



## Assessing the Writing Levels of Malaysian Armed Forces Officers Based on the ADFELPS Writing Scale

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Australian Defence Force English Language Profiling System (ADFELPS) is an English language proficiency rating system used to assess the English language skills of Malaysian candidates and to describe the levels of English required for target courses conducted by the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) and the New Zealand Defence Forces (NZDF). It covers all the four language skills i.e. Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking and it is graded from Level 1 to a maximum of Level 9 which is a native speaker's proficiency. Currently, Malaysian officers have some difficulty getting a Level 7 and above for the ADFELPS Writing Scale. Although there are some officers who are at Level 7 or Level 8 at the other language skills, they have difficulty going from Level 6 to Level 7 for the Writing skill. An English language writing workshop was held at the Armed Forces Library over three days to improve the writing skills of Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) Officers. The main aim of this course was to improve the writing skills for MAF officers especially for officers who are going for overseas courses where the minimum ADFELPS level is a Level 6. The course covered grammar, coherent and cohesive writing, analyzing a typical five paragraph essay, culminating in the students being given two essays and being graded at ADFELPS writing scales. The results show that there has been a deterioration of writing skills of MAF officers and some of the problems related to writing will be discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** ADFELPS, profiling system, proficiency rating, writing skills, deterioration

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## INTRODUCTION

ADFELPS is the acronym for the *Australian Defence Force English Language Profiling System*. ADFELPS is an English language proficiency rating system used to assess the English language skills of Malaysian candidates and to describe the levels of English required for target courses conducted by the Australian Defence Forces (ADF) and the New Zealand Defence Forces (NZDF).

The ADFELPS is used to:

- **assess** English language proficiency of candidates.
- **identify** suitable candidates for Australian Defence Forces (ADF) and New Zealand Defence Forces (NZDF).
- **determine** English language profiles to all ADF and NZDF courses available to our personnel.
- **match** our personnel to appropriate courses, based on their English language proficiency.

The test covers all the 4 skills of the English language i.e. Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing. For each skill, there are 9 levels of Language Proficiency Level Descriptors from Level 1 to Level 9, with Level 1 being the minimum and Level 9 being the maximum level of proficiency. So for Speaking, Level 1 indicates that almost no communication is possible, while Level 9 indicates that there is high effective communication of meaning in all situations.

For the Writing Assessment Scale at Level 1, the writer may be able to form or transcribe most letters, some numbers and some high frequency words and phrases for the 'language use' (LU) domain but is non-functional for the 'coherence & cohesion' (CC) and 'communicative effectiveness' (CE) domains. However at Level 9, the writer's language is controlled, flexible and precise at the LU domain. The text is skilfully structured and sequenced throughout at the CC domain and communication is thorough and substantive at the CE domain.

The Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) has adopted this testing system for all military personnel going far overseas and local courses as the ADFELPS tests all the four language skills of English. Furthermore, for Australia and New Zealand, achieving the required levels for English is a pre-requisite to attending their target courses and ranging from the radio technician course to their Masters programme at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA). Malaysian English language testers have to attend a 3 week ADFELPS Raters course at the Defence International Training Centre (DITC) in order to qualify as a tester.

In this paper the researcher will be discussing what the ADFELPS test is all about, with emphasis to the Writing test. The researcher will not be discussing the other tests which concentrate on listening, reading and speaking but will touch on them from time to time. The researcher will be discussing the components of the Writing Workshop that was held over three days to improve the writing skills of MAF officers. Lastly, the researcher will discuss the results of the ADFELPS test conducted at the end of the course and some of the problems faced by MAF officers related to writing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

For any assessment or evaluation, two important concepts come to mind which is whether the test is reliable or whether the test is valid. One means of determining whether the measure you are using is effective is to assess the reliability of the measure. According to Sherri Jackson (2003:39) reliability refers to 'whether a measuring instrument is consistent or stable'. In other words, we want a measure to measure exactly the same way each time it is used.

The ADFELPS test is only conducted by people who have attended a 3 week course at DITC, Australia. During the course, they will first be taught the basics of the test and have to conduct mock interviews for 5 sessions. Only then will they be assessed and given the accredited testers qualification. Furthermore they have to resit the accreditation test every two years. Every tester follows the same procedure and uses the same interviewing kit. So there is reliability as all testers use the same kit and follow the same descriptors.

In addition to being reliable, measures must also be valid. Validity refers whether a measure is truthful or genuine (Jackson,2003). In other words, a measure that is valid is one that measures what it claims to measure. Construct validity is considered by many to be the most important type of validity. The construct validity of a test assesses the extent to which a measuring instrument accurately measures a theoretical construct or trait that it is designed to measure. Some examples of theoretical constructs are verbal fluency, depression, anxiety, intelligence and scholastic aptitude.

The ADFELPS test is valid because it measures what it is supposed to measure. Writing proficiency is rated on the results from two graded writing tasks. In total, the tasks should take no more than 60 minutes to complete. Each writing task is assessed in the areas of *Language Use*, *Coherence & Cohesion* and overall *Communicative Effectiveness* of the passage. The descriptions in each of these areas of assessment for any particular level are drawn from the Language Profile Descriptors for that level and are drawn up in a Rating Scale to enable easier rating in each area. Thus it is criterion referenced.

## WRITING PROFICIENCY

Writing is very important for the Armed Forces officers because they have to attend overseas courses at Diploma and tertiary level. One of the problems is that they are not very conversant with academic rules and conventions: as they are more attuned to military writing conventions. This affected their writing of dissertations as they lacked Communicative



Academic Language Capability (CALP). Thus other than Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), officers also need CALP in English for their academic writing, summarizing and translating relevant information from Malay to English.

For their writing needs, the following learning outcomes are suggested: Students must be able to

- write academic papers
- write reports/thesis based on research
- summarize information from reading military/academic articles
- take notes during professional/academic encounters.

The following recommendations for teaching writing have been made with reference to the need assessment findings that writing is crucial for students both academically since all their evaluation is written and professionally as the military places utmost importance on writing proficiency. The integrated skills approach which contends that the development of writing skills results in the improvement of the other skills, particularly reading and speaking, has to be instituted.

First, an overview of the phases of writing instruction through “mediated scaffold instruction” strongly advocated by Dixon, Kame’enui and Carnine (2007) is briefly sketched. In “mediated scaffolding” temporary support is provided for students to learn new material which becomes “faded over time” (Dixon, Kame’enui & Carnine, 2007:10). Students are taught to regulate their own thinking about the use of composing strategies, as these features are critical to the goal of making students independent.

Many experts (Murphy & Stoller, 2001; Coyne, Kame’enui & Carnine, 2007; Nelson & Burns, 2000; Ponder & Powell, 1989) recommend the use of Sustained Content Based Instruction (CBI) in any ELT programme. In Sustained CBI the students are encouraged to read and write within a few selected (three or four) topic areas throughout the duration of the entire ELT course.

Use of the Process Approach to writing in writing instruction is advised by a number of experts (Tickoo, 2003; Tribble, 1997; Cunningham & Allington 2003; Harmer, 2001; White & Arndt, 1991). Thus in teaching writing we should focus on the “writing process itself, concentrating on the various stages that any piece of writing goes through, and spending time with learners on pre-writing phases, editing, redrafting - get(s) to the heart of the various skills that should be employed when writing – asks students to consider the procedure of putting together a good piece of work” (Harmer, 2001:257).

The use of a “Data collection prelude” prior to any assigned writing task was suggested by Tribble (1997:148-50). He proposed the students should be made to “spend time every day for a week,” looking at real samples of a text, for example, letters to newspapers. They are asked to “make notes of particular vocabulary and/or grammar constructions in the letters” find any language that expresses “approval/disapproval (and) note down (interesting) sentences they come across”.

Some experts (Pally, 2000; Carson, 2000; Tickoo, 2003) suggested the explicit teaching of note-taking skills is vitally important for students. They opined that these skills should be directly taught including “recognizing and signaling of main points and organizational patterns and the importance of developing abbreviation systems.” Whether it is done from reading or listening, note-taking is “primarily a writing task – it is a form of summary writing (students write summaries of material they have either read or heard)” (Carson, 2002:21).

## METHODOLOGY

An English Language Writing Workshop was held for Tri – Service Officers between 28 May and 30 May 2013 at the Auditorium Panglima Angkatan Tentera, MINDEF Library. It had been noticed that the English Language levels of Armed Forces Officers have been deteriorating over the years, especially in the writing skills. Thus, this course was held to improve the writing skills of Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) Officers.

The main aim of this course was to improve the writing skills of Armed Forces Officers especially for officers who are going for overseas courses where the minimum level according to the Australian Defence Force English Language Profiling System (ADFELPS) is a Level 6.

The objectives of the writing workshop were as follows :

- a. To give exposure to students on the importance of English Language as a Second Language.
- b. To guide students on the correct usage of the language in order to have good writing skills.
- c. To raise the knowledge of English and improve the writing skills of MAF Officers.
- d. To implement and imbue the value of English to all MAF Officers as stated in the ‘Perintah Am Angkatan Tentera (PAAT)’ 1/2003.

There were 29 participants in the course and they were from all the 3 services i.e. the Army, Navy and Air Force, which is as follows:

- a. Army - 12





- b. Navy - 12
- c. Air Force - 5

## FINDINGS & RESULTS

Various tests and exercises were conducted such as two ADFELPS Writing tests, a Grammar exercise and a Vocabulary exercise. However from the tests and exercises conducted, it was noticed that most of the students were weak in the command of the language as well as had only reasonable communication skills. This will be highlighted in the next section for the grammar exercise and the writing test conducted at ADFELPS level.

For the grammar exercise, the tenses done were the Simple Present and the Present Progressive. These two tenses are basic tenses and there were 45 blanks in the exercise. Students were given 45 minutes to fill in the blanks and then marked their colleague's paper with the answers given by the lecturer. Only three students had less than 10 mistakes while the majority had between 11 to 30 mistakes and three students had 31, 32 and 38 mistakes respectively. The writing exercise is as per Annex C.

For the ADFELPS Writing Test, the levels were as follows:

- a. Level 4 - 1 student
- b. Level 5 - 20 students
- c. Level 6 - 5 students
- d. Level 7 - 1 student

Note: 2 students did not attend the test.

## PROBLEMS FACED BY THE STUDENTS

From the grammar exercise, it can be seen that students are very weak in grammar which is the basic unit that they have to master in order to write a good essay. Only 3 students had less than 10 mistakes. The rest did not measure up to the standards needed in writing skills especially to go for overseas courses.

The results of the ADFELPS Writing Test shows that only one student qualifies to go for overseas course at the University level while 5 students qualify to go for military courses overseas. 21 students do not qualify at all for overseas courses.

Among the comments stated by the lecturer regarding the essays were:

- a. Did not complete task
- b. Limited vocabulary / incorrect spelling
- c. Significant strain for reader
- d. Bad Grammar
- e. No subject-verb agreement
- f. Some loss of meaning
- g. Main ideas not developed
- h. Limited coherence and cohesion
- i. Frequent syntactic errors
- j. Weak essay
- k. Use of direct translation from Malay to English
- l. Wrong choice of words
- m. Bad handwriting
- n. No paragraphs

With all these comments, it can be seen that many of the officers cannot write good essays at ADFELPS level where the assessment scale is based on 3 criteria:

- a. Language Use
- b. Coherence and Cohesion
- c. Communicative Effectiveness



## CONCLUSION

Generally MAF Officers can achieve a Level 6 for the Speaking Skill and Reading Skill. They may have some difficulty at the Listening Skill due to being unfamiliar with the accent of Australian English. However as the results show from the Writing Workshop, it is obvious that MAF Officers attending this course were weak in their Writing Skills especially in their grammatical skills which adversely affected the flow of the essay in terms of coherence, cohesion and communicative effectiveness. Most of the officers only achieved a Level 5 while one officer was at Level 4. Even the officers at Level 6 only achieved a weak Level 6 which is not conducive to attending courses overseas.

## RECOMMENDATION

From the above results, it is obvious the course students were weak in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, coherence and cohesion and communicative effectiveness. It is thus recommended that:

- a. The next course concentrates on the basics which is grammar, syntax and vocabulary.
- b. After this, another course should give due credence to paragraph writing which will lead to good coherence and cohesion of essay writing.
- c. At Unit level, all Units should make English compulsory for at least 2 days of the week where all communication should be in English.

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Summary of Language Proficiency Level Descriptors - Australian Defence Force English Language Profiling System (ADFLPS) APPENDIX E

	SPKING	LISTENING	READING	WRITING
1	Almost no communication is possible. Any production that is limited to isolated words. Pronunciation is often unintelligible.	Unable to understand any of the spoken language. Comprehends only basic single word greetings and responses such as "Hello" and "Goodbye".	Unable to read English although may recognise some letters when it printed form.	No communicative effectiveness. May be able to form some letters, some high frequency words, phrases, some numbers.
2	Extremely restricted communication. Utterances are formulaic or limited to few words. Vocabulary is very basic and its usage inconsistent. Pronunciation may be extremely poor and difficult to understand.	Comprehends limited number of formulaic and memorized utterances only eg requests for personal data, greeting etc.	Recognises a very limited number of isolated words. Comprehends high frequency key words from simple forms and documents. Comprehends a variety of simple signage. Does not comprehend compound sentences.	Extremely limited communicative effectiveness. Writing consists mainly of memorized and formulaic expressions. Writing more than immediate surface meaning is communicated.
3	Restricted communicative effectiveness. Only simple utterances are conveyed. Communication is characterized by short responses, hesitation and reformulation and sometimes breaks down completely. Focus is pronunciation rather than understanding.	Ability to follow a very limited number of basic survival needs. Able to comprehend and follow simple directions and simple commands, directives and instructions related to very familiar routine military situations.	Sufficient comprehension to satisfy most survival needs. Understands a very limited number of words. Identifies gist and key information from short personal messages, simple instructions or orders. Identifies key information from an uncomplicated timetable or schedule.	Able to meet very limited practical needs only. Meaning is effectively conveyed only when using very simple constructions and sequences. High level of error causes considerable strain for the reader.
4	Limited communicative effectiveness. Content of utterances is often difficult to hear and hard to hear. General formulaic responses are used. Communication is characterized by short responses, hesitation and reformulation and sometimes breaks down completely. Focus is pronunciation rather than understanding.	Sufficient comprehension to meet most basic survival needs. Comprehends and follows simple commands, directives and instructions related to general military situations. Identifies the gist and details of recorded messages such as announcements.	Sufficient comprehension to satisfy most survival and some social needs. Identifies gist and key information from short personal messages, simple instructions or orders. Identifies key information from an uncomplicated timetable or schedule.	Meaning is effectively conveyed only when using very simple constructions and sequences. High level of error causes considerable strain for the reader.
5	Communication is effective when talking about familiar topics only. There are still some hesitations. Uses simple grammatical constructions with accuracy. Longer, more complex sentences require a low tolerance for ambiguity. Flow of speech is adequate to sustain one-to-one interaction despite frequent pauses, hesitations and reformulation.	Ability to describe an idea, social level of comprehension. Comprehends gist and basic information from simple interviews and conversations.	Sufficient comprehension to deal with most simple work-related needs. Identifies gist and summarizes most key points of a detailed article. Able to identify and correctly state key points of a short text describing a detailed procedure, specific information from a detailed listing, instruction or extracts from an information/ consultation booklet.	Communicates adequately on familiar subjects and in work-related contexts. Able to deal with work-related concrete topics. Able to identify and summarize most key points of a detailed article. Able to identify and correctly state key points of a short text describing a detailed procedure, specific information from a detailed listing, instruction or extracts from an information/ consultation booklet.
6	Communication is generally effective. There is still many times when hesitations or errors are noticeable. Vocabulary is limited with a high degree of accuracy. Speech is generally clear and flexible and delivered at a pace which would be comfortable to an average native speaker of English.	Readily identifies gist and most key details of all work-related texts. Comprehends discussions and social conversation although struggles to follow discussion of abstract subject matter. Some difficulty following rapid conversation involving abstract language and slang. Recognizes and responds appropriately to most nuances of expression.	Adequately deals with all work-related needs. Able to identify the main ideas and supporting details in Service essays and articles on non-abstract, general military topics. Able to locate specific information in Service essays and articles on non-abstract, general military topics. Able to recognize and deliver the meaning of some abstract, inference and bias.	Communicates lengthily and with some depth in all personal, social and work-related requirements. Main ideas and supporting details are clear and are generally above logical development. Any communications place only occasional strain on the reader.
7	Highly effective in communicating meaning in most situations. Occasional hesitations and non-systemic errors of grammar do not impede communication of meaning. Speech is expressive and fluent. The speaker rarely has to guess for a word and stresses between register and topics will ease. Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation are complexly effective. A clear way of evidence for does not intrude.	Readily identifies gist and comprehends key details of all texts. Able to follow and contribute to social conversation. Able to follow and contribute to social conversation. Able to follow and contribute to social conversation. Able to follow and contribute to social conversation.	Very effective reader. Correctly identifies gist and main ideas in most texts on familiar-related topics. Able to deduce most subtleties, inference and bias. Uses contextual clues and other word detail skills to decipher meaning of specialist or unfamiliar vocabulary.	Jack is still able to access a wide range of subject matter. Writing is very effective with all main ideas and supporting details clearly expressed and clear, convincing conclusions reached. Text is convincing and engaging although there are still a few areas which require attention.
8	Highly effective in communicating meaning in all situations. Virtually no hesitations or errors. Language is varied, flexible and expressive across all registers. Speech is the flowing, flexible and spontaneous with frequent effective use of language.	Highly effective listener. Readily identifies gist of all texts. Comprehends all key details of texts and public notices on abstract and non-abstract military and non-military topics. Takes an effective part in all discussions and social conversations, on any topics. Some difficulty following extremely rapid conversation although readily comprehends other limited restrictions or repetition. Readily recognizes	Highly effective reader. Correctly identifies gist, main ideas and all key information. Recognizes and readily infers subtle meaning, inference and bias in complex texts on both abstract-related and general topics. Able to use contextual clues and other word detail skills to decipher meaning of specialist or unfamiliar vocabulary.	Writing is thorough and substantive. Uses information and opinions are expressed with great skill and ease and are compelling and impressive.
9	Pronunciation, intonation, stress, rhythm and accent appear completely natural.	Highly effective listener. Readily identifies gist of all texts. Comprehends all key details of texts and public notices on abstract and non-abstract military and non-military topics. Takes an effective part in all discussions and social conversations, on any topics. Some difficulty following extremely rapid conversation although readily comprehends other limited restrictions or repetition. Readily recognizes	Highly effective reader. Correctly identifies gist, main ideas and all key information. Recognizes and readily infers subtle meaning, inference and bias in complex texts on both abstract-related and general topics. Able to use contextual clues and other word detail skills to decipher meaning of specialist or unfamiliar vocabulary.	Writing is thorough and substantive. Uses information and opinions are expressed with great skill and ease and are compelling and impressive.

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