

APTIS AS AN ALTERNATIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TEST: THE USIM EXPERIENCE

¹Noor Saazai Mat Saad, ²Fariza Puteh Behak, ³Ramiaida Darmi, ⁴Hazleena Baharun,
⁵Suzanah Selamat & ⁶Alfaiz Md Salleh

^{1,2,3,4,5,6}Fakulti Pengajian Bahasa Utama, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Malaysia
*noorsaazai@usim.edu.my

ABSTRACT

English proficiency is essential for Malaysian graduates to thrive in today's competitive global job market and digital economy. At Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), graduating students are required to meet an English language proficiency exit requirement. They usually sit for Malaysian University English Test (MUET) or the University English Proficiency Test (UEPT). MUET is a national test while UEPT is an internal assessment, but both are aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Alongside these exams, Aptis is introduced as an alternative English proficiency test that is flexible, practical, and widely recognised by employers. Developed by the British Council, Aptis is a computer-based assessment that evaluates reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, as well as grammar and vocabulary. It measures proficiency levels ranging from beginner (A1) to advanced (C), based on the CEFR framework. This study investigates the potential of Aptis as an alternative exit test for USIM students. Data were collected through document analysis, including test results and written feedback from 219 students. They were the third and final year students from seven faculties in USIM. The findings indicate strong student performance and highly positive experiences with Aptis. These results provide compelling justification for considering Aptis a viable alternative to existing English proficiency assessments.

Keywords: *Aptis, CEFR, English language proficiency, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia,*

INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency is an important asset for graduating students as it can be a determining factor in securing a job. Graduates with commendable English language skills are better equipped to manage collaboration across borders and penetrate the international market. Hence, employers often prioritise candidates who can communicate effectively in English because it reflects not only language competence but also adaptability.

Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) enforces English language proficiency exit requirements for all graduating students. Thus, USIM students are required to achieve a minimum score of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Band 5 for English Language major programme and Band 3 for all the other programmes. Usually, students either sit for Malaysian University English Test (MUET) or University English Proficiency Test (UEPT). The former is a national test while the latter is an internal assessment, and both are aligned to CEFR.

UEPT resembles MUET in various aspects. Besides being CEFR-aligned, both require students to sit for all 4 skills with similar test format. The receptive skills – listening and reading encompass objective questions while the productive skills – speaking and writing include 2 tasks (individual presentation and group discussion) and two essays, respectively. Though UEPT is USIM internal test and MUET is a nationally accepted assessment, having equivalence in most elements is the crucial justification why UEPT is also listed and accepted as an English language proficiency test for exit requirement.

Besides MUET and UEPT, there are many other English language tests in the market -- International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Aptis, TOEFL, Pearson Test of English (PTE), and Linguaskill, just to name a few. These tests are also aligned to CEFR and offer the 4 skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Usually, each skill is in separate modules but there are some variations where 2 skills might be combined or there is an addition of the grammar and vocabulary module. These tests are either taken in their paper-based or computer-based format.

Referring to the crucial role that English plays in boosting the graduates' employability, Ministry of Higher Education provided each public university with a grant in 2024. The grant is for the university to conduct an English Language Communication Enhancement Certification Programme for Malaysian Public Universities. The focus is to enhance the English language communication skills among the graduating students from public universities. USIM was also one of the fortunate universities to have been awarded the grant. This paper uses a three-pronged approach where firstly is to share the insights on how USIM managed the programme, secondly is on the justifications on why Aptis has been roped in as an alternative English language test, and thirdly is the sharing of the findings regarding students' experiences going through the programme. Prior to outlining the three-pronged approach, this paper begins with an overview of the Aptis test to provide the context.

Aptis

Aptis is a computer based English language proficiency test developed by the British Council. It is aligned with the Common European Framework for Reference for Languages (CEFR), making it suitable for international benchmarking. Aptis evaluates four core language skills – listening, reading, writing and speaking – and grammar and vocabulary components which

allow for a more accurate determination of the test-takers CEFR level. The results are produced rather fast – 48 to 72 hours after the test. Interestingly, Aptis allows retaking of the skills which is termed as ‘Combined Score’. This is unlike MUET, UEPT and numerous other tests where there is no retaking of the test to better the score. Aptis retest-takers are allowed to retake 2 skills. Aptis is accepted by various organisations like universities, schools and governments in more than 85 countries.

MANAGEMENT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION ENHANCEMENT CERTIFICATION PROGRAMME FOR MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN USIM

The English Language Communication Enhancement Certification Programme for Malaysian Public Universities was managed by the Faculty of Major Language Studies (FPBU) and it was conducted together with the provider – the British Council. The target was to get 250 students from 9 faculties in USIM. However, due to timetabling, only 7 faculties could follow the programme as it would run for more than 6 months. There were 3 main phases of the programme – the classes, the practice and the test. The classes were set according to the level of the students. Thus, the provider conducted a diagnostic test for placement.

In handling the programme, FPBU identified 8 coordinators – 7 representing each faculty and 1 was especially appointed for the English major group. These coordinators were tasked to firstly get students to register. Since the focus was on the graduating students, it was set that the places were offered to year 4 students who have not reached the required English band to graduate. Then, it was cascaded to year 3 students who were facing similar situation. A poster was prepared for coordinators to blast to students in their faculties. Each faculty had different quota of students joining based on the percentage. This exercise was done to ensure fairness to all students. Some faculties managed to meet the quota, and some exceeded it. The number was then balanced to fit the places offered. However, only 232 students sat for the diagnostic test and completed it. They were then assigned to 16 classes ranging from level B1-C classes. There were a few A2 students, but they were also placed in B1 class.

The classes were conducted online by native speakers for about 3 months. There were 2 classes every week and coordinators could monitor the students’ attendance and progress. To encourage consistent participation, the management team at FPBU created posters and distributed badges to active participants via email. They are as seen below:



The posters

The biggest and longest phase was the online class experience while the next 2 phases of the programme, although short, were equally crucial. Phases 3 and 4 were Aptis ready and Aptis test sessions, respectively. The former was when the students were given a month to do

practices resembling the actual test. The latter was the test itself. The students were given the opportunity to choose the date for their test based on their own convenience but depending on the availability of the places.

As preparation for the test, the technical team from the British Council paid a visit to the computer laboratories in FPBU building, USIM. With the help from the USIM technical team, the test application was uploaded into the computers in the labs. The headsets and microphones were also checked to ensure that they were in good working condition. There were 2 labs involved but the capacity for each was only 15 because the candidates needed space between them as to ease the speaking test. Thus, with more than 200 candidates, the Aptis tests were done for more than 2 weeks. The management had to hire help for invigilation as it was quite a demanding job and classes were ongoing. The team from the British Council had been very helpful and accommodating to our needs. They provided training for our invigilators and took us through the process of administering the tests.

APTIS AS AN ALTERNATIVE

USIM graduating students who have not fulfilled the exit English language requirement usually choose to sit for MUET / MUET on demand or UEPT. With the positive experience in handling Aptis, the management team members cum the researchers prepared a proposal to USIM Senate for the acceptance of APTIS as an alternative test. This is as justified below.

Firstly, Aptis test is recognised as an internationally accepted assessment. It was developed by the British Council, an institution with a strong reputation in the field of English language teaching and assessment in Malaysia and the world over. The development process of the Aptis test followed a systematic and detailed approach, based on international standards and specifications, namely the CEFR. Reliability testing was conducted for the receptive skills components (listening and reading) using Cronbach's Alpha, and inter-rater validity testing was applied to the productive skills components (writing and speaking). This information is further detailed in Aptis Scoring System by Dun (2020).

Secondly, the Aptis test scores have been aligned with the CEFR by a panel of English language testing experts through a comprehensive process involving familiarisation, specification, standard setting, and validation. This matter has been discussed and reported as presented in *Linking the Aptis Reporting Scales* by O'Sullivan (2015) to the CEFR.

“All of this evidence combines to support both the validity of the test for use as a measure of general proficiency and the accuracy and appropriacy of the claimed links to the CEFR” (p.53)

Thirdly, the Aptis test is recognised by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. Referring to section 2.5, English option teachers are required to achieve a C1 proficiency level under the international CEFR framework. To meet this requirement, they are mandated to take an English proficiency test that is aligned with the CEFR. Therefore, they may sit for various tests as stated in the Ministry of Education Malaysia's *Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas* No. 6, Year 2017 dated 23 June 2013.

Lastly and the most distinctive of all is that the Aptis test features a **Combined Score** system. Candidates who fail can improve their overall score by retaking only the skill component that caused the failure. This is a unique feature of Aptis, not available in MUET or IELTS. It is

especially suitable for USIM students who have not yet achieved the required CEFR level and in need to just work on certain skills and improve the overall score.

RESEARCH RELATED TO APTIS

The administration of English Language Communication Enhancement Certification Programme for Malaysian Public Universities has opened doors for research to be conducted. With more than 200 students involved, there are many research angles. This paper, however, reports only on the outcomes the programme which aimed at enhancing learners' English language proficiency and workplace communication skills. Delivered via a structured syllabus and supported by ongoing assessments, the programme demonstrated strong engagement, significant progress in proficiency, and positive test outcomes. To help focus on the voluminous data that were gathered, an objective was set – To investigate the Aptis experience. However, before the findings are shared, there is a need for elucidation of the method.

Looking at the Aptis experience through the lens of research, it can also be said that the study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of the programme involving the 3 phases – classes, Aptis Ready and Aptis Test. The research employed a case study design which utilised both the quantitative and qualitative data. The method used to gather data was document analysis. There were two pertinent documents involved. There were the (i) progress and results of the students – the diagnostic test, the progress percentage, and the final Aptis score and (ii) the feedback from the students regarding their Aptis experience. The former provided the quantitative data while the latter presented the qualitative data.

Though the places were provided for 250 students, only 232 sat for the diagnostic test and then registered for the classes. The number further dwindled during phase 3 where only 219 sat for the Aptis test. Thus, the results and findings below are from the 219 students who went through the 3 phases.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

In parsing out the objective, there are a few aspects that can be put together to paint the Aptis experience. The experience refers to the endeavours of the managing party cum the researchers' and the students'. In painting the picture of Aptis experience, the aspects which play a role are student involvement, Aptis exit test performance, proficiency development, attendance and learning outcomes and student feedback.

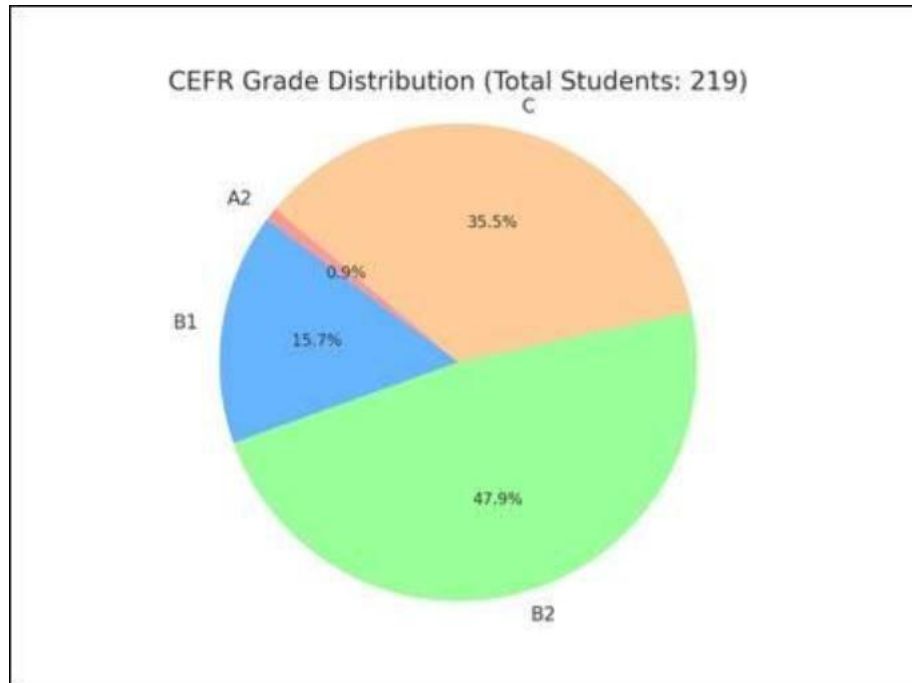
i) Student involvement

- Every week, the British Council shared the students' progress report and attendance. This has helped as a monitoring tool. The report recorded high levels of student involvement and follow-through. **91% of students actively engaged** with their course, reflecting strong motivation and the effectiveness of the online delivery model.
- Furthermore, **85% of enrolled students completed the exit test (Aptis)**, demonstrating their commitment to evaluating their language development.

ii) Aptis Exist Test Performance

The Aptis test, aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), served as the exit assessment for the programme. Results were notably positive:

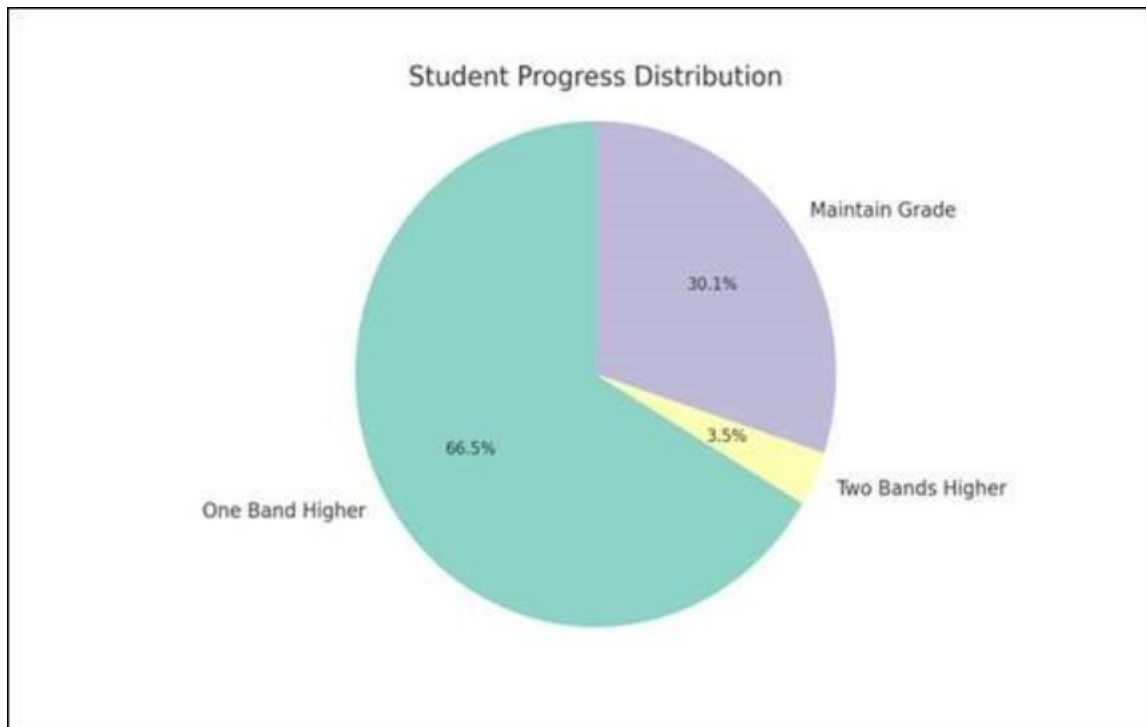
- **83% of students achieved a CEFR level of B2 or higher**, indicating that most participants reached an upper-intermediate proficiency level suitable for academic, professional, and social communication.
- **The distribution of CEFR grade is as follows:**



CEFR Grade	Number of Students	Percentage
A2	2	0.9%
B1	34	15.5%
B2	104	47.5%
C	77	35.2%
Total	219	100%

iii) Proficiency Development

Although direct entry-to-exit comparisons were not conducted for all participants, the results still showed clear evidence of progress. The pie chart below shows the progress of students in terms of their CEFR band movement.



Furthermore, 94% of test takers at A1 and A2 level showed progress by moving at least one band higher. 84% at B1 demonstrated progress of at least 1 CEFR level. This level of progress indicates that the programme was effective in developing learners' language skills across key proficiency bands.

iv) Attendance and Learning Outcomes

Data analysis reveals a clear relationship between attendance and language gains:

- **100% of A2-level students** and **88% of B1-level students** who moved up a CEFR level **had excellent attendance**. This suggests that consistent participation—particularly in live sessions—was a critical factor in achieving optimal results. Students who were committed to attending live classes reaped the most benefits from the course, both in terms of performance and confidence.

v) Student Feedback

Generally, students were happy with the course and thought that it was beneficial for their English language proficiency.

“I think this class is good for me because it can improve my english. My perspective for the class, i think is so relax because it can be access anywhere which do not required to class face to face. For the test, I think is okay, not so hard and not so difficult. Overall it is okay.”

“I think this test really help me to improve my english language especially in speaking. I hope I can join this class more.”

Students also felt that the online APTIS test was well-organised and the fact that it was held online had reduced their anxiety significantly.

“Firstly, I feel really happy to take British Council Programme. It's very helpful the student to learn English effectively such as writing, speaking, reading and listening. I feel better when I have a conversation with my friend or others. My teacher from British Council teach me to talk confidently even still poor in speaking. It will too hard in beginning but it's the process to be perfect. Thank you very much British Council. The exam is challenging to me but I still can answer and I am not anxiety with that question of exam.”

“To be honest, I though it would very uncomfortable to taking test together with others especially for speaking part. But everything went well. The headphone is provided so for me it is good. Nice internet connection. Good experience I must say. But just now I had a moment with some connection trouble but I manage to encounter it. And also the supervisor nice, very helpful. Thank you”

Amalgamating the 5 aspects from the data to present a picture of the Aptis experience has given illumination to the objective stipulated earlier. The experience itself is positive, and the end results are satisfying.

CONCLUSION

The English Language Communication Enhancement Certification Programme for Malaysian Public Universities has successfully met its goal of empowering students to use English with increased confidence and accuracy, particularly in workplace and global settings. High levels of student engagement, clear evidence of language proficiency improvement, and a strong correlation between attendance and success highlight the programme's overall effectiveness. These findings support the continued use and further involvement with the British Council as USIM has formally accepted Aptis to be placed together with MUET and UEPT.

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