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**PERFORMANCE OF PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS  
ON THE WRITING COMPONENT OF THE  
MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY ENGLISH  
TEST (MUET): A CASE STUDY**

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**THIS ACADEMIC EXERCISE IS SUBMITTED IN  
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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work in this dissertation is my own except for quotations and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.

26 FEBRUARY 2008



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## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the purpose of identifying the performance of the pre-university students of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Khir Johari, Tanjong Malim, Perak, in the writing component of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), also known as MUET Paper 4. This part of the paper comprises summary writing and extended writing that contribute 25% of the overall score in MUET. As a whole, MUET consists of four components. Being second in importance in terms of marks distribution, the writing component offers a substantial amount of marks that is capable of affecting the overall score. Past MUET scores indicate that a great number of students did not fare well in this component, thus affecting their overall MUET scores. Resultant of this, a study is deemed appropriate in identifying the problematic areas in the MUET writing component itself. Therefore, data were analysed based on the students' English language proficiency that is represented by their SPM English grades, and their MUET writing scores obtained in this study. The findings show that the students' SPM English grades are not the defining ability of their MUET writing performance. In addition, summary writing turns out to be the most difficult question with a majority of its components identified as the key problems. Presumably, the outcome of this study would indicate a bearing on certain pedagogical requirements.

## ABSTRAK

Kajian ini cuba mengenal pasti pencapaian pelajar pra-universiti di Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Khir Johari, Tanjong Malim, Perak, dalam kertas 4 yang merupakan sebahagian daripada keseluruhan kertas dalam peperiksaan Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Kertas 4 adalah kertas penulisan yang diperuntukkan 25% daripada skor keseluruhan peperiksaan ini. Ia mengandungi dua bahagian yang terdiri daripada rumusan dan penulisan. Dikenal pasti sebagai kedua terpenting berdasarkan peruntukan markah, kertas penulisan mampu menggugat pencapaian skor keseluruhan seorang pelajar dalam peperiksaan MUET. Analisis pencapaian peperiksaan yang lalu membuktikan bahawa pelajar menghadapi masalah dalam kertas penulisan ini. Atas sebab itu, kajian ini dijalankan. Dalam kajian ini, gred pencapaian Bahasa Inggeris di peringkat SPM dikenal pasti sebagai penanda aras kebolehan linguistik pelajar, manakala skor kertas penulisan MUET yang dijalankan ke atas pelajar dalam kajian ini mewakili keupayaan pelajar dalam kertas penulisan MUET. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa gred Bahasa Inggeris peringkat SPM tidak boleh dijadikan kayu pengukur kepada keupayaan penulisan- MUET seseorang pelajar. Di samping itu, bahagian rumusan dan komponen sokongan yang mentaksir bahagian ini merupakan bahagian yang paling sukar bagi pelajar. Oleh itu, diharapkan dapatan kajian ini dapat berfungsi sebagai penunjuk arah kepada pengisian keperluan pedagogi berkaitan dengan pengajaran penulisan dalam MUET.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

MUET or the Malaysian University English Test is administered by the Malaysian Examination Council (Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia) twice a year, in the months of June and December. It is a compulsory requirement for students seeking entry into Malaysian universities for the undergraduate courses.

To begin with, MUET consists of four components with an overall score that represents a candidate's performance in the language. They are the Listening component (800/1), Speaking component (800/2), Reading Comprehension component (800/3), and Writing component (800/4). The weighting given to each component is 15% (45 marks), 15% (45 marks), 45% (135 marks), and 25% (75 marks) respectively with an overall score of 300 marks. The candidates' scores are further graded into bands of 1 to 6 with the latter being the highest score.

### 1.2 Need for the Study

From the overview of the MUET paper, it can be deduced that it tests all the four language skills of a candidate with each component score having indirect effects on the other. However, this study has its focus on the Writing component which makes up 25%

of the overall score. Being second in importance in terms of weighting, the Writing component contributes a large part of the marks in the overall MUET score. Candidates who are not able to write well lose a large part of their marks on writing, thus affecting their overall score in MUET. In turn, poor scores in writing may be reflective of the candidates' incompetence in writing. This is reflected in the past MUET scores of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Khir Johari, Tanjong Malim which displays a poor performance on this component. The followings are the analysis of the MUET scores for the years 2004, 2005, and 2006.

**Table 1.1**

**Analysis of MUET Scores in SMK Khir Johari, Tg. Malim**

Components / year	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
2004 (mid-year)	61	55	51	23
69 candidates	88.4%	79.7%	73.9%	33.3%
2005 (mid-year)	74	35	60	14
97 candidates	76.3%	36%	61.9%	14.4%
2006 (mid-year)	20	29	39	18
42 candidates	47.6%	69%	92.9%	42.9%

From Table 1, it can be seen that the Writing component produces the least number of passes in the school for the past three years, thus predicting a possibility that Writing is the most difficult component for the students in the school.

### 1.3 Statement of the Problem

The Writing component of MUET comprises summary as question 1 and extended writing as question 2. In general, this component tests the candidates' abilities in comprehending texts, determining the required information, discriminating main points from supporting points, rephrasing ideas to summarise texts and employing a controlling idea to direct the course of a text in question 1. In essence, question 2 requires the candidates to generate and present ideas with focus on coherence and cohesion. However, all these skills are generally addressed and categorised by band descriptors that best describe the candidates' use of language and treatment of a given topic through language and task fulfillment respectively. Besides being graded in the range of 1 to 6, both these assessment scopes carry an equal weighting in terms of marks distribution.

In effect, it is identified that various interconnected writing skills that underlie writing are being tested in the Writing component. Therefore, this case study carried out on pre-university students of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Khir Johari, Tanjong Malim will seek to identify their level of performance and probable areas of difficulties in the Writing component of MUET.

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

This study tries to identify the students' problems in answering the Writing component and the findings may guide the teachers in accommodating the students with plausible strategies that best suit their needs. Consequently, the outcome of the study is hoped to assist English teachers in general, and the MUET Writing teachers in particular in considering the following aspects:-

- i) The areas of difficulties commonly faced by students in the MUET Writing component.
- ii) The ways to overcome the problems specified.
- iii) The employing of suitable and relevant strategies that address the difficulties identified.

Although this is a case study and the respondents represent a population current to the time when this study is carried out, the findings may prove vital in addressing problems commonly displayed by students of the MUET Writing component.

### 1.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify difficult areas in the MUET Writing component as reflected in the students' answers in the test provided. These difficult areas are

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- i) Comparing the students' MUET writing test scores with their levels of English language ability represented by their SPM English Language grades.
- ii) Analysing their scores in summary and extended writing that make up the MUET Writing component.
- iii) Analysing their scores in task fulfillment and language aspects that form the assessment scopes in both summary and extended writing sections.

## 1.6 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is realized by determining the answers to the following questions.

- i) What is the relationship between the students' performance in the MUET Writing component and their English Language grades in the SPM examination?
- ii) Which of the two sections in the Writing component of the MUET paper, namely summary and extended writing, presents more problems to the students?
- iii) What are the areas of difficulties in the Writing component of the MUET paper faced by the students from different English Language ability groups?

## 1.7 Research Hypotheses

To answer the research questions, the following research hypotheses are formed.

- (i) There is a statistically significant correlation between the students' performance in English Language paper of the SPM examination and their scores in the Writing component of the MUET paper.



- (ii) The extended writing section constitutes the most difficult area in the Writing component of MUET compared to the summary section faced by the pre-university students from different ability groups.
- (iii) The language aspect of the summary section constitutes the most difficult area compared to the task fulfillment aspect faced by the pre-university students from different ability groups.
- (iv) The language aspect of the extended writing section constitutes the most difficult area compared to the task fulfillment aspect faced by the pre-university students from different ability groups.
- (v) The scopes in the task fulfillment aspect of the summary section are the difficult areas in the MUET Writing Component.
- (vi) The scopes in both the task fulfillment and language aspects of the extended writing section are the difficult areas in the MUET Writing Component.

## 1.8 Definitions of Terms

The following are definitions of terms that appear in this study:

***MUET:***

Malaysian University English Test, an English Language competency test that is compulsory for students pursuing first degree course of local tertiary education.

***Pre-university students:***

They are secondary school students who have taken SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) examination and are in their sixth and seventh year of education.

***Extended writing:***

The second question in the Writing component of MUET (Paper 4) that requires candidates to write in about 250 words based on a given stimulus.

***Difficult areas***

Summary and extended writing which are question 1 and question 2 respectively in the Writing component of MUET (Paper 4) and the parts that make up the criteria in their assessment namely language and task fulfillment.

***Assessment scopes***

The criteria, namely language and task fulfillment that make up the areas in which summary and extended writing are assessed.

### ***Weighting***

The percentage of marks that shows how much focus is given on a chosen area.

### ***Controlling idea***

The first sentence in a summary (question 1) that states the purpose or main point of the writing in answer to the task set in the instruction.

### ***Thesis statement***

The main idea that forms the focus in extended writing.

### ***Coherence***

“The underlying organizational structure that makes the words and sentences in discourse unified and meaningful for the reader” (Reid 1993: 289).

### ***Cohesion***

“Specific words and phrases (eg., transitions, pronouns, repetition of key words and phrase) that tie prose together and direct the reader” (Reid 1993: 289).