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Students' Perceived Test Difficulty, Perceived Performance and Actual Performance of Oral Tests

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ABSTRACT

Having to sit oral tests is tense particularly for individuals who have poor command of the language being tested. This study examines students' reasons in perceiving an oral test as the easiest or hardest and analyses whether they perform poorly (achieving the lowest score) in the test which they perceived as being the most difficult by comparing their perceived oral test difficulty and perceived oral test performance with their actual oral test performance. The study examined 63 students, selected by means of purposive sampling. Data of the survey research were obtained through a self-administered questionnaire and from students' test scores. The descriptive analysis revealed that the prepared individual speech was perceived as the easiest test, followed by the impromptu two-way communication, 20-minute group discussion and the 30-minute group discussion, while the most difficult test was the impromptu individual speech. Besides that, the top four challenges faced by students in the oral tests which they perceived as being the most difficult were insufficient ideas and/or elaboration, time constraint, being nervous and lack of preparation. The implications of the research on adequacy of oral practice were also discussed as the findings provided better understanding of the challenges faced by participants in oral tests.

Keywords: Reasons of performance, perceived test difficulty, perceived performance, actual performance

INTRODUCTION

Most students would agree that having to sit tests and final examinations and attempting to complete assignments are considered nerve-wracking episodes of college or university life. This is due to the fact that examinations affect the overall grades in many of the courses offered in colleges

(Weber & Bizer, 2006). According to Upshur (1971), testing is an important part of teaching as it provides constant information on learners' efforts in speaking English. In other words, oral tests could further offer more information to enhance students' oral English. However, various factors have been identified in affecting students' performance in learning in past studies, which include social self-esteem, teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction (Cardoso, Ferreira, Abrantes, Seabra, & Costa, 2011); achievement motivation, attitudes towards learning, peer influence in learning, ethnic group and gender (Abu Bakar, Ahmad Tarmizi, Mahyuddin, Elias, Wong & Mohd Ayub, 2010); teaching style, English language and communication, and assessment methods (Lebcir, Wells, & Bond, 2008); academic and general self-esteem (Pullmann & Allik, 2008); intelligence and personality (Laidra, Pullmann, & Allik, 2007); student burnout (Yang, 2004); peer achievement (Hanushek, Kain, Markman, & Rivkin, 2003); and perceived test difficulty (Weber & Bizer, 2006; Hong, 1999).

Examining students' perceived test difficulty is essential because Hong (1999) pointed out the results of testing two hypothesised models that represented relationships among test anxiety, perceived test difficulty and test performance that were observed immediately before and after a final examination on 208 university students. It was found that the stimulation of worry by test difficulty perception deteriorated students' actual test performance. In other words, viewing the test as difficult provoked students' worries, which tended to give a negative impact on their test performance. One possible justification would be "students who are worried about the exam may be so because they are not well prepared for the test" (Hong, 1999, p. 443). Hong (1999, p. 433) further stated that worry anxiety is "aroused and maintained by evaluative situations in which the anxiety-provoking elements that influence individuals' cognitive functioning continue to exist throughout the evaluation period." Apart from that, Weber and Bizer (2006) discovered in their research on 62 psychology undergraduates that warning of test difficulty provided immediately prior to test administration had a more complex impact on performance; it may either enhance or impede performance. They have manipulated the degree of the perception of difficulty by randomly telling students that the examination would be: (1) very difficult as most students did poorly in the exam and they would likely score very poorly; (2) very easy as most students did well in the exam and they would likely score very well; and (3) nothing was informed to create a neutral condition. Their research also revealed that low-anxiety students had better performance when warned that the test would be hard (Weber & Bizer, 2006). However, as compared to the perceived test difficulty measured before examination, Hong's (1999) research discovered that the perceived test difficulty during examination (which was recalled after the examination) had greater direct effect on arousing worry and emotionality.

Problem Statement

The English language proficiency in oral communication has been one of the alarming factors in Malaysia that has affected university graduates getting and securing a job in recent years. It has been reported in the Borneo Post Online by Bernama (2014, March 2) that the reasons for local graduates remaining jobless are poor command of the English language, inability to communicate and lack of self-confidence. In a survey conducted by Jobstreet.com (2011), both groups of employers and fresh graduates stated that poor command of English and weak communication skills were among the top five reasons which stopped applicants from getting hired. Furthermore, it was stated that one of the top five issues facing Malaysian employers since 2006 was poor English proficiency among Malaysian fresh graduates (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Despite learning English as a second language in formal education from primary school to tertiary institution for about 15 to 17 years, some graduates are still burdened with low English language proficiency, which hinders them from landing opportunities in the job market.

As stated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the education system aims at ensuring that every individual is proficient in English as the international language of communication upon leaving school through implementation of the new curriculum in both primary and secondary school (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). It has been the aim of the national curriculum to "create Malaysian students that are balanced, resilient, inquisitive, principled, informed, caring, patriotic, as well as an effective thinker, communicator, and team player" (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013, p. 4-2). These two points indicate that proficiency in oral English is essential in producing effective communicators. As a result, improving students' proficiency in the English language is the main concern of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). However, the new curriculum and school-based assessment are only implemented in the primary and secondary education levels. Therefore, it is crucial that the education programmes offered are able to equip future graduates with the necessary skills to join the workforce, and that one of the skills should be communication (Jobstreet. com, 2013), be it oral or written. According to Moslehifar and Ibrahim (2012), higher institutions in Malaysia are making efforts to develop language courses that focus on communicative skills so as to produce graduates who are able to communicate effectively at the workplace.

A study conducted by Zulkurnain and Kaur (2014) on 100 UiTM Diploma of Hotel Management students in Penang, Malaysia had revealed oral communication difficulties faced by the students, namely:

(i)   Insufficient resources as the students had limited English vocabulary, which could lead to deficiencies in sentence structure, grammatical structure and pronunciation.

(ii) Time pressure as longer time was required by the students to produce English sentences as they searched for Malay words, created sentences and then translated them into English sentences.

(iii) Wrong use of words as students produced English sentences incorrectly as they used words that were inappropriate for the context in which they were used.

(iv) Lacking in the ability to understand what their interlocutors had said due to their limited knowledge of the English language as the interlocutors sometimes used sophisticated English words that they had not heard before.

This depicts a clear need to study oral tests and students' perceptions on their performance in the Malaysian higher education context with the intention of getting a better understanding of the students' oral performance and their justification of their performance.

Significance of the Study

The current study was carried out with the main objective of determining students' reasons for their performance in oral tests, which they perceived as the hardest and easiest. This led to designing this study to investigate students' perceived oral test difficulty recalled after the test since Hong (1999) had revealed that the test difficulty perception after tests asserted a stronger influence. In addition, the current study was motivated by the work done by Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2005), which revealed that students' views may suggest to educators a way forward for refining educational practices and achieving a higher quality of education; they added that students' perceptions on assessments and evaluation practices are significantly related to their learning approaches, and vice versa. Thus, it strengthens the course of the study to look at students' comments on perceiving a particular oral test as being the easiest or most difficult. This study also embarked on another two objectives, which were to compare: (1) students' perceived oral test difficulty with their actual oral test performance, and (2) students' perceived oral test performance with their actual oral test performance in order to observe whether they performed poorly (achieving the lowest score) in the test which they perceived as being the most difficult.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The data in this study were collected from 63 students who underwent an oral communication course in a public university in Malaysia. The oral communication course was compulsory for all undergraduates (who had obtained Bands 1 and 2 in the Malaysian University English Test) to complete in addition to the other three English courses on grammar, reading and writing, as well as English for occupational purposes. The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is a pre-requisite for

entry into tertiary education in Malaysia; it measures students' English language proficiency in all the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing and grades using a banding system ranging from the lowest Band 1 to the highest Band 6 (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2014). Students who obtained Band 1 in MUET are described as very limited users of English, hardly able to use the language and have very limited understanding of language and context as well as a very limited ability to function in the language (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2014). MUET Band 2 achievers are labelled as limited users of English, not fluent, with inappropriate use of language and making frequent grammatical errors, with a limited understanding of language and context and ability to function in the language (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2014). This indicates weakness in the command of English. Students who obtained a MUET Band 3 and above must sign up for one of the advanced English courses such as Academic Reading and Writing, English for Research Purposes, Grammar in Context, or Grammar in Practice after going through a foreign language course (levels 1, 2 and 3) for three semesters. The oral communication course runs for 14 weeks in a semester (with 3 hours of contact each week) and by the end of the course, students should possess appropriate and fairly fluent communication skills as well as the ability to comprehend information in both social and academic contexts, understand the use of language and vocabulary, and deliver individual speeches.

A total of 60 classes were offered in the oral communication course in semester 2 of session 2013/2014, and students were selected from three classes comprising 88 students who were taught by the same teacher through the purposive sampling technique. However, 25 students were excluded from the study due to the incomplete data collected from the self-administered questionnaire. The oral communication course in the particular semester was taken by students in the Arts stream, namely, those from the Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy, the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage and the Faculty of Psychology and Education. As the course was taught by different teachers, the teachers had the authority to set oral test questions based on the given themes and this in turn made the assessments less standardised. As a result, the purposive sampling was used as the researcher intentionally selected the students who shared identical characteristics, that is the participants of the three classes were from the Faculty of Psychology and Education (enrolled in programmes such as Industrial and Organisational Psychology, Youth and Community Development, Counselling Psychology, Child and Family Psychology and Social Work), while the oral tests were standardised in all the three classes taught by the same teacher. Babbie (2011) acknowledged that it is appropriate to utilise purposive sampling to select a sample on the basis of the researcher's knowledge of a population, its elements and the purpose

of the study in order to choose the most useful and representative sample for a research.

From the data collected, 20 students obtained Band 1 and 41 students achieved Band 2 in their MUET, whereas two students did not state their achievement in MUET. The students (16 males and 47 females), aged 20 to 24 years old, were in their first year of study in the university. They were all Malaysians of different races and from various states in Malaysia: Malays (n=18), Chinese (n=13), Indian (n=3), Kadazan-Dusun (n=11), Bajau (n=8), and other races such as Melanau, Lunbawang, Iranun, Brunei, Kedayan, Ubian, Bugis and Murut (n=10).

Data

The data of this study were derived through a self-administered questionnaire and from students' oral test scores. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: Part 1 (student's particulars), Part 2 (students' perceived oral test difficulty) and Part 3 (student's perceived oral performance). The questionnaire was constructed in bilingual medium (both English and Malay) as the respondents were described as very limited users of English and thus, they were allowed to answer in either English or Malay. In Part 1, students' demographic data, information such as name, degree programme, age, gender, race, state of origin and achievement in MUET, were obtained. The students' names were required (instead of their matric numbers) for precise identification and labelling as the researcher would not meet the participants again after the completed self-administered questionnaires were collected, as well as to match the data from the questionnaire with the students' test scores. The names of students were kept confidential and were not included in any report and study. Besides that, students were required to rank the five oral tests of the course in Part 2 (from the easiest to the most difficult), namely: (a) Impromptu Two-way Communication, (b) Prepared Individual Speech, (c) 20-minute Group Discussion, (d) Final Test Part 1: Impromptu Individual Speech, and (e) Final Test Part 2: 30-minute Group Discussion. Table 1 provides the description of each oral test.

In addition to that, students were asked to state their reason(s) for stating a particular test as the easiest or most difficult among the five tests. In Part 3, students were required to express the oral tests in which they felt they gave their best and worst performance; and the reason(s) they said so with the aim of comparing their perceived oral performance with their actual performance. All the reasons provided by the students in Parts 2 and 3 of the questionnaire were then grouped into categories during the data analysis.

TABLE 1
Description of Each Oral Test

Oral Test	Description	Example of Topic
Impromptu Two-way Communication (15%)	Pairs of students have to prepare for 3 minutes and converse for 6 minutes on a given topic based on the areas covered from week 1 to week 6 of the semester, for which they draw lots. The evaluation is based on the ability to ask and answer questions and present objective and subjective information as well as on grammar and vocabulary usage, fluency of expression, body language, pronunciation and sophistication of ideas.	The benefits of joining the National Service
Prepared Individual Speech (25%)	The speech is 4 to 5 minutes long and is based on a topic (themes covered in weeks 1 to 8) chosen by the teacher and handed to the students two weeks in advance. The evaluation is based on facial expression, vocal expression, grammar and vocabulary usage, pronunciation, fluency of expression, body language, sophistication of ideas and structure and organisation.	The importance of having a good personality
20-minute Group Discussion (20%)	Four students are given 5 minutes to prepare for the task and 20 minutes to present the discussion of the topic (themes covered in weeks 2 to 8) given by the teacher. The evaluation is based on understanding the given task, development of ideas, fluency, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary usage, structure and organisation, body language, manner of interaction and ability to maintain a discussion.	The Internet brings more advantages than disadvantages to university students
Final Test Part 1: Impromptu Individual Speech (20%)	Each student will be given 3 minutes to prepare and 3 minutes to deliver the speech. The evaluation is based on understanding the given task, development of ideas, delivery, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary usage, structure and organisation and body language.	The effects of gambling
Final Test Part 2: 30-minute Group Discussion (20%)	Students work in groups of four and they are given 10 minutes to prepare for the group discussion and 30 minutes to present the discussion. They must come to a kind of agreement on the conclusion of the topic concerned. Topics to be tested are based on all the themes of the course. The evaluation is based on understanding the task given, development of ideas, delivery, fluency, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary usage, structure and organisation, body language, manner of interaction and ability to maintain a discussion.	Academic qualification is more important than soft skills in getting a job

A pilot test was conducted on the questionnaire, and necessary amendments were made according to the feedback gathered prior to the data collection. Copies of the questionnaires were distributed to the students of the three classes at the end of the semester after they had taken their Final Test Part 2: Group Discussion in week 13. The questionnaires were given out after their actual performance because

Hong (1999) mentioned that test difficulty perception after tests had a greater impact on students. Apart from that, the students' test scores, which were their actual test performance, were gathered from all the oral tests of the course.

Then the students were labelled as S1 (Student 1), S2 (Student 2) and so on until the last participant, S63 (Student 63) according to the sequence of the student name lists

provided by the university's student database system. After that, a descriptive statistics analysis of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 20 was used to analyse the students' demographic data and the ranking of the five oral tests. As the distribution of the five oral test scores was disproportionate, the researcher divided the test score obtained for each test with the total score of each test to compute the score in ratio (see Table 2) in order to compare the scores of the students' actual performance with their perceived test difficulty as well as their perceived test performance.

TABLE 2
Conversion of Five Oral Test Scores into Ratio for S1

Student	Oral Test	Total Score of Test	Student's Obtained Score	Student's Score in Ratio
	A	15	10.6	.71
	B	25	18	.72
S1	C	20	14.6	.73
	D	20	13.6	.68
	E	20	16.8	.84
	Total Score	100%		

Note. A = Impromptu Two-way Communication. B = Prepared Individual Speech. C = 20-minute Group Discussion. D = Final Test Part 1: Impromptu Individual Speech. E = Final Test Part 2: 30-minute Group Discussion. Formula for converting Oral Test A score of S1 into ratio = 10.6/15 = .71

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In determining students' perceived oral test difficulty, the results of the descriptive statistics analysis shown in Table 3 indicated that the Prepared Individual Speech was perceived as the easiest test (n=37), followed by the Impromptu Two-way Communication (n=24), the 20-minute Group Discussion (n=21) and Final Test Part 2: 30-minute Group Discussion (n=23), while the most difficult test was the Final Test Part 1: Impromptu Individual Speech (n=31). Table 4 specifies the students who identified the Prepared Individual Speech as being the easiest test and the Test Part 1: Impromptu Individual Speech as being the most difficult test.

TABLE 3
Students' Perceived Oral Test Difficulty

| Oral Tests | Ranking | | | | | |
	1 (The easiest)	2	3	4	5 (The most difficult)	Total students
Impromptu Two-way Communication	10	**24**	16	10	3	63
Prepared Individual Speech	**37**	7	4	6	9	63
20-minute Group Discussion	10	18	**21**	8	6	63
Final Test Part 1: Impromptu Individual Speech	2	5	9	16	**31**	63
Final Test Part 2: 30-minute Group Discussion	4	8	14	**23**	14	63

TABLE 4
Students' Perception of Their Easiest and Most Difficult Oral Tests

Oral Tests	Students	Total Students
The Easiest Test –Prepared Individual Speech	S1, S5, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, S16, S17, S19, S22, S24, S25, S26, S27, S28, S29, S30, S31, S32, S33, S35, S37, S41, S42, S47, S49, S50, S53, S56, S57, S58, S61, and S63.	37
The Most Difficult Test – Final Test Part 1: Impromptu Individual Speech	S1, S2, S6, S8, S10, S15, S21, S22, S24, S25, S26, S29, S31, S32, S33, S34, S38, S39, S40, S41, S43, S46, S47, S49, S50, S51, S52, S53, S54, S61, and S62.	31

Note. S = Student.

In most cases, it was expected that those who perceived a test as being the most difficult test would also perceive that they performed the worst in the same test, and vice versa. Nevertheless, such an expectation was only relevant to about two thirds of the two groups in Table 5. Of the 37 students who identified the Prepared Individual Speech as being the easiest oral test, 67.6% perceived that they performed best in the test, while 32.4% stated that their best performance was not the prepared individual speech. On the other hand, of those who specified the Impromptu Individual Speech as being the most difficult oral test, 61.3% stated that they gave their worst performance in the particular test whereas 38.7% expressed that their worst performance was not the Impromptu Individual Speech.

Although students voted the Prepared Individual Speech as the easiest test, not all scored the highest mark in the same test. In comparing students' perceived oral test difficulty with their actual performance (see Table 6), only 10 out of the 37 students who perceived the Prepared Individual Speech as being the easiest test had achieved the highest mark in the stated test. Similarly, not all who felt that the Impromptu Individual Speech was the most difficult test had achieved the lowest mark in the same test. Of the 31 students, there were 16 students who obtained the lowest mark in the Impromptu Individual Speech. Unpredictably, there were seven odd cases where students obtained the lowest score in the Prepared Individual Speech, which they regarded as being the easiest oral test. Another interesting finding was that there were two cases (S40 and S41) where the students who perceived the Impromptu Individual Speech as being the most difficult test had obtained the highest test score. These two cases fit the findings found in the study by Weber and Bizer (2006), who stated that a possible explanation to the two cases was that low-anxiety students who perceived a test to be difficult would obtain better achievement in the test. However, this study did not venture to gather the anxiety level of the participants.

TABLE 5
Students' Perception of Their Best and Worst Oral Test Performance

Perceived Performance	Oral Tests	Students	No. of Students	Percentage (%)	Total Students
The Best Test Performed	B	S1, S7, S8, S11, S12, S13, S14, S16, S22, S25, S26, S27, S28, S29, S31, S32, S33, S37, S41, S42, S47, S50, S53, S61, and S63	25	67.6	37
	A	S56	1	32.4	
	C	S5, S9, S10, S19, S30, and S49.	6		
	E	S24 and S57.	2		
	Individual Speeches (B and D)	S17, S35, and S58.	3		
The Worst Test Performed	D	S1, S2, S6, S8, S21, S22, S25, S29, S34, S38, S39, S41, S43, S46, S47, S50, S52, S53, and S61.	19	61.3	31
	A	S40 and S49	2	38.7	
	B	S15, S24, S54, and S62.	4		
	E	S10, S31, and S33.	3		
	Individual Speeches (B and D)	S51	1		
	Final Test Parts 1 and 2 (D and E)	S26 and S32.	2		

Note. S = Student. The percentage values are rounded to one decimal place. A = Impromptu Two-way Communication. B = Prepared Individual Speech. C = 20-minute Group Discussion. D = Final Test Part 1: Impromptu Individual Speech. E = Final Test Part 2: 30-minute Group Discussion.

TABLE 6
Students' Actual Performance, Perceived Performance (the Best and Worst) and Perceived Test Difficulty (the Easiest and Most Difficult)

Perceived B as the easiest oral test	A	B	C	D	E	Perceived D as the most difficult oral test	Perceived D as the worst performance	Perceived B as the best performance
S1	.71	.72	.73	**.68**	**.84**	**S1**	**D**	**B**
S5	**.66**	**.66**	**.64**	**.64**	.65		A	C
S7	.71	**.74**	.72	**.70**	.72		E	B
S8	.76	.76	**.77**	**.68**	.75	**S8**	**D**	B
S9	.70	.71	**.77**	**.62**	.70		D & E	C
S10	.72	.73	**.74**	**.65**	**.65**	**S10**	E	C
S11	.71	.70	**.75**	**.65**	**.65**		E	B
S12	**.71**	.70	**.61**	.62	.64		E	B
S13	**.83**	.78	.77	**.68**	.74		D	B

S14	**.91**	**.78**	.83	.87	.84		E	B
S16	.77	.78	.80	**.68**	**.82**		D	B
S17	**.76**	.72	**.70**	**.70**	.75		D & E	B & D
S19	**.67**	.63	.52	.49	**.45**		C & E	C & E
S22	.72	**.79**	**.63**	.64	.67	S22	**D**	**B**
S24	**.79**	.78	**.72**	.74	.74	S24	B	E
S25	**.80**	**.80**	.79	**.72**	.77	S25	**D**	B
S26	**.75**	.68	**.64**	.68	**.75**	S26	D & E	B
S27	.79	**.75**	.81	**.84**	**.84**		C	B
S28	.84	**.97**	.82	**.80**	.82		C	B
S29	.74	**.75**	.72	**.67**	.72	S29	**D**	B
S30	.76	**.72**	.74	.75	.84		D	C
S31	.73	**.78**	.74	**.70**	**.70**	S31	E	B
S32	.44	**.63**	.47	.42	**.40**	S32	D & E	B
S33	.71	**.77**	.71	**.68**	**.68**	S33	E	B
S35	.73	.73	**.71**	**.80**	.75		E	B & D
S37	.77	.81	**.71**	**.82**	.74		E	B
S41	.79	**.74**	.79	**.80**	.75	S41	**D**	B
S42	**.73**	**.73**	.75	**.80**	.78		C	B
S47	**.77**	.76	.76	.67	**.60**	S47	**D**	B
S49	**.80**	.78	.79	.78	**.74**	S49	A	C
S50	.74	.78	**.79**	**.68**	.77	S50	**D**	B
S53	**.81**	.76	.69	**.65**	.68	S53	**D**	B
S56	.78	**.69**	**.69**	.72	**.80**		C	A
S57	.74	.66	**.77**	**.65**	.75		D	E
S58	.80	**.77**	.79	.82	**.84**		C	B & D
S61	.69	**.71**	.70	**.67**	**.67**	S61	**D**	B
S63	.75	.75	**.76**	**.68**	.70		D	B
	.85	**.75**	.79	**.75**	.82	S2	**D**	C
	.74	.71	**.78**	.70	**.67**	S6	**D**	C
	.91	**.72**	.87	.78	.84	S15	B	C & E
	.82	.75	.81	**.72**	.75	S21	**D**	A
	.75	**.76**	.75	**.70**	.74	S34	**D**	C
	.60	.69	**.71**	.65	.68	S38	**D**	E
	.80	**.86**	.78	**.68**	.80	S39	**D**	E
	.74	.78	.78	**.80**	.78	S40	A	C
	.85	.72	.82	**.68**	.80	S43	**D**	C
	.67	.70	**.71**	.62	**.59**	S46	**D**	C
	.73	**.69**	.72	.70	**.77**	S51	B & D	E
	.76	.67	.62	.64	**.60**	S52	**D**	E
	.76	**.77**	.75	.72	**.68**	S54	B	D
	.79	.70	.75	**.67**	.72	S62	B	C

Note. A = Impromptu Two-way Communication. B = Prepared Individual Speech. C = 20-minute Group Discussion. D = Final Test Part 1: Impromptu Individual Speech. E = Final Test Part 2: 30-minute Group Discussion.

Apart from that, in relating students' perceived oral performance with their actual performance, 9 of the total of 25 students who thought that they performed the best in the Prepared Individual Speech had obtained the highest score in the same oral test. Meanwhile, of the 19 students who believed that their worst performance was the Impromptu Individual Speech, 12 did in fact score the worst in the same test by achieving the lowest score in the test in comparison with the other four oral tests. Interestingly, these two groups of 9 and 12 students were also the ones who perceived the Prepared Individual Speech as being the easiest oral test and/or the Impromptu Individual Speech as the most difficult oral test (see Table 6).

In examining the reasons behind the students' perception of the most difficult or easiest oral test, as well as their worst or best performance, some of them gave more than one reason. In considering the Impromptu Individual Speech as the toughest oral test, students indicated a total of 13 reasons, as listed in Table 7. Specifically, the top three reasons given by the students were insufficient time to prepare the speech, lack of ideas and/or elaboration and being nervous during the test. The first two reasons are similar to the two categories of oral communication difficulties stated by Zulkurnain and Kaur (2014), which are time pressure as students may require longer time to produce English sentences and insufficient resources that may be due to lack of English vocabulary, sentence structure, grammatical structure and pronunciation. In this study, one of the possible reasons for the limited time in preparing the speech was the nature

of the test as students were only given 3 minutes to prepare their speech before delivering it. Meanwhile, being nervous during the oral test supports Hong's (1999) contention that worry has a negative impact on test performance.

On the other hand, students who viewed that they had given their worst performance in the Impromptu Individual Speech test indicated a total of 10 reasons as listed in Table 7. The reasons with the top three frequencies provided by the students were: lack of ideas and/or elaboration, insufficient preparation for the test, being nervous and weak understanding of the title of the speech. These results, where insufficient preparation and being nervous were among the most stated reasons to perceiving the test as students' worst performance, again confirmed Hong's (1999) notion that lack of adequate preparation for the test may cause students to be nervous during the test, which in turn could affect performance. Furthermore, these same reasons also supported Zulkurnain and Kaur's (2014) findings, where time pressure and insufficient resource were the difficulties faced by students during their English oral communication activities. According to Zulkurnain and Kaur (2014), having limited knowledge of the English language could cause students to have weak understanding of the speech title as the titles may contain sophisticated English words that students have not seen/heard before.

In these two groups of the perceived test difficulty and perceived performance, it was evident that one of the major weaknesses in delivering an impromptu individual speech

was that the students lacked ideas. From the total frequency of both perceived test difficulty and performance, the four reasons with larger values were: insufficient ideas and/or elaboration (f=21), time constraint (f =11), being nervous (f =10), and lack of preparation (f =10).

In contrast to the Impromptu Individual Speech, only five reasons were given in suggesting Prepared Individual Speech as the easiest test and/or viewing that they

gave the best performance in this particular test based on the justifications given in Table 8. Most of the students disclosed that they were able to prepare for the test and that made them to believe that the test was the easiest and/or they performed the best in the Prepared Individual Speech. One explanation to this was the characteristic of the oral test, where students were given two weeks to prepare their speech prior to delivering it.

TABLE 7
Students' Justification in Perceiving Impromptu Individual Speech as the Most Difficult Oral Test and Worst Performance

Reasons	Perceived Impromptu Individual Speech as the Most Difficult Oral Test		Perceived Impromptu Individual Speech as the Worst Performance		
	Students	f	Students	f	Total f
Time constraint	S8, S26, S31, S34, S40, S43, S49, S52, S61	9 (29.0%)	S34, S52	2 (10.5%)	11
Insufficient ideas/ elaboration	S8, S21, S39, S41, S50, S51, S53	7 (22.6%)	S2, S6, S8, S21, S25, S34, S38, S39, S41, S43, S46, S50, S53, S61,	14 (73.7%)	21
Nervous	S1, S2, S29, S43, S47, S51, S52,	7 (22.6%)	S34, S47, S52	3 (15.8%)	10
The need to be spontaneous	S24, S26, S29, S47, S62,	5 (16.1%)	S41	1 (5.3%)	6
Insufficient understanding of the title	S6, S22, S39, S53	4 (12.9%)	S39, S50, S53,	3 (15.8%)	7
Lack of preparation	S1, S15, S29, S31	4 (12.9%)	S1, S29, S39, S43, S47, S52	6 (31.6%)	10
Lack of words	S10, S25, S32, S46,	4 (12.9%)	S22, S25	2 (10.5%)	6
No assistance from peer/no reference	S32, S33, S49, S61	4 (12.9%)			4
Weak in sentence structure	S2	1 (3.2%)	S2, S29	2 (10.5%)	3
Insufficient reading	S6	1 (3.2%)			1
Unable to make good conclusion	S21	1 (3.2%)	S21	1 (5.3%)	2
Lack of confidence	S51	1 (3.2%)			1
Introvert personality	S40	1 (3.2%)			1
Poor health condition			S1	1 (5.3%)	1

Note: f = Frequency. The percentage values do not equal to 100% because a student can provide more than one reason. The percentage values are rounded to one decimal place.

TABLE 8
Students' Justification in Perceiving Prepared Individual Speech as the Easiest Oral Test and Best Performance

Reasons	Perceived Prepared Individual Speech as the Easiest Oral Test		Perceived Prepared Individual Speech as the Best Performance		Total f
	Students	f	Students	f	
Able to make preparation/ Sufficient time for making preparation	S1, S7, S8, S9, S10, S11, S12, S13, S14, S16, S24, S25, S26, S27, S28, S29, S30, S31, S32, S33, S35, S37, S41, S42, S47, S49, S50, S56, S58, S61, S63	31 (83.8%)	S1, S7, S12, S13, S14, S16, S22, S25, S26, S27, S28, S29, S31, S32, S33, S37, S41, S42, S47, S50, S53, S61, S63	23 (92.0%)	54
Sufficient ideas/ elaboration	S56, S57	2 (5.4%)	S8, S11, S27, S31, S61	5 (20.0%)	7
Understand the title	S5, S30, S53	3 (8.1%)	S32	1 (4.0%)	4
Absence of stress			S14	1 (4.0%)	1
No group discussion	S17	1 (2.7%)			1

Note: f = Frequency. The percentage values do not equal to 100% because a student can provide more than one reason. The percentage values are rounded to one decimal place.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the results had shed light on students' accounts in their perception of the oral test difficulty and oral test performance. The prepared individual speech was perceived as the easiest test while the most difficult test was impromptu individual speech. Insufficient ideas/elaboration, time constraint, being nervous and lack of preparation were the top four problems faced in the Impromptu Individual Speech (which the majority thought was their most difficult oral test). On the other hand, being able to prepare was the reason for those who viewed the Prepared Individual Speech as their easiest test and/or who thought that they had given their best performance in it. Nevertheless, the findings of the study revealed that students who viewed a particular oral test as their most difficult test may not have achieved the lowest score in that test, and those who thought that a particular oral test as the easiest test also may not have obtained the best score in it. These results have pertinent pedagogical implications with respect to the suitability of oral activities executed in the classroom, particularly the oral communication course

in the university. As educators begin to better understand students' main problems in oral tests, they discover the opportunity to develop better tools for teaching the Oral Communication course. This calls for building the content and vocabulary of students, as effective communication is more dependent on possessing adequate and appropriate vocabulary than mastering grammatical rules (Vermeer, 1992). Thus, it is vital for educators to build students' vocabulary so that students are able to convey their intended message effectively; however, the researcher does not suggest that grammar is not important. On top of that, educators can incorporate specific reading materials in their lessons to assist students in attaining appropriate and necessary knowledge input, and provide other optional readings for students' autonomous reading. Apart from that, educators can cope with students' weaknesses in oral English by integrating the five-category framework outlined by Littlewood (2006), which ranges along a continuum from Non-communicative Learning (e.g. grammar exercises and substitution drills), through Pre-communicative Language Practice and Communicative Language Practice (e.g. question-and-answer practice, basic information-exchange tasks and conducting a survey among classmates) to Structured Communication and Authentic Communication (e.g. more complicated information-exchange tasks, discussion, problem-solving and content-based tasks). To assist students with low English proficiency, educators can start either from

the first or second category before gradually expanding to the other three. This is only a suggestion made by the researcher and it is not a one-size-fits-all method. Apart from that, educators can include some structured or simulation activities in order to familiarise students with the specifications of the tests. With adequate knowledge of the English language, students would be less nervous and more confident as well as more prepared in expressing their intended meaning in oral communication activities. Consequently, the results are crucial in enhancing educators' understanding of students' problems in their oral English so that educators can utilise them to reflect on their teaching practices and act to improve them by either adopting or adapting existing and new practices in order to maximise student learning. Besides that, educators must note that students' mental picture of the difficulty level of a test might affect students' oral performance differently in different individuals; hence, future research could examine the levels and effects of students' perceived test difficulty on their actual performance.

Like other studies, some limitations to the current study must be noted. The small sample size prevented the generalisability of the findings because the sample was taken from only three classes of a total 60 classes in that particular semester. Consequently, the sample was not representative of the students' opinions of other classes, which comprised students who were from similar or different faculties and fields of studies. It is suggested that casting a

wider net that involves a larger sample of all students from the same field of studies taking the same course would improve the understanding of the phenomenon and reinforce the findings of the current study as well as standardising the questions and topics asked in the oral tests. As the study only discussed the most difficult and easiest oral tests, further research could build on the current study and look at other oral tests on students' perceived test difficulty and perceived performance with their actual performance. Besides that, future research could investigate why students did not present their best in an oral test which they perceived as being the easiest, and vice versa.

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