
DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCE-BASED ENGLISH TEST FOR WORKPLACE READINESS

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Abstract

This article discusses the development of an English test to prepare for workplace readiness among Malaysian graduates. This test is considered important to indicate the level of competency of the graduates before entering workplace. This test focus on the oral competence as it was found that Malaysian graduates lack communication skills. Six competencies (based on the framework developed by TOCC) are examined in the test. These are discrete but work together holistically to make a speaker persuasive and convincing in presentations and discussions: discourse competence – holistic impression of speaking ability – persuasiveness, articulateness, linguistic competence – fluency and accuracy of language, interactional competence – ability to give feedback or comment on another’s ideas without offending, strategic competence – ability to recover from mistakes, or to think on feet, socio-cultural and formulaic competence – expected courtesies as heard in common expressions.

Keywords: *English test, Workplace readiness, Competence-based English test, Communication skills.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia’s higher education has grown up tremendously in the last 20 years due to the shifting of the country’s economy from agricultural to industrial and service oriented (Kim & Rasiah, 2011). There were seven public universities in the era of 1990’s which has expanded to 20 by 2007; an additional of 18 private universities created during the same period. At the same time, there are more than 500 other higher education institutions, which includes university colleges, branch campuses of local and overseas institutions, open universities and other institutions with non-university status. The total number of students enrolled in higher education institutions was 748,797 in 2007. The Malaysian economy has grown, too during this period at an annual rate of 6.6% for the last 30 years (Ismail 2011).

The expansion of the economy has produced an abundance of jobs primarily in the industrial and service sector which requires graduates to fill them. These jobs require skill sets that are different from those that were needed in a primarily agricultural society. One of the major emphasis is on communication skills. Many jobs in the industrial sector and most jobs in the service sector rely heavily on employees to have strong communication skills (Ismail 2011). Of course when communication skills are mentioned here, it is the global language of English that is referred to.

Despite the expansion of the economy and higher education as well an abundance of jobs in the industrial and service sector, many Malaysian graduates still do not find suitable employment. Since 1998, the rate of unemployment has been on the rise consistent with the transition of the economy from agricultural to industrial and service oriented (Ismail 2011). The employment rate among graduates is the highest in the country (Singh and Singh, 2008).

Although there are many factors that contribute to the high unemployment rate among graduates in Malaysia, a lack of English proficiency in general and a lack of communication skills in particular are the major contributing factors. Ambigapathy and Aniswal (2005) noted that English language skills in general are the major factor in Malaysian graduates’ lack of employability. In a survey conducted with 10 companies that recruited Malaysian graduates, 81% of them reported that English language proficiency is the utmost important when recruiting graduates. Ismail (2011) found that graduates may receive adequate

training in the technical knowledge related to their field of study, but do not possess soft skills (communication skills, in particular) needed in the workplace. She continues by saying that since the official language of Malaysia is Bahasa Malaysia almost all courses are delivered in this language. As a result of this, graduates may have difficulty communicating in English upon entering workplace. At the same time employers are also reluctant to hire graduates based on prior bad experiences with graduate employees with bad communication skills.

Hence, there is a need to prepare graduates with effective oral communication skills in English that is required by the potential employers. This article presents the development of a competency test that focus on workplace readiness in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). UKM students were found to be incompetent in speaking and writing in English (Siti Hamin Stapa et al 2008). They also found that students are less able to use English for developing and conveying new knowledge. Based on the problems in equipping the right intervention for the students, then there is a need to investigate their level of oral communication. A team of lecturers from the School of Language Studies and Linguistics proposed to develop a Competency based English Test (CBET).

CBET is a test which is developed to enable UKM students, undergraduate or postgraduate, to assess how well prepared their oral communication skills are for the multinational workplace.

2. COMPETENCY BASED ENGLISH TEST

The CBET is a criterion referenced proficiency test of oral communicative competence. This means that as long as a candidate fulfils the basic criteria of communicative competence as defined by the test framework they will be given a score to reflect their proficiency at that point of time. The test which is focused on the speaking competency which is seen as situated social practice which involves reciprocal interaction with others, as being purposeful and goal-oriented within specific context. Being competent, in other words, involves not just production, but also interaction, which is clearly reflected in the CEFR treatment of speaking as comprising of two skills: production and interaction (Council of Europe 2001a:26). CBET will be designed based on the six levels of language proficiency organized into three bands as described by CEFR: A1 and A2 (basic user), B1 and B2 (independent user), C1 and C2 (proficient user).

Six competencies (based on the framework developed by TOCC) are examined in the test. These are discrete but work together holistically to make a speaker persuasive and convincing in presentations and discussions.

- Discourse competence – holistic impression of speaking ability – persuasiveness, articulateness
- Linguistic competence – fluency and accuracy of language
- Interactional competence – ability to give feedback or comment on another's ideas without offending
- Strategic competence – ability to recover from mistakes, or to think on feet
- Socio-cultural and formulaic competence – expected courtesies as heard in common expressions

3. METHODOLOGY

This research utilized the following instruments to gather data

1. Questionnaire for background details
2. Interview (Post test analysis)
3. Experts' evaluation (Content validation)
4. Open-ended questionnaire for test evaluation

Hence, this investigation requires a mixed methods approach in which both qualitative and quantitative data will be utilized. The validation of the proposed instrument would be done quantitatively and qualitatively.

It is our belief that the validated proposed test could be used as an alternative to other well-known proficiency tests to decide on the language ability of the prospective students. We believed that once the proposed CBET is validated it is appropriate to be used as an indicator to gauge the students' language ability before leaving the university.

The Test

The test is divided into three parts:

1. Monologue
2. Description of tables/graphs
3. Problem solving task (pair work)

CBET PILOT RUN

A pilot run of CBET (Competency-based English Test) was conducted on 16 October 2015 by Faculty of Social Science and Humanities (FSSK), Faculty of Islamic Studies (FPI) and Faculty of Technology and Information (FTSM), and on 25 October 2015 by Faculty of Science and Technology (FST). The test was administered by the respective faculty. The test takers were required to tape their responses to Parts 1 and 2 of the test using their smartphone, and sent their audio files to a CBET email. For Part 3, the test takers were required to converse in pairs. Their performance was either video-taped by the faculty as was done by FPI, FTSM and FSSK, or by the students themselves and the video-file emailed to the CBET email account (FST).

A rater-training to ensure standardization of expectation of performance at the different competency levels was conducted on 20 October 2015 and attended by 12 raters assigned to assess the performance. All raters are from PPBL except for one who is from Pusat Citra. The raters were given 4 weeks to rate the performance. They were also told to assess the performance in-pairs to ensure better scoring validity.

Test takers, Files and Performances

100 students were identified by each faculty to sit for CBET. However, the actual number of students who turned out and registered as test takers was below that number (Table 1). FTSM and FSSK have 79 and 78 test takers respectively while FPI and FST have 51 and 56 respectively. The number of audio and video files received does not tally with the number of test takers as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of Students Who Sat for CBET According to Faculty

Faculty	Number of Students who registered*	Number of students#			Comments
		CBET Part1 (audio)	CBET Part 2 (audio)	CBET Part 3 (video)	
FPI	51	35	33	47	More students completed Part 3 compared to Parts 1 and 2 because the video recording was carried out by the Faculty while Parts 1 and 2 had to be audiotaped by the students themselves.
FST	56	40	18	38	Only 14 students have completed all 3 parts. For Part 3, the videos are of poor quality. The test taker voice is very soft and there are many voices in the background.
FTSM	79	39	32	73	Some of the audio files sent are in AAV format and they could not be assessed by the raters. Voice quality of some audio

					files are poor.
FSSK	78	60	60	77	More students did Part 3 than Part 1 and 2. This is similar to the situation in FPI and FTSM.

* figure provided by the faculty

based on availability of files

FPI

For FPI, even though there were supposed to be 51 test takers, there are only 35 audio files for Part 1, 33 for Part 2 and 47 for Part 3. However, only 30 students completed all the different parts of the test.

The breakdown of the performance of the students is given in Table 2.

Table 2: Performance of FPI Test Takers

Band	CBET Part 1		CBET Part 2		CBET Part 3		Overall	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
A1	7	20	8	24.24	2	4.26	3	10
A2	18	51.43	15	45.45	22	46.8	18	60
B1	5	14.28	7	21.21	20	42.55	7	23.34
B2	4	11.44	3	9.1	1	2.13	1	3.33
C1	1	2.86	-	-	2	4.26	1	3.33
C2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	35	100	33	14	47	100	30	100

FST

The number of test takers given by the faculty is 56 but there are only 40 audio files for Part 1 and 18 audio files for Part II. Most students only responded to Part I. Only 14 students completed all 3 parts of the test. Therefore, the overall analysis can only be done for the 14 students. The breakdown of the FST student performance is given in Table 3.

Table 3: Performance of FST Test Takers

Band	CBET Part 1		CBET Part 2		CBET Part 3		Overall	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
A1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
A2	9	22.5	3	16.67	7	18.42	3	21.43
B1	12	30	6	33.33	15	39.47	6	42.86
B2	7	17.5	6	33.33	8	21.05	4	28.57
C1	8	20	3	16.67	6	15.79	1	7.14
C2	4	10	-	-	2	5.27	-	-
Total	40	100	18	100	38	100	14	100

FTSM

The number of FTSM students with at least one file that could be accessed is 77. Out of this 77, there are only 31 audio recordings for Part 1 and 32 for Part 2. Students either did not attempt the question or did not provide a file in a format that could be accessed by the raters.

There are 72 student video performances. There are 5 students who have audio files for Part 1 and/or Part 2 but do not have any video performance (Part 3). Only 29 students have completed scores for all the three parts.

The performance of the FTSM students are presented in the table below (Table 4). Generally, majority of the FTSM students obtained either a B1 or B2, and there more B2 students than B1.

Table 4: Performance of FTSM Test Takers

Band	CBET Part 1		CBET Part 2		CBET Part 3		Overall	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
A1	1	2.56	0	0	0	0	0	0
A2	5	12.82	4	12.5	6	8.34	2	6.9
B1	8	20.51	5	15.62	23	31.94	6	20.69
B2	17	43.60	17	53.13	33	45.83	15	51.73
C1	8	20.51	5	15.62	9	12.5	5	17.24
C2	0	0	1	3.13	1	1.39	1	3.44
Total	31	100	32	100	72	100	29	100

FSSK

The number of students who registered is 78 but the number of students who sat for at least one part of test is 80. This means that 2 students did the test without registering. There were 15 students who had only their video performance. There were no audio-files. This suggests that the students might not have sent their audio files. There were 3 students with audio files but had no video performance which means that they left after doing Parts 1 and 2. There were 4 students who submitted blank files and one students who responded in Malay. There were only 54 students who completed all the 3 parts of the test. All problematic cases mentioned were excluded from the analysis of FSSK student performance presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Performance of FSSK Test Takers

Band	CBET Part 1		CBET Part 2		CBET Part 3		Overall	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
A1	-	-	-	-	2	2.6	-	-
A2	2	3.33	5	8.33	13	16.88	1	1.85
B1	14	23.33	10	16.67	21	27.27	15	27.78
B2	21	35	20	33.33	26	33.77	22	40.75
C1	10	16.67	12	20	10	12.98	8	14.81
C2	13	21.67	13	21.67	5	6.5	8	14.81
Total	60	100	60	100	77	100	54	100

Because of incomplete data and other problems summarised below, the test results that have been presented might not be indicative of actual student performance.

PART 1: Ratings of students' performance

A1 – Test takers have very limited ability to answer questions. Effort is lacking. They might on occasions repeat parts of the questions and give up on the task or remain silent. They might attempt to perform task but fail. Only occasional words or phrases are intelligible.

A2 – Test-takers have limited ability to answer questions. They respond with much effort but provide limited speech sample and they often run out of time. It is obvious that they cannot fully answer the questions posed due linguistic weakness but function can be evident. Answers given are incomplete ideas without substantiation.

B1 – Test- takers can answer questions quite competently. They respond with effort, sometimes provide limited speech sample and sometimes run out of time. They sometimes use excessive distracting

and ineffective language to compensate for linguistic weaknesses (vocabulary and/or grammar). Content is adequate. Some listener effort is required.

B2 -- Test-takers can answer questions competently. They provide relevant information, sometimes with difficulty and usually do not run out of time. There are linguistic weaknesses and repair strategies might be necessary and these could be distracting. Sometimes awkward expressions are used. Generally, there are good content and supporting details. Little listener effort is required.

C1 -- Test-takers can answer questions very competently. They provide relevant information freely with little difficulty, and may go beyond the task by using additional appropriate functions. Very good language and appropriate expressions. Generally, there are very good content and supporting details. No listener effort is required.

C2 -- Test-takers can answer questions very competently and effectively. They provide information freely with no difficulty and go beyond the task by using additional appropriate functions. Excellent language and sophisticated expressions. Generally, very strong content and supporting details. No listener effort is required.

PART 2 : Ratings of students' performance

A1 -- Test-takers do not have the skills to understand the test directions and the content of the test questions.

A2 -- Test-takers can do limited description but cannot state their opinion or support it. The opinion given is either not logical or not relevant. Responses given have very basic vocabulary and grammar. Generally, the test-takers' responses are difficult to understand.

B1 -- Test-takers can undertake simple basic description. They can with some difficulty state their opinion but cannot support their opinion well. Responses given used limited vocabulary and grammar. Generally, it is possible to comprehend their responses.

B2 -- Test-takers can successfully describe the graph but grammar and vocabulary used are limited in variety and range. They have some success in expressing their opinion but their weaknesses include vocabulary that is not precise enough, answers that are not clear and there seem to be insufficient audience awareness. It is possible to comprehend their responses easily.

C1 -- Test-takers can describe the graph with good grammar and suitable vocabulary. They have successfully expressed their opinion and support them clearly. Use of vocabulary and grammar when they give their opinion is concise and appropriate. Answers are clear and show audience awareness. It is possible to comprehend what is spoken with ease at all times.

C2 -- Test-takers can do an excellent job in describing by using appropriate grammar and vocabulary at all times. Opinion given are expressed and supported very clearly and logically. Answers given are very appropriate and show their abilities to respond not only accurately but critically. Basically they are very advanced speakers who have succeeded in meeting all the requirements of the task given.

PART 3 : Ratings of students' performance

A1 -- Test-takers display very limited ability to perform task. Effort is evident. They might repeat prompt and give up on the task or remain silent. They might attempt to perform task but fail. Only occasional words or phrases are intelligible.

A2 -- Test-takers perform task limitedly. They respond with much effort but provide limited speech sample and they often run out of time. Much effort is required on part of the listener to understand. It is difficult to tell if task is fully performed because of linguistic weakness but function can be evident.

B1 -- Test-takers can perform task somewhat competently. They respond with effort, sometimes provide limited speech sample and sometimes run out of time. They sometimes use excessive distracting and ineffective repair strategies to compensate for linguistic weaknesses (vocabulary and/or grammar). Content is adequate. Some listener effort is required.

B2 -- Test-takers can perform task competently. They volunteer information, sometimes with effort and usually do not run out of time. There are linguistic weaknesses and repair strategies might be

necessary and these could be distracting. Sometimes awkward expressions are used. Generally, there is strong content. Little listener effort is required.

C1 -- Test-takers can perform task very competently. They volunteer information freely with little effort, and may go beyond the task by using additional appropriate functions. Good repair strategies, appropriate expressions and content are used. No listener effort is required.

C2 -- Test-takers can perform task very competently and effectively. They volunteer information freely with no effort, and go beyond the task by using additional appropriate functions. Excellent repair strategies, sophisticated expressions and very strong content are evident. No listener effort is required.

4. PROBLEMS

A number of problems are identified and will be discussed below.

- Students did not attempt all questions and parts

For Part I, raters reported that some students answered only the first question out of the 3 questions. Also, many did not answer Part II or did not appear to know what to say (FPI and FTSM). This could be due to an error in the task for Part II which could be resolved when the test was conducted at FSSK, but not at FPI and FTSM. However, when the test was conducted at FST the error was correct. Nevertheless, only 18 students answered Part II out of 40 students who answered Part I in FST (Table 3). This could be due to the way the test is conducted at FST.

- Quality of audio and video files is poor

Raters for FTSM and FST reported that some of the audio files are barely audible probably because students spoke very softly. There are also reports of voices overlapping (responses from one part overlapped with responses from the other).

FST raters reported that the quality of the video files is poor. The videos appeared to have been taped by the students and that they could hear many voices in the background. This suggests that there are other students also carrying out the task in the same room. FTSM raters also said that there are a lot of background noises in the videos. They could hear other students responding to the task in the background. No quality issue was reported with the video files of FSSK and FPI.

- Discrepancy in number of students who registered and number of files received

There are some FSSK students who either did not send their audio files for Parts 1 and 2 which involved self-taping or did not do them (Table 5). There were also students who sent blank files. The reason why is not immediately clear. It could be due to internet access, uploading issue or problems with taping or smartphone.

- File Format that could not be accessed

A number of students from FTSM uploaded their audio files to Goggle Drive or Dropbox and provided the link to the files via email. Raters reported that they could not access these files which are in the AAV format.

- Difficulty in assessing the test

Raters have problems rating some of the files because of the sound quality. Some raters could not meet the deadline despite being given a month to do so as it was during the semester and they are busy with classes etc. As the rating involves 2 raters, some have problems meeting up with their partners as required.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The committee suggests the following changes to solve the problems highlighted above:

- Streamline the test and response mode

The test will only have 1 task with 3 / 4 questions instead of the current 3 tasks. Test takers would be required to talk about themselves, and be given a real world scenario that requires them to problem solve and think critically to come up with solution(s). The students will not be required to discuss in pairs.

Test takers' responses will be audio-taped in the computer laboratories, if available. Alternatively, they would be audio-taped using the students' own smartphones. With the change to the test, the test takers only need to send in one audio file solving the problems of missing files or not attempting certain tasks. There would be no video-taping as not all faculties have facilities to do this, and asking the students to video-tape themselves have proved to be problematic. This also facilitates assessing as the examiners only need to give one score.

- Dissimilate Information about CBET prior to the test

Sample test items with clear instructions on the mode of assessment, and the dos and don'ts will be dissimilated to test takers at least a week before the test so that they would not only be able to practice and be familiar with using their smartphone to tape their response but also the pitfalls of self-taping could be overcome.

6. CONCLUSION

With the implementation of these changes, the committee believes that the problems encountered could be minimized and that CBET will not only be more test-taker and examiner- friendly, but also more practical.

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