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The need for competent work ready English language learners

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Abstract

In Malaysia, Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is a test of English language proficiency used in Malaysian public higher educational institutions for the purpose of undergraduates' admission. However, in preparing students for the workplace, proficiency test alone is not enough. They also need to be competent in applying the four language skills in work related tasks which cover listening, speaking, reading and writing. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to share the authors' experience in using thematic approach in developing English proficiency test paper at a technical university in the east coast of Malaysia. The test paper developed encompasses four language skills which share a similar theme. The input from listening and reading texts will be used as the output in speaking (in the form of presentation) and writing assessment. Should this assessment be successful to measure our engineering students' ability to apply the four skills in work related tasks, this test will show how successful the students are in applying what they have learnt throughout their course of studies at the university. The industries may as well benefit from the assessment as not only it could serve as an indicator to gauge the English language proficiency level of newly-employed staff but also as an instrument to measure their competency on work-related skills where English is concerned. It also holds a potential to be used as an entrance requirement for new employees

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1. Research Background

In Malaysia, Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is a test of English language proficiency used in Malaysian public higher educational institutions for the purpose of undergraduates' admission. The similar test is also used by some local universities as an exit test as an indicator that students have improved their language proficiency after undergoing language courses provided by these universities. However, in preparing students for the workplace, a test which measures proficiency alone is not sufficient as signified in a study by Dooey (1999). The study found no evidence to suggest that those students who did not meet Curtin's minimum English proficiency criteria (IELTS Band 6.0), were destined to fail; as the only two students who failed to meet admissions requirements both passed their first year. Conversely, the study shows that most of the clear failures were among the native speakers who came in with high IELTS scores. This would seem to indicate that, for this group at least, language was not a key factor contributing to their academic success and it would seem that skills other than language proficiency are needed.

Similarly, like language proficiency, even technical knowledge and competence is not sufficient for graduates to secure jobs as some research has shown. Apparently, according to Zaharim et al., (2009) one of the contributing factors of increased unemployment rate in Malaysia in the first quarter of 2008 is because "graduates are not ready for the workforce". In a workshop organized by the Economic Planning Unit in July 2004, representatives agreed that the graduates are "…well equipped with the technical skills such as in ICT, management, engineering and marketing but they lack in certain aspects such as ability to communicate, skills to solve problems and poor interpersonal skill" (Nurita et al., 2007 in Zaharim et al., 2009). Furthermore, several research in engineering education basically found out that the current educational system and practices in Malaysia are unable to deliver graduates who are fully equipped with employability or generic skills required by employers nowadays or in the near future (Lee Fui Tong, 2003; Mohamad et al., 2004; Nurita et al., 2007 in Zaharim et al., 2009). Fong (2004) and Henwood (2007), as cited in Norshima Zainal Shah (2008) blame the exam-oriented education system practised in Malaysia for producing graduates who are not "work-ready" for their future employers in that they are fully equipped with theories but may lack practical exposure which could help prepare them the reality of working environment.

This 'deficit' in graduate skills is also recognized in other parts of the world. The UK and American government are also experiencing the same problem with respect to its graduates (Dickinson, 2000, Lawrence 2002 in Kaur and Kaur, 2008). According to the Dearing Committee (1997), studies of employers have repeatedly emphasized the importance placed on 'personal transferable skills'. Employers today want graduates not only with specific skills and knowledge but with the ability to be proactive enough to see and respond to problems (Kaur and Kaur, 2008).

2.1 Employability from the Employers' Perspectives

According to Mason, Williams & Cranmer (2006) in Kaur and Kaur (2008), from the employers' perspective, 'employability' and 'work readiness' are synonymous. Both indicate possession of the skills, knowledge, attitudes and commercial understanding that will allow new graduates to make productive contributions to organizational objectives upon commencing employment. "Employability skills are generic in nature rather than job specific and cut across all industries, businesses, job levels from the entry-level worker to the senior most position" (Kaur and Kaur, 2008).

Most employers look for candidates who not only have excellent academic performance but also possess good communication skills especially in English language. in Yemen where, as a result of graduates' poor performance in English, most of them were rejected when applying to work in oil companies. As such, the former Yemeni Minister of Oil and Minerals Mr. Khaled Bahah urged the graduates to improve their English skills in order to secure jobs especially with petroleum companies (Al-Tamimi and Shuib, 2009).

In Asia, Malaysia for example, Malaysian graduates, especially engineering graduates possess good basic engineering knowledge and are very competent. However, most of the employers complain that most of the graduate-level job applicants are lacking employability skills which refer to "the basic skills which are necessary for getting, keeping and doing well on a job" (Robinson, 2000 as cited in Zaharim et al.,2009).

In the Employability Skills Profile (1992) (as cited in Norshima Zainal Shah , 2008), 25 major employers in Canada list the required graduate attributes:

    i)   People who can communicate, think and continue to learn throughout their lives.

    ii)   People who can demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours, responsibilities and adaptability.

    iii) People who can work with others.

This is in line with a study carried out by Zaharim et al., (2009) who studied employers' perception toward engineering graduates and the employers' level of satisfaction towards skills possessed by employees. It was found that top priority was given to '*Ability to function effectively as an individual and in a group with the capacity to be leader or manager as well as an effective team member*' followed by '*Ability to communicate effectively, not only with engineers but also with the community at large*' (pg 298). The first is said to be important to work within a project team and to keep the project going as scheduled and communication is deemed necessary for an engineer to negotiate, work in a team, to serve and meet customers, to interact and work well with people and to solve problems.

Results show some significant gap between the skills actually possessed by employees and the skills thought to be important by employers. Ability to function as a leader or team member is second on employers' satisfaction level whereas effective communication which is second most important requirement is fifth on the employer's satisfaction

level. This concurs with reports which state that employers are generally contented with graduates' technical competence but feel that these graduates are not sufficiently ready to enter the workforce especially in terms of the ability to communicate, skills to solve problems and poor interpersonal skills.

Zaharim et al., (2009) also investigated engineering employability skills in four Asian countries such as Malaysia, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong. The study found that communication skills rank at the top in Japan and Malaysia. In Japan, personal presentation skill is the second most important personal skill and in Singapore, according to Siu (2007)(in Zaharim et al., 2009) his study found that a graduate without visual literacy is considered 'incompletely educated' as there is a need to communicate using visuals. Although it is stated that Communication and Relationship Management is number five on the ten employability skills list identified by Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA), in Singapore, engineering undergraduate curricula consist of 'basic literacy skills like language, mathematics and computer literacy in addition to a set of skills in their core subjects…' (pg 310) that Singapore Employability Skills System (ESS) places literacy and communication as the first two employability skills. In Hong Kong, English language proficiency is at number four but Lau and Pang (2000) (as cited in Zaharim et al., 2009) suggest that Hong Kong graduates have to build up confidence through better communication and negotiation skills in order to make known the talents and achievements they possess.

The skills described above are teachable and transferable to graduates and can be integrated in other non-technical aspects of engineering education. In support of this view, a study conducted by Hassan (2007) shows that there should be a shift in education programmes in order to enhance employability skills among graduates (Zaharim et al., 2009). At present, the most common perceived reasons why most graduates seem to be unemployed are the lack of skills to impress employers during the interview which include presentation and communication skills in English (Vijan, 2007; and Phang, 2006) (as cited in Norshima Zainal Shah, 2008). Therefore, it can be claimed that proficiency is important but the extent to which graduates can apply that proficiency skills in English in interpersonal skills, presentation skills and negotiation skills are equally important.

2.2 Employers' Perspectives on Communication Skills

Since communication skills seems to be prevalently at the top of many employability skills lists, it is vital to understand how employers view communication skills. According to Chang (2004) proficiency in English means the ability to present ideas, explain issues and problems, to speak up in a constructive manner, to resolve problems, to understand issues and problems faced by companies and to come up with workable solutions to problems are all good communication and interpersonal skills sought after by employers. Therefore, employees are expected to contribute from 'day one of being hired' (as cited in Kaur and Kaur, 2008:18).

Ayiesah Ramli et al. (2010) state that communication skills comprise making effective presentations, having the ability to put up a good logical argument to persuade others, as well as the ability to express idea verbally – one to one or to groups, having relevant skills in written communication such as emails, reports, letters to clients, the ability to listen attentively and respond to others' comments ideally.

Another definition is communication skills is the ability an individual displays in consistently demonstrating the ability to effectively communicate with clients, colleagues, subordinates, and supervisors in professional manner and in the personal department. Communication skill is generally understood to be the art or technique of persuasion through the use of oral language and written language." (taken from "Communication Skills," n.d.)

Therefore, it can be said that graduate employability is not only determined by their academic performance but also strongly influenced by their communicative competence. Since the employers' perceptions are now becoming predominantly important in determining graduates' future career, there should also be a paradigm shift in the assessments of English Language among soon-to-graduate students so as to reflect their employability skills. The shift can be a move from focusing on rather discrete item tests or proficiency based to an instrument which tests on students' strategies on the act of negotiation, situated performance, communicative repertoire and language awareness (Canagarajah, 2006).

2.3 The Development in English Language Teaching

The central aim of the changes in education is to improve the delivery status especially in Higher Education (HE). Until the personal computers were made widely available in the 1980s, the audio visual aids used in HE were overhead projectors, cassette players, video, to name but a few. The discipline of educational technology had also become widely known due to the changes in the methods of delivery. The changes have not only affected the way knowledge is imparted on the learners but also on academic curriculum at the university. Despite the influence of technology, there has also been a very close connection between HE and professional work. As the result of this, the university considers the inclusion of transferable skills which are necessary for employment purposes such as problem solving, analytical skills, and communication in general. Therefore, HE can be regarded as a consumer-oriented business which prepares what is required by the consumers (Laurillard, 2010).

In the past decades, the development of technology has also revolutionized the teaching of English language. The integration of technology in the teaching of English Language has also led to the shift of teaching English for Academic purposes to teaching English for more specialized purposes so as to suit the need of using English for in workplaces (Al-Khatib, 2005). The nature of English language required by workers is influenced by professional requirement as well as specific duties assigned.

The integration of technology in the classroom teaching for the past twenty years has also transformed the way English language is taught. The shift indirectly influences the course designers to shift from ' teaching English for Academic purposes to teaching English for more specialised purposes'(Al-Khatib, 2005). The interest is now leading to an increase in researching the most effective and efficient way in improving the ability of workers in using English for specific purposes in the workplace (Li So-mui and Mead, 2000; Louhiala-Salminen 1996) (as cited in Al-Khatib, 2005). This is another strong indicator which shows that there is a strong correlation between the design of curriculum at university and the demand at the workplaces. There is also a growing demand on the use of specific purposes English as the medium of communication as it plays an important role in workers' and administrators' success in their fields of work and business environments. Basically, it can be deduced that how a graduate is able to apply language in the workplace is far more significant than a graduate's proficiency. Therefore, there is a dire need that exams or test should be revolutionised to keep up with the changes and transformation in the language classroom.

3.1 Project Description

This paper is actually a part of research paper developed by a team of academicians in Malaysian public university, Universiti Malaysia Pahang, Malaysia. The rationale for carrying out the research is mainly based on the fact that English Language is greatly emphasised to be used as the medium of instruction for teaching and learning purposes at the university. The percentage of the use of English in lecture is almost one hundred percent, this, in turn proves to be a source of extrinsic motivation for the students to be more motivated and confident to use the language for their academic and social purposes.

Realising the fact that mastering English language is important for their workplace, the university has decided to evaluate graduates' level of English before stepping out of the university. Therefore, an English test assessing students' level of English before commencing university study is significant to give enough information for the Modern Languages Department to prepare a suitable curriculum for the students. The test too will be used as an exit test for the university to measure the finishing school graduates' level of English before stepping into their varied career paths. As such, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

  a. What are the elements which need to be considered in developing the test paper?
  b. What is the students' English proficiency level before commencing their academic studies at the university.
  c. What is students' English proficiency level after completing their academic studies at the university.

3.2 Designing the Test

The test is developed based on Canale and Swain's (1980) distinguishing communicative competence from communicative performance. Their comprehensive theoretical framework serves as the foundation for more effective teaching in second language learning in which eventually will lead to a more valid and reliable measurement of second language communication skills.

Canale and Swain (1980) explain that there is a clear distinction between grammatical and communicative competence which is not to be confused with communicative performance. 'Communicative competence' refers to the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, which refers to 'knowledge of the rules of grammar', and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of the rules of language use. Communicative performance on the other hand refers to the realisation of these competencies and their interaction in the actual production and comprehension of utterances (under general psychological constraints that are unique to performance. If communicative performance is the realization of grammatical competence, i.e., English language proficiency and communicative competence, i.e., sociolinguistic competence, therefore what is referred to as communication skills under employability skills is actually communicative performance i.e., actual demonstration of this knowledge in real second language.

Like Canale and Swain (1980), we too believe that it is important to maintain these basic definitions for second language teaching and testing purposes because if this is what employers are looking for in graduates, then it is this communicative approach to second language teaching that should be adopted in the classrooms that *integrates* aspects of both grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence for competent communicative performance. Therefore, teaching methodology and assessment instruments must be designed so as to address not only communicative competence but also communicative performance. The emphasis on grammar as well as communicative competence, and ultimately communicative performance is integrated in all the skills tested. A comprehensive conceptual framework which includes cognitive, semantic, communicative and sociolinguistic factors in testing are also considered to ensure the test developed takes into account the different perspectives in language testing (August & Hakuta (1997) and Bransford, Brown and Cocking (1999)) (as cited in Solano-Flores and Trumbull, 2003).

The consideration of different perspectives enables test developers to look into the linguistic features of language as well as societal contexts which influence the development of language throughout the years. The linguistics features are grammatical elements which form as the foundation of the test and the societal contexts are related issues which will be used as the themes to develop the materials.

Themes selected will be based on the programmes offered at the university. Since the university is a technological based university, the themes chosen will be issues which are related to the fields. One theme will be used as the main source of reference to develop test items for each of the skill tested. For example, one of the themes considered is "Green Technology". Then, all the texts and questions for listening, reading, writing and speaking will be developed based on that particular theme. The detail of the flow is given in Figure 1.
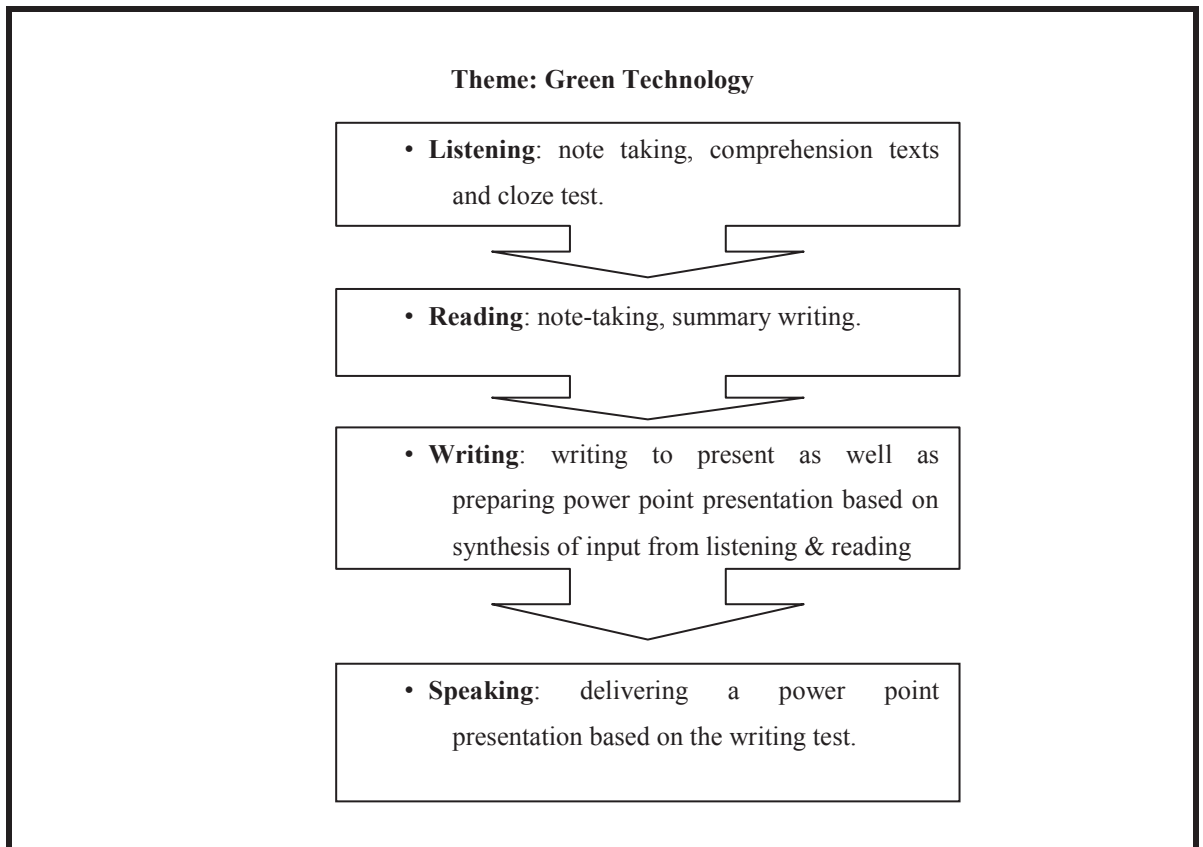
Theme: Green Technology

- **Listening**: note taking, comprehension texts and cloze test.

- **Reading**: note-taking, summary writing.

- **Writing**: writing to present as well as preparing power point presentation based on synthesis of input from listening & reading

- **Speaking**: delivering a power point presentation based on the writing test.

Figure 1: The Flow of the Thematic Test

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed some literature which highlights the importance of communicative competence among graduates to secure employment upon graduation. It has also been discussed that academic success alone will not guarantee work if graduates lack employability skills. Among the employability skills which employers consider necessary include job seeking skills, interview skills, presentation skills which require a certain level of competency

in English. Even though it is important to bear in mind that competency cannot be measured directly, if there is one way that employers can benefit from is though graduates' performance in a test which reflects their work readiness.

The proposed English language test in this paper will be designed not only to measure engineering students' English language proficiency, but also to gauge their communication skills. The test will measure the students' ability to transfer one language skill to other language skills, for instance the input from listening and reading will be used as the output in the writing and speaking tests. The measurement of graduates' ability is not only limited to proficiency but beyond that. Apart from proficiency, the transfer of input from one language skill to another skill as output reflects the real workplace setting which requires employees to apply all the four language skills to complete a given task within the required time.

The whole evaluation method will take into account the employers' expectations which influence graduates' employability success rates. It has also been the hope of the research team that this project will benefit all parties involved; the university curriculum developers, the graduates and employers in general. It is firmly believed that, if this test is properly designed and conducted, employers may utilise the test as part of their recruitment exercise.

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