

# The Importance of Social Learning Strategies in Enhancing Students' Speaking Skills in MUET.

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**Abstract-** In Malaysia, it is compulsory for all students in primary and secondary schools to learn English as a second language. To acquire and master all the language skills i.e reading, writing, speaking and listening, definitely is not an easy task. Hence, language learning strategies can be used to guide the students to improve their learning in order to be more competent and proficient in English language. This paper investigates the importance of social strategies in enhancing speaking skill among the students. The respondents of the research are 24 students in Form 6 (pre-university) from SMK Tun Syed Zahiruddin, Melaka and those students are the MUET (Malaysian University English Test) candidates. The issue that contributes to this research is that, many of the MUET candidates are in a low proficiency in English speaking. They have limited ability to speak in English as to respond to the task given in the test. Thus, they are unable to score good language band in MUET speaking. The social strategies in learning were based on a few series of group discussions practice among the students in MUET speaking class. Task fulfillment, language and communicative ability in the group discussion were the aspects to assess the students' enhancement in speaking. A set of questionnaires using a Likert-Scale on speaking strategies by Oxford & Cohill, were distributed to all students involved. Based on the findings, it was found that, social strategies were the types of language learning strategies that can be applied to enhance their speaking skill in MUET speaking. This study also emphasizes that, these two strategies are important and there are few aspects that students could benefit from the strategies that they can apply in group discussion to enhance their performance in speaking skill.

**Index Terms** - Language learning strategies, social strategies, MUET, speaking skill, group discussion

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language learning strategies are used to facilitate students in learning foreign languages in more meaningful and interesting way. It will also determine the progress and improvement of students' competency and proficiency in using the language. In English as a second language (ESL) classroom, students may use any types of learning strategies that best suit to their preferences to acquire all the language skills i.e reading, writing, speaking and listening. However, this study only focuses on how the language learning strategies could help students to improve their speaking skill.

Speaking is an action of someone in conveying information or expressing feelings in speech with someone else. It is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Speaking any language could be difficult if it is not well-mastered by the speakers. It would lead to misunderstanding and the messages could not be conveyed.

It is a fact that there are many of students who still could not speak well in English. As stated by Trent (2009), one of the many reasons to take into considerations might be the lack of confidence and anxiety about making errors. This could be minimized by practising and using the language in their daily conversation. This is to prepare the students to be more proficient in using the language as proficiency and competency in the language are regarded as a passport to better academic achievement (Bellingham, 1995; Cheng, 2008).

When a person is delivering a formal speech, the act of speaking is considered to be more complicated than general everyday conversation. Besides, it also involves some other aspects that have to be considered during the delivery process such as choosing topics, organizing thoughts, tailoring the message, and adapting to listener feedback (Lucas, 2001). And all these are very much related to MUET speaking where the students need to speak up and deliver their points, ideas and maturity of thoughts within the time limit. Apart from that, the correct use of English language and their good communicative ability will be an advantage for them to get better marks.

Due to the that, social strategies can be used by the students to enhance their speaking skill by working together in groups. A group discussion is one of the methods in social strategies of learning language. All the group members will have the opportunity to discuss about the topic and share their opinions through speaking.

This is per the standard requirement of speaking task in MUET (Malaysian University English Test). In MUET speaking, one of the tasks is group discussion. The students are given a topic and they have to discuss about the topic in groups. Giving ideas, agreeing or disagreeing on others' points of view could bring the students chances to speak and interact with others. At the end of the discussion, the group will have a group consensus on the topic and then the task is already completed. Without a proper way in managing the group discussion and without help and support from the group members, the discussion will be boring and not lively. Due to that, social strategies could help them to perform better in generating ideas and give maturity responses through speaking during the group discussion.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Language learning strategies

According to Rigney (1978) who gave an early definition of language learning strategies stated that, these strategies are the often-conscious steps or behaviours used by the language learners to enhance the acquisition, storage, retention, recall and use of new information. It is agreed by Oxford (1992) who later classified language learning strategies into 6 categories which are cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, memory related strategies, compensatory strategies, affective strategies and social strategies.

According to Oxford (1992), cognitive strategies enable the learners to manipulate the language material in direct ways through reasoning, analysis, note taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, reorganizing information to develop stronger knowledge structures, practicing in naturalistic settings and practicing structures and sounds formally. Metacognitive strategies refer to the process of identifying one's own learning style preferences such as planning task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study space and as schedule and also evaluating the success of learning. These behaviours are to manage the learning process overall.

Other than that, memory-related strategies help learners to link one language item or concept with another but do not necessarily involve deep understanding. It enables learners learn to retrieve information via orderly string, sounds, images, body movement, location and mechanical means. Compensatory strategies refer to the activities that involve guessing, talking around and using gestures and pause words and it depends on the skills that the learners are focusing to. Affective strategies are the learning strategies that concerned with managing emotions, both negative and positive. The relationship between affective strategies and learning is not clear, but a positive affective environment helps learning in general. Last but not least, social strategies is used when cooperating with others in the learning process.

## **Social strategies**

Social strategies in language learning facilitates the students to establish communication with other people by speaking the target language. According to Lan and Oxford (2003) by having social strategies, the students have the interaction with others by asking questions in a foreign language, receiving answers, correcting mistakes, establishing cooperation, trying to study feelings and thoughts of people of the targeted culture.

In order to make communication in the target language effectively, the students need to develop their speaking skills. Teacher plays a very big role to establish communication among the students. One of the way is to conduct group discussion among students. It is because social strategies need students to interact with other friends to create language social environment. Cooperation with others in generating ideas, sharing knowledge and giving opinions are the process of developing speaking skill. Group discussion would give advantages to students to get ideas and then explain the information that is not clear in the process of language learning. Besides, it is a way to confirm the knowledge and establish cooperation. Cultural sensitivity also can be learned in the process of learning the feelings and thoughts of their friends who belong to different cultures.

## **MUET (Malaysian University English Test)**

English is a second language in Malaysia. However, it is largely used for academic purposes and widely used as a medium of instruction at the tertiary level (Gill, 2005). According to Bellingham, (1995), competency and proficiency in English is a passport to better academic achievement.

In line with that, Education Ministry of Malaysia has introduced Malaysian University English Test (MUET) and it is a mandatory requirement for admission into public universities in Malaysia (Lee, 2004). It can be served as either an entrance requirement or an exit requirement depending on the courses and university that students wish to enroll in. MUET was introduced by the Ministry of Education in late 1999 and fully implemented in 2000. MUET is administered by the Malaysian Examination Council and it specifically aims to bridge the gap in language needs between secondary and tertiary education (Chan & Wong, 2004) Besides, the test is to enhance the students' command of English in a holistic approach, whereby it focuses on all the four skills of language learning (Malaysian Examination Council, 2005). The skills are reading, writing, speaking and listening and all these skills are tested in MUET. Each skill has different weightage for the language band results. Speaking test carries a total of 60 marks for each task and a 15% out of the total score in MUET.

MUET has its own objective, which is to measure the English language proficiency of students. It is a predicator of academic achievement in ESL teacher education (Othman, J & Nordin, A.B (2013). The aggregated scores ranging from 0 to 300 obtained by the students will determine the level of English proficiency of the students. The scores correlate with the band system ranging from Band 1 to Band 6, in which Band 1 is the lowest while band 6 is the highest.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

A series of group discussions were carried out to determine the progress and improvement of the students' performance in speaking skill. There were 24 students taking part in the activity and they were divided into 6 groups in which each group consists of 4 students. All groups are given a task that they need to conduct a group discussion among the members in the group. They are given 2 minutes for preparation and 10 minutes for group discussion.

The topic to be discussed was given in the written task situation in which there were 4 options given that related to each situation. Along the discussion, all students had to talk about the topic based on the situation given, using the listed options. They can choose any option given in the task and later discuss it in their group. By giving their own points of view, they had to convince the others about their stand on the topic. Besides, they have to either agree or disagree about the other students' opinion with a good explanation and elaboration. At the end of the discussion, they have to reach to a group consensus.

Prior to the activity, all students have been taught about the way how the MUET speaking is conducted. All students also had gone through their first experience sitting for MUET speaking when they were in previous semester. Teachers also have given input about the speaking task and activity during teaching and learning session in class on the previous lesson.

Social strategies in language learning is found when the students are participating in the group discussion. They interact with each other when discussing about the topic. Paying attentively while the others giving responses is in a way to show respect to them. They may ask few questions among themselves about the task in order to make the communication going on. Besides, in this task, they have to help each other by prompting the weak ones to speak. This is to avoid them to be left behind along the discussion. By sharing opinion and ideas, it would enable the other group members who have limited knowledge to get a clear picture and understand more about the topic. So that, they will try to continue the discussion by repeating and adding some other points on their own.

The main objective of the study is to investigate the importance of social strategies in enhancing students' speaking skill in MUET by focusing the aspects of speaking skill that they could improve in group discussion. The aspects are task fulfillment, language and communicative ability. Besides, there will be a comparison of marks that they obtained in Test 1 and Test 2. The difference of marks that they obtained between the two tests will be the guidelines of determining the importance and effectiveness of social strategies in enhancing their speaking performance in speaking skill in MUET. The Test 1 was carried out a few weeks before the programme of group discussion started in the beginning of the semester while the Test 2 was carried out in the MUET final exam in semester 2.

#### IV. DATA COLLECTION

This study used a survey questionnaires to collect data. The questionnaires used in this study adapted from a Likert scale, a self rating scale questionnaires in which choices were given for each item. It allows respondents to make choices whether they agree, strongly agree, disagree or strongly agree with the items stated in the questionnaires. There were 11 items altogether that related to the aspects of improvement in speaking skill i.e task fulfillment, language and communicative ability.

The survey questionnaires were distributed to all respondents. They were given 15 minutes to answer all the 11 items in the questionnaires. This was an individual task where the respondents should rank the preferred scale on their own. Discussion in answering the questionnaires among them was not allowed.

#### V. DATA ANALYSIS

Based on the students' responses from the questionnaires, the aspects of improvement in speaking skill the respondents may gain in participating in the group discussion will be discussed further in findings section. This is to highlight how importance the social strategies are in terms of improving students' skill in speaking. It will be shown in tables.

Besides that, there will be a table that shows the comparison of marks obtained by the students in speaking test between Test 1 and Test 2 of MUET speaking. Descriptive statistics is used to describe the mean, standard deviation and the mark range between the two tests.

VI. FINDINGS

Based on the responses from the questionnaires, each student had chosen their most favoured choice in the self rating scale, whether they agree, strongly agree, disagree or strongly disagree with all the items that correspond with the 3 aspects that were being studied in this research i.e task fulfillment, language and communicative ability. The details of the items for each aspect are listed in the questionnaires

The findings are as follows;

Item		Total number of respondents	Strongly	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
	By using social strategies in group discussion, it helps me to enhance my speaking skill in MUET in terms of;					
	Task fulfillment					
1.	understanding the topic better	24	0	3	16	5
2.	developing and organising ideas effectively	24	0	3	14	7
3.	providing adequate and relevant response to the task	24	0	3	15	6
	Language					
4.	using correct language grammar in my speaking	24	0	5	14	5
5.		24	0	5	13	6

	using variety of sentence structures					
6.	using varied vocabulary	24	0	4	14	6
7.	using correct and clear pronunciation of words	24	0	4	14	6
8.	showing mastery of basic stress and intonation patterns	24	0	4	15	5
	Communicative ability					
9.	keeping communication going through fluently	24	0	3	15	6
10.	building up my confidence level	24	0	3	15	6
11.	managing the discussion competently	24	0	5	13	6

Figure 1 : The number of students who gave responses for each item correspond with the aspects of speaking that can be enhanced through social strategies in group discussion

**Task fulfillment**

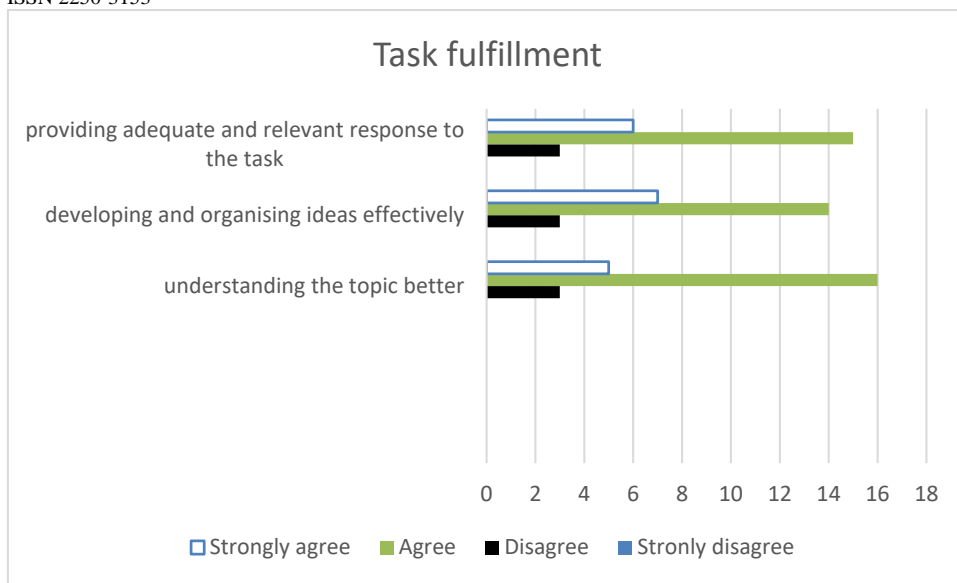


Figure 2 : The responses of students on task fulfillment

Based on the speaking task given, the students are given a situation or an issue that they have to discuss in group. The level of understanding of the topic could be different among the students, whether they have a very good understanding, satisfactory understanding or limited understanding of the topic. However, by practicing social strategies through group discussion, the students will get to understand the topic better as the other group members would somehow help indirectly by explaining and interpreting the whole issue through the discussion. With a good understanding of the topic, the students would develop and organise their ideas effectively and reasonably well. Consistency and looking the issues at various angle could make the speakers outstanding in their presentation. Prompting is used for those who hardly or have a very limited development of ideas. Besides, they have to make sure that their responses on the topic are relevant and convincing enough. Besides, it must be also adequate by having a good elaboration on it. This needs help the other group members to support accordingly. However, if the responses are irrelevant, the group members could argue and help that particular students to be back on track of the discussion.

### Language

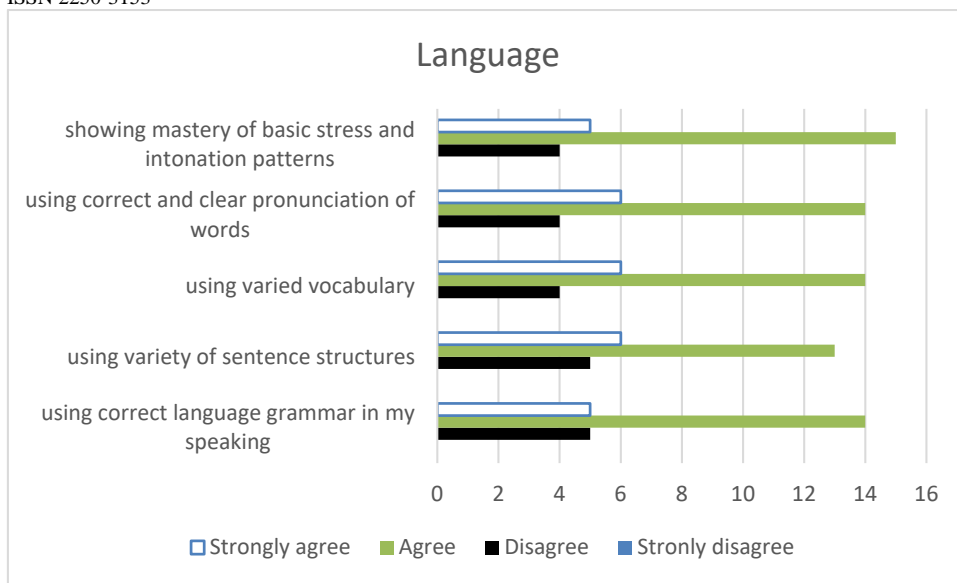


Figure 3 : The responses of students on language

There are a few parts of language that students could improve by practicing group discussion through social strategies. First, the students could improve their command of language. They may use different structures in their presentation without any major errors. There could be some errors in structures but these do not hamper communication. Second, varied vocabulary. Students might use appropriate and varied vocabulary satisfactorily. This also refers to any quotations, popular phrases that are added in during the presentation. They also use appropriate linkers to show the connection between ideas. Third, word stress, intonation and pronunciation of words. By collaborative learning, the students can learn and practice to have a proper kind of pronunciation. There are some students who could not pronounce words correctly, but they have to make sure that their pronunciation does not interfere with comprehension and understanding. The students also could improve the word stress and intonation by social strategies. All these can be improved when the other group members help and support each other.

### Communicative ability



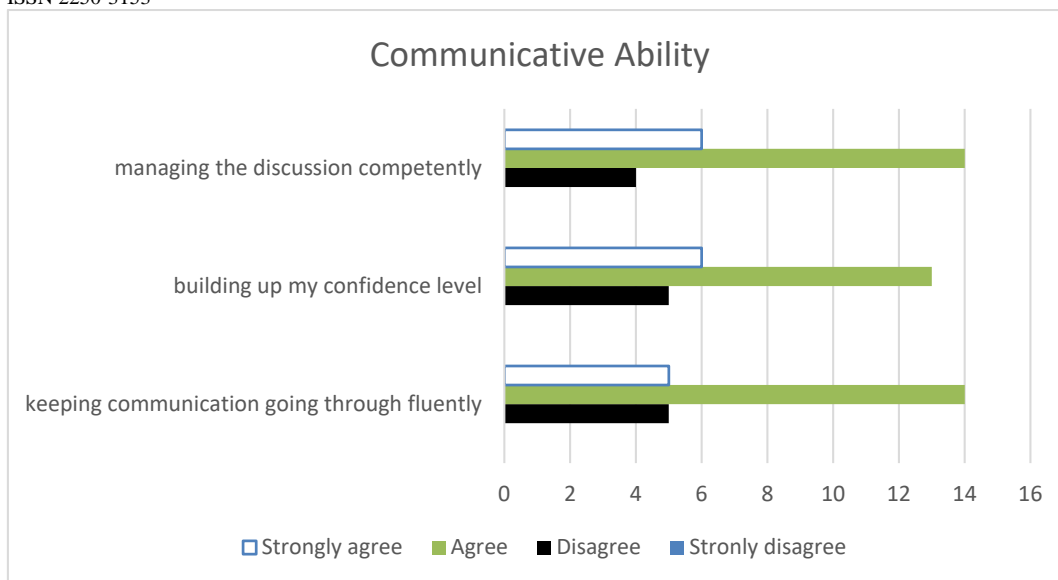


Figure 4 : The responses of students on communicative ability

By doing social strategies through group discussion, the students could build up their confidence level not only in speaking the language but also in giving their point of view on the issues raised. Delivering the speech confidently could convince the others to agree with and at the same time showing maturity in personality and thoughts. The students also could improve their fluency in delivering their presentation. They are able to keep communication going and reduce occasional unevenness, light stumbling and groping for words. Overall, communicative ability makes the presentation to be very easily understood. Besides that, by collaborative learning, the students could display initiative and interest in discussing the topic. They can also improve their interactions with the other group members and manage the discussion very competently.

Based on the responses made to all the aspects of speaking skills above, it was found that there was no students strongly disagree with the items listed. Only a few students chose disagree on certain items but the percentage was too low. Majority of students chose that they agreed that social strategies could enhance their speaking skills in all the three aspects.

### Comparison of Students' Marks in Speaking

To prove that social strategies through group discussion could enhance students' skill in speaking, this research also came out with the comparison of students' marks in MUET speaking according to the Test 1 (beginning of semester 2 examination) and Test 2 (final semester 2 examination).

The findings are as follows;

NAME	MARK (60m)	MARK	%

		TEST 1	TEST 2	DIFF	
1	ABDUL MATIN BIN MOHD SAID SOH	27	30	3	10.00
2	MUHAMMAD FATAHUL HAZIQ BIN MOHD HARIS	25	27	2	7.41
3	SYARIF HIDAYATULLAH BIN KELANA	12	12	0	0.00
4	MUHAMMAD FAIRUS AKMAR BIN ABDULLAH	18	20	2	10.00
5	FILZAH ILI MUSFIRAH BINTI MOHAMAED NOOR	25	29	4	13.79
6	MARIATUL AISYAH BINTI ABB RAHMAN	22	25	3	12.00
7	SYAFIQAH LIYANA BINTI KHAIRUL FUZZI	12	15	3	20.00
8	NURFATIN AFIQAH BINTI RAZALEE	14	20	6	30.00
9	NUR AQIDAH BINTI MOHD SANI	20	25	5	20.00
10	NURUL ATIQAHA BINTI MUHAMAD JAIS	13	16	3	18.75
11	NUR FARZANA BINTI ADAM	24	28	4	14.29
12	NURUL NAJIHAH BINTI SALLEH	14	15	1	6.67
13	AFFIAH IZZATI BINTI ABDUL RAZAK	23	27	4	14.81
14	AHMAD FAUZI BIN DAUT	20	24	4	16.67
15	AHMAD MUJAHID BIN MOHD HANAFI	21	21	0	0.00
16	HASYATUL HUSNA BINTI ABD RAHMAN	22	24	2	8.33
17	MUHAMMAD AIMAN BIN AZLAN	32	34	2	5.88
18	MUHAMMAD NOR SHASZREEN BIN SHARAIL	20	21	1	4.76
19	NOR ZAIRELL IKHMAL BIN NOR WAZIZ	28	30	2	6.67
20	NUR HAZIRAH BINTI HASAN	23	20	-3	-15.00
21	NUR WAHIDAH BINTI SALEH	23	24	1	4.17
22	NUR HAZIMAH BINTI LAILATUL AKBAR	21	24	3	12.50
23	NURUL RAIHANAH BINTI HISHAMUDDIN	23	27	4	14.81
24	SITI AISYAH BINTI AWALUDIN	25	26	1	3.85

Figure 5 : Comparison of students' marks in Test 1 and Test 2

Based on the mark difference, it shows that most of the students had obtained an increase of marks in second test compared to first test. Eventhough it was just a slight increase, it showed that there was still an improvement made by students after participating in the group discussion.

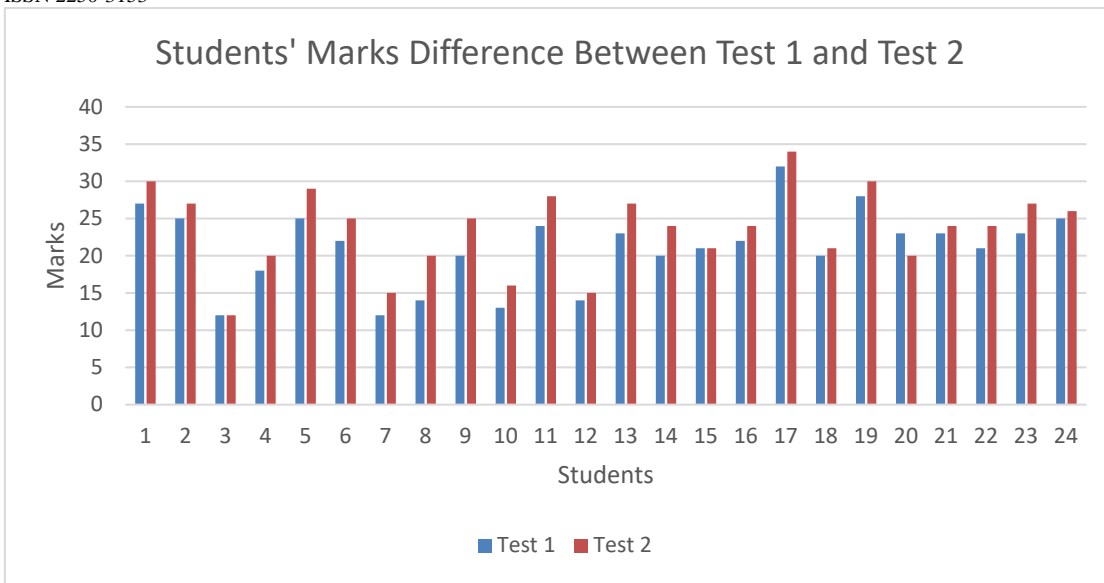


Figure 6: Mark difference obtained by students in Test 1 and Test 2

Test	N	Min score	Max score	Mean	Median	SD
Test 1	24	12	28	21	23	5.18
Test 2	24	12	34	24	24	5.42

Figure 7 : Descriptive statistics analysis of the scores

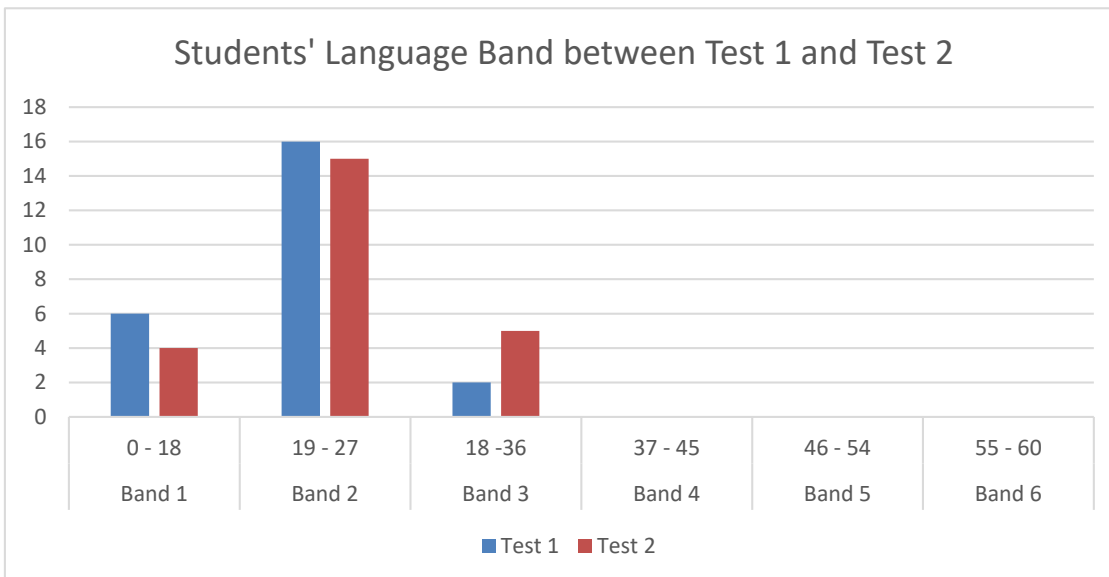


Figure 8 : Comparison of students' language band between Test 1 and Test 2.

Most of the students were happy for having group discussion conducted in MUET speaking class. By participating in the discussion, they could use social strategies in language learning to improve their performance in speaking skill as per the standard requirement of the MUET. Besides, there are many benefits that students could gain through social strategies. It is in line with the requirement of MUET that speaking component is one of the skills tested in examination. If the students do not practise speaking, they will have difficulty to get good score and language band in MUET speaking. Practice makes perfect. Therefore, by having a lot of practice, the students will be able to speak in English as well as they can give good ideas as responses to the task given in MUET speaking.

Besides that, this is an exposure for them to do well in MUET speaking. Having a group discussion will give an opportunity for them to share new knowledge and ideas with regards to the topic given in the task. This is important as the task fulfillment is one of the criteria assessed in MUET speaking. The scope of the topic is too wide. Many of the students have limited knowledge on certain issues. Therefore, through social strategies, the students might discuss a lot of topics in details and they will share the knowledge during the discussion. It will be useful for them as their preparation before the examination.

The concept of social strategies by practicing a group discussion among the learners has become a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning trend. It is indeed a way to enhance the ability of the students not only in speaking and but also in giving ideas and opinions. This approach also gives the opportunity for the students to broaden their minds by discussing the issues given in the task thoroughly. It prepares the students to be a proficient user of the language and gives a tremendous effect in students' performance and could lead them to achieve a good score and language band in MUET speaking. There is an improvement that the students show after several practice of group discussion conducted in line with the collaborative learning method.

## VII. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, social strategies in language learning through group discussion is one of the ways to enhance the students' speaking skill in MUET. It is believed that in order to improve language skill especially speaking, it takes time and hard work from the students. They should always practice speaking and never be shy to communicate with others using the language. By having several practice on group discussions, we can see the improvement of speaking skill among the students. Even though there was just a little improvement, the students should never feel disappointed. It shows that they should never stop having this programme in MUET classroom. Definitely, before they sit for the real MUET speaking test at the end of their studies in form 6, they would improve a lot and a higher score and language band will be in their hands if they continue and focus on collaborative learning.

Besides that, they should read a lot as they need knowledge and information with regards to any topic as their preparation for the task in MUET speaking. Having a wide general knowledge is an advantage to score well in the task fulfillment. In contrast, if they have limited knowledge, they will be facing difficulties to present ideas and thoughts. By social strategies, it helps the students to expose themselves with many areas of topics to discuss in groups. Group discussion is one of the ways to generate and share ideas with the others. The reflection upon the discussion would enable the students to identify their strength and weaknesses in their presentation. Finally, social strategies is proven that it could enhance students' speaking skill in MUET.

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