Analysing The Factors Influencing English Performance of Islamic-Based University Students

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Abstract

As one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, English in Malaysia is also an important language for both national and global operations widely used in the aspects of business, education, and international relations. Due to such importance, there is constant concern towards the English language performance of students at all levels of education, and it is one of the issues addressed in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025. This paper sought to answer the question of 'What are the factors contributing to students' English language performance?', with specific reference to students from the religious education background at an Islamic-based public university in Malaysia. Derived from a larger study, this paper reported the qualitative findings gathered from interview sessions with a total of 47 English teachers, English and content subject lecturers as well as students regarding the factors contributing to the students' English language performance. Findings revealed 4 main themes of internal features or inner components that influence the students' English achievement which are: (1) teacher attributes (2) learner determination (3) learner beliefs / attitudes and (4) *'I don't understand'*. The findings of this study reveal the needs to explore new areas to address the issue of students' English language performance, particularly those of religious background education. It also has broader implications for the global community, which makes it critical for educators and policymakers to collaborate in developing new strategies and resources to help learners overcome the challenges and develop the language skills they need to thrive in today's interconnected world. With that, it is hoped that students are able to access the same opportunities for success as their peers, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background.

Keywords: English Language, Achievement, Performance, Religious Background

Introduction

English is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, with over 1.5 billion speakers globally, including both native and non-native speakers. It is the official language of over 50 countries and is widely used in international organisations such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the International Olympic Committee (Barnawi, 2022).

At a global level, the importance of the English language cannot be refuted as it is the accepted language of international trade, diplomacy, and tourism, and is the primary language used in scientific and academic communication (Piller et al., 2020). Many of the world's top universities and research institutions use English as their primary language of instruction and communication. At a national level, the importance of English varies depending on the country. In places where English is the official language, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, it is crucial for communication within the country and for international trade and diplomacy. In other countries, such as India and Nigeria, English is used as a second language and is often the language of education, business, and government (LaDousa, 2022; Unuabonah et al., 2022). In these countries, fluency in English can provide a significant advantage in the job market and can help individuals to communicate more effectively with people from other parts of the world.

In the Malaysian context, English is an important language for both national and international communication. Malaysia has a diverse population, with over 130 different ethnic groups and languages, and English serves as a common language that enables communication between people of different backgrounds (Rahman & Singh, 2022). English is also widely used in business, education, and government in Malaysia. Many international companies have a presence in Malaysia, and fluency in English is often a requirement for employment in these organisations. English is also the language of instruction in many higher education institutions in Malaysia. However, the proficiency level of English among Malaysians varies. Some Malaysians are fluent in English, while others may struggle with the language due to limited exposure or resources (Mahdun et al., 2022), e.g., those from the Islamic religious school background, where the Arabic language is given more emphasis. These students, who are equipped with great Islamic knowledge, are generally expected to spread the Islamic teachings to a wider audience. Therefore, being proficient in the English language will assist them to shoulder this responsibility more competently. Due to the importance of reaching out to more people at the global level, this study specifically looks at this category of students, with the aim of assisting and raising their English language achievement.

Malaysian Students' English Language Performance

Within the Malaysian academic context, the English language is given great prominence from primary to secondary school levels, as well as at tertiary level (Gill, 2005). Students' proficiency levels are measured through a national standardised examination like *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) or Malaysian Certificate of Education, before sitting for Malaysian University English Test (MUET) which is a mandatory requirement for placement at public universities. A few studies have found a positive correlation between high MUET band attainment and learner's academic success at universities (Moon & Siew, 2004; Zulkifli et al, 2011; Nurhazlini et al., 2015). A recent study by Krishnan et al (2019) provided further validation that the students' MUET results, in particular for the reading and writing components, were strong indicators for the high academic performance in accounting and science stream programmes at matriculation level.

If MUET results can be seen as good predictors of learners' academic success at tertiary institutions, thus it is imperative that the mastery of the language begins at school level. However, a baseline study conducted in 2013 by Cambridge English, which was commissioned by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) within two years after the introduction of the Standard-based English Language Curriculum for Malaysian National Primary Schools (KSSR), found that 32% of students fell under the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) A1 level. For context, CEFR was developed by the Council of Europe in 2001 (Council of Europe, 2001). It comprises six-level descriptors for listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The descriptors categorise language learners into three main groups based on their language ability with each group comprising two levels: i) Proficient users (levels C1 & C2), ii) Independent users (levels B1 & B2), and iii) Basic users (levels A1 & A2). In the Malaysian setting, primary school children start with A1 and are expected to reach A2 by the time they complete their primary school education. At secondary level, students start with B1 and are expected to reach B2 by the time they finish their secondary education. University students are expected to reach B2 or C1 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

Similar trend is shown for the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary School (KBSM) level, as it was reported that a large number of lower-secondary students struggled in their English subject (Rahman et al., 2022). These results have prompted an urgent need for an integrated solution that would allow the Malaysian English language education to meet the global standard. The education transformation was then established through the launch of MoE's blueprint, "The English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025", that would affect all study levels. The MUET examination has also been restructured to be CEFR-aligned.

English and MUET at an Islamic-based public university
The adoption of the CEFR into the Malaysian English language curriculum from school and continuing to higher institutional level, has caused worries among some students (Nawawi et al., 2021). This is because public universities in Malaysia have set an English language requirement for future students to be accepted into universities. In the English Language Roadmap, it has stated that through the number of hours learning English at schools from primary to upper secondary would realistically enable students to achieve a Band B1 in Malaysia University English Test (MUET). The English language requirement to enrol into public universities is at least a Band 2. By the end of their university candidature, students are expected to achieve at least Band B2 in MUET. This has brought anxieties and apprehensions for some students, especially students from religious background schools.

The extant body of literature reported on variety of obstacles faced by the religious background school students in their English language learning, such as insufficient exposure to the language (Ler, 2012), scarce resources and facilities for language learning (Ahmad, Abdullah, & Ghani, 2014), cultural and motivational impediments (The et al., 2009), and a teacher shortage (Hashim & Langgulung, 2008), may affect the English language ability of students from religious backgrounds. To guarantee that students from religious backgrounds have the same opportunity for success as the mainstreams, it is crucial to identify and address the reasons that impede their English language performance. Thus, this study aims to identify the factors that influence the English language performance among religious background students. Specifically, it is guided by the following research question: What are the factors that influence English language performance among religious background students?

Methodology

The findings shared in this paper are derived from a bigger study which employed a mixed-methods approach through the use of survey and interview methods. However, this paper only reports on the data gathered from the latter method. This section delineates the research context, the phases in conducting and analysing the interview, the groups of participants involved in the interview, and the interview protocol.

The Research Context

The study took place at an Islamic-based public university in Malaysia, whereby the majority of the students are from religious school background. To enter the university, students are required to have a MUET result. Since the entry requirement is not stressed by all programmes of study, the exit requirement is highlighted. The students are supposed to exit with Band 3.0 or a band higher for programmes that have set entry requirements. Due to the leeway given to the minimum entry band, students entered the institution with MUET bands ranging from 1.0 to 5+. Based on their MUET bands, the students are then streamed into five levels of English courses. The medium of instruction at this institution is both Arabic and English. For science-based programmes, the lectures are delivered in English while for most social science classes, the delivery is done in Arabic. Even though Arabic and English are emphasised as the academic medium of instructions, the administration matters (official letters, formal documents, and communication at the counters) are performed in the national language, which is the Malay language.

The Phases

The qualitative part presented in this paper involves six (6) phases as illustrated in Figure 1 below.
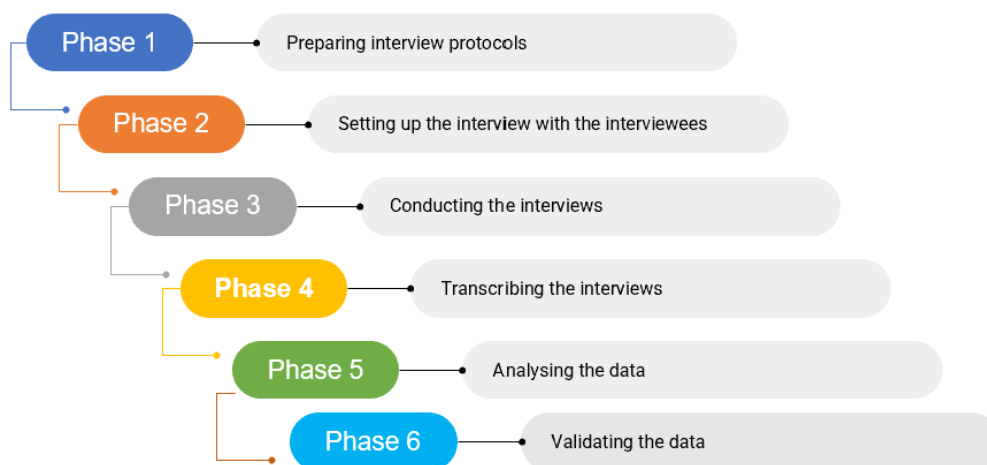
Figure 1. The phases

The first phase was the development of the interview protocol for both the teachers/lecturers and students, followed by the ethics application which was later approved and granted the approval code USIM/JKEP/2021-176. Subsequently, phases 2 and 3–identifying participants and conducting interviews–were performed. Phase 4 involved the transcription processes of the audiotaped interview sessions, and upon completion, phase 5: data analysis, was carried

out by the researchers using the ATLAS.ti programme as a data management tool. Immersing themselves in the data set, the researchers then identified, analysed, organised, described, and reported emerging themes discovered within the data set. Finally, in phase 6, the identified themes were relayed to two inter-raters who are education experts for the purpose of data validation.

The Interview and the Participants

In detailing the factors influencing the English language performance of the students in the institution, there is a need to explore their experiences through an interview. The interview involved not only the students as the participants but also the teachers and lecturers in order to gauge the multiple angles of those involved in the teaching and learning of English at the institution. Therefore, in ensuring the depth and breadth of the data, there were four (4) groups of participants included in the interview sessions. Informed consent forms were distributed and collected from the participants, who were then given pseudonyms to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Figure 2 below shows the groups of participants involved in this study.

Figure 2. Participants of the study

Figure 2 illustrates four (4) groups of participants - the students, the subject lecturers and also the English language instructors (teachers and lecturers), and the school teachers. The first three groups were from the institution while the last group consisted of English teachers from the feeder schools for the institution. The feeder schools involved in this research were determined by the number of students from the respective schools enrolled in the institution. The participants from the institution were chosen from the science and social science clusters. Besides considering the clusters, the students were also representatives from the five (5) levels of English classes and also those who had delayed graduation due to not meeting the English language exit requirement.

Interview Protocols

Interview protocols were prepared for all the four (4) groups of interviewees, incorporating seven (7) main components as presented in the table below.
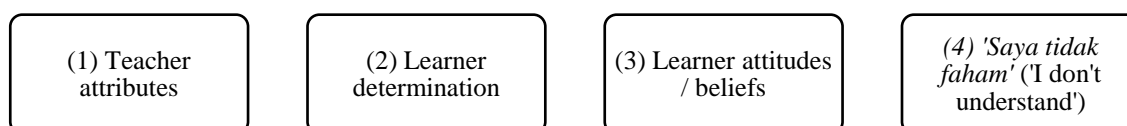
Table 1
Components in the Interview Protocols

Component	Description
Component 1	Experiences with English
Component 2	Acceptance of English; Motivation; Strategies
Component 3	Present Proficiency
Component 4	Strengths and Weaknesses
Component 5	Factors influencing English language Proficiency (including institutional support)
Component 6	Factors impeding the use of English language
Component 7	Ways to improve

Table 1 shows the seven (7) components that were included in the Interview Protocols prepared for all the four (4) groups of interviewees mentioned earlier. Although there were four (4) types of Interview Protocols prepared, all adopting the components above, each Interview Protocol was worded and expressed quite differently, depending on its suitability of the participants, e.g., component 1 for teachers/lecturers, the focus of experience is on teaching whereas for the students, the focus is on learning. These components were chosen based on literature reviews, as well as the stipulated research question addressed in the study.

Findings and Discussion
Guided by the research question *What are the factors that influence English language performance among religious background students?*, this section presents the themes that have emerged from our analysis. As noted earlier, this paper describes part of our larger study which has discovered various factors that influence students' English language performance (Zainuddin et.al., in press). This paper presents one angle of the factors—Internal features— or the inner components that influence the students' English achievement. They signify the characteristics or traits of the stakeholders, namely lecturers, teachers, and students, involved in the process of teaching and learning. The four themes which surfaced from the interview data are:

(1) Teacher attributes	(2) Learner determination	(3) Learner attitudes / beliefs	*(4) 'Saya tidak faham'* ('I don't understand')

Teacher Attributes
As found in other past studies (e.g., Holbah & Sharma, 2021; Getie, 2020), findings in the current study indicate that students' learning of the English language was influenced by their teachers' (also instructors' or lecturers') attributes. Majority of the students stated that their learning process was enhanced when the teachers were more organised and coordinated in

their approach towards teaching the English language course. It is found that students value teachers' efforts in dividing lessons into manageable chunks or parts, as well as allowing ample time to prepare for assessments. Such traits are perceived as being crucial in motivating students to excel in their language performance. This is evident through one of the students who shared her positive sentiment,

> *"I think what was done by my lecturer—she taught me English in a strategic way, very orderly, where there are weeks when we learn vocabulary, there are weeks we will learn about speaking. For example, if we have three or four weeks before the Speaking Test, my teacher will give an early reminder before the speaking test. So, we can prepare well before we sit for the test"* (SS3).

In addition, it is noticeable that students also appreciate their teachers' positive personalities in tackling and handling them. This seems to be an important factor that facilitated them to learn the English language in a less stressful manner. One student recollected how her primary school teacher had positively motivated her to learn the English language, a subject that is challenging and tough for her. The teacher's gentle and tactful approach provided reassurance and encouragement for her and other students to learn English.

> *"During my primary school, the way my teacher taught me was different – she didn't force but gave encouragement. If people force us, it will be difficult to learn, especially students who hate the subject. Being forced at home, being forced at school … it becomes more difficult. Teachers should encourage …"* (SS10).

Here it is apparent that a teacher's disposition plays a role in students' acceptance towards learning the English language. Students, especially in the case of second language learners who are anxious to learn English, seem to value teachers' positive traits and non-patronising approach when teaching. Many other studies support that the teacher element is one of the important factors in students' learning (e.g., Sun, Bornstein & Esposito, 2021; Getie, 2020). It makes them feel less apprehensive in learning the language, a battle that is already half won since apprehension is one of the challenges encountered by many second language learners.

In many studies, teacher attributes appear to be an external factor that affects learners' English language proficiency (e.g., Maruf et.al., 2022; Sun et.al., 2021; Hidayat et.al., 2021). Nevertheless, in the current study, teachers' positive characteristics are observed as one of the main internal factors that motivates students to learn. In other words, teacher qualities become an intrinsic motivation that drives students to learn English and improve their proficiency.

Learner Determination

The second theme that emerged from the interview data is learner determination. Along with other crucial factors influencing language learning success (e.g., teacher attributes explained earlier), some language learners are successful by virtue of their sheer determination, hard work, and persistence. In this study, it is indicated that the English language achievement of the students could be influenced by their characteristics and efforts in learning the language. This finding is aligned with other previous studies that recorded students' persistence when

facing challenges as one of the top factors influencing English language learning (e.g., Astuti, Shalawati & Hadijah, 2022; Bai & Wang, 2023; Cabrera-Solano et.al., 2019).

Some students asserted that they liked to challenge themselves to become better English language users. To do this, they 'pushed' and 'dared' themselves to use English as much as possible. One instance was shared by SS2, who was assigned a task to conduct interviews for her assignments. As opposed to taking shortcuts which was to interview her own friends using the Malay language, she went the extra mile to carefully select and interview the 'real people' and utilised the opportunities to use the English language during the interview sessions required by her English lecturers. By doing this, she gained the positive experience of using and improving her language use.

"My strategy - I always challenge myself – I mean, when there's an assignment that we have to interview people, friends especially, most people will just say 'Let's speak in Malay'. But I will try to challenge myself to interview strangers, other people. So, when with strangers, I will tell them that I'm doing my assignment, and I will use English as needed in the assignment" (SS2).

Aside from self-challenge, students were also discovered to utilise other recommended language activities to improve their language proficiency. They watched movies, listened to English songs, and conversed with other people using the English language. SS1, for example, learned the English language more by watching movies on Netflix and listening to songs. Deliberately and consciously listening to the movie scripts, as well as paying attention to the subtitles found in movies and lyrics of songs enabled her to increase her understanding and vocabulary in the target language, and in due course, improved her overall English performance.

> "*I learn by watching Netflix, movies and all. I love English, and when I watch movies, the subtitles are also in English. That really helps … when we watch movies, listen to songs … we'll know many words, idioms …*" (SS1).

Being determined to ensure their language proficiency improves, students become driven and challenge themselves to find ways and opportunities to use the language. Through these, students' language achievement can progress and advance to the next level, or at least they maintain the positivity towards the language.

The students' determination was also confirmed by their English teachers, triangulated through the teacher interviews. According to a teacher, GB3, her students dedicated a great deal of determination to learn English. They were committed, self-directed and self-driven when assigned tasks. The students did not passively wait for the teachers to provide every single information but acted proactively in exploring and searching for relevant materials or information required to complete tasks assigned to them. In GB3 words

> "*They will put an effort to actually go and search for all the information, all the necessities that they need to find to complete the task. If and only if they couldn't solve the problem then only, they come to me*" (GB3).

The strong determination to become better English language users has prompted students to challenge themselves in creating opportunities to use the language. Students also utilise all possible resources to increase exposure to English as they are aware that getting direct contact with the language facilitates improvement in their proficiency. This is in line

with Ryan and Deci's (2017) Self-determination theory which explains how and why sustainable motivation and action occur.

Learner Attitudes / Beliefs

Another key factor that influences the achievement of the English language proficiency among religious school students is their own attitudes towards learning the English language. The correlation of learners' attitudes to the success of learning a foreign language has been highlighted by many scholars such as (Gardner, 1985; Buschenhofen, 1998; Pritchard and Nasr, 2004). It is believed that a positive attitude will be the driving factor to motivate the learners to acquire the target language.

As for the participants of the study, some noted that they have less interest in learning a language that they have a low mastery of. As mentioned by SS9, one major factor thwarting his English language learning and improvement was the fact that he was not interested in learning the language. He claimed that due to the lack of interest, it was difficult for him to motivate himself in learning the English language. He stated that:

"I think the number one reason is lack of interest. If you have no interest, then it is hard to develop it. I think that is the biggest problem, interest. I am not really sure, but I think that could be the main reason" (SS9).

This point was also mentioned by SS5 as he claimed that he was not interested at all to learn the English language. He said "*The English language is not at fault. The thing is, the main issue is myself, I do not have interest in learning the language" (*SS5). Another student, SS2 identified his lack of interest towards English as one of the main factors impeding his efforts in learning the language. The student claimed that he had no interest in learning the language; consequently, he did not put any effort into understanding the language, let alone learning the language. He stated that:

"The factor of my difficulty in learning the English language is myself. I am not interested in learning MUET. I did not try to learn the language and did not even try to understand it" (SS2).

Data show that the students' interests contribute to the motivation to learn the English language. Without the presence of interest, learners will not have the motivation to even make the smallest effort in improving their English language proficiency. This point was highlighted by quite a few studies (Elyederim & Ashton-Hay, 2006; Khan, 2016). Seminal work by Gardner (1985) states that positive attitudes generate motivation to learn. Khan (2016) investigated the correlation between positive attitudes and English language proficiency among Arab students and he found out that positive attitudes had a strong correlation with the achievement of the students in learning the English language in which it overcame other factors such as the availability of related equipment and resources. Elyederim and Ashton-Hay (2006) emphasised the massive connection between interest and English language as a foreign language learning achievement. As such they conducted an action research study to enhance positive attitudes among students of English language as a foreign language at Atarturk University in Turkey. The findings of the study show that the intervention that they used elevated positive interest among students, thus increasing the level of achievement of the English language learning among those students.

In short, it shows that interest plays a major role in learning the English language; thus, active steps should be taken in handling this issue. Activities invoking interest should be taken more actively to generate motivation among the learners.

Apart from the lack of interest and motivation to learn the language, data shows that the participants' English language learning and achievement is affected by their innate beliefs associated with English language usage such as other people's negative perceptions, feeling of shyness and fear of failing the examinations.

Some participants pointed out that they were not comfortable speaking the language due to the negative perceptions that some people have towards English language usage. One of the teachers stated that most learners were influenced by what other people think, as well as by other people's attitudes and beliefs towards the usage of the English. This was explained by GB1 who mentioned that the learners associated speaking in English as being unpatriotic. Hence, they refrained from using English for fear of being mocked or ridiculed by their friends for not loving the national language, Bahasa Melayu.

> *"Most students still have the mental image that speaking English makes you want to look like Westerners, and you don't love the national language when you speak in the English. This is the reason why they are afraid to speak English" (GB1).*

On the same note, SS1 added that he had stopped speaking the English language with friends as some would ridicule him as being arrogant and a show off. He said that "*When I speak the language with my friends, they will say that I am showing off. So, I stopped talking to them in the English language*".   SS5 also stressed similar points when she was mocked and labelled as arrogant when she tried to use the English language outside the classroom. "*They called me arrogant. I want to communicate in English, but people ridiculed me*" (SS5).

Furthermore, the feeling of shyness has also been identified by the participants as the most common internal factor that contributes to their English language proficiency. Many claimed that using the English language in the classroom was a challenging task for them and it was even more challenging to use the English language outside the classroom. This point was shared by a teacher, as he pointed out that most of his students were shy to use the language especially in front of classmates who were better at using the language. *"Especially when they have classmates that are good in English, sometimes the weak ones don't want to speak in class because they are shy." (TS1)*. This was due to the fact that the students would feel intimidated by their friends. This point was also shared by SS5 when she mentioned that the biggest challenge of learning English was being ridiculed by peers. She told a story when she was using the English language for a speaking task given by her teacher. She stated that some students who were already good in the language jeered and made fun of her pronunciation, thus she lost her confidence in speaking the language.

> *"I still remember, one class, in preparation to take MUET. The teacher asked us to use the language the whole day, so I used it with my friends. However, some students, advanced students, ridicule me and laugh at us. I want to learn but people laugh, so I feel shy to continue" (SS5).*

Feeling inferior and shy stops learners from using English in front of others. They do not feel their language proficiency is good enough to be used particularly to communicate with others. Hence, they end up staying quiet. The issue of shyness in the English classroom is not a new

issue and still prevalent to this day as it has been identified as one of the challenges in learning English in Malaysia (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Hamid, 2001; Nijat et al., 2019). Hamid (2001) pointed out that shyness is a major factor expressed by her participants when asked about their passive participation in the English class.

Being afraid of failing was also another factor highlighted by the learners. Due to their inability to comprehend or use the language well, the risk of failing in exams like MUET was inevitable. They felt it was difficult for them to perform in exams especially in speaking and writing as they knew they were weak. This was elaborated by SS11 who voiced out his fear of failing. Because he was not proficient, he felt everything was difficult and the fear of failing in exams became real.

> *"The challenge is, I am scared of the failure risk. Failing MUET. So many challenges because I don't know English. I have difficulty in speaking, writing, I am weak. So, I feel it is hard" (SS11).*

'Saya tidak faham' ('I don't understand')

One more substantial factor that contributed to the progress of proficiency of the learners is the students' English language knowledge. Some participants of the current study indicated that they were weak in the English language because they "*tak faham*" (do not understand) the English language. In other words, data show that most learners attributed their low English language performance to their incompetence to understand the language due to the complicated grammar and unfamiliar vocabularies. SS4 mentioned that he could not comprehend the lectures delivered in the English language. *"I don't understand at all what the lecturers said in class"* (SS4).

The pertinence of having sufficient vocabularies in the target language in learning a second language cannot be refuted (Embi & Amin, 2010); Misbah et al., 2017; Nor, Mazlan, & Rajab, 2015). In the case of the current study, limited vocabulary was a challenge for some learners. Due to limited vocabulary that they had, they could not understand what they read, they got confused over meanings and were not able to use words correctly. This point was mentioned by many. For instance, SS26 mentioned that he got confused over the meaning of words as well their spellings. "*Among the biggest challenges for me is the confusion in understanding the meaning and spelling of certain words*" (SS26). SS35 also stated a similar issue of not being able to understand the meaning of words written in English and this hampered his overall understanding of the language. He said that "*Usually, I don't understand the meaning of several words in a sentence*" (SS35). Here, it is clear that limited vocabularies in the English language would affect the learners' ability to use the language effectively. The findings of the study concur with the findings of Misbah et al (2017) who identified four impacts due to limited vocabulary such as inability to understand conversation in English, inability to speak and write in the language as well as inability to understand English language materials.

In addition, other participants highlighted the importance of having adequate vocabulary in achieving a good command of the English language. SS40 was very committed in her quest to obtain new vocabularies to improve her English language proficiency. She explained in great detail her efforts of gaining new vocabularies through watching English dramas and reading English subtitles in a popular video streaming platform. She thought that building a repository of new words would help a student to use the newly obtained vocabularies in daily communications, meetings, and any English language tasks. She said that:

> *"The best way is to speak the language...like teenagers nowadays like to watch Netflix, my friend watches English dramas and uses English subtitles in Netflix. While we are listening to the speech, we read the subtitles. The words that we don't understand, we have to look it up"* (SS40).
> *"Words that we don't know, never heard of, new words, when you see that in movies, we can use in our daily lives like in communication or in meetings" (*SS40).

SS10 also claimed that his English language success is due to his interest in watching anime with English subtitles. He compared his experience with a peer that did not watch anime and he claimed that he encountered new vocabularies and were able to use the vocabularies to communicate in English. In contrast, he noticed that his friend faced problems in speaking the language due to the lack of vocabulary.

Another aspect that is important in the English language is the understanding of the English language grammar system. SS5 claimed that grammar posed a lot of problems to him as he could not understand how the English language grammatical system worked. Thus, he could not produce high quality written work.

> *"Because grammar, I think, sometimes in Malay as well I made a mistake, let alone the English language (grammar). In learning English, I really don't like learning English. Not that I don't like it, it is difficult to understand. Really hard to understand, I don't understand, so I don't know how to apply especially in writing"* (SS5).

This point was also shared by SS13 when she stated that the hardest part for her in learning the English language is using the correct grammar, especially in writing. She said that "*For me, the hardest would be grammar. Yes, grammar*"

This problem is not exclusive to the current institution as many studies (Azar & Sahar, 2021; Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Karnine et al., 2022; Nor et al., 2015) discussed how the English language knowledge influenced the students' English language performance. Many scholars reiterated that the students' lack of English language knowledge becomes one of the obstacles for the students to express themselves in the said language. This is evidenced when one of the participants, SS41 claimed that lack of the English language knowledge would impact the ability of the students to use the language in real life contexts; She said that "*If we are at one level, at a low level (low English language proficiency), we will not have the courage to use the language or to even ask for help*". It seems that the 'tak faham' situation can spiral into other issues mentioned above such as symptoms of language anxieties.

Conclusion
It can be concluded that even after approximately 13 years of formal English language training from primary to secondary schools to tertiary institutions, learners are still facing difficulties in understanding the English language. The findings of this study indicate that there is a need to explore new areas to address this persistent issue. Despite the extensive training and education that learners receive, they are still struggling to comprehend the nuances and complexities of the English language. This highlights a significant gap in the effectiveness of traditional language teaching methods and underscores the need for more innovative and engaging approaches to language instruction.

The results of the current study also have broader implications for the global community, as English is widely regarded as the international language of communication, and proficiency in the language is often a prerequisite for academic and professional success. As such, it is critical that educators and policymakers work together to develop new strategies and resources to help learners overcome these challenges and develop the language skills they need to thrive in today's interconnected world.

In recent years, there have been growing concerns about the level of English proficiency among students from religious backgrounds, particularly in Malaysia. Thus, this study is significant in providing insights to university management in terms of planning and implementing English language-based programmes that can help religious background students achieve the desired standards of English language proficiency. Through these efforts, it is hoped that religious background students will be able to access the same opportunities for success as their peers, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background.

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