universals has yet to yield directly applicable to language learning, teaching, and assessment. As such, the CEFR asserts that it can make statements for the "General linguistic range" illustrative descriptor (p.110) only to provide classificatory tools for some parameters and categories that may be useful for describing linguistic content serves as a basis for reflection. Additionally, the illustrative descriptor's attempt to distinguish the different abilities of language is a widely used one that reflects the need to consider the complexity of the language being used rather than the errors that learners commit. A more recent version of the published CEFR manual (Council of Europe, 2020) operationalised the illustrative descriptor for 'General linguistic range' as follows: (1) learners' linguistic proficiency ranges from A1 to C2, (2) learners produce language from either rehearsed phrases to a very broad

range of language conventions in order to express, emphasise, or differentiate their ideas concisely, and to eliminate any form of ambiguity, and (3) learners limitations in producing comprehensible language can range from frequent breakdown/misunderstanding in non-routine situations to having no restrictions of what they want to produce. For this research, the authors believe that the 'General linguistic range' illustrative descriptor scale closely matches the linguistic repertoires illuminated in the in-house developed IIUM EPT writing descriptor.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sampling

This study was conducted to investigate the English language writing proficiency of graduating undergraduates at the International Islamic University Malaysia based on two different scales of proficiency; (i) the writing proficiency scale of the IIUM administered English Proficiency Test (EPT), and (ii) the 'General linguistic range' illustrative descriptor of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In addition to this, the research aimed to investigate and explore the correlation between the graduating students' EPT examination writing bands and the CEFR 'General linguistic range' illustrative descriptor.

The study participants included 460 IIUM final year undergraduates at all Faculties of the Gombak campus and were selected using a random stratified sampling method. The researcher believed that

using such a sampling method would lead to an outreach of students from different faculties, thus representing the University's undergraduate final year population. In addition, the participants were also students studying an academic English language course offered by the Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development (CELPAD).

Instrument

The research instrument comprises a writing test containing a single prompt requiring participants to respond in an essay-based format, grounded on a set of arranged criteria. The test was constructed based on the structure and emulation of the IIUM EPT. The test also demanded basic demographics from the respondents, which included students' names, matric number and year of study, faculty and major. Although the respondents to this study remain anonymous, a field requiring respondents to provide their name was included so that the class instructors could request the essay questionnaires for classroom activities should instructors wish to do so, a win-win situation for both the researcher and class instructors. On the other hand, the question prompt required respondents to answer a simple question concerning the English language and employability, suitable for students in their final year of study, as they were more mature in exploring the topics concerning after campus life. The notion behind the usage of a questionnaire in the form of an essay question mainly lies in meeting the objectives of this research,

which was to measure the proficiency level of graduating IIUM students based on the EPT bands and the CEFR illustrative descriptor for 'General linguistic range'.

Data Analysis

Since the nature of this research was to investigate the IIUM students' English written proficiency, a writing test was administered during the data collection process, and because a writing test was conducted, the scripts needed to be assessed and scored. A few examiners then assessed the papers after a sit-in session was conducted in order to standardise test scores. After all papers were examined and scores recorded, the data (test scores) were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software to generate findings to the three research questions. For research questions 1 and 2, a simple statistical calculation was performed. The intended outcome was expressed by a mean

score (\bar{x}) whereas for research question 3, the data were analysed for correlation through Spearman's rho (ρ). The result was conveyed via a coefficient correlational value.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question One

The first research question of this study attempted to identify the IIUM students' performance in the EPT scale of writing.

Table 1 displays the score range of the IIUM graduating undergraduates. As can be seen, it is clear that the minimum score achieved was 4 (representing Band 4) whilst the highest was 8 (representing band 8). However, the mean score achieved by respondents in this study was $\mu=5.872$ and can be rounded up to 6 (representing Band 6). The result also displayed a standard deviation of 0.4402 between the lowest and highest score (band).

Table 1
EPT score range

N	Min band	Max band	Mean band	Std. Deviation
460	4	8	5.872	0.4402

Table 2, on the other hand, exhibits the distribution of the EPT scores (bands) of the respondents for this study. It was discovered that 171 (37.2%) of the respondents failed to achieve Band 6. Upon careful examination, it was discovered that only two respondents (.4%) achieved Band 4, while 23 (4.9%) achieved Band 5. On a more positive note,

146 (31.3%) respondents, making up one-third of the overall sample population, managed to attain Band 5.5—a score deemed 'acceptable'.

Table 2 also states that 289 of the respondents have, without doubt, surpassed the minimum passing score making up a passing rate of 62.8%. Nevertheless,

it is worth noting that most of this population only managed to secure a Band 6, the minimum band for entry into the undergraduate courses. On a more serious

note, the remaining 37.2% have not reached the minimum EPT requirement as stipulated by IIUM. However, these respondents are completing their studies at the university.

Table 2
EPT score distribution

Band	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
4	2	0.4	0.4
5	23	5.0	5.4
5.5	146	31.7	37.2
6	221	48.0	85.2
6.5	56	12.2	97.4
7	11	2.4	99.8
8	1	0.2	100

Research Question Two

The second research question to this study strives to investigate the IIUM students’ performance in English language writing, based on the CEFR ‘General linguistic

range’ illustrative descriptor. Therefore, the writing test papers were also scored based on the selected CEFR illustrative descriptor, and the results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3
CEFR score range

N	Min band (CEFR)	Max band (CEFR)	Mean band	Std. Deviation
460	4 (B1)	9 (C2)	6.722	0.8329

Based on Table 3, the score ranged from 4 to a maximum of 9, representing Level B1- to C2, respectively. A reading of $\bar{X} = 6.722$ was achieved for the mean score. When rounded up, it can be said that IIUM students’ English language writing proficiency score is 7, signifying a CEFR Level of B2+ (strong vantage). In

comparison to the test results based on the EPT Bands, a higher deviation of standard (0.8329) was seen when the writing papers were examined using the CEFR illustrative descriptor.

Table 4 illustrates a detailed distribution of the respondents’ CEFR scores. It should be noted that the scores were coded

numerically for statistical analysis using SPSS, and therefore, each numerical item is representative of a specific CEFR level of proficiency: 1 (A1), 2 (A2), 3 (A2+), 4 (B1), 5 (B1+), 6 (B2), 7 (B2+), 8 (C1), and 9 (C2). Although an allowance was made to code all the CEFR proficiency levels numerically, only the levels from 4 (B1)–9 (C2) was relevant after the analysis was made.

From Table 4, it can be understood that only one respondent's English writing level of proficiency (0.2%) was recorded as being B1- whereas 23 (5%) of the respondents were assessed as being Level B1+ users. When clustered together, the number of respondents whose English language writing proficiency can generally be categorised as Level B1 was 24, making up 5.2% (the minority) of the total population. On the other hand, 156 (33.9%) of the respondents' proficiency was evaluated as Level B2- users and another 213 (46.3%) respondents' proficiency level was categorised as B2+. It brings about a total of 369 (80.2%) respondents whose English language writing proficiency can be universally categorised

as Level B2, making up the majority of the sample population. A total of 57 (12.4%) respondents' proficiency was rated as Level C1 users, whereas the remaining 10 (2.2%) were evaluated as having a proficiency level of C2, the highest level based on the CEFR illustrative descriptor.

To sum, it is safe to conclude that a large proportion of IIUM students' English language writing proficiency based on the CEFR 'General linguistic range' is Level B2+.

Research Question Three

This study's third and final research question is intended to investigate whether a relationship exists between the EPT bands and the CEFR illustrative descriptor for 'General linguistic range'.

For this purpose, a Spearman's correlation was run to assess the relationship between the EPT bands and the CEFR scale of proficiency using a substantial sample size of 460 undergraduate respondents who were in their graduating semester at the IIUM. From the statistical analysis, results in Table 5 indicate evidence to suggest good agreement and a strong positive correlation between the EPT Bands and the CEFR illustrative descriptor. In other words, there is a strong relationship between students' writing performance in the EPT and CEFR ($r_s = .874$). The results also illustrate that the relationship is statistically significant at $p = .000$.

Table 4
CEFR score distribution

Level	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
B1	1	0.4	0.2
B1+	23	5.0	5.2
B2	156	33.9	39.1
B2+	213	46.3	85.4
C1	57	12.4	97.8
C2	10	2.2	100

Table 5

Correlation between EPT and CEFR

		EPT	CEFR
EPT	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	0.874**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.000
	N	460	460
CEFR	Correlation Coefficient	0.874**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	.
	N	460	460

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

IIUM Students Performance Based on EPT

Results indicate that most IIUM graduating undergraduates' English language writing proficiency based on EPT stands at Band 6 ($\bar{X} = 5.872$). According to the EPT rubric, this denotes that undergraduates at IIUM have an effective command of the language, although some imprecisions, incongruous usages and misapprehensions may be seen. Being a Band 6 also signifies that a student can comprehend a fairly sophisticated English language level, usually in a situation recognisable to them.

IIUM Students Performance Based on CEFR

The second research question to this study attempts to identify the IIUM English language writing proficiency based on the scale of the CEFR 'General linguistic range'. Grounded on the written examination results, IIUM students' level of proficiency, when measured against the CEFR 'General linguistic range', stands at Level B2+, characterised by the Council of Europe as

“strong vantage” or “independent” users. However, based on the global proficiency scale, B2+ users still fall under the B2 (independent vantage users) portfolio. Learners at this level are generally described as being able to utilise a limited number of cohesive devices; link sentences together smoothly into clear, connected discourse; use a variety of linking words efficiently to mark the relationships between ideas; develop an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points as well as relevant supporting details (Council of Europe, 2020).

Correlation of EPT and CEFR Scores

The present study shows that the EPT writing bands have a strong positive relationship with the writing proficiency scale of the CEFR as the value of the correlation was found to be $r_s = .874$. As previously mentioned, the EPT writing test bands measure one writing proficiency on a scale from 0 (no attempt)–9 (native fluency), while the CEFR's descriptor for 'General linguistic range' further highlights

what students can execute whilst performing writing tasks and the proficiency is measured on a scale from A1 (beginner–breakthrough/basic level) to C2 (proficient user–mastery/proficiency).

As the strength of a correlation reflects how consistently values for each factor change, it can be deduced that the higher the score for the EPT, the CEFR levels would also increase. This study also discovered that the mean level of English writing proficiency of IIUM's graduating undergraduates stood at 6, while based on the CEFR writing proficiency scale, the students were at B2+. As such is the case, it is also safe to construe that a Band 6 (EPT) correlates to Level B2+ (CEFR).

As illuminated above, the discussion of the study's third research question corroborates that although the IIUM EPT writing descriptor is not developed based on the conventions of CEFR and its can-do statements, it does to a certain extent reflect students writing ability to communicate effectively despite IIUM's focus on preparing students to negotiate successful learning at the higher education level. About CEFR, its emphasis on communicative competence is exemplified in the IIUM students as the EPT, as shown in this research, corresponds to the principles of CEFR.

CONCLUSION

The study's findings have revealed that the majority (48%) of IIUM graduating undergraduates' level of English writing proficiency when measured using the IIUM English Proficiency Test's Band score stands

at Band 6. The study also reveals that 37.2% scored lower where 0.4%, 4.9% and 31.3% scored Band 4, Band 5, and Band 5.5, respectively. However, the research results also indicated that 14.8% of the respondents managed to surpass the minimum language requirement for entry into the faculties as 12.2% scored Band 6.5, 2.4% scored Band 7, while the remaining 0.2% succeeded in scoring Band 8. As the study was conducted to investigate the English language writing proficiency of IIUM undergraduates, this can be interpreted to mean that most IIUM undergraduate students generally possess abilities to use the language effectively despite some inappropriacy, inaccuracy, and misunderstandings. In addition, these students can also use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in situations familiar to them. Such elucidations were made valid through the sample scripts scrutinised to identify what construes a Band 6 student at the IIUM.

In addition, results to this study have indicated that the English language writing proficiency level of the majority of IIUM undergraduate students, when set against the CEFR's 'General linguistic range' illustrative descriptor, stood at Level B2+. According to the CEFR framework, this level indicates that IIUM students are "strong vantage" language users while at the same time, independent (Council of Europe, 2020), also suggesting a transition into different and worthwhile zones of language development (McCarthy, 2013). Although placed at proficiency level B2+, the global descriptor specifies only the main

proficiency levels without consideration of the “strong” categorisations. With this in mind, it can be further deduced that B2 would best describe the proficiency level of IIUM undergraduates. The Council of Europe (2001) describes independent vantage language users as adept at producing vivid and comprehensive text on many subjects. It can explicate a viewpoint on an interesting issue by furnishing the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Also shown through the study results is that 5.2% of the respondents were assessed as universally being B1 users. The term ‘universally’ is used as the mentioned figure (5.2%) encompasses both B1 (0.2%) and B1+ (5.0%) users. Conversely, 14.6% of the respondents were rated to be C1 (12.4%) and C2 (2.2%), users and these graduating undergraduates’ score is over the minimum graduation language requirement set forth in the English language roadmap.

Although results were encouraging, a small percentage of IIUM graduating undergraduates have not been able to maintain or improve their English language writing proficiency. In response to this revelation, research reveals a presence of variability and instability in proficiency, and because of this, it is challenging to define a person’s level of proficiency at a specific moment in time (Lowie, 2012).

The study also reveals a statistically significant positive relationship between the scores of the EPT and CEFR as a reading of $r_s = .874, p = 0.000$ is obtained. The strength of the relationship ($r_s = 0.874$) is expected since both tests use the same construct,

i.e. writing proficiency in English. Such disclosure signifies a similarity between the two measures of proficiency because the value designated in one construct of either EPT or CEFR will increase with the measurement of the other construct used in tandem.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future researchers who are interested in conducting mapping studies of the writing proficiency levels of graduating IIUM undergraduates may be interested in aligning the EPT Band scores of the data interpretation writing task to the CEFR ‘General linguistic range’ illustrative descriptor. Such a research initiative would enable the IIUM to have a more detailed and comprehensive outlook of its students’ linguistic profile in writing. In addition, outside the scope of IIUM EPT, recommendations include mapping an institution’s own in-house developed language assessment to the CEFR so that a clearer overview of the extent to which it corresponds to CEFR, especially with the introduction of CEFR in the Malaysian educational system since 2015. Therefore, other researchers and institutions wanting to contextualise their learners along the CEFR scale could also benefit from this research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was funded by a research grant from the International Islamic University Malaysia.

REFERENCES

- Al Asmari, A. (2013). Investigation of writing strategies, writing apprehension, and writing achievement among Saudi EFL-major students. *International Education Studies*, 6(11), 130-143. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v6n11p130>
- Ali, N. L. (2013). A changing paradigm in language planning: English-medium instruction policy at the tertiary level in Malaysia. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 14(1), 73-92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2013.775543>
- Allen, L. K., Snow, E. L., & McNamara, D. S. (2016). The narrative waltz: The role of flexibility in writing proficiency. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(7), 911-924. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000109>
- Ansarimoghaddam, S., & Tan, B. H. (2014). Undergraduates' experiences and attitudes of writing in L1 and English. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 14(1), 7-28. <https://doi.org/10.17576/GEMA-2014-1401-02>
- Aryadoust, V. (2016). Understanding the growth of ESL paragraph writing skills and its relationships with linguistic features. *Educational Psychology*, 36(10), 1742-1770. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2014.950946>
- Chiang, S. (2003). The importance of cohesive conditions to perceptions of writing quality at the early stages of foreign language learning. *System*, 31(4), 471-484. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2003.02.002>
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe. (2020). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Cambridge University Press.
- Crossley, S. A., Kyle, K., & McNamara, D. S. (2016). The development and use of cohesive devices in L2 writing and their relations to judgments of essay quality. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 32, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2016.01.003>
- Cummings, V. (1990). *Speech and writing: An analysis of expository texts compared by native and non-native speakers of English at The City University of New York* (Doctoral dissertation). Columbia University, New York.
- Deygers, B., Van den Branden, K., & Peters, E. (2017). Checking assumed proficiency: Comparing L1 and L2 performance on a university entrance test. *Assessing Writing*, 32, 43-56. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2016.12.005>
- Don, Z. M. (Ed.). (2015). *English language education reform in Malaysia: The roadmap 2015-2025*. Ministry of Education Malaysia.
- Eckstein, G., & Ferris, D. (2017). Comparing L1 and L2 texts and writers in first-year composition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 52(1), 137-162. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.376>
- Finch, A. E. (2009). Europass and the CEFR: Implications for language teaching in Korea. *English Language and Literature Teaching*, 15(2), 71-92.
- Ganapathy, M. (2015). *Boosting Malaysian graduates' employability via the new MUET policy*. National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN).
- Gyllstad, H., Granfeldt, J., Bernardini, P., & Källkvist, M. (2014). Linguistic correlates to communicative proficiency levels of the CEFR: The case of syntactic complexity in written L2 English, L3 French and L4 Italian. *EUROSLA Yearbook*, 14(August), 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1075/eurosla.14.01gyl>
- Harsch, C., & Hartig, J. (2015). What are we aligning tests to when we report test alignment to the CEFR? *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 12(4), 333-362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2015.1092545>

- Ivanic, R. (2004). Discourses of writing and learning to write. *Language and Education*, 18(3), 220-245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500780408666877>
- Jafarpur, A. (1991). Cohesiveness as a basis for evaluating compositions. *System*, 19(4), 459-465. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X\(91\)90026-L](https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(91)90026-L)
- Lee, Z. E. (2015). *Colloquial Malaysian English (CMaLE): A problem or a cool phenomenon?* (Published Masters Thesis). Universitat Jaume I, Spain.
- Liu, M., & Braine, G. (2005). Cohesive features in argumentative writing produced by Chinese undergraduates. *System*, 33(4), 623-636. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2005.02.002>
- Llurda, E. (2013). English-medium instruction at universities: Global challenges. *ELT Journal*, 67(4), 497-500. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cct045>
- Lowie, W. (2012). The CEFR and the dynamics of second language learning: trends and challenges. *CercleS*, 2(1), 17-34. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2012-0002>
- McCarthy, M. (2013). Putting the CEFR to good use: Designing grammars based on learner-corpus evidence. *Language Teaching*, June 2013, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444813000189>
- Ministry of Finance. (2014). *Budget 2015: People's economy* (Issue October 2014). Ministry of Finance.
- Mohamed, M. (2008). Globalization and its impact on the medium of instruction in higher education in Malaysia. *International Education Studies*, 1(1), 89-94. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v1n1p89>
- Ming, T. S., & Alias, A. (2007). Investigating readiness for autonomy: A comparison of Malaysian ESL undergraduates of three public universities. *Reflections on English Language Teaching*, 6(1), 1-18.
- Noijons, J., & Kuijper, H. (2010). Mapping the Dutch foreign language state examinations onto the CEFR. *Aligning Tests with the CEFR: Reflections on Using the Council of Europe's Draft Manual*, 33, 247.
- Noor, S. N. F. M., & Kadir, Z. A. (2007, June 14-16). Students' learning preferences of English for academic purposes -A KUiTTHO affair. In *The Second Biennial International Conference on Teaching and Learning of English in Asia : Exploring New Frontiers (TELiA2)* (pp. 1-11). UUM, Malaysia.
- Nunan, A. (2014). Standardising assessment to meet student needs in foreign language modules in a university context: Is standardisation possible? *Language Learning in Higher Education*, 4(1), 117-135. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cercles-2014-0008>
- Raofi, S., Binandeh, M., & Rahmani, S. (2017). An Investigation into writing strategies and writing proficiency of university students. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 8(1), 191-198. <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0801.24>
- Shah, P. M., Mahmud, W. H., Din, R., Yusof, A., & Pardi, K. M. (2011). Self-efficacy in the writing of Malaysian ESL learners. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 15(October), 8-11.
- Singh, M. K. M. (2016). An emic perspective on academic writing difficulties among international graduate students in Malaysia. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 16(3), 83-96. <https://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2016-1603-06>
- Samuel, R., & Bakar, Z. (2008). The effectiveness of 'VELT' in promoting English language communication skills : A case study in Malaysia. *International Journal of Education and Development Using Information and Communication Technology (IJEDICT)*, 4(3), 109-126.
- Schoonen, R., van Gelderen, A., de Glopper, K., Hulstijn, J., Simis, A., Snellings, P., & Stevenson, M. (2003). First language and second language writing: The role of linguistic knowledge, speed

- of processing, and metacognitive knowledge. *Language Learning*, 53(1), 165-202. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9922.00213>
- Shakir, R. (2009). Soft skills at the Malaysian institutes of higher learning. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 10(3), 309-315. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-009-9038-8>
- Tajuddin, A. J. A. (2015). *A Malaysian professional communication skills in English framework for English for occupational purposes courses* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham]. Nottingham eTheses. <http://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/id/eprint/28747>
- Tan, K. E., & Miller, J. (2007). Writing in English in Malaysian high schools: The discourse of examinations. *Language and Education*, 21(2), 124-140. <https://doi.org/10.2167/le663.0>
- Taylor, L., & Jones, N. (2006). Cambridge ESOL exams and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). *Research Notes*, 24, 2-24.
- Weigle, S.C. (2002). *Assessing writing*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511732997>
- Wu, J. R., & Wu, R. Y. (2007). Using the CEFR in Taiwan: The perspective of a local examination board. *The Language Training and Testing Center Annual Report*, 56, 1-20.
- Wudthayagorn, J. (2018). Mapping the CU-TEP to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 11(2), 163-180.
- Yang, W., & Sun, Y. (2012). The use of cohesive devices in argumentative writing by Chinese EFL learners at different proficiency levels. *Linguistics and Education*, 23(1), 31-48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2011.09.004>
- Yoon, H. J. (2016). Association strength of verb-noun combinations in experienced NS and less experienced NNS writing: Longitudinal and cross-sectional findings. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 34, 42-57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2016.11.001>
- Yoon, H. J. (2017). Linguistic complexity in L2 writing revisited: Issues of topic, proficiency, and construct multidimensionality. *System*, 66, 130-141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.03.007>

