

Facilitating Students for an English Course: A Teacher's Journey

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Abstract

Internationalization and globalization enable positive returns in a wide range of human activities. The affected sectors include education and industry. English language is critical to Malaysia's ability to become a global player in education and encourage the internationalization of higher education. As a result, there has been a greater emphasis on improving graduates' language proficiency. One of these focuses takes the shape of a nationwide test. Since its inception in 1999, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) has been one of the requirements for school leavers to enroll in any undergraduate programs at Malaysia's public universities. The MUET assigns candidates bands to demonstrate their English language proficiency; it mentions nine bands, with Band 1 (equal to CEFR level A2) representing the weakest and Band 5+ (corresponding to CEFR level C1+) representing the most competent. The purpose of this pilot research is to chronicle the author's quest to identify suitable teaching methods for Bands 1, 2, and 2.5 (CEFR level A2) in a specific course. The Language Dean Council proposed the development of such a course, citing the need to address this lack of English language competency swiftly and consistently. This research used a descriptive research design, employing qualitative approach, which included class observations of seven weeks for two short semesters and semi-structured interviews with four students enrolled in these two short semesters. The preliminary data suggests that extensive drilling and practice before, during, and after face-to-face sessions enhances the skills of students in this specific course.

Keywords: Behaviorism, Communicative Language Teaching, Drill-and-Practice, Grammar, MUET

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Introduction

Malaysia is adamant on becoming an international educational hub (Loo, 2022). Many efforts have been made by the government and other relevant agencies in ensuring that Malaysia is able to attract foreign students to pursue higher education in the country. Given all these, Malaysian students must be empowered to make them equally or more competitive. One of the areas of empowerment is English language. Since its introduction in 1999, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) becomes one of the requirements for school leavers to enter any undergraduate programs in public universities in Malaysia. This requirement was introduced due to issues such as low English language proficiency of Malaysian university graduates, which has hindered some of the graduates to succeed during interview sessions. The MUET is managed by the Malaysian Examinations Council, which also manages all national level examinations including *Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia* (Malaysian Certificate of Education).

Offered to all candidates thrice a year (April, July, and November), candidates will have to sit for three papers, including listening, reading, and writing and attend a speaking test/session. Candidates are given bands to demonstrate their ability in using English language; nine bands are listed with Band 1 (equivalent to CEFR level A2) being the weakest and Band 5+ (equivalent to CEFR level C1+) being the most proficient. The weightage of the bands covers communicative ability, comprehension and the quality of task performance which will then be summarized into candidates being proficient users (Band 5+ = C1+); (Band 5 = C1); independent users (Bands 4.5 and 4 = B2); (Bands 3.5 and 3 = B1); and basic users (Bands 2.5, 2 and 1 = A2). Most offer letters to pursue undergraduate studies will just require a Band 1 except for medical and law programs that require a Band 4 and for Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program, its requirement is set at a Band 5. It must be highlighted that these bands have been aligned to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, also known as CEFR, *arguably* an international standard for describing language ability of the students.

This pilot study attempts to document the journey of the author in finding suitable approaches that can be used in a special course at the National Defense University of Malaysia (NDUM) for scorers of Bands 1, 2 and 2.5 (CEFR level A2). The existence of such course was driven by the concerns of the Language Dean Council, operating at the ministerial level, which sees this lack of English language competency as something that must be addressed immediately and constantly. Because the NDUM has its own foundation programs, the defense university is thus responsible to prepare these students to take the MUET, normally offered in April each year. In general, ever since the NDUM has its students sitting for the test, not a single student has scored a Band 5+ (or a Band 6 in the previous assessment standard). From 2008 to 2021, a total of 2,678 students took the examinations, and only 21 students managed to obtain a Band 5. Most of these foundation students obtained Bands 3.5 and 3, and quite a handful of them obtained Bands 4.5 and 4.

Problem Statement

Taking into consideration the needs for internationalization and globalization, the concerns of the nation and the achievement of these foundation students, the Language Center at the NDUM decided to offer a non-credited English course that must be taken by all achievers of Bands 1, 2 and 2.5. The course titled *Basic Grammar and Vocabulary* aims at facilitating students who are weak at English especially in two critical skills of English, grammar, and

vocabulary. The course focuses on these two skills because the rest of the English courses at the NDUM are considered English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. *Basic Grammar and Vocabulary* is categorized as HW (*Hadir Wajib* – compulsory to attend), and this course is conducted one hour weekly during main semesters and two hours weekly for short semesters.

The questions that will be addressed by this paper are on how the author had conducted the classes for the achievers of Bands 1, 2 and 2.5, and how she had explored the teaching and learning activities, as well as the materials used. In so doing, the author attempts to find the best approaches to assist students to master grammar and vocabulary within a short period of time (one hour weekly for 14 weeks in a main semester and two hours weekly for seven weeks in a short semester). Although it is impossible for these students to exit the course at a Band 3, at least, the Language Center aspires that these students become more confident, effective, and accurate when using the language. This will assist students in internationalization programs such as mobility or exchange students' programs, and later to market themselves after graduation and to further studies abroad.

After conducting the course for two semesters (Short Semester, Academic Session 2021/2022 and Short Semester, Academic Session 2022/2023), the author is still perplexed in adopting the best approaches to help the students taking the course. Albeit the course outline and informed learning activities provided for all students taking the course, the author is not convinced that the students have benefited much from the course. During these two semesters, the author used a compilation of notes on grammar and vocabulary and explained to students the rules, followed by practices by completing tasks from various sources. Online strategies were used such as notes shared on WhatsApp and the Learning Management System (LMS) of the NDUM, and the students had had the opportunities to practice orally in face-to-face sessions due to the smaller number of students. Therefore, based on the journey of the author, approaches to mastering grammar and vocabulary could have been determined for this particular course.

Significance of Study

Because *Basic Grammar and Vocabulary* is a compulsory course for achievers of Bands 1, 2, and 2.5 of the MUET to enrol and pass to graduate, the best approaches for students to master grammar and vocabulary must be identified. The approaches used during their previous learning at primary and secondary levels may no longer be effective. New ways and approaches must be utilized to allow students to use the language accurately and effectively. The successful approaches can then be applied too in other English courses to enrich the learning environment at the NDUM.

This pilot study has two key research questions that will be answered at the end of this paper. There are:

- a. What are the best approaches to assist students to master grammar and vocabulary effectively?
- b. What are the learning activities that can best accompany the approaches to assist students to master grammar and vocabulary effectively?

It is now important to present the layout of this paper. There are four main sections including this introduction. The second section presents selected literature relevant to this paper including one learning theory, behaviorism and one approach to teaching English, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Next, the methodology adopted will be

explained, followed by the conclusion that discusses the findings from the observations, together with data from the semi-structured interviews. It then closes the paper with recommendations.

Selected Literature

This section examines the critical literature that helps to build the arguments in this study. It starts with a discussion on behaviorism, and how it has influenced the mind-sets of many educators on teaching and learning. Then, the discussion continues to examine one approach to language teaching, CLT, and how it affects English language learning. It needs to be emphasized that these two aspects are crucial in understanding issues related to mastery of grammar and vocabulary for the achievers of Bands 1, 2, and 2.5 of the MUET.

Behaviorism

Contemporary behavior originates from the contributions of Pavlov, Watson, and Skinner. These scholars opined that repetitive training shapes human behavior by rewarding certain actions and penalizing others. For example, Skinner (1976) proposed that students may enhance their learning by rigorous drilling and practice, necessitating repeated exercises until they achieve proficiency. In a traditional classroom, students learn grammar by repeating sentences and memorizing rules. Language instructors frequently articulate words or sentences, which students are required to replicate both collectively and individually. This is what Skinner referred to as “drill-and-practice.” The objective is to guarantee that students articulate correctly and retain rules appropriately. This is because it is argued that behaviorism has an impact on students’ language acquisition (Anastasi & Cyprien, 2021).

Digital educational resources have also utilized behaviorism in their development. For one, behaviorism plays a crucial role in military applications, requiring quick responses and rapid personnel learning to ensure efficient deployment and ensure course mastery. Consequently, it is unsurprising that military training requires behaviorism. Military personnel rely fundamentally on their instinctive reactions to perilous circumstances. These perilous conditions resemble the “stimuli” discovered by Pavlov and Skinner as catalysts for eliciting a behavioral response. Contemporary military education is fundamentally based on behaviorism. The advent of technology in military education has rendered the behaviorist approach the principal learning theory for developing pertinent courseware. The first courseware employing the behaviorist approach was Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI), among others (An, 2021). CAI employs “drill-and-practice” methodologies to reinforce students’ learning. The design of CAI is contingent upon the assessment of learning requirements and the methodical production of training known as instructional design (ID). ID derives from behaviorism, emphasizing observable behaviors, and subsequently serves as a methodology for instructional development.

As a pivotal figure in ID, Gagne (1985) established five principles of learning conditions as the framework for courseware development. Five primary categories of learning conditions are verbal information, intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, physical skills, and attitudes. The five categories indicate that designers must consider students’ needs for acquiring the necessary abilities, depending on the talents to be taught. Gagne’s initial category of learning circumstances, verbal information, facilitates learning through presentation in a structured, relevant context. Gagne’s second condition of learning, intellectual skills, necessitates the preceding acquisition of prerequisite abilities. Cognitive methods are a type of learning that

demands repeated exposure to intellectual challenges. Practice acquires motor abilities, while human models and vicarious reinforcement most efficiently learn attitudes. In fact, Gagne's initial studies mostly focus on the requirements of the U.S. Air Force (Curry, Johnson & Peacock, 2021).

Ultimately, contemporary military education seeks to cultivate officers capable of acting not merely on a conditioned basis but primarily through their capacity to interrogate and understand important situations. Consequently, the pedagogical approach in military contexts is increasingly transitioning toward constructivism. The author in her quest to identify the best approaches to teaching students in *Basic Grammar and Vocabulary* has chosen to incorporate online tactics, such as videos, notes, exercises, and quizzes, to provide students with diverse learning resources. Some of them adhere to behaviorist concepts, while others align with constructivist theories.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

This paper will not explore constructivism in depth. Instead, it will directly address one of the numerous tactics employed in constructivist learning methodologies. This methodology is based on several concepts of constructivism that anticipate students would engage actively in classroom learning. The CLT approach examines the utilization of language (Teh, 2021). There is a contention that students should effectively manage English courses at the university level, considering their exposure to the language since Standard One. This is because the Malaysian education system consists of six years of primary education, followed by five years of secondary education. The basic and secondary English language curricula ensure that school graduates acquire all six English skills, encompassing grammar and vocabulary. While the NDUM did not focus solely on grammar and vocabulary until the launch of *Basic Grammar and Vocabulary* in 2012, it provides other ESP courses aimed at preparing prospective graduates for their daily lives and professional careers.

Huang (2023) identified three features of CLT: communicative ability, application principles, and the significance of meaning and context. For students at the NDUM, a teaching atmosphere that fosters the communicative aspects of a language enhances engagement and encourages them to express their thoughts more freely. Due to the nature of the courses, students are required to communicate in English with confidence and efficacy. The CLT approach also advocates for the use of more real resources in teaching and learning (Qasserras, 2023). The shift to authentic content enables students to engage with the real world in advance. Qasserras claimed that CLT prioritizes learners in the teaching and learning process. This aligns with the objective of the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, which stresses student-centered learning (SCL).

Nggawu and Thao (2023) discovered that CLT recognizes and addresses various student populations. Due to the diverse backgrounds of students entering English lessons, CLT enables them to leverage their prior knowledge and apply it in various classroom learning scenarios. Nonetheless, CLT has its challenges. According to Panyaatisin and Toomaneejinda (2022), CLT must strike a balance between communicative competencies and explicit instruction in grammatical and lexical elements. Moreover, there are problems regarding the use of CLT, as it neglects to account for local learning contexts and the specific needs of students (Al-Khamisi & Sinha, 2022). The summary provided by the critics highlights several common misconceptions about the implementation of CLT in English language classrooms. Thompson (1996) identified four misconceptions: that CLT classrooms do not teach

grammar, focus solely on speaking, rely on pairwork, and place excessive demands on instructors. These fallacies indicate a superficial comprehension of the CLT technique itself. This study emphasizes CLT since it underpins all activities and resources utilized in English language classes at the NDUM, despite the contention that no single technique or method is inherently superior to others. In short, these two facets of literature illustrate that they can effectively enhance one another in English language instruction and acquisition, provided there is enough planning and execution. The section after the next will further elucidate this.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research is a descriptive research design, employing qualitative approach, where class observations and semi-structured interviews were employed. This study focuses on trying to solve the issue of effective grammar and vocabulary learning for achievers of Bands 1, 2, and 2.5 of the MUET at the NDUM.

The number of students used in this research was small; only four students, who enrolled in the author's groups for *Basic Grammar and Vocabulary* for two short semesters mentioned earlier (the first – one student; the second – three students). The reason for the small number of samples is because the author was the only instructor teaching the course during the short semesters, and thus the time spent on face-to-face sessions, which was 14 hours focused on activities such as role plays, impromptu running commentaries, and the students had to take three formative tests. Apart from a compilation of notes and materials used during face-to-face sessions, students were also given online notes and materials through the LMS, and online quizzes were also prepared for them.

The students were given pre- and post-tests to investigate any improvements in their proficiency. The tests can provide some evidence on any improvements in the students' results using the learning methods utilized by the author. Further, the data from the semi-structured interviews were manually analyzed based on students' responses.

Conclusion

Findings and Discussions

This sub section will first present the results of the pre- and post-tests of the students, followed by data from the semi-structured interviews. Before that, Table 1 illustrates the approaches and learning activities involved in the author's class.

Table 1: Strategies and Learning Activities Used

Approaches and Learning Activities	Medium	Hours
Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) – Engage-Study-Activate (ESA)	face-to-face sessions & online	Every hour
Drill-and-Practice – grammar rules; pronunciation of new vocabulary; dictation	face-to-face sessions	Every hour except for hours 2 and 12
Role Play – short conversations based on predetermined situations	face-to-face sessions	Hours 4, 7 and 9
Cue cards (phrases/single words) – build up sentences [each student held three cards, then students were asked to create sentences based on the cards held by their peers]	face-to-face sessions	Hours 5, 6, 9, 11
Online notes and reading materials	online	Every hour
Online quizzes	online	Every hour except for hours 2 and 13
Three tests – formative assessment	face-to-face sessions	Hours 4, 8 and 12

*For students attending the course alone, the author was the companion for role-playing activities or any activity that required a partner.

Table 2 shows the students’ pre- and post-test scores. Briefly, it appears that there is a mixed outcome between pre- and post-tests, meaning that not every student did better after completing the learning exercises. Out of four students, one fared better in the pre-test than in the post-test, while one scored the same on both. Despite the inconclusive summary on the pre- and post test scores, the author opines that these scores are indicators of the effectiveness of the learning activities and teaching methods *or* lack of them during the class.

Table 2: The Scores of Pre- and Post-tests

Students	Pre-test	Post-test
A (male)	15	19
B (male)	14	16
C (male)	14	14
D (male)	14	11

All students were selected for the semi-structured interviews. Each respondent spent about 10 to 15 minutes for the interview session. There were generally six questions asked to all respondents including:

- a. What do you think of the activities in the class?
- b. What do you think of the online materials given for the course?
- c. Which activity in the class do you like the most?
- d. Which online material is the most helpful?

- e. What can be done to improve the learning of grammar and vocabulary?
- f. Which learning activity that has assisted you the most in learning grammar and vocabulary?

The results of the students' interviews are presented in Table 3. The analysis is done manually based on the students' answers.

Table 3: Findings From the Semi-structured Interviews

Questions	Responses	Frequency of Answers (some with multiple responses)
What do you think of the activities in the class?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very Interesting • Interesting • Engaging • Challenging 	<p style="text-align: center;">4 3 3 4</p>
What do you think of the online materials given for the course?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very Interesting • Interesting • Engaging • Challenging • Easy to follow • Beneficial 	<p style="text-align: center;">4 4 4 3 3 3</p>
Which activity in the class do you like the most?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role Plays • Cue Cards • Drill-and-Practice • Presentation-Practice-Production 	<p style="text-align: center;">4 4 4 4</p>
Which online material is the most helpful?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Videos on Grammar Rules • Videos on Role Playing • Vocabulary Notes • Grammar Notes 	<p style="text-align: center;">4 3 4 3</p>
What can be done to improve the learning of grammar and vocabulary?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More time to learn grammar and vocabulary • More Drill-and-Practice online activity • Use English outside of classes 	<p style="text-align: center;">4 4 4</p>
Which learning activity that has assisted you the most in learning grammar and vocabulary?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role Plays • Drill-and-Practice 	<p style="text-align: center;">4 4</p>

Based on the data, the author argues that the approaches and learning activities utilized in her class helped students enhance their grammatical and vocabulary skills. The findings show that the most effective approaches and learning activities for assisting students with grammar and vocabulary are a combination of behaviorism and CLT. Behaviorism enables language instructors to impart rules and concepts to their students. The author did this through two

modes of instruction: face-to-face sessions and online. After drilling, the students practiced the rules and ideas.

These practices incorporate CLT in their approach so that students can apply the principles later in real-world circumstances. Due to time constraints, the author frequently moved directly to drill-and-practice. The author informed the students about their roles, which included listening to or watching online lectures and reading online notes and resources. They were better prepared for the drill-and-practice sessions when they arrived at class. Then students were expected to take online tests based on the week’s lessons. Figure 1 illustrates the students’ learning experience.

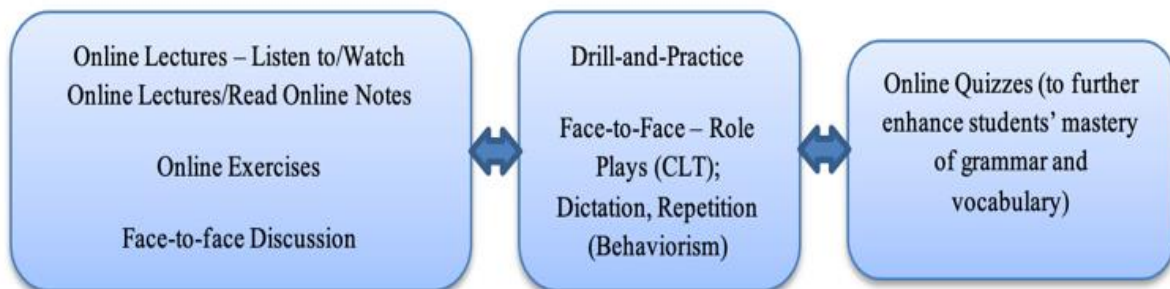


Figure 1: The Learning Experience of Students

This learning experience is similar to Harmer’s (2007) proposal for the Presentation-Practices-Production (PPP) idea. For all three components, there were two modes of delivery: face-to-face and online. Harmer went on to provide three ways for educators to apply in their classrooms, each with three procedures: engage, study, and activate (ESA). ESA’s three techniques include straight boomerang and patchwork arrow lesson procedures. This study uses the Patchwork Arrow because students can activate their knowledge at any time, and reengagement can occur after the study session (see Figure 2). However, Harmer warns that the PPP is “useful in a focus-on-forms lesson, especially at the lower levels, but is irrelevant in a skills lesson.”

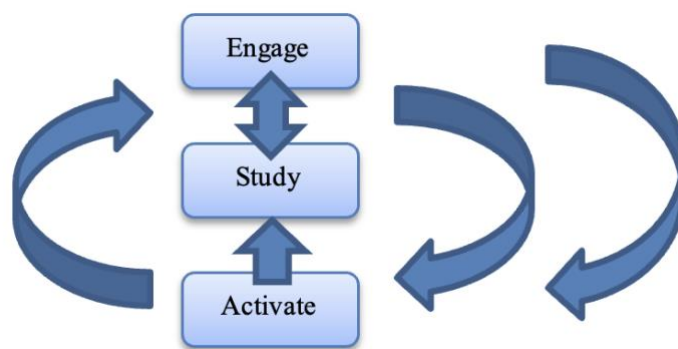


Figure 2: An Example of Patchwork Lesson Procedures (Harmer, 2007)

During the teaching and learning process, the author halted the students when they made mistakes, particularly during grammar and vocabulary drills (phrase and sentence repetition). Although halting students in the middle of their spoken discourses may demotivate them (Farjami & Takhti, 2020), the author contends that there must be opportunities to emphasize their errors so that they can relearn their grammar abilities. Moreover, there remain

unresolved disagreements about the role of grammar education in second language learning. Among these considerations are the function of explicit instruction, the selection of structures to target, the type of intervention, and its duration, timing, and intensity (Aguion et al., 2021). However, this study will not address these concerns. The author also observed students during face-to-face interactions using a checklist table on their reactions and responses. The author believes that students were better prepared during classroom learning sessions. They felt comfortable participating in role plays, particularly those involving the use of tenses and terminology. Furthermore, the author discovers that students in these classes have a better understanding of tenses and the purposes of English language. Students' engagement has improved because they understand how to execute assignments more effectively, particularly in role plays and sentence creation activities.

Given the above discussion, it is reasonable to assume that the optimum techniques and learning activities for the MUET achievers in Bands 1, 2, and 2.5 are a blend of behaviorism and CLT strategies. Since this is a pilot project, extensive research is necessary to convince other English language instructors to utilize these methodologies and learning activities for enhancing students' comprehension of English grammar and vocabulary.

Moving Forward

This paper details the author's teaching journey and her search for the best ways and learning activities to help achievers in the lower bands of the MUET learn grammar and vocabulary. While the findings do not definitively reveal the reasons behind students' achievements, such as the activities or methods that led to higher post-test scores, they do offer valuable insights into potential steps to assist students. Therefore, the next step towards maximizing the value of the course for students is to ensure that all instructors teaching *Basic Grammar and Vocabulary* during the main semesters implement the same teaching methods and learning activities.

To further evaluate the teaching methods and learning activities, future studies should involve all students enrolled in the course. The language instructors can then test the approaches and learning activities on students enrolled in different English courses too. The author goes on to suggest that retraining all English instructors who teach the course is necessary and should be done soon, given that the course is offered in both main and short semesters. This pilot study is not without restrictions. Aside from the small number of students who participated, this paper is unable to determine which approaches or learning activities were most effective in improving students' grammar and vocabulary. Furthermore, this paper is unable to identify any additional external elements that could have contributed to the increase of students' language skills.

This course at the NDUM addresses the Language Dean Council's issue, but it is important to note that higher grades or bands do not guarantee students' communicative competence. Students must feel comfortable using the language, and the author argues that comfort in English stems from both knowing *what* (functions) and knowing *how* (forms) knowledge. Furthermore, the author expresses confidence in the existence and effectiveness of additional approaches and learning activities, which she plans to implement to cater to the diverse student body at the NDUM. The country expects graduates of the NDUM and other Malaysian higher learning institutions to confidently speak and communicate in English. Aside from gaining decent employment with polished English, these graduates may demonstrate Malaysia's commitment to educate future global leaders. These graduates can

also serve as ambassadors for Malaysia by participating in internationalization programs and representing the country abroad. As one of the initial steps, it is hoped that this obligatory English course is able to help students communicate more effectively by improving their grammar and vocabulary.

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