

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG TECHNICAL STUDENTS OF KOLEJ KEMAHIRAN TINGGI MARA

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## ABSTRACT

Proficiency exclusively in English is one of the main features important for graduates. It serves to support the required skills in technically based industries. Technical skills alone are not sufficient as the incompetency to communicate in English may cause graduates failure to market themselves internationally. Therefore, this present study aimed to investigate English language proficiency level based on perceptions among technical students of Kolej Kemahiran Tinggi MARA. Three factors; environmental, personal and behavioral factors served as a framework that contributes towards respondents English language proficiency. 279 respondents from three selected KKTm were involved to complete the questionnaires provided by the researcher. This is a quantitative research and data was collected and analyzed using Winsteps 3.69.11 based on Rasch Measurement Model Approach and Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS) Ver. 20 software. As a result, the findings indicate highest percentages of respondents perceived they have low English proficiency level. It was also found out that the most dominant factors towards English proficiency level among KKTm students was personal factors. The main implications of the research is that there is a need for language educators in KKTm to adjust students' perceptions and manipulate personal factors such as interest and motivation in their instructional method to produce better graduates competent in English language.

**Keywords:** English language proficiency, technical student, factors

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## INTRODUCTION

English has become the language of the world due to the reason that the number of people using the language has exceeded the number of the native speakers (Hakki, 2003). He pointed out that people regardless of their mother tongue mostly preferred English as their means of communication. It is generally known that the English language is widely used as a second language in many countries and held as a language of communication globally. Kirkpatrick and Sussex (2012) addressed that English was the "first foreign language" taught in schools around Asian. They explained how the language was used in various ways from signage to documents, marketing, business and broadcasting. This illustrates the accepted norm of English language usage in daily activities in Asian countries. Malaysian graduates were known to have problems in English proficiency.

One of the aims of National Education Blueprint 2013-2025 was to create a transformation to ensure the weaknesses of English language proficiency among graduates can be overcome. According to the blueprint, the dispute was pointed out by employers and industries since 2006. Thus, employers linked graduates with English proficiency problems as also having other problems such as attitude and leadership problem. The aim of the research was to investigate the proficiency level of English language among KKTM students. It was also used to identify environmental factors, personal factors and behavioral factors contributing towards English language proficiency among technical students in KKTM.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory**

Albert Bandura is the main architect of social cognitive theory (Santrock, 2011). He developed the Social Cognitive Theory as means to explain learning that occurs through observation and imitation. As Mathison et al. (2008) explained, learning mastery approach focuses on self-improvement and develop understanding. The reason people perform in certain behaviors can be related to their desire to learn and increase competency. Therefore, a positive surrounding in teaching and learning process is essential as students exposed to a conducive learning environment will imitate each other's behavior and willingly supports the learning systems.

### **Kolej Kemahiran Tinggi MARA**

As one of the higher educational institution producing skilled manpower for Malaysia, KKTM under Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), is a statutory body under the supervision of the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (Kementerian Kemajuan Luar Bandar Dan Wilayah, KKLW). Overall, there are 9 KKTM in Malaysia which produces graduates with diploma qualification. Most of these colleges were established with the sole purpose to create highly skilled Bumiputera's graduates in different fields especially technical and entrepreneurship. As in the report by the Ministry of Education for "Pembangunan Pendidikan 2001-2010", the increase importance of technical education become apparent either in primary education or higher learning institutions. This was due to the rising demand towards skilled workers in industries or as a preparatory for students to continue in tertiary education in technical fields. KKTM serve for the latter purpose of providing another means of tertiary education which cater towards competent graduates for Malaysian work force.

### **Importance of English**

Mustapha (2004) mentioned that TVET would provide the necessary skills required to prepared students for a productive employment. He also added that output has shown that knowledgeable and skilled workers in Malaysia are still insufficient compared to other advanced countries. Hence, there is a need for graduates to prepare themselves with English competency at the workplace. As Sihes and Marjuki (2010) expressed, communication skills played an important role to establish rapport and share ideas in an informal way. Thus, English is widely used as a medium of communication especially in building an understanding between people.

## **Issues of English In Malaysia**

Idris (2011) commented on the abolished policy of teaching Mathematics and Science subjects (PPSMI) in English. He believed that the policy was one of the efforts done to address the “issue of competitiveness on the workforce” in Malaysia. However, the issue seems to pose challenges towards the implementers, such as teachers that have been teaching in Malay language for years. Razali, Jafar, Arif, Yaacob, Isa and Mustapha (2008) in their study found out that engineering students are still weak in the proficiency of English language and mostly shown a low confidence level in presentation. As a result, it produced graduates with insufficient English proficiency as well as lacking the ability to adapt themselves in the challenging career world. Another issue in the technical and vocational education was also highlighted by the The Ministry of Human Resources Malaysia (2008). It focuses on the learning institution which should cater to the need to update the curriculum and fulfil the demand-driven approach responsive to real needs by the government and industries. Shoffner (2013) believes that the process of learning English literature can indeed be carried out only with the use of books and discussions. But realistically, learning is no longer a one-way process that focuses on teaching.

## **Factors Affecting Proficiency of English Language**

Bakar and Madni (2010) addressed the attitudes of students towards English usage. Results shown students are less interested in the language itself. English was learnt only to fulfill their academic needs as required by the institution. In their research, Anthony and Abdul (2012) describes students as having low self confidence in regard to oral communication in English. Meanwhile, Bhar et al. (2012) highlighted that self-confidence to converse in English are also crucial in the industry. Respondents shared feelings of intimidation and difficulties to express opinion and ideas to their superiors.

Arshad and Zakaria (2010) explored students’ interest in English language learning. They discuss that students believe an effective and interesting learning materials can be used to instill their interest towards English. Bernat and Lloyd (2007) in their study investigated the relationship between beliefs about language learning and gender. The results concerned with the relationship between speaking more than one language and intelligence with females are expected to interpret that intelligence plays a greater role in language learning compared to males. Meanwhile, Bhar et al. (2012) research described that most respondents agreed that their socio-cultural backgrounds have direct influence over their communication skills. This was also supported by Razali et al. (2008) in his study where the percentage of Bumiputera’s students fluency in English was lower compared to non- Bumiputera’s students.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design**

The research design for this study is a quantitative based research approach. The study uses a questionnaire method as the instrument to collect the research data. The data collected from the questionnaire was then analyzed and interpreted using the Winsteps 3.69.11 and SPSS (Version 20) software. This study would analyze factors affecting the proficiency level of English language among KKTm students.

### **Data collection**

279 questionnaires were distributed to three KKTm selected which are KKTm Sri Gading, Batu Pahat, KKTm Ledang, Muar and KKTm Masjid Tanah, Melaka. The data was then tabulated and analyzed using Winstep 3.69.11 and SPSS version 20. The analyses include item measurement based on Infit MNSQ, Outfit MNSQ and point measure correlation (henceforth PT Mea Corr).

### **Research instrument**

To collect the required data for the research, a questionnaire was employed in this study. An advantage of using questionnaire as the research method was explained by Singh, Chan and Kaur (2006) as cost effective compared to other techniques in collecting 'expert information' from the distinctive population with direct knowledge and experience. Although the research investigated English language proficiency, it has been decided that the questionnaire will be written in Malay language. The reason was to ensure that respondents clearly understand items given. Thang and Alias (2007) also revealed that questionnaires are translated into the respondents' first language "to avoid subjects' failure to understand and respond appropriately due to difficulty in comprehending the questions."

### **Content of the questionnaire**

The result was a paper-based questionnaire with 4 sections. Section A focuses on demographic data, whereas Section B looks at identifying the proficiency level rated by respondents themselves. Next, Section C requires respondents to provide feedbacks on factors affecting their English language proficiency. Lastly, respondents were asked to write their opinion on suggestion regarding the research topic.

The questionnaire was based upon the 4 basics English proficiency level, specifically Reading Skills, Listening Skills, Writing and Speaking Skills. These skills are then divided upon environmental, personal and behavioral factors. In environmental factors, items are delegated to parents and family, school and college and social environment. Then, personal factor concentrates on the student's emotional, motivational level and student's prior knowledge. For behavioral factor, item was written to study at a student's confidence level and self learning capabilities.

## **The sample**

As stated in the research objectives, the targeted population consisted of semester two technical students from KKTM. The criteria of the selected respondents from the population are students with at least one semester of learning in the college. Students of KKTM were required to go through 2 or 3 semesters of English courses. The courses focus on communication skills and preparation for personal development skills. These respondents are selected among Semester 2 students registering for 'English for Communication' courses. The reason for such criteria is to ensure respondents have previous knowledge and experience in English language proficiency from the college. This will help students to identify factors that they felt has influenced their English language proficiency in the college. The researcher targeted accessible population by choosing 3 colleges as the selected sample consisted of colleges in the Southern region, namely Kolej Kemahiran Tinggi MARA in Batu Pahat, Ledang and Masjid Tanah. This is supported by Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) Table for Determining Sample Size from a Given Population. For a population of 1000 people, the sample size needed was 278 people.

## **Validity and reliability**

The questionnaire has gone through content validity with three experts in order to ensure that each item was correct. The reviewers are qualified professor and lecturers from the Faculty of Technical and Vocational Education, UTHM. The pilot questionnaire distributed was analyzed using the Winstep 3.69.11 software. Based on the analysis, the score for person reliability was 0.97 whereas item reliability was 0.87. Meanwhile, the Cronbach alpha's reliability score was 0.97.

## **RESULTS**

As presented in the literature review, the three factors which affect English language proficiency level are: environmental factors, personal factors and behavioral factors. The results are reported and divided towards five composed research questions.

### **English Language Proficiency Levels**

The four levels of proficiency are based upon four basics English skills. These basic skills are specifically Reading Skills, Listening Skills, Writing Skills and Speaking Skills. These English proficiency levels were analysed according to the perceptions of technical students in KKTM. Based on the analysis, only 4% of the respondents perceived they had a high level of English proficiency while another 25.8% of the respondents perceived they has a medium level of English proficiency. Majority of the respondents makes up to 70.2% that perceived their English proficiency level was low.

Meanwhile, the separation index value for Person was 2.04. However, the separation index value for Item was 5.94. Both of the values are still in the good range of separation index. Meanwhile, the value of person reliability was 0.81 which signifies that the respondents were consistent in their response. The item reliability was 0.97 which is an excellent index. For English proficiency level, the Infit Mean Square was between 0.74 to 1.23 and the Outfit Mean Square was between 0.67 to 1.14. Both of the values were good

because its positive, thus showing that there is no misfit item. For polarity item, the point measure correlation value was referred. Most of the PT Mea Corr score was 0.74 to 0.81 and it displayed a positive index and translated to high visibility item that moved in the same direction with the construct.

Table 1: Analysis of item measurement of proficiency level based on Infit MNSQ, Outfit MNSQ and PT Mea Corr.

Item	Infit	Outfit	PT Mea Corr
	MNSQ	MNSQ	
Reading skills	1.12	1.10	0.75
Listening Skills	1.23	1.14	0.74
Writing Skills	0.74	0.67	0.81
Communicating Skills	0.90	0.86	0.80

Overall, it is found from the variable maps using RASCH model that most of the person were scattered under the min logit of -1 to -10. Thus, 70.2% person position with low ability stayed at the lower part of the scale. 25.8% of person hangs about in the middle of the scale and only 4% person position was with high ability remained at the top scale.

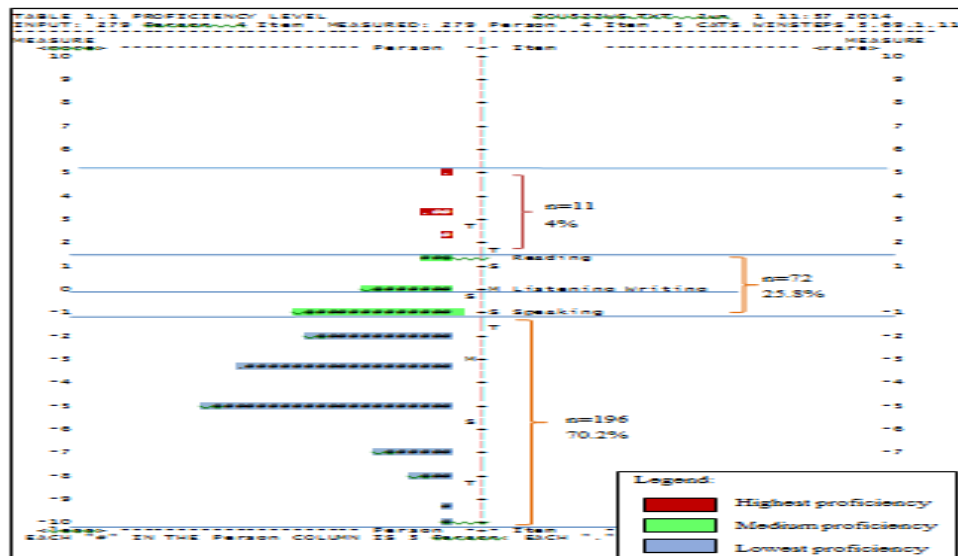


Figure 1: Variable maps for English language proficiency level

## Environmental factors that contributes towards English language proficiency

The separation index value for Person was 3.75 while the separation index value for Item was 5.75. Both of the values are in good range of separation index. Meanwhile, the value of person reliability was 0.93 and the item reliability was 0.97. Together, the value for reliability was in an excellent index. For contribution of personal factor, the Infit Mean Square was between 0.64 to 1.37 and the Outfit Mean Square was between 0.65 to 1.43. The rest of the item was positive. For polarity item, all items are well in the positive index. Generally, the map distribution depicts that most of the person are scattered and heading towards various level of contributions in between the min logit of -3 to 5.

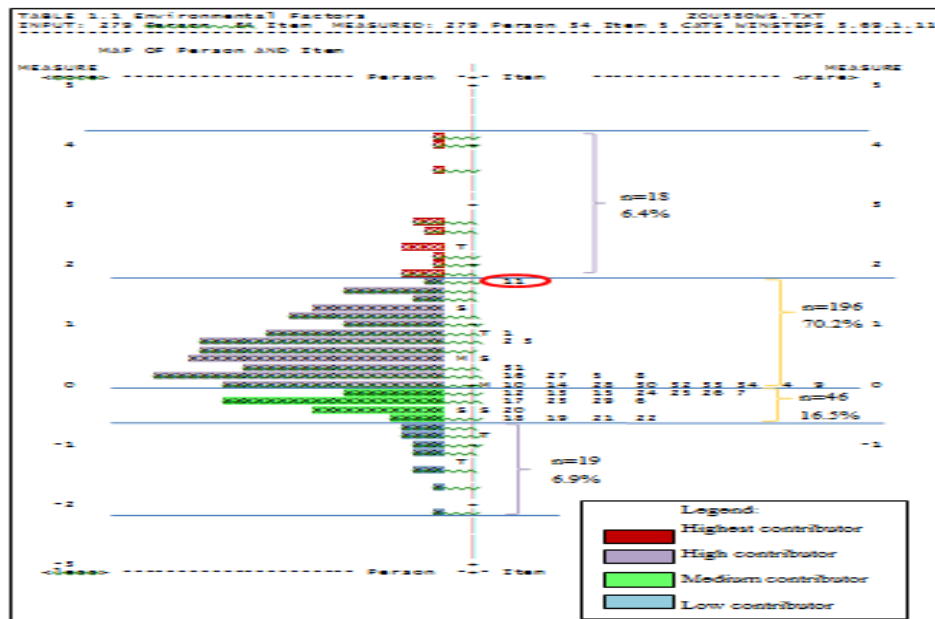


Figure 2: Variable maps for environmental factors

As a result, 19 respondents believed that environmental factor has little effect on their English language proficiency level. The highest number of respondents with 196 was dispersed in between the min logit of 0 to 2. These respondents believed that environmental factor did have some influence on their English language proficiency level. Then it was followed by high contributor at the scale of min logit 0 to -0.7 with 46 respondents. Lastly, another 18 respondents strongly believed that environmental factor did have a great impact on their English language proficiency level.

## Personal factors that contribute towards English language proficiency

The separation index value for Person was 3.57 while the separation index value for Item was 3.34. Both of the values are well above the range of separation index. Meanwhile, the value of person reliability was 0.93 and the item reliability was 0.92. The value for both person and item reliability achieved a strong index. The expected range of 0.5 to 1.5 was followed accurately by all items. In contribution of personal factor, the Infit Mean Square was between 0.64 to 1.33 and the Outfit Mean Square was between 0.65 to 1.51. The rest of

the item was positive. For polarity item, the PT Mea Corr values for items are well adjusted according to the expected index of  $0.4 < \text{PT Mea Corr} < 0.8$ .

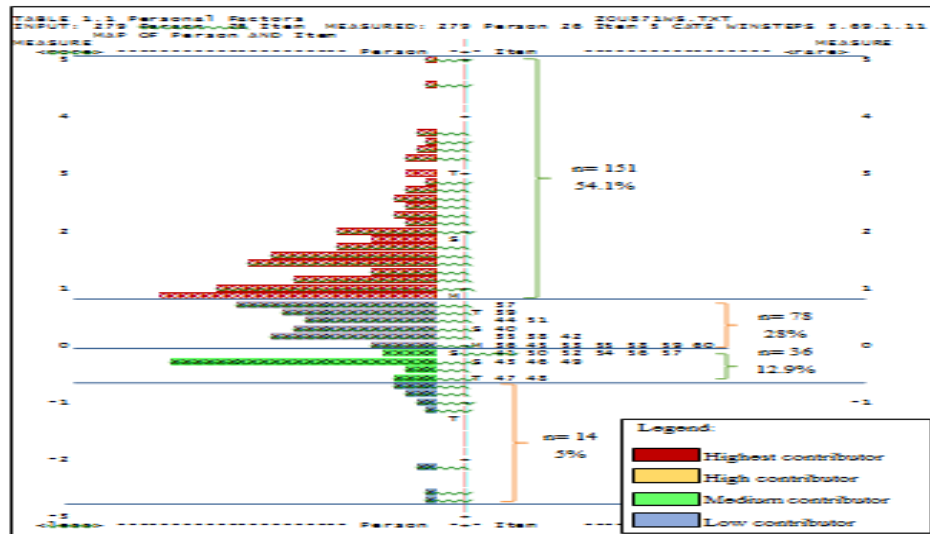


Figure 3: Variable maps for personal factors

The map distribution illustrates that most of the person are scattered and heading towards a higher level of contributions in between the min logit of -3 to 5. The highest number of distribution was 151 respondents that believed personal factor did have immense effect on their English language proficiency level. Another 78 respondents were dispersed in the upper middle of the scale and believed that environmental factor did have some influence on their English language proficiency level. At the lower middle of the min logit, 0 to -0.7, 36 respondents thought personal factors contributed towards their proficiency. Lastly, 14 respondents believed that environmental factor has small impact on their English language proficiency level under the min logit scale of -0.8 to -2.7.

### Behavioural factors that contributes towards English language proficiency

The separation index value for Person was 1.99. The separation index value for Item was 2.11. Both of the values are below the expected range of separation index. Meanwhile, the value of person reliability was 0.80 and the item reliability was 0.82. The value for Infit Mean Square was in the range of 0.59 to 1.42. In the meantime, the value of the Outfit Mean Square was in the range of 0.58 to 1.58. The expected range of 0.5 to 1.5 was followed accurately by all 10 items. In terms of polarity item, the PT Mea Corr value corresponds with the expected index of  $0.4 < \text{PT Mea Corr} < 0.8$ . The values for item all 10 items are within 0.43 to 0.70. The map distribution demonstrates that most of the person are well scattered in various levels of contribution between the min logit of -3 to 5. The highest number of distribution was 143 respondents that believed behavioral factor has hugely affected their English language proficiency level.



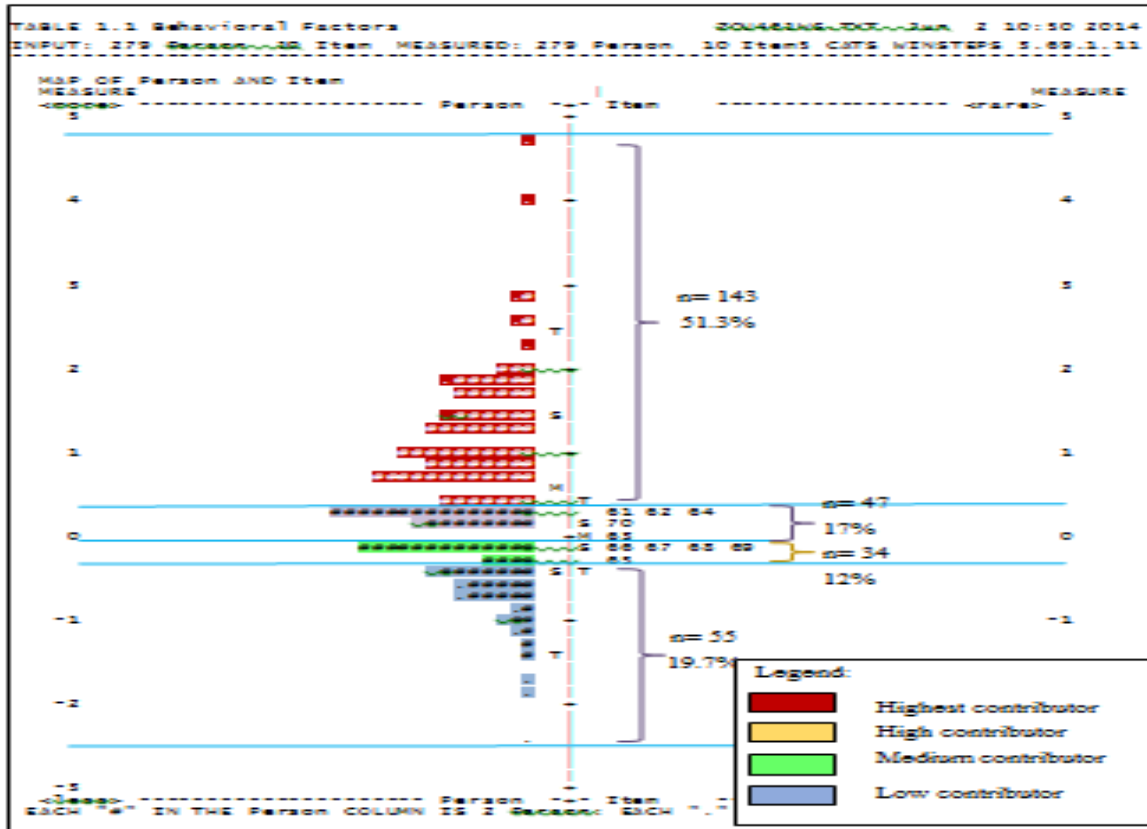


Figure 4: Variable maps for behavioral factors

From the variable map, a different 47 respondents were dispersed in the upper middle of the scale and believed that behavioral factor did have some influence on their English language proficiency level. It was followed with 34 respondents that remained in the lower middle of the min logit scale. Last of all, 55 respondents believed that behavioral factor did have minor impact on their English language proficiency level.

### The most dominant factor that contributes towards English language proficiency

Based on the One way ANOVA test, the F value is (DF=2, 831, P<.05) = 28.886. The significant value is .000. Therefore, the results indicated there is significantly both between each factor as well as within the factors itself.

Table 2: Result analysis using One Way ANOVA

	Df	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2	28.886	.000
Within Groups	831		
Total	833		

Meanwhile, the result for Post Hoc test between all three factors examined. Environmental factors shown negative mean difference with personal factors ( $M= -.588$ ) as well as Behavioural factors ( $M= -.030$ ). Thus the negative result displayed confirmed that the mean score for environmental factors are the lowest among the mean score of the other two factors. Other than that, the behavioral factors mean score with environmental factors are ( $M=.030$ ) but with personal factors, the mean score was ( $M= -. 588$ ). The highest mean difference was contributed by personal factors, where for both environmental factors and behavioral factors, the mean score was ( $M=.588$ ).

**Tukey HSD**

(I) Factors	(J) Factors	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Environmental	Personal	<b>-.588*</b>	.087	.000	-.79	-.38
	Behavior	-.030	.087	.936	-.23	.17
Personal	Environmental	<b>.588*</b>	.087	.000	.38	.79
	Behavior	<b>.558*</b>	.087	.000	.35	.76
Behavior	Environmental	.030	.087	.936	-.17	.23
	Personal	<b>-.558*</b>	.087	.000	-.76	-.35

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Figure 5: Result for post hoc test

The lowest means plot was environmental factors, followed by behavioral factors and the highest was personal factors. This is aligned with all the analysis done above.

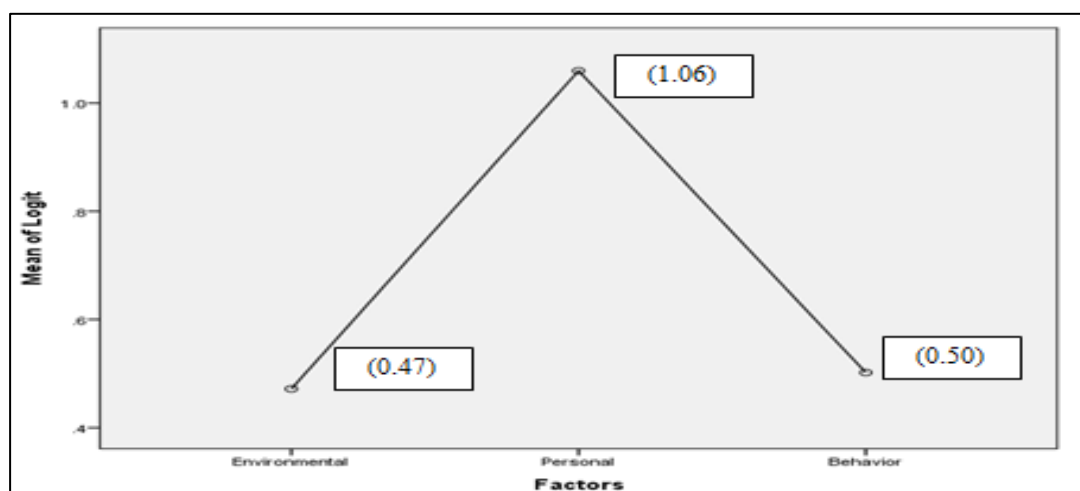


Figure 6: Result for means plot between factors

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **English language proficiency level**

The findings on English language proficiency level revealed that most of the respondents believed that they have a low proficiency level. Respondents were required to pass English subject to enrol into the college. Thus, this proved that most of them should have at least basic English skills before continuing their tertiary education. As Yahaya et. al (2011) explained, there is a necessity to increase the level of English acquirement among Malaysian students. They mentioned how current English proficiency influence students attitude towards English and vice versa. Students with low level of proficiency tend to have lower efficacy when they have to use English.

### **Environmental factors contributing towards English language proficiency**

Findings related to environmental factors included demography details on the background of the respondents such as gender, age and academic qualification. It also comprised of influences from social context and surroundings such as parents, family, teachers, peers or school, colleges and the English teaching and learning process. Earlier studies by Abdul & Hanifah (2010) saw a significant effect on the English language proficiency among students across gender. Meanwhile, Alsheikh, Parameswaran & Elhoweris (2010) argued that the more challenging the parents were, the better the performance of the child in education. In other words, parents are a dominator that influences their children.

As Abdul and Ramli (2011) remarked, English speaking skills will progress if students are exposed to the community or family who often speak the language. Another social context of environmental factors includes influences in school or colleges. This is where students spent most of their time socializing with other people which comprises of lecturers, teachers, staff and peers. However, in this research, environmental factors such as parents or family, teacher and peers were the lowest contributors. Thus, according to the respondents' perceptions, environmental factors did have some influence, but it was not the main contributors that affect the English language proficiency level among technical students of KKTm.

### **Personal factors contributing towards English language proficiency**

The findings of this study look at personal factors that contribute towards English language proficiency among technical students in KKTm. Among the factors identified was student interest in English subjects itself and the motivation that drive them to succeed in the language. Abdul and Ramli (2011) commented on the situation where most of today's graduates are still ignorant and were not interested in the importance of English proficiency in finding a job, especially in communication skills. The awareness that English is an important language lingers on but was not enough for the respondents to take action. Even though respondents are aware of such opportunities; they were still reluctant to equip themselves with the necessary skills. It was consistent with the findings of this study where most of the respondents highly perceived that a personal factor was the highest contributors affecting their English language proficiency level. The findings of this study confirmed that personal factors were the most dominant contributor in English language proficiency level

### **Behavioral factors contributing towards English language proficiency**

The findings regarding behavioral factors focused on attitudes and confidence level of respondents. In previous studies, Tan et. al (2012) shared how academic qualifications are important, but the aptitudes and attitudes of future employee are correspondingly, if not more, significant to employers. Other studies by Sirat, et. al (2012) discovered that graduates showed lack of attitude while working but anticipated to be given high incomes without going through the process of gaining knowledge and experience. Abdullah et. al (2012) cited that graduates believed presentation skills enabled them to have self confidence in performing their jobs. The findings in this study connected how behavioral factors contributed towards English language proficiency among technical students in KKTU. The result was higher compared to environmental factors.

As such, based on students' perception, behavioral factors was the second highest contributor that affects English language proficiency level. Additionally, respondents felt all three factors from Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory contribute towards their proficiency level. Environmental factors, personal factors and behavioral factors were perceived to affect respondents English language proficiency level. This was approved by the entire test administered statistically. Between all the contributing factors, significant factors that served as a dominant factor affecting English language proficiency level were personal factors.

It is also interesting to note on personal factors such as interest in a subject and motivation could well drive the respondents to be a better student. It might be supported by the two other factors which is environmental and behavioral factors as well. Therefore, parties involved especially in the administration roles should step up and take the responsibilities to positively make changes for better English language proficiency.

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