



proceedings



International Academic Symposium of Social Science 2022

3 July 2022 | Kota Bharu, Malaysia


iassc.my

Volume 82 · IASSC 2022



mdpi.com/journal/proceedings
ISSN 2504-3900

A Study on Difficulties Encountered and Perception by English as Second Language (ESL) Learners in Malaysian University Examination Test (MUET) †

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† Presented at the International Academic Symposium of Social Science 2022, Kota Bharu, Malaysia, 3 July 2022.

Abstract: Malaysian University Examination Test (MUET) is one of the English proficiency tests required for students who want to pursue a degree at Malaysian public universities. This test consists of four skill tests, namely listening, reading, speaking, and writing. However, over the past several years, many students who sit for the exam achieved an incredibly low band, and the reasons are not clear. This study aims to investigate the perceptions and difficulties encountered by learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) students in the Malaysian University Examination Test (MUET). Three Malaysian Polytechnic degree-level students who had to re-sit for MUET to complete their degree programme were chosen as the informants. The study applied the qualitative research design, and data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. It was discovered that the students faced the challenges such as preparation, lack of knowledge in vocabulary, grammar, and time constraints in answering the question in MUET. The paper concludes by suggesting that the students are taking steps to overcome MUET-related challenges. Future research is required to investigate the type of teaching methodology that can assist these students prior to MUET.

Keywords: Malaysian University English Test; proficiency test; skills; English as a Second Language



Citation: Karnine, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.; Preece, A.S.D.; Ahmad, I.B.S.; Muhammad, S.S.B. A Study on Difficulties Encountered and Perception by English as Second Language (ESL) Learners in Malaysian University Examination Test (MUET). *Proceedings* **2022**, *82*, 53. <https://doi.org/10.3390/proceedings2022082053>

Academic Editors: Mohamad Rahimi and Mohamad Rosman

Published: 15 September 2022

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1. Introduction

In Malaysia, the English language is considered by many as a second language after the national language, Bahasa Melayu. English is widely used in trade at domestic and international levels. Hence, fluency and mastering English is an added value for any professional or highly skilled job. However, students still struggle to learn English as a second language (ESL) in Malaysia. An average student spends about 14 years learning the English language from primary school, secondary school, and up to the Polytechnic level. In these 14 years, many of them fail to become fluent. Hunt and Beglar [1] found that English learners are continuously weak in vocabulary acquisition. This situation is supported in a newspaper, where the Malaysian central bank reported that about 15.3% of youths are unemployed [2].

According to Marlyna et al. [3], there are incidences of mistakes in 'subject-verb agreement' (SVA) and copula 'be' in learning English. In addition, graduates in Malaysia, in general, are still not fluent in English [4].

1.1. Malaysian University English Test

The Malaysian University English Test, introduced in 1999, is one of the English proficiency tests for potential students planning to pursue their studies at any local universities

in Malaysia and Singapore. The Malaysian Examination Council (MEC) was the appointed council to administer the test [5]. MUET is one of the holistic methods to develop the students' abilities to master English and the pre-degree students need to take the test [6]. It measures the candidates' level of English mastery and evaluates their performance. Achievement in MUET is indicated using bands ranging from Band 1 to Band 6. MUET covers all four skills of speaking, reading, writing, and listening, which are essential skills in the process of language learning.

1.2. Perception and Difficulties Encountered by Students as the Second Language Learner

Perception is one of the elements of thinking that is subjective. On the other hand, difficulties can be referred to as challenges and obstacles that can be tangible and intangible. Students as second language learners have been struggling to master English in their academic life, as well as professionals in the workplace. There are also differences in Eastern and Western cultures that affect language acquisition [7]. Three problems identified as the result of these differences are mistakes in grammar, organisation drawbacks, and unsuitable presentation of ideas in English [8].

What are the solutions to problems faced by these learners? How can scaffolding be used in the learning process? There could also be other factors that were not discovered in their process of learning ESL.

The learners face problems from the primary level towards the secondary until the tertiary level. The entrance to university, which requires these learners to obtain a specific band, resulting in MUET, has been one of the major demotivating factors and a major obstacle in their studies at the higher education level.

2. Problem Statement

Students' learning behaviours can change with the preparation for a high-stakes test and can be seen in their determination to learn [9–11]. Learner autonomy can also be increased by determination [12,13]. The context of this paper is centred on learners who are preparing themselves for MUET, an entry test to public universities in Malaysia and Singapore. They face difficulties obtaining a higher band to enter public universities. Most of them obtain Band 2, which is a poor result, and therefore, entry to the university is not possible. Previous studies suggest that the learners are overburdened with the risk of the test, where they think that they will not be able to achieve a good result even if they put a lot of effort into the preparation [14,15]. Thus, the sample of this study involved the MUET repeaters, in which they received poor results. These informants are chosen because it is strongly believed that the difficulties and challenges they faced prior to or during the test can be investigated in-depth.

3. Purpose and Objectives of the Study

This study's goal was to investigate the perceptions and difficulties encountered by learners of ESL students in the Malaysian University Examination Test (MUET).

4. Research Questions

The central research question of this study is to investigate the difficulties encountered by ESL students in MUET.

The following are the sub-research questions of the study:

1. What are the challenges faced by ESL students in MUET?
 - 1.1 Challenges in terms of readiness;
 - 1.2 Challenges in terms of knowledge in varied vocabularies;
 - 1.3 Challenges in terms of time constraints in answering questions.
2. What are the perceptions of ESL learners toward MUET?

5. Significance of the Study

This paper is significant in terms of investigating the difficulties encountered by ESL students in MUET. It is hoped that this paper can help the students to improve their band in MUET and thus further their studies at any public university in Malaysia or Singapore. This research is also could improve the teaching methods used by the instructors, teachers, or lecturers of MUET candidates.

6. Literature Review

6.1. *The Use of MUET for University Entry and Graduation Purpose*

English is often the medium of instruction at the tertiary level [16]. Therefore, students' English language proficiency needs to be determined before university admission. In order to ensure the students are proficient in English, the Malaysian University English Test is used as the yardstick, and the pre-degree students as mentioned earlier need to take the test. According to Kaur and Nordin [17]. MUET is an indicator of their proficiency level in the English language, which allows the pre-degree students to enrol on the pre-degree students' desired course. In addition, MUET is administered by the Malaysian Examination Council, which is one of the well-trusted exam councils, and it is acknowledged by Malaysia and Singapore [18]. After the students have successfully entered the desired university in a specific course or program, they are expected to be able to pursue their studies effectively as they are more well versed in the English language. In fact, after completing their degree, the acceptable band in MUET is the requirement for their graduation purpose.

6.2. *Research Related to the Scope of Study*

Moreover, for ESL teacher education, MUET is the indicator of academic achievement [18]. Unfortunately, the students in Malaysia are facing challenges of the interference of the first language, which affects their self-confidence [19–21]. The low proficiency level among Malaysian students was investigated in a study by Che Musa et al. [20]. Other studies found that students' level of confidence is affected because they feel comfortable speaking in their native language rather than English [20–22]. Arshad et al. [23] discovered that confidence in the students' abilities plays a significant role in their academic performance. In conducting a given task, there are different reactions from students because they have various levels of confidence and abilities [24]. Rethinasamy and Chuah [25] found a correlation between students' performance in English Preparatory class and the students' MUET marks. Hence, it is significant to investigate whether there could be any improvements for the students' preparatory classes. This study can fill the gap in which an in-depth investigation should be carried out to discover improvements in the preparatory class for better marks in MUET. A study carried out by Yunus and Chien [26] discovered that mind mapping is the best strategy in MUET preparatory classes for writing skills. However, other strategies for other skills are yet to be discovered. Hence, this highlights another gap to be filled in this study. An in-depth investigation is required for further information on the specific difficulties in other skills opens an opportunity for this study to be carried out.

7. Methods

This study chose a qualitative research design due to the researchers' experience and interest in teaching preparation classes for MUET among ESL students. Qualitative research gives importance to meaning and does not produce generalised hypotheses [27]. The method of gathering data was a semi-structured interview. The objective of this method was to gain insights from experience shared in the interview about the difficulties encountered with MUET. The researchers also wanted to investigate their perception of MUET as well as their thoughts and experiences. The source of the interview questions is based on the nature of the research questions. Adequate interview questions were raised to find information to explain the research questions. All interview questions were piloted and reviewed by quali experts.

7.1. Population and Sample

This study used purposive sampling to understand the phenomenon that was investigated [28]. Three degree-level students who had to re-sit MUET to graduate from their degree programme at a Malaysian Polytechnic were purposely chosen as the sample. They were selected based on the ability to provide rich data on the challenges of taking MUET for the first time and their perception of the result obtained. The students' perspectives are significant because they had to re-sit MUET due to the low band obtained in the first attempt of MUET, which was Band 2. These students could not successfully graduate until they obtain Band 3 as the graduation requirement of their degree programme, which is relevant to the research objectives [29]. The information of the informants was kept confidential. They were addressed as Informants 1, 2, and 3.

7.2. Instrument

The three informants were interviewed using seven semi-structured questions. The seven questions asked in the interview were: (1) How do you learn to prepare yourself for MUET? (2) What are the challenges you faced prior to taking the MUET exam? (3) What is your hope/expectation/s from MUET? (4) How do you express your feeling toward your previous MUET result? (5) Why do you feel that way when you get your result? (6) What do you do to cope with that feeling? (7) What is your suggestion to improve your English? Question numbers 1 and 2 were raised to answer research question 1, and questions numbers 3 to 7 were raised to answer research question number 2. The informants who were chosen for this study were the MUET repeaters who were in their final year of studies at one of the Malaysian Polytechnic. The questions are based on the research questions. In order to ensure the quality of the interview data, an interview protocol refinement framework was used [30]. The phases are: (1) ensuring the alignment of the interview questions with research questions, (2) constructing an inquiry-based conversation, (3) receiving feedback on interview protocols, and (4) piloting the interview protocol is piloted.

7.3. Pilot Interview and Saturation of Study

A pilot interview was conducted with two informants with the same background of studies and problems. According to Hassan [31], a pilot study is a small-scale trial, which is a technique for preparing a larger study. There were comments on adding the questions from six to seven. The question that was added was about suggestions for improving English mastery. Other than that, the word expectation was not understood by the informant in the pilot interview. In the final set of interview questions, the word 'expectation' was changed to 'hope.' The interview questions were validated before conducting the actual interview with the three informants identified. Even though this study only involved three informants, Charmaz [32] claims the saturation of the study can be achieved but with modest claims.

7.4. Data Collection Procedure

Three informants, degree students, pursuing their studies in a tertiary institution, were selected from the population. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather their insights and in-depth data. According to Seidman [33], it is worth knowing the individual's stories by conducting interview-based research. Researchers can explore more details from clarifications requested during the interview. The interview protocol was prepared before the interview session to gather responses from the interviewee [34]. The interview was held using the Zoom online meeting application. This platform was chosen due to the 'Conditional Movement Control Order' implemented by the government of Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview was held by texting the interviewees and planning the interview time and date with them. The interview lasted between 15 and 40 min and was recorded, saved as a video, and later converted to an MP3 audio file.

7.5. Data Analysis Procedure (DCR) Steps

Data analysis is an essential part of every study. The data were extracted from the informants effectively in order to reach the saturation level. The data were collected using a semi-structured interview, and a thematic analysis was conducted to analyse it. Either the DCR or the 3-step formula by Bazeley [35] was used as the data analysis procedure.

Firstly, 'D' stands for description. It is used to provide more data about the sources of data. In this study, the sample was the fourth-semester students undergoing a degree programme in one of the tertiary level institutions in Malaysia. They were taking MUET for the first time, obtained Band 2, and were going to re-sit for the test in September 2020.

The second step is 'C' or compare. More or less, the informants suggested remarkably similar themes. The themes were generated by choosing the keywords from the interview. WH questions were used, and the informants provided many data in response.

The third step is 'R,' which stands for Relate. Generated coding was used to know and explore further the conditions from which the theme arose and form relationships between the themes. Each informant's answer was coded, and themes were generated separately. Similarities of keywords helped the researchers generate a theme that applies to all types of answers given by the informants.

7.6. Credibility and Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the generated themes are credible and trustworthy, two inter-raters were chosen from the same workplace as the researchers. They are the experts in their field of study and knowledgeable about the problem of the study. This process helped the researchers in checking the themes. There were a few comments given by the inter-raters, and the researchers' interpretation of the themes was acceptable and reliable at an average of 88% inter-raters agreement.

8. Result and Discussion

Table 1 above shows a clear picture of the major theme generated from the two main research questions and as well as the interview questions.

Table 1. Inter-raters agreement.

(Total Number of Agreements/Total Number of Responses) × 100%	
Inter-rater 1:	(8/9) × 100 = 88%
Inter-rater 2:	(8/9) × 100 = 88%
Average:	(16/18) × 100 = 88%

Table 2 shows the themes derived from the answers generated from the interview. It provide the reports on the difficulties encountered and perception by ESL learners in MUET. The given responses were based on the research questions mentioned earlier in this paper.

- Research question 1: What are the challenges faced by ESL students in MUET?

In relation to this question, the informants answered the questions by sharing the learning strategies used to prepare themselves for MUET. They stated that they studied by attending class for guidance as well as applying independent study in their learning strategies. This first generated theme is supported by the following evidence (No. 5: I#3).

Attending class and taking notes from the internet and YouTube (some channels) that provide teaching MUET for all the skills, so I just see the format and how to prepare and do the exercises.

Table 2. Major themes derived from the research questions.

Research Questions	Interview Questions	Major Themes
Research Question 1: What Are The Challenges Faced By The ESL Students in MUET? a. Challenges in Terms of Readiness b. Challenges in Terms of Knowledge in Varied Vocabularies c. Challenges in Terms of Time Constraint in Answering Question	1. How do you learn to prepare yourself for MUET? 2. What are the challenges you faced prior to taking MUET exam?	1. Dependent and Independent study 2. Lack of preparation 3. Lack of knowledge
Research Question 2: What Are the Perceptions by The Esl Students Toward Muet?	1. What is your hope/expectation/s from MUET? 2. How do you express your feeling toward your previous MUET result? 3. Why do you feel that way when you get your result? 4. What do you do to cope with that feeling? 5. What is your suggestion for improving English?	4. Improvement toward the higher band 5. Disappointment 6. Awareness in future exam 7. Sharing feelings 8. Increase effort in reading and other skills

This finding corresponds with a study carried out by Mahmud [36], in which the independent study was implemented by the informants by performing the exercises on their own as part of the preparation for the test. This finding indicates that even though the informants are facing challenges in their learning process, they still have the motivation to push themselves to work hard in order to gain a better result. However, it is not known whether, in the independent study approach, they are using the right source for the exercises and examples. Thus in future studies, this area can be explored more.

Furthermore, the study explored what challenges the students faced before taking MUET. This question was divided into three types of challenges to obtain in-depth data from the interviewees. The first challenge was in terms of readiness. In this context, the informants agreed that they were not ready at all, and the second theme is the lack of preparation generated from this answer (No. 8: I#1).

In terms of readiness, I think I am not ready I can't prepare all the things and push myself to do three papers listening writing and reading.

The study indicates that the informants were not ready for the test due to a lack of preparation in three skills, namely listening, writing, and reading. However, another study carried out by Kuen and Embi [37] showed that listening skill is highly prepared compared to the other three skills, namely reading, speaking, and writing, with the least preparation. The reason for various levels of readiness is yet to be known; hence, this leads to future studies in the area.

The third theme, which is a lack of knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, was generated from the three informants' responses which sounded similar. Hence, it was interesting to learn that they were facing the same problem, and this shows that they are very weak (No. 15: I#2).

For me I think . . . aaaa I have enough knowledge, but I think I don't have quite enough knowledge, but the grammar and vocabularies don't think to have enough knowledge because if take reading and writing I always forget the meaning of the words and also, I forget the vocabulary and grammar.

This is another key finding that exhibits the students' encountering lack of knowledge in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Hence, this result indicates that over the years, the same problem has been faced by the MUET candidates, and further studies need to be looking into how to overcome the same problem.

The fourth theme is the lack of time to answer the question. This theme was generated based on the information from the informants. It shows that they were struggling with their incapability to think and answer the questions in MUET. One excerpt from Informant 2 indicated that (No. 17: I#2),

Not enough time for answering the question for reading and listening.

This particular informant showed that these specific skills require more time to answer. Interestingly, it was supported by the first informant, pointing to the listening test (No. 14: I#1),

I can't real the apa . . . aaaa the audio what the audio said sometimes it's fast for me so I can't catch the audio.

The informant added more information on the reading test (No. 16: I#1),

Reading is long passage sometimes words more too hard I don't the passage is talking and the topic about not in Malaysia the words lah difficult to understand.

In addition, Informant 2 gave another insight into the time constraint during the speaking skills test (No. 18: I#1).

Speaking sometimes we get two times, and the duration is 2 min to get the point and to elaborate and when we lack vocabulary, we don't know how to describe and know what to talk but we can't talk in front of the examiner.

Interestingly theme number four is related to theme number 3, which is a lack of knowledge in vocabulary and grammar. This is a piece of significant evidence that shows cause and effect. There is a relationship between the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar when the informants want to produce their answers through reading, writing, and speaking.

- Research question 2: What are the perceptions of ESL students toward MUET?

Research question two is a very subjective measurement that resulted in all sorts of responses from the informants. However, the answers are vital because this is key to improving MUET and the teaching methodology in MUET preparatory classes. The question that is relevant to this research question is what the students hope from MUET. The fifth theme, which is to improve the band in MUET to a higher band, was generated from this question. All three informants indicated that they want to achieve at least Band 3 and above. Band 3 was mentioned by all three of them. Evidence of these statements can be seen in the following excerpt from the informants (No. 28: I#1):

We can learn more skills and we can use them for the next life in working I hope MUET can improve my English. the expectation in terms of band I hope I can get Band 3 or four to finish my studies and my future studies.

This was supported by Informant 2 with this statement (No. 21: I#2):

I hope I can get a minimum of Band 3 and do well in listening because I have very bad listening skills. In the hall, I can't hear the voice clearly and it's too quick to catch up on what they want to say in the audio.

Informant 3 added (No. 18 I#3):

To get Band 3 and above.

All these feedbacks show the crucial needs of the informants. They want to score Band 3. Therefore, the researchers wanted to know more about why there was a mutual answer from all three informants. Hence, more questions were asked to explore the details.

The next question was about the expression of feelings when they received the previous MUET result. All three informants received Band 2 in their previous MUET. They mentioned feeling sad about the result obtained, for instance, in this statement (No. 33 I#1),

Because to enter university I need Band 3 so I am sad because I think I can't further study in degree.

The informants had to repeat the test because of their Band 2 result and achieve at least Band 3 in the next test in order to graduate.

The next theme is theme number six, which was generated from their expressions of the previous MUET result. The themes of disappointment and awareness were raised regarding improving the MUET re-sit result (No. 23: I#2).

When I see my result...yes. I feel disappointed.

Informant 3 reflected (No. 22: I#3),

Because I know I am not prepared for the exam and do not have enough time and mistakes is from me and I accept it and I know I can take it again.

Theme number seven was generated from the question regarding the reason the informants obtained their previous results. The seventh theme is lack of preparation. The excerpt from Informant 3 indicated (No. 22: I#3),

Because I know I am not prepared for the exam and do not have enough time and mistakes is from me and I accept it and I know I can take it again.

This informant realised their own mistake and had incredibly positive insights that indicated improvements were made in preparation for the next test.

Theme number 8 is managing feelings by sharing them with family members and friends. This shows that family members are one of the most important sources of motivation for these informants. The following statement shows the sharing of feelings (No. 32: I#2),

The reason for sharing because between parents because later they want to know the result because they know I am taking the result. I share it with my parents and friends and the friend's result is better than mine, so I feel disappointed.

Share with my friends because they asked if they don't ask, I will keep it to myself.

The source of Informant 3's motivation can be seen from the following answer (No. 24: I#3).

Discuss with my mom and share with mom why fail and listen to their advice and not get stressed. Other than that, I tried to correct my mistakes to overcome so I promise myself.

The last theme, or the ninth theme, is to increase reading materials and audio sources exposure to improve English. This theme was generated from the question seeking the informants' suggestions on how to improve their level of English. The following is a statement from Informant 2 (No. 36: I#2):

Mmm more reading to get a new word or new, new . . . more reading to get new word . . . more exercises to know the sentence the meaning of the sentence and more speak to others.

Anything else? (interviewer)

Mmm more hear a lot of English songs (No. 38: I#2)

Informant no 1 indicated a concern about improvement in knowledge about Malaysia and overseas. It also suggested that the informant had ambitious English language skill goals (No. 40: I#1).

Read articles and journals to improve my knowledge and get to know the situation in Malaysia or oversea. We can watch movies to gain knowledge from that we can hear and read subtitles so want to improve in speaking and reading especially.

All these themes suggest that the informants, as MUET candidates, need more guidance, motivation, and strategies in their preparation. Their hope of obtaining Band 3 and above is possible if effective strategies are taught in the module used in the preparatory classes along with the support from the instructors. Teaching quality can increase meaningful learning [38].

The preliminary model based on the themes generated from the findings is shown in Figure 1.

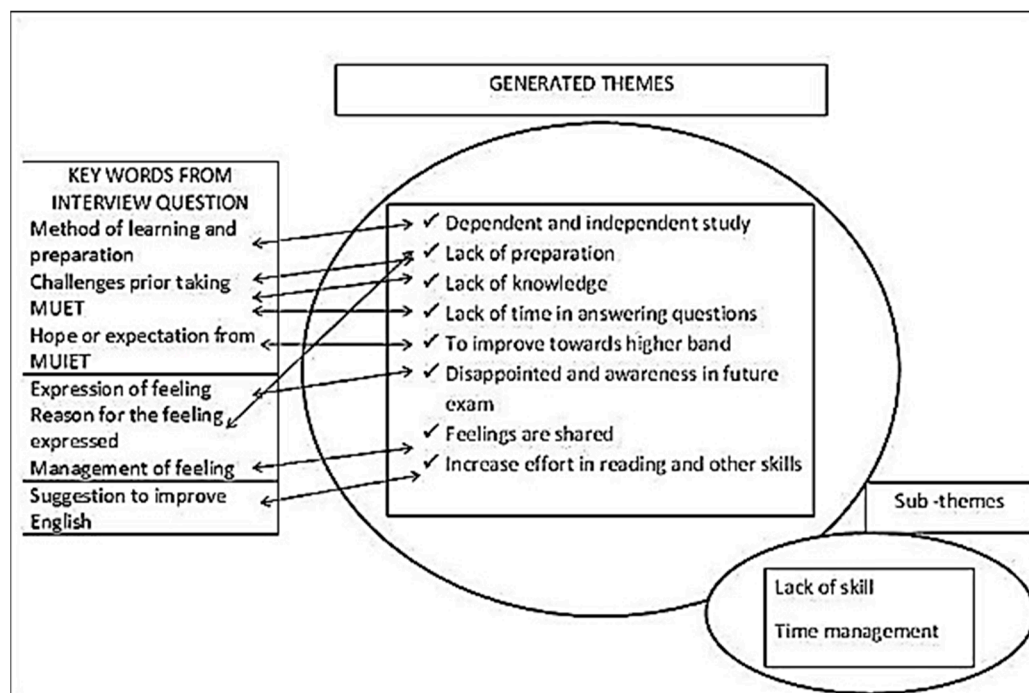


Figure 1. D3LTDLFI Model.

9. Conclusions

This paper suggests that there are difficulties faced by ESL Students during MUET. The difficulties encountered by the students were supported by their perceptions of MUET. This answered two research questions posed by this study, namely, the challenges faced by the ESL students in MUET and the ESL students’ perception of MUET. Challenges described through difficulties in preparation, lack of knowledge in vocabulary, grammar, and time constraints in answering the question show that students are aware of their weaknesses. When they expressed their perceptions, fortunately, they were still motivated to improve themselves by performing an independent study in order to achieve a higher band.

Interestingly, the findings include positive actions such as the sharing of feelings with their family members and friends. The students also responded excellently when they indicated that they wanted to involve themselves with more reading materials and audio sources to improve their English level.

Some suggestions should be taken into consideration in improving the teaching methodology for the preparatory class as well as special workshops for the weak candidates. These measures can help increase their motivation and confidence level to ensure their score band will be higher, allowing them to enter the university, graduate successfully, and have a great career in the future.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; methodology, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; validation, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; formal analysis, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; investigation, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; resources, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; data curation S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; writing—original draft preparation, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; writing—review and editing, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; visualisation, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; supervision, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A.; project administration, S.M.B.B.V.K.S.V.K., A.S.D.P., S.S.B.M. and I.B.S.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: Paper presented in International Academic Symposium of Social Science (IASSC) 2022.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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