

## Proficiency Standards of Melaka Non-Optionist in-Service Teachers

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### Abstract

In the state of Melaka in 2011, 90 non-optionist primary school teachers underwent the proficiency course under the new policy of “Strengthening the English Language” (MBI) which is run for 12 days by the teacher trainers with the help of master trainers from schools. This research intends to look into the proficiency levels (OPT test scores) of non-optionist teachers in the state of Melaka from Melaka Tengah and sub-urban districts, namely Jasin and Alor Gajah and their pedagogy standards in terms of the first dimension, proficiency. It will also see teachers’ self-assessed levels as related to knowledge of the language, teachers’ self-assessed levels regarding competencies in the use of the language as well as teachers’ self-assessed levels when it comes to modeling for language learners and the findings indicate only the first research question, regarding the differences between the non-optionist teachers’ OPT test scores and their self-assessed pedagogy standards for proficiency were found to be significant. All the other three research questions are discussed descriptively. These findings indicate that after several months of undergoing the MBI Proficiency course, teachers seem to have a lower level of proficiency. It may be due to the constant pressure with the growing demands of teaching in a primary school as well as a heavy workload, thus not enabling them to constantly upgrade their own levels of proficiency in terms of fluency as well as accuracy. Further implications of the research findings are discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** Proficiency; Teachers’ Professional Development; Pedagogy Standards for English Language Teaching

### 1. Introduction

In order for the English language programmes in Malaysian schools to succeed, there is first a need for teachers who can speak, read and write well in English. Therefore we need to work with these teachers to improve their proficiency so that they are of a high standard. For that purpose, proficiency courses were implemented under the *Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris* (MBI) – Strengthening the English Language Project since 2010. It led to the introduction of two main courses to up-skill in-service teachers which are mainly designed by the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC), namely the proficiency and pedagogy courses (K.F. Choong, 2011).

In 2011 also, the Ministry of Education (MoE) with the help of ELTC and the Teacher Education Division (TED) introduced Pedagogy Standards for English Language Teaching (PSELT). It outlines six standards for English language teachers to plan their continuous professional development.

In the state of Melaka (situated in Western Peninsular Malaysia) alone, in 2010, 120 non-optionist primary school teachers underwent the proficiency course which is run for 12 days by the teacher trainers with the help of master trainers from schools. However, in 2011 only about less than 90 teachers were selected for the proficiency course.

When the MoE decided to implement the new MBI policy, at the same time, the PPSMI policy which was the teaching of Mathematics and Science subjects in English ceased to be enforced. For English, the objectives were clearly stated as “proficiency in the English Language is important as English is the international language of communication. Mastering the language enables the exploration of knowledge which is vital for one to compete nationally and globally” (MOE Malaysia, 2010). As the previous policy had already been in place since 2003, the ministry adopted a *soft-landing approach* and some of the following strategies were adopted by the ministry:

- i. Increasing the time allocated for the teaching of English Language in both the National and National-type schools
- ii. Teachers who teach the subject must be English-optional to ensure quality from the pedagogical aspect.

As many of the primary schools did not have adequate English-option teachers (there were 18,385 non-optionists, Choong, KF, 2011) an MBI proficiency course was specifically designed to improve their levels of proficiency. Those participants who obtained Bands 5 and above in their Oxford Placement Tests were required to attend a 14-week course “Certificate in the Practice of English Language Teaching” whilst those who obtained Bands 4 were required to attend a 4-week course “Reinforcing English Language Teaching”

The primary school teachers who were not English-optional were given a 12 day course on the following aspects:

- i. Listening and Speaking
- ii. Reading
- iii. Writing

iv. Integration of all four skills

The modules and teaching materials were prepared by ELTC while the courses were run by the Teacher Training Institute lecturers with the help of master trainers from schools. After the participants had completed the course, they sat for Oxford Placement Tests as well as organised an exhibition themed “Global Citizen’s Day”.

According to Gaudart (2011) who has more than 25 years of experience in teacher education said that there is a thin line drawn between emphasising teachers’ proficiency levels and pedagogical competency. Backman (1990, 16) defines language proficiency as ‘knowledge, competence, or ability in the use of a language, irrespective of how, where, or under what conditions it has been acquired’. Pasternak and Bailey offer a compelling take on language teacher proficiency:

“Proficiency is not necessarily equated with nativeness, and certainly not all native speakers are equally skilled users of English. There are varying degrees of proficiency: being proficient is a continuum, rather than an either-or proposition. Apparently people can continue to develop their second language proficiency throughout the span of their lives... Whether or not a teacher is proficient depends on how we define this multifaceted construct” (Pasternak and Bailey, 2004: 163).

According to Nakata, Y (2010), in an EFL context where many of the language instructors are non-native teachers of English, and there appears to be a growing gap between the teachers’ current level of language proficiency and the language proficiency level required in the system, the question of language proficiency may become an increasingly crucial element for professional development (Andrews, 2007; Kamhi-Stein, 2004).

Goh L.H. and Kwong, J. 2010 conducted a study on the The Effect of the MBI Proficiency Course on the Perceived Proficiency and Self-Efficacy of Non-Option English Language Teachers: A Case Study. The survey research explores the teacher self-efficacy and perceived proficiency of a group of non-option English Language teachers participating in the proficiency course implemented under the MBI Project. On the other hand, Nakata Y. (2010) attempted to examine the possibilities of the Classroom Language Assessment Benchmark (CLAB) as a proficiency tool for EFL teachers in Japan. There were 2 questionnaires utilised where CLAB was used as a self and peer assessment tool of teachers’ classroom English in their trial lesson. The questionnaire results show that the Classroom English Observation Programme (CEOP) using CLAB and the Classroom Language Assessment Sheet (CLAS) is a useful approach for raising pre-service and in-service teachers’ awareness of their classroom English and help them to strive for improved classroom language proficiency, suggesting that CLAB should not be used as a tool for their qualification assessment but as a tool for their professional development, implying that there is a potential for teachers to improve their ability to assess classroom English, suggesting that there may be a reciprocal relationship English Language proficiency and assessment capability. In fact, by using a benchmark, teachers become aware of their strengths and weaknesses with reference to classroom English. Thus, these results are can be interpreted as evidence for a major claim that the PSELT for English teachers can be used as a reflective, interactive and pedagogical tool. Perhaps, this will help them put more meat on the bones of the English proficiency, that is, confidence in their English Language teaching.

According to Tang, Ting (2007), teachers’ current proficiency was lower than the desired level. As they were non-native speakers of the language, obviously they were not confident of their level of proficiency and thus, it would be interesting to find out if the non-optionist teachers of English Language in Malaysian primary schools also feel the same way. As to the instrument used for gauging the levels of proficiency, Nakata, Y (2010) found the CLAB was a useful tool for professional development and it would also be interesting to see if the new instrument, particularly the proficiency dimension developed by ELTC (2011) will be as useful to gauge the levels of proficiency of teachers. This is because poor command of the English language could undermine their confidence in the classroom (Doff, 1987).

Language proficiency is a key concern for non-option English Language teachers. Lange (1990) rated language competence as the most essential characteristic of a good teacher. Rani’s (1997) study of untrained teachers highlighted some problems faced by them: teaching specific skills, effective use of different teaching methods, discovering level at which to teach, punishing students appropriately, inadequate guidance and support, awareness of students’ previous learning, classroom discipline and awareness of teachers’ responsibilities and conditions or terms of work (p. 90). After all, Students learn more from good language teachers than from less competent language teachers under virtually any set of circumstances (Elizabeth, 2003).

### 1.1 Statement of Problem

The non-optionist in-service teachers needed to develop their language skills. Although they underwent 12 days of proficiency course, majority of them (91%) only obtained bands 3,4 and 5 respectively, of which almost half (41%) only scored a band 4 (pre and lower intermediate level). If teachers do not have a good knowledge of the language and are hardly competent users of the language, it may have a tremendous impact on their teaching of English as a second language.

So far, previous studies, i.e. (Nixon, D., Kamariah Shamsuddin 2011), (Moorthi, S.T. 2011), (Bateman J., Kwong, J 2011) as well as Goh LH, Jenny K, 2011) were mostly regarding needs of teacher participants, teachers’ perceptions about the course as well as the effect of the course on teachers’ self-efficacy.

This study will also be about the MBI course participants but specifically, answer some vital questions regarding their levels of proficiency by looking into the OPT test scores and the self-evaluated instrument "Pedagogy Standards for English Language Teaching" only on one dimension, which is Proficiency.

### 1.2 Research Aims

This research intends to look into the proficiency levels (OPT test scores) of non-optionist teachers in the state of Melaka and their pedagogy standards in terms of the first dimension, proficiency. It will also look into the three aspects of the proficiency dimension, namely knowledge of the language, competent use of the language and model for language learners

### 1.3 Research Objectives

Firstly, this research compares non-optionist teachers' OPT test scores and their pedagogy standards for proficiency. Then, it will see the mean scores of the three aspects of the proficiency dimension, namely knowledge of the language, competent use of the language and model for language learners

### 1.4 Research Questions

1. Is there a difference between the teachers' OPT test scores and their self-assessed pedagogy standards for proficiency?
2. What are the teachers' self-assessed levels regarding knowledge of the language?
3. What are the teachers' self-assessed levels regarding competencies in the use of the language?
4. What are the teachers' self-assessed levels when it comes to modelling for language learners?

## 2.0 Research Methodology

The research is quantitative in nature, using an instrument to be filled by teachers. The study is looking at OPT test scores as the independent variable, and the proficiency standard based on PSELT as the dependent variable. Besides, the researcher will also look into the frequencies for the three aspects under the proficiency dimension, namely knowledge of the language, competent use of the language and model for language learners.

### Research Instrument: Pedagogy Standards for English Language Teaching (PSELT)

PSELT (ELTC, 2011) is a document which will enable English language teachers to upskill their professional development in line with the current developments in education by identifying their professional training needs and provide direction for their continuous professional development. These standards are supposed to be reflected upon by the teachers and critique their own practices but they can also be principally used to inform the Education Ministry to plan, design and implement teacher development plans.

The aspects covered in PSELT include:

1. Proficiency
2. English Language Curriculum
3. Learner
4. Methodology
5. Management
6. Assessment

### Dimension 1: Proficiency

This should be the most important standard as according to statistics it takes a child 3 years to recover from bad language input, up to 5 years if it's two years of bad language input and the consequently, a child may never recover if a child is exposed to bad command of the language for a period of longer than 3 years (Choong, KF 2011). Thus, this dimension is a model for good language use and for the teacher to be knowledgeable in the language.

It includes 3 main aspects regarding proficiency:

- i. Knowledge of the language
- ii. Competent use of the language
- iii. Model for the language learners

**Stratified sampling** is a commonly used probability method that is superior to random sampling because it reduces sampling error. A stratum is a subset of the population that shares at least one common characteristic. Examples of strata might be males and females, or managers and non-managers. The researcher first identifies the relevant strata and their actual representation in the population. Random sampling is then used to select a *sufficient* number of subjects from each stratum. "*Sufficient*" refers to a sample size large enough for us to be reasonably confident that the stratum represents the population. Stratified sampling is often used when one or more of the strata in the population have a low incidence relative to the other strata.

Although the sampling method was not fully randomised, the sample size can be said to be sufficient for a pilot test (30). The researcher carried out a pilot test to ensure the clarity of the questions in the instrument and identify deficiencies that were not apparent by simply reviewing the items. As the total number of teachers involved in the course was 89, the researcher pilot tested the instrument on 30 teachers. Based on Cronbach's Alpha value on all the 17 items, 0.972, all the items were found to be reliable. Fifty teachers were involved in the survey. The choice of teachers was based on location in order to obtain a representative sample from sub-urban

and urban communities. The number of male and female teachers was close to an equal proportion as the subjects also consist of both genders from sub-urban and urban community. The questionnaires were distributed to the subjects after a brief explanation by the researcher. The subjects were given two days to complete the questionnaires. On the third and fourth day, the researcher collected all the questionnaires. The researcher took five days to complete the tasks.

Table 1: Respondent Statistics

District	TOTAL	OPT Band							Males	Females	Rural	Urban
		1	2	3	4	5	6	9				
MT1	24				11	9	4		4	20	7	17
MT2	24			18	3	3			3	21	13	11
A.G	24			5	11	6	1	1	7	17	18	6
JASIN	27	1	1	3	13	9			8	19	27	0
TOTAL	99	1	1	26	38	27	5	1	22	77	65	34

The questionnaires were distributed by-hand as well as through emails. The teachers read and answered during their break time and when there were any problems they asked the researcher.

According to W. Wiersma (2000), validity of measurement is the extent to which the instrument measures what it is designed to measure. The instrument is generally based on the PSELT designed by the ELTC but only the proficiency dimension has been utilised.

W. Wiersma (2000) also stated that reliability is the consistency of the instrument in measuring whatever it measures. Reliability coefficients can take on values of 0 to 1.0, inclusive. There are a number of procedures by which reliability can be empirically estimated. As this research will be using the Likert-scale in its instrument, there is a high possibility of respondents faking their responses. Based on the pilot test conducted, the Cronbach's Alpha value is said to be very reliable as the value is found to be .972.

### 2.1 Data Analysis Methods

In order to collect the data the researcher obtained permission from the school administrators. After administering the questionnaire, the data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18.0. Test scores for the proficiency standards were compared with their OPT test scores and then the researchers looked into the frequencies of each item in the PSELT Proficiency dimension.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

There were altogether 50 respondents who took part in this survey from the state of Melaka. The response rate is 71.4% as there were 70 questionnaires sent out.

Table 2: Gender

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Males	23	46	46.7	46.00
	Females	27	54	53.3	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

According to the table above, there were 50 respondents altogether who participated in the survey. There were 23 males and 27 females respectively.

Table 3: Race

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Malays	22	44.0	44.0	44.0
	Chinese	20	40.0	40.0	84.0
	Indians	8	16.0	16.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.2 depicts the ethnicity of the respondents and it clearly shows that the Malay respondents comprised of 44% which was the highest while the Chinese, 40%, the second highest and the Indians were the lowest with only 16%.

Table 4: Location

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Urban	16	53.3	53.3	53.3
	Suburban	14	46.7	46.7	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

The location of the respondents is clearly shown in the table above. Most of the respondents, 53.3% come from urban areas while only 46.7% of them come from semi-urban areas.

**Table 5: OPT**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2	1	2.0	2.0
	3	10	20.0	22.0
	4	19	38.0	60.0
	5	16	32.0	92.0
	6	3	6.0	98.0
	9	1	2.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

As for the OPT test scores, it is clearly seen from the table above that most of the respondents, 38% obtained an average of Band 4, 32% scored a band 5, 20% obtained a Band 3, 6% obtained Band 6 while only 2% obtained Band 2. Having gone through a 12 day proficiency course, it can be said that 60% of the course participants obtained bands 4 and 5 and it is rather successful.

The data for OPT and PSELT for the proficiency dimension were tested for normality (Table 4.5).

**Table 6: Test of Normality for Teachers' OPT Scores and PSELT (Proficiency Dimension)**

	Skewness	Kurtosis	Test of Normality			Test of Normality		
			Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
			Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
PSELT (Proficiency Dimension)	.175	.492	.110	50	.182	.969	50	.209

Skewness statistics of teachers' PSELT displays the data distribution. The almost zero value of the Skewness and Kurtosis shows that the data is close to 100% normal. Using the rule of thumb cited in many statistical books for social science (for example, Miles & Shevlin, 2001), this variable is close to normality. In addition, looking at the Shapiro-Wilk result ( $n > 50$ ), since the  $p > 0.05$ , it shows that both the variables are normal. Therefore parametric analysis could be employed.

**RQ1: Is there a difference between the non-optionist teachers' OPT test scores and their self-assessed pedagogy standards for proficiency?**

Table 7: Paired-Sample T-test of OPT test scores and their self-assessed pedagogy standards for proficiency?

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1 OPT-	4.30	50	1.129	.160	.636	.000
Total PSELT	3.2976	50	0.59982	0.08483		

**Paired Samples Test**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Df	Sig (2-tailed)
OPT - Total PSELT	1.002	.87926	8.061	49	.000

The results above show the differences are significant ( $t = 8.061$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The researcher rejects the null hypothesis. The results indicate that there is a difference between the non-optionist teachers' OPT test scores and their self-assessed pedagogy standards for proficiency. The findings indicate that the teachers have a lower perception of their proficiency levels (3.29 for PSELT) as compared to their test scores (4.30 for OPT) which was taken right after they completed their proficiency course. These findings are parallel to Goh L.H. and Kwong, J. 2010 findings whereby the data indicated that sustained language training programs are essential to improve the quality of the non-option English Language teachers. It is also noted that Tang, Ting (2007) found that teachers' self-assessed levels were lower than their desired levels in all domains, not only proficiency. This may be due to the fact that many teachers tend to feel as though their proficiency levels are that of year 6 students as they are overwhelmed by their work and administrative duties and have no time to maintain their levels of proficiency.

**RQ2: What are the teachers' self-assessed levels as related to knowledge of the language?**

**Table 8: Knowledge of the Language**

No.	EVALUATIVE DESCRIPTORS:	Low Developing	High Developing	Competent	Low Excellent	High Excellent
<b>How would you rate yourself in these areas of English Language?</b>						
1.	Vocabulary	0%	8%	52%	38%	2%
2.	Sound system / phonics	0%	14%	46%	36%	4%
3.	Grammar	2%	4%	60%	30%	4%
4.	Literary Terms	0%	12%	56%	28%	4%
5.	Communication	0%	10%	56%	30%	4%
6.	Use in different contexts	0%	14%	50%	30%	6%

To answer Research Question Two: "What are the teachers' self-assessed levels as related to knowledge of the language?" frequencies with respect to this dimension were analysed. Under the question, "How would you rate yourself in these areas of English Language?" the aspects that were analysed were vocabulary, sound system / phonics, grammar, literary terms, communication and use in different contexts.

As can be seen in Table 4, it was found that while only 2% indicated they were highly excellent in vocabulary, more than half the teachers (52%) self-assessed themselves as competent in the area of vocabulary. They also rated themselves as competent in sound system / phonics (46%), grammar (60%), literary terms (56%) and use in different contexts (50%).

**RQ3: What are the teachers' self-assessed levels regarding competencies in the use of the language?**

**Table 9: Competency in the use of the language**

No.	EVALUATIVE DESCRIPTORS:	High Developing	Competent	Low Excellent	High Excellent
<b>How would you rate yourself in these areas of English Language?</b>					
1.	Speaking	12%	52%	32%	4%
2.	Writing	10%	52%	36%	2%
3.	Giving teaching instructions	10%	46%	42%	2%
4.	Questioning techniques	8%	60%	30%	2%
5.	Using appropriate language in getting answers from students	14%	46%	34%	6%
6.	Responding to questions, answers and statements	6%	56%	34%	4%
7.	Pronunciation of words/ phrases / sentences with correct stress and intonation	12%	48%	36%	4%
8.	Fluency	8%	54%	34%	4%
9.	Building rapport with students	16%	44%	36%	4%

To answer Research Question Three: "What are the teachers' self-assessed levels regarding competencies in the use of the language?" frequencies with respect to this dimension were analysed. Under the question, "How would you rate yourself in these areas of English Language?" the aspects that were analysed were speaking, writing, giving teaching instructions, questioning techniques, using appropriate language in getting answers from students, responding to questions, answers and statements, pronunciation of words / phrases / sentences with correct stress and intonation, fluency as well building rapport with students.

As can be seen in Table 5, it was found that very few teachers (between 2-6%) consider themselves as highly excellent on all the items in the dimension. Majority of them rated themselves "competent" in those areas of the language (between 46-60%).

**RQ4: What are the teachers’ self-assessed levels when it comes to modeling for language learners?**

Table 10: Teachers’ Self-assessed levels when it comes to modeling

No.	EVALUATIVE DESCRIPTORS:	High Developing	Competent	Low Excellent	High Excellent
	How do you rate your:				
1.	Competency in language skills and the use of English in different contexts	10%	58%	30%	2%
2.	Strategies in motivating students to acquire language in the classroom	14%	48%	36%	2%

To answer Research Question Four: “What are the teachers’ self-assessed levels when it comes to modelling for language learners?”, frequencies with respect to this dimension were analysed. The aspects that were analysed were competency in language skills and the use of English in different contexts as well as strategies in motivating students to acquire language in the classroom. Although almost two-thirds (58%) of the teachers considered themselves competent in the first aspect, less than half (48%) of them are competent in the second aspect, which is strategies in motivating students to acquire language in the classroom.

**4. Implications of Research**

There was a significant difference between the non-optionist teachers’ OPT test scores and their self-assessed pedagogy standards for proficiency. After several months of undergoing the MBI Proficiency course, teachers seem to have a lower level of proficiency. It may be due to the constant pressure with the growing demands of teaching in a primary school as well as a heavy workload, thus not enabling them to constantly upgrade their own levels of proficiency in terms of fluency as well as accuracy. Future research should examine the new types of professionalism required for teachers in facing these obstacles, especially in light of globalisation and the advent of digital age. Apart from that, it would be interesting to actually research and delve deeper into the different types of primary schools such as Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools to see if there are differences in the proficiency standards of teachers.

A the government has recruited 375 native speaker teachers from overseas to improve the teaching and learning of English Language in schools, it is certainly hoped that the teachers will be able to learn a thing or two from them as they will be able to speak and model the use of English Language in the classroom and students will have more confidence in expressing themselves fluently in English. As for the reluctant learners, they still need to acquire more strategies to motivate learners to acquire language in the classroom.

**5. Conclusion**

Only the first research question findings, regarding the differences between the non-optionist teachers’ OPT test scores and their self-assessed pedagogy standards for proficiency were found to be significant. All the other four research questions weren’t significant. One important factor that must always be considered is that learning a language is a never ending journey, it is a life-long process. It is just hoped that these teachers will be able to reduce uncomfortable moments speaking and writing in English after undergoing the MBI Proficiency course.

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