

CEFR-BASED ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILL SELF-ASSESSMENTS BY MALAYSIAN GRADUATING NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Malaysians need to acquire the English language which is widely used in various daily activities such as business, education and administration. Previous researches have shown that local university graduates frequently face problems in getting jobs as they are unable to speak confidently. The objective of this research was to explore how final year students from two English medium universities in Malaysia assessed their own speaking skills, based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptors. A survey was carried out and responded by 133 final year students from a Malaysian Comprehensive English Medium Public University and 100 final year students from a Malaysian Focused English Medium Public University. The outcomes of this study indicated that most of the respondents from the Comprehensive Public University felt that they were at level B2, for spoken interaction and spoken production, while those from the Focused Public University felt that they were at level B1 for the same skills.

Keywords: self-assessment, Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), spoken interaction, spoken production

INTRODUCTION

The Common European Framework of Reference or better known as CEFR was published in 2001 by the Council of Europe in France (YaLatay & Gürocak, 2016). The aim of the framework is to enhance the educational language in terms of reflection, communication, and networking (Göksu, 2015).

In the CEFR, there are five distinguished communication skills which are listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing (Darmi et al., 2017). This framework consists of six ascending levels of proficiency namely Breakthrough (A1), Way stage (A2), Threshold (B1), Vantage (B2), Effective Operational Proficiency (C1) and Mastery (C2) (YaLatay & Gürocak, 2016). The CEFR also provides a self-assessment grid which can be used by language learners to profile their own language skills and assesses their own proficiency level. As explained by Alishah and Dolmaci, (2013: 874), self-assessment can provide " specific information about learners from their own perspective, and is regarded as a kind of reflection about their abilities and disabilities, the

progression they assume they are making in a course and what they have learned up to a certain moment in a course".

Currently, being able to communicate effectively in English has become a common requirement for Malaysian graduating students to be employed. In communication, speaking is perceived as one of the most important language skills and it is the basic to communication (Yunus, Kaur & Singh, 2014). If it is based on the CEFR language proficiency scales, Darmi et al., 2017 in an article stated that the university students are set to achieve B2 or C1 upon their graduation based on the Malaysian English Language Education Roadmap.

Then again, researches on Malaysian tertiary learners' speaking skills and how they assess their own speaking abilities based on the CEFR are yet to be broadly discussed. Hence, in this study, how two Malaysian English medium universities' students assessed their own speaking skills, which were the spoken interaction and spoken production skills using the CEFR, was investigated.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

According to Nooraini Mohamad Sheriff and Noordini Abdullah (2017), all public universities in Malaysia have been structured and categorized by the Malaysian government into three categories which are research university, focused university (the technical education, management and defense universities) and comprehensive university. They further explained that this structure is done in line with the National Higher Education Strategic Plan Beyond 2020 in order to achieve the world class status. Malaysian students who continue their studies at the Malaysian public universities would have attended 11 years of formal English classes in primary and secondary schools. Despite the long years of English language learning, many Malaysian students have been reported to be still weak at using the language (Dwee & Elizabeth, 2017). In fact, in 2016, Zuraidah Mohd Don wrote in an article that, "the [Education] ministry had undertaken a "baseline study" to ascertain the present state of affairs, including the level of proficiency of our schoolchildren (Hazlina Aziz, 2016). It is further explained that the study found that we have problems with spoken English".

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Darmi et al. (2017) stressed that among all language skills, speaking is the main element of the communication as it is the benchmark of how fluent a person is. Where English is concerned, many have reported that Malaysian students are not able to speak the language well. Then again, information on how Malaysian students assess their own speaking skills using the CEFR is still scarce. Traditionally, in order to know the students level of speech fluency, they were assessed by their teacher (Asdar, 2017). Nowadays, self-assessment is considered as one of the reasons that will help the students to accomplish their task in their own learning (Khonbi & Sadeghi, 2013). In addition, the researchers also stated that by doing self-assessments, students are given the chance to self-assess on their learning accomplishments and upgrade their academic achievements and behaviors. By referring to the CEFR self-assessment grid, this study therefore looked at how some graduating students from two English medium Malaysian public universities assessed their own speaking skills, namely their spoken interaction and spoken production skills, since there is lack of information however on how non-native speakers of English who are studying in English medium universities assess their speaking skills.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to find out how some Malaysian graduating non-native English speaking students from a comprehensive and focused English medium public university in Malaysia assess their own speaking skills as specified in the CEFR.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aimed to address the following research questions:

- (a) How do the Malaysian graduating non-native English speaking students from the two English medium public universities rate their own spoken interaction skills?
- (b) How do the Malaysian graduating non-native English speaking students from the two English medium public universities rate their own spoken production skills?

LITERATURE REVIEW

SPOKEN INTERACTION

According to Correia (2016), speaking is an interactive process performed using several particular patterns and characteristics which are influenced based on the purposes, topic and setting. As observed by Eggins and Slades (1997), the range between casual talk to everyday talk is similar to any form of spoken interaction (as cited in Itkonen, 2010).

Several studies have already been conducted in other countries to explore the students' self-assessment in their spoken interaction according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptors. This can be seen, for instance, in a study done by Asdar (2017) in Indonesia, entitled 'Students' Self-assessment on Their Spoken Interaction Using CEFR'. The research which involved 30 students who were in their first semester of study at the English Education Department, showed that at this stage of learning, 27 of them felt that they were either under B1 (Threshold User), A1 (Breakthrough level) or A2 (Way Stage User). Only 3 respondents out of the 30 thought they were in B1 (Threshold User) indicating that most of the students felt that they had a low level of spoken interaction.

Spoken interaction self-assessment can also be seen in a study done in Turkey by Korkmaz (2017). The findings of the study showed that 86 percent of the respondents felt that they could generally identify matters of discussions around themselves when people spoke slowly. 86 percent of respondents also said that they could express what they liked and disliked in any spoken interactions. The finding also showed that 82 percent of the participants thought they could surely understand what was said and directed to them in simple daily conversations if the speaker repeated the conversation. The study also discovered that 78 percent of the participants opined that they could describe themselves, their family and other people.

Self-assessments by secondary school students on their English speaking skills according to the CEFR proficiency levels can also be seen in a study done by Fasoglio and Tuin (2018), involving forty secondary schools in the Netherlands. The result showed that almost 40 percent of the students thought they were below level A2 while the rest rated themselves to be at level A2.

SPOKEN PRODUCTION

According to the Council of Europe (2011), oral production is an activity where the language user will speak based on the oral text and is listened by one or more audiences such as speech, sales presentation, public address and sports commentaries. While applying the oral production skills during the task, the speakers do not need to use the perfect sentences, however, they need to produce the text according to the circumstances (Tüm, & Emre, 2017). According to Geranmayeh, Wise, Mehta and Leech (2014) and Nishimaki (2014), spoken production may be disorganized because of the linguistic process and human utterances that are controlled around the brain. Many previous studies have been carried out to look at the speaking production skills among the second language learners of English. Researchers have explored how students think of their oral production skills such as their self-assessments of their own speeches, how they perceived to be their difficulties in oral presentations and what they think of the implementations of speech training.

For spoken production self-assessment, Rian, Hinkelman and Cotter (2015) did a research on students' self-assessment of their presentation videos. The findings showed that the students did not rate themselves higher than their lecturer but rated themselves to be lower than their peers and lecturer. The findings also showed that the students appreciated the chance of watching and evaluating their own presentations even though they initially felt embarrassed.

A study on the students' perception of the difficulties of the oral presentation was also done by Al-Nouh, Abdul-Kareem and Taqi (2015). The findings showed that the students perceived the difficulties of oral presentations at a moderate level. The results showed 57.4 percent of the students believed that the conversation course was not enough to improve their speaking skill and 44.4 percent of them believed that shortage of oral-skill courses was the reason behind their low performances. The college students felt that they could improve their presentation skills by presenting in other classes.

Another research was done by Syafryadin, Nurkamto, Linggar and Mujiyanto (2016) to look at students' perception on the importance of speech. The result indicated that the students felt enthusiastic when they joined the speech training. They gave positive response towards the implementation of speech training in a classroom and felt that the speech training helped them to improve their speaking competence and reduce their speech anxiety.

METHODOLOGY

This research was to investigate how Malaysian non-native English speaking students from two English medium public universities in Malaysia assess their own speaking skills as specified in the CEFR. The speaking skills focused in this study were the spoken interaction and production skills as specified in the CEFR.

SAMPLING

This study included 233 final year students who were non-native speakers of English, from two English medium public universities in Malaysia and they were from different campuses of the universities, located in three different states in Malaysia which were Johor, Selangor and Pahang. The respondents were Malaysian students aged between 22 years old and 25 years old. The respondents were all undergraduate students in their fourth year either in the first or second semester. They were from twelve major programs from a comprehensive English medium public university and seven major programs from a focused English medium public university.

INSTRUMENTS

In this research, two speaking skills were investigated and they were the spoken interaction and spoken production. With these two main skills, the researcher was trying to find out on how the graduating non-native English students of a comprehensive English medium public university and seven major programs from focused English medium public university in Malaysia assessed their own speaking skills which were the spoken interaction and spoken production skills, using the CEFR, similar to Asdar (2017).

To collect the data, a set of questionnaires which consisted of two questions were distributed to the respondents. The questionnaires were adopted from the CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2001). This questionnaire consisted of two multiple-choice items. The first question was on how the students rated their own spoken interaction while the second question was on how they rated their own spoken production. To answer the questions, the students were given six ascending choices of level A1 to C2 as in the CEFR self-assessment grid descriptors for spoken interaction and spoken production.

PILOT STUDY

The questionnaire was piloted before it was distributed to the graduating non-native English students in the two different universities. According to Ismail, Kinchin and Edwards (2017), a pilot study is done before the final full-scale study and it is a small-scale research project. A pilot study is done in order to reflect all the procedures of the real research and it validates the original study by assessing the criteria of the participants and testing of the instruments used for measurements in the study (In, 2017). Thirty-two respondents were involved in the pilot study. Whitehead, Julious, Cooper and Campbell (2016) stated that based on the general flat rule, 30 subjects and above is the minimum number for a pilot study to estimate the parameter of the research.

According to Heale and Twycross (2015), aside from validity, reliability is one of the methods used in order to measure the quality of a quantitative study. In order to provide a reliable measure of internal consistency of a test, Cronbach alpha was developed by Lee Cronbach in 1951 and the measure was stated in a number range between 0 until 1 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The reliability of the items of the questionnaire used in this study, was determined by putting the responses from the pilot test into Microsoft Excel 2013 to get its Cronbach Alpha value. The value was 0.68 and Taber (2017) stated that in interpreting alpha values, 0.67 until 0.87 is considered as reasonable.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The data for the research was collected through an online survey application. Kılınc and Fırat (2017), stated that compared to the face-to-face survey, an online survey may give more flexibility and positive results as there are respondents who are sensitive and do not want their identities to be known. Thus, a questionnaire was constructed in the Google Form and the link to the questionnaire was delivered to the fourth year students in both universities using the WhatsApp message application. Google Form was chosen as a medium to collect the data as the respondents were from different campuses of the universities, located in three different states in Malaysia which were Johor, Selangor and Pahang. The survey data were collected from March until April 2018.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher analyzed the data using the Microsoft Excel 2013. Rose, Spinks and Canhoto (2015) explained that Excel can function well in providing the standardized spreadsheet, which makes it useful for analysis and data manipulation tasks which include generated graphical and other formats. They also believed that by using Excel, a researcher does not need to learn other statistical analysis software and stated that many basic analysis projects had been successfully analyzed by using the application. Therefore, for this research, the researcher has used the Microsoft Excel to analyze the data and answer the research questions. The data used were in the forms of percentage and numbers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

How do the Malaysian graduating non-native English speaking students from the two English medium public universities rate their own spoken interaction skills?

According to Eggins and Slades (1997), as cited in Itkonen (2010), the range between the casual talk to everyday talk is similar to any form of spoken interaction skills. Interaction is not only about the conversation between a speaker and listener but also about how the speaker adapts to the situation and avoid noise along the conversation (Everard, 2015). To answer the first research question, the students were given six ascending choices of level A1 to C2 as in the CEFR self-assessment grid descriptors for spoken interaction. The respondents' self-assessments of their spoken interaction skills can be seen in Figure 1.

Based on the figure below, most respondents from the Malaysian comprehensive university (MCU) assessed themselves to be at level B2 where at this level, speakers can respond to others fluently and spontaneously (Council of Europe, 2001). Among 133 respondents, 41 MCU respondents (31 percent) assessed themselves to be at this level.

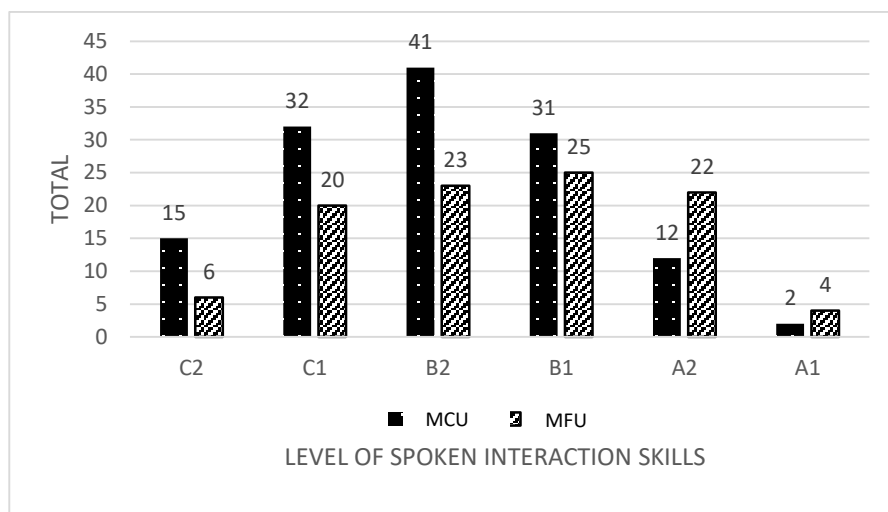


Figure 1 Students' self-assessment of spoken interaction skills

Following B2, the next level that a large group of MCU graduating non-native English speaking students felt they were at was level C1. At level C1, speakers are able to express themselves fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Speakers should also be able to use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes. Besides, at this level, speakers would be able formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate their contribution skillfully to other speakers (Council of Europe, 2001).

The third level that some of the respondents from MCU felt they were at, was level B1. At this level, speakers should be able to deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken and able to enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or relevant to everyday life topics such as family, hobbies, work, travel and current events (Council of Europe, 2001).

Only few of the respondents from MCU assessed themselves to be at level C2. This level was chosen by only 15 of them (11 percent). C2 is the highest level of the CEFR scale and at this level, speakers should be able to take part effortlessly in any conversation or discussion and have a good familiarity with characteristic form of expressions and colloquialisms (Council of Europe, 2001).

Meanwhile, from the Malaysian focused university (MFU), the majority of the graduating non-native English speaking students, which was 25 students out of the 100 respondents (25 percent) saw themselves to be at level B1 followed by level B2, chosen by 23 graduating non-native English respondents (23 percent). This means they thought they were independent users who would be able to fluently participate in unprepared conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or relevant to everyday life topics such as family, hobbies, work, travel and current events (Council of Europe, 2001).

In contrast to the MCU graduating non-native English speaking students, more non-native English students from the MFU felt that they were in the lower levels namely level A2 (22 percent) and level A1 (four percent). At these levels, the students perceived themselves to be able to communicate in simple and routine tasks, handle very short social exchange on familiar topics and activities but may not be able to understand enough to keep the conversation going themselves, (Council of Europe, 2001).

With many non-native English students perceived themselves to be at the lower levels of speech interaction skills, the graduating non-native English students from the MFU who assessed themselves to be at the higher levels, specifically at levels C1 and C2 were lower than the MCU students. Only 20 percent of the MFU students thought they were at level C1 of overall spoken interaction while six percent assessed themselves to be at level C2.

From these findings, it can be said that the Malaysian graduating non-native English speaking students from the two universities that use English as a medium of instructions assessed their abilities to interact in English, differently. From the findings, it can be seen that more graduating non-native English students from the comprehensive university assessed themselves to be having better abilities to interact in English than the students from the focused university. It is however, noticeable that the percentages of students who rated themselves to have low levels of spoken interaction skills are quite high in both universities. A total of 33 percent of the respondents from the comprehensive university rated themselves to be at levels A1 to B1 while a total of 51 percent of the respondents from the focused university opined that they were at those three low levels.

The findings for the question of how Malaysian graduating speakers of English from two English medium public universities rate their own spoken interaction skills indicate that the Malaysian students who took part in this study assessed themselves differently from the Indonesian university students reported in Asdar (2017). The majority of the Malaysian graduating students in this study may have rated themselves at a higher proficiency level because they are already at the final year of their studies.

How do the Malaysian graduating non-native English speaking students from the two English medium public universities rate their own spoken production skills?

Oral production is identified as an action where the speaker will orally present the text to one or more audiences and the best examples are speech, sales presentation, public address and sports commentaries (Council of Europe, 2001). Nishimaki (2014), stated that the utterances produced by the speaker is controlled by the head and the utterance itself may be fragmented and disorganized. To explore the answers for the second research question which is how Malaysian graduating non-native English speakers of English from two English medium public universities rate their own spoken production skills, the respondents who took part in the survey, were given six ascending choices of level A1 to C2 as in the CEFR self-assessment grid descriptors for spoken production. Figure 2 shows the findings for Research Question 2.

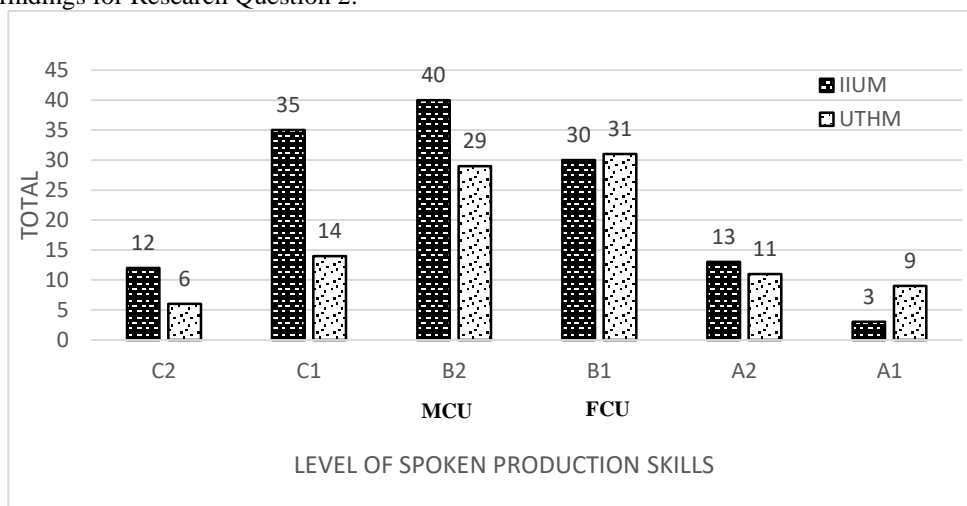


Figure 2 Students' self-assessment of spoken production skills

Based on the comparison of the responses from the two groups of graduating non-native English students, it can be seen that 87 (65.4 percent) respondents from the MCU assessed their speaking production to be at B2 and above, while only 49 (49 percent) of the respondents from the FCU saw themselves to be at those levels.

To elaborate, the most common level chosen by the MCU graduating students was level B2 which was 40 respondents (30 percent) from the total number of 133 respondents. At level B2, speakers can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to their field of interest and would have the ability to explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options (CEFR, 2001). This was followed by 35 respondents (26.3 percent) who assessed themselves to be at level C1. At level C1 of spoken production, the students have perceived themselves to be able to present complex subjects with clear details, develop points, integrate sub-themes as well as end their presentations with appropriate conclusions (Council of Europe, 2001).

Thirty out of the 133 MCU graduating non-native English respondents (22.5 percent) assessed themselves to be at level B1. This is the level where the speakers are able to connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions. At this level, they would also be able to briefly reason and explain their opinions or plans (Council of Europe, 2001).

Only 12 respondents (nine percent) out of the 133 graduating non-native English respondents saw themselves to be at level C2 of spoken production skills. At this level, speakers are able to present a clear, smoothly-flowing description or argument in a style, relevant to the situation and with an effective logical structure which helps the receiver to remember significant points (Council of Europe, 2001).

The least chosen level by the MCU respondents was level A1. This is the lowest level in the CEFR scale and at this level, speakers would be able to use simple phrases and sentences to describe where they live and the people they know (Council of Europe, 2001).

In the case of the MFU students, the majority of them (31 respondents or 31 percent) assessed themselves to be at level B1 of spoken production. This level is where speakers can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, their dreams, hopes and ambitions and also can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans (Council of Europe, 2001).

Level B2 was the next level of spoken production skills chosen by the MFU graduating students. It was chosen by 29 respondents (29 percent). Based on the CEFR descriptor, students at this level can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide matter of subjects related to their field of interest. They would also be able to describe an aspect of a topical issue (Council of Europe, 2001). Following level B2 is level C1 with 14 MFU respondents (14 percent) self-assessed themselves to be at this level.

Nine graduating students (nine percent) from the MFU rated their spoken production skills to be at level A1. This is the level where speakers can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where they live and people they know (Council of Europe, 2001). The least chosen level of spoken production was level C2 and it was chosen by only six MFU graduating non-native English respondents (six percent).

To summarize, it was found in the study that, for spoken production skills, most of the graduating non-native English students of the Malaysian comprehensive university assessed themselves to be at the level B2, followed by C1 and level B1. For level C2, only 12 graduating non-native English respondents assessed their own spoken production to be at this level while a total of 16 felt they were at the level A. Most of the graduating students from the Malaysian focused university on the other hand, assessed themselves to be at level B1 and then level B2. The third level chosen by the MFU graduating non-native English students were level C1 followed by level A1. For the highest level of spoken production skills based on the CEFR descriptors which is level C2, only six respondents assessed their own spoken production to be at this level and this is the least chosen level of spoken production skills among the MFU graduating students.

Based on the findings above, it can be understood that the graduating students from the two universities that use English as a medium of instructions assessed their own spoken production differently. 87 percent of the respondents from the Malaysian comprehensive university perceived themselves to be at level B2 and above of overall spoken production skills and only 49 percent from the Malaysian focused university thought they were at these levels.

When comparing these results to previous studies, it can be pointed out that the findings of this study are similar to Al-Nouh, Abdul-Kareem and Taqi (2015) as well as Rian, Hinkelman and Cotter (2015), where most students assessed their spoken production to be at low level of proficiency.

LIMITATIONS

Throughout the process of the research, there are several limitations that have been identified. Firstly, the study only involved one English medium university from each university category in Malaysia. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all English medium universities in Malaysia.

Other than that, this study only involved the assessments from the students themselves and this could lead to the overrated or underrated issues. Saito (2008) (as cited in Joo, 2016) explained that there are tendencies for learners to overrate or underrate performances. Furthermore, there were also no interview sessions conducted for the students to explain their reasons why they assessed themselves the way they did.

IMPLICATIONS

The obtained results indicate the need for all universities especially the English medium ones to focus more on developing their students' speaking skills and helping them to be more proficient speakers when they graduate. More practices may be needed for university students to feel better about their own performances in spoken interaction and spoken production in English.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended for future researchers to investigate the speaking abilities of students based on the CEFR framework from universities that use English or other languages as medium of instructions for teaching and learning. It is also suggested for future studies to be conducted on how learners of English assess themselves on other English language skills namely listening, reading and writing. Trainings on spoken interaction and spoken production should also be intensified at primary and secondary school levels.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that most of the graduating Malaysian comprehensive university students who participated in this study felt that they had achieved level B2 for both spoken interaction and spoken production, a minimum level targeted by the Malaysian Higher Education (Hazlina Aziz, 2016) before they graduated from their university.

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