



Determining the Oral Construct of the Test of English Communication Skills

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ABSTRACT

Exit tests to measure and inform new graduates of their oral and written communicative abilities are non-existent. This paper is our attempt to determine the oral construct of the exit test through a study involving graduating students and workplace professionals. Information regarding oral tasks, minimum standards and quality expected from new graduate employees were gathered through interviews and discussions with the human resource personnel from various industries. Based on the information gathered, a pilot test of group oral interaction was designed and administered to a group of four graduating students. The interactions of the group were video-recorded and were then assessed by professionals from various specialisations based on their respective criteria of assessment. The professionals' responses, comments and suggestions to interview questions posed were noted. The results were analysed to establish the different categories of criteria being applied by the professionals in their assessment of the new graduates' performances. Findings show that thinking ability, interactive ability and professional image, which go beyond language skills, were other equally important criteria of assessment, besides language accuracy. From the analysis, the construct of oral communication ability for the exit test was determined, followed by the development of a six-band oral rating scale.

Keywords: Oral Construct, Exit Test, Minimum Standard Expected, Workplace Assessment Criteria, Oral Communication Ability

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language test scores have been in use as tools to implement stipulated educational, employment and political policies of nations. Currently, a minimum expected score on the International English Language Test System (IELTS) is being imposed on foreign students seeking admission into certain courses and institutions in countries where English is the medium of instruction as evidence of their ability to cope with academic study and to perform future tasks in non-test contexts. Similarly, evidence of professionalism and language proficiency is also expected of non-native English speaking professionals seeking employment in

English speaking countries through the imposition of a minimum expected level on the IELTS as well as on required occupational English tests by the host countries. In other instances, similar certification of a satisfactory score on the IELTS has also to be met by foreigners applying for permanent residence in some English-speaking countries. In the local context, applicants aspiring to pursue tertiary education must show certification of a functional command of the English language, in this instance, a required level on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) expected by the receiving institutions, as proof of their capacity to cope with future academic study and tasks. The above emphases on language test scores imply that there exist a theoretical construct

and availability of relevant and adequate tests for describing language test performance for each purpose, to correspond to the language abilities needed for expression of intentions in non-test contexts of language use (Bachman, 1991; Qureshi et al., 2014).

In setting up the criteria for describing language test performance and validating the theoretical construct, opinions vary on whose standards should be applied. In the case of an exit test for graduating students in which there is none available, presently, it is our strong conviction that the gap in exit language and communication certification of these students is addressed and they being informed that a measure of their workplace readiness communicative ability is being developed. In light of this a number of issues need to be addressed. How do we, academics, determine that construct of workplace language and communication ability? How do we measure it? From whose perspective should these concerns be addressed? Should it be from the perspective of the academics' or the employers'? In our earlier paper (Attan et al., 2012) we have identified difficulties with determining the test of English communication skills (TECS) written construct from both the real life approach and components ability approach perspectives. From the real life approach perspective, specifically seen from the point of view of domain experts, because the students have yet to join the job market and thus lacking the experience and abilities needed for effective performance in the workplace, any measurement of expected abilities may be deemed inaccurate. From the components skills approach perspective, since the expectations are viewed from the academics' point of view, they may be unrealistic and its adoption may not meet actual skills needed for performance of tasks in the workplace, and this again may result in inaccuracy of measurement (Naz et al., 2014). On a similar note, we believe the same argument applies for determining the TECS oral construct.

In determining the criteria for the development of the university entrance test construct, the opinion of the academics is sought as these academics have been immersed in the teaching-learning process for a long time and have had extensive knowledge and experience of the levels and abilities displayed on various tasks. Thus they would be in a strong position to determine the levels and the abilities that fit the specifications at each level. Validation of the construct, in turn, should involve the opinion and performance of 1st-year students as these students have had substantial experience of the knowledge and skills needed for satisfactory pursuit of tertiary education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite its increasing prominence, a literature search on validation of the MUET from undergraduate test takers' opinion revealed only one. Rethinasamy and Chuah's (2011) study comparing 1st-year students' performance on the MUET and the university preparatory English 1 (obligatory for students achieving Bands 1, 2 and 3 on the MUET) revealed findings of a significant positive relationship between MUET band and preparatory English 1 grades, in which students achieving a higher MUET band were indeed performing well in the university English language proficiency course. Similarly, students achieving lower MUET bands tend to obtain

average and weak pass in the preparatory English 1 course. It was further highlighted that since the benchmark study reported by the Malaysian Examination Council (2005) showed a good correlation between IELTS and MUET bands ($r = 0.662$), it is also indicative that MUET is a reliable measure of students' English language ability. In like manner, they asserted that "it can also be inferred that the English preparatory 1 test results which correlate strongly with MUET band is an indication of its validity" (p. 243).

Validation of workplace readiness communicative ability construct from domain experts' point of view has shown a mixed response. Using domain experts as test-takers in different work contexts, the results obtained were both positive and negative. In Brown's (1993) study of test-takers' response on a tape-mediated oral proficiency test of Japanese for the tourism and hospitality industry, findings confirmed that the test tasks elicited the type of language use required in the industry. Thus the results were treated as evidence that the test was measuring relevant language skills. In a separate study, Elder (2007) compares the adequacy and relevance of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as a screening device, which was originally designed to measure proficiency for academic purposes with the occupational English test (OET) which was designed to measure the communicative competence of health professionals for registration. In the study involving 53 health professionals on two tests, it was found that while IELTS could be considered a valid measure of general English proficiency, the OET was, over and above, a better measure of the health professionals' communicative competence. From the above two studies, it can be shown that feedback from domain experts can be considered by responsible bodies in determining the relevance of the test construct and workplace communication readiness of the participants to the target language use domain.

In other contexts, test validity is a challenge when adverse feedbacks were obtained. In Bessette's (2005) study of a proficiency testing policy implemented aimed at ensuring adequacy of civil servants' provision of service in both French and English in bilingual regions in Canada, findings showed negative feedback received from the civil servants on many aspects ranging from the training programme to the test itself, which they considered irrelevant to their jobs. On a similar note, Murray et al., (2012) study in New South Wales, Australia, on the relevance of the Professional English Assessment for Teachers, a professional screening test, found negative attitudes shown by 105 qualified overseas-trained teacher test takers towards the test as they felt that the test was irrelevant to their needs. Further negative feedbacks were found in Kim and Elder's (2014) exploration of pilots' and air traffic controllers' perceptions of tests administered in Korea. A large majority of the participants responded that the test did not reflect their communicative competence in radiotelephony communication in that the test content was inappropriate and irrelevant to the demands of the job and that test development procedures were unclear. Likewise, Knoch's (2014) study of criteria used by native English speaking pilots to evaluate speech samples from a number of different aviation English tests, found a far wider range of criteria being applied including non-linguistic factors such as technical knowledge,

experience and level of training, besides those prescribed by the International Civil Aviation Organisation guidelines. With a mixed response obtained on the above validation studies from the views of domain experts, more research needed to be done to obtain more conclusive results.

3. THE STUDY

For our purpose to determine the workplace communicative ability construct, specifically the oral construct, since our graduating students have yet to obtain work experience and to be immersed in actual work context, we believe the appropriate persons for us to obtain relevant information would be the human resource (HR) personnel from technical and technology-related industries. Since these personnel will be responsible for recruitment of deserving applicants, they would be in a better position to assess the quality of potential recruits for their organisation. Based on the above scenario of a gap in the exit oral communicative test construct development, two important considerations have prompted us to conduct the study. First, the critical need to know the employers' expectations of graduating students' oral communicative ability in light of the graduating students' effective participation in the workplace. Second, the urgent need to develop valid instruments that can accurately measure the true oral communicative ability of the graduates when they enter the job market.

In this paper, we attempt to identify and describe the workplace oral language and communication construct. First, we discuss the process and procedures that we have adopted to determine that oral construct; and next, we present our proposed construct of workplace oral language and communication for feedback and suggestions. Two research questions have been formulated in our attempt to establish the workplace oral language and communication construct. They are:

Research Question 1	What criteria do employers adopt when evaluating the quality of oral output?
Research Question 2	What is the minimum level expected for acceptance of completed oral tasks in the workplace?

3.1. Participants of the Study

In our attempt to find answers to the research questions three groups of participants were identified. One was a group of five language practitioners from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) with teaching experience ranging between 18 and 25 years. The second group comprised of nine workplace professionals from various technical and technology-related industries. These professionals were either HR Managers or personnel responsible for recruitment in their respective organisations in Malaysia. These two groups served as informants or assessors for this study.

The third group of participants was a group of four final year undergraduates of UTM; three male students and one female student (Table 1). All, with the exception of two male students, had different English language proficiency levels based on their MUET band scores.

3.2. Procedure of the Study

The study involved two phases, adapting the procedures used by Abdul Raof (2002). Prior to the video recording of the group of students (Table 1) preliminary input were obtained through informal discussions with a few HR personnel to guide the researchers in designing the oral communicative task. Based on the information gained, a speaking task was designed based on the assumption that new graduate employees would be involved in a discussion with fellow employees. For the pilot study the students were asked to deliberate, give their views, interact with each other and eventually come up with a collective decision on what they think is the most important quality in a worker. The task lasted for about 20 min and was moderated by an English language lecturer. The session was video-recorded and used as speech sample in this study.

In the first phase the video-recording was then shown to all five language practitioners. Each was asked to view the recording, rank and assess the oral interaction of the four students without referring to any rating scale. After the assessment was done a group interview cum discussion was conducted with the language practitioners to compare rankings and to know how these were determined.

This procedure was repeated in the second phase, this time with the workplace professional group. Each personnel was approached individually and was asked to view the video-recording, rank and assess the students. As with the language practitioners, it was done without the aid of any rating scale. At the end of the assessment each of them participated in a semi-structured interview revolving around the criteria used to rank and assess a student, the reasons why a student was ranked higher than another, and which of the student(s) would most likely be recruited and the reasons behind such a decision.

Data from both groups were analysed to look for similarities and differences in the rankings made. In addition, data were further studied to elicit the criteria used by the two groups of assessors.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed that there is a disparity in terms of the ranking of the performances made by the language practitioners and workplace professionals. The language practitioners group had no dispute over who the best speaker was i.e., Student D. However, no workplace professionals ranked this student as the best. Instead, majority of the workplace professionals chose Student C as the one who had performed the best in the task given.

From the analysis of the interview responses it was evident that the language practitioner group based their assessment of the students

Table 1: Background of student participants

Student	Gender	MUET band	Faculty
A	Male	Band 2	Engineering
B	Male	Band 2	Engineering
C	Female	Band 4	Management
D	Male	Band 5	Education

mainly on the criterion of language proficiency (Khan et al., 2012). Thus, Student D who demonstrated good control of the English language was their choice. On the other hand, the workplace professionals were not impressed by the proficiency of Student D as to them he did not contribute much to the task assigned. He was merely managing the discussion; initiating the discussion, asking opinion from the others, making sure the task gets done and concluding the discussion. Basically, his “voice” was not heard and hence, contribution to the task was considered “minimal.”

In contrast, Student C was ranked highest by majority of the workplace professionals on the basis of her maturity in the arguments put forth and her interactive ability. She was able to make significant contribution to the discussion and elaborated her viewpoints. She also listened to what others had to say and considered their alternative opinion but at the same time defended her arguments well. Though her language proficiency was good, this was not the main reason she was chosen as the best by many. The language practitioner group ranked Student C as second behind Student D. The reason being she was not as fluent and accurate as Student D in her language proficiency.

Nevertheless, it was pointed out by the professional group that Student C could improve on the image she portrayed or as some of the professionals termed it as the “package.” From the interview responses this criterion could be described as how one carries or projects oneself in communicating with others, and one’s confidence when voicing one’s views, and composure which make up the overall image of a good speaker. It was noted also that this aspect of the students’ performance was not given much prominence or importance in the ranking criteria of the language practitioners.

With regards to Students A and B, the language practitioners ranked both as equal i.e., the lowest due to their lack of proficiency. Despite this, the professionals, however, were willing to recruit Student B as he was seen to have some potential based on the contributions made in carrying out the task. He also demonstrated the ability to defend his arguments, though to a lesser extent, as compared to Student C. One HR manager even thought that Student B was better than the others apparently due to the potential that he has as observed by the HR personnel (Khan et al., 2014). From here, it is clear that language proficiency was not used as the main criterion in determining the choice of candidate to be recruited.

In evaluating the quality of oral interaction (refer to Research Question 1) it seems that while the language practitioners were paying more attention to language skills (as expected), the workplace professionals were focusing on some other criteria beyond language ability. These were found to be related to thinking ability, interactive ability, and professional image. Based on these criteria, rankings given by both groups were therefore different.

The discussion with both groups of assessors was also aimed at determining the minimal level of language ability expected by employers for acceptance of potential employees into the workplace (Research Question 2). It was established that the

Table 2: Proposed construct of workplace oral language and communication competence

Criteria	Description
Contribution to task	Able to analyse Shows creativity of ideas Shows maturity of ideas
Interactive ability	Able to express opinion Able to convince
Language	Accuracy Fluency Vocabulary
Personality	Sentence variety Professional image Confidence Enthusiasm

ability to express opinion, to respond to viewpoints, to participate in discussion, to be able to analyse problems, to keep the communication going with a fair command of the language but the lack of confidence and sophistication of language and adequate amount of content and level of maturity to dwell further on the topic or discussion merit as “acceptable level” of communicative ability for the workplace. These abilities were deemed as functional that is, equivalent to Level 3 on a 6-Level scale. A graduate at this level would have many errors in his language and his vocabulary lacks variety. Nevertheless, this is regarded as the minimum acceptable level that can sustain the potential employee in the workplace. With exposure and further on-the-job training, the new employee is expected to be able to gain better control of and use the language more correctly and appropriately.

Our proposed workplace oral language and communication construct, conceived from the collaboration between the academics and workplace professionals, is captured in the Table 2.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The approach advocated by this study was empirically-based and utilized insights of workplace specialists. Similar to the study by Abdul Raof (2002), this study proves that engaging workplace specialists in developing a rating scale is possible, in fact highly recommended. From the analysis of the data gathered, a rating scale of oral communication ability for the oral exit test was devised. It comprised the criteria of assessment which are thinking ability, interactive ability, professional image, and language ability. Continuous collaboration with workplace specialists seems to be the way forward to further validate the draft scale before it can be widely used. More importantly, the study highlights the importance of engaging the workplace professionals in the design of the exit test, most critically in determining their assessment of new graduates’ performance, which this study reveals, go beyond language skills.

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