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Oral Competency Test: Difficulties in the Muet Preparatory Course in Tertiary Setting

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ABSTRACT

Fluency in English is a major yardstick by which the marketability of a graduate is assessed. In gearing graduates towards world class standards, competency in the English language has always been stressed upon. As such, the English Language has been an essential component of the academic curriculum in tertiary institutions. Among the many courses offered are the basic language and proficiency courses. The aim of this paper is to examine the difficulties faced by undergraduates and examiners while undertaking the MUET Speaking Test in tertiary setting. The results show it would help if the papers set were of the level of the students' ability. The paper also provides suggestions and guidelines about how the Speaking test in tertiary setting may be improved.

Keywords: difficulties, oral competency, tertiary setting

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Fluency in English is a major yardstick by which the marketability of a graduate is assessed. In gearing graduates towards world class standards, competency in the English language has always been stressed upon. As such, the English Language has been an essential component of the academic curriculum in tertiary institutions. The English language proficiency of Universiti Teknologi MARA (henceforth UiTM) students has been a source of concern for a very long time. The major problem encountered by English language lectures is the students' inability to communicate in English despite the fact that they have studied the language for at least eleven years in school. Grammatical errors in writing and inability to express ideas orally in English are just some of the common problems encountered.

To overcome these basic problems, each branch campus has a Language Studies Academy which services all the faculties by providing English language courses for all programmes. The English language courses range from Basic English Language (BEL) courses to specialized language courses such as MUET. The BEL courses are formulated to meet the needs of students who need to improve their basic language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students entering UiTM for the first few semesters at the diploma level are put through 6 hours per week of English language courses designed to improve their language proficiency and the passing rate has been quite encouraging.

The first of such courses is the BEL 120 or *Consolidating Language Skills*. This course is compulsory for all Diploma Semester One students. The course integrates all the four skills together with a focus on grammar to achieve a higher level of language proficiency for the students who have obtained at least a pass in their *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM examination. Those who have passed BEL120 would proceed to BEL 260 in the following semester. BEL 260 or *A preparatory course for MUET* is designed to prepare students for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) which is an entrance requirement for students who plan to continue their studies at degree level in UiTM or other public universities in Malaysia. The course prepares students in all the four skills, namely reading, speaking, listening and writing. It also incorporates grammar in those four skills. BEL 260 allocates 2 hours each week for reading, writing and listening and speaking respectively. Since listening and speaking are combined in a two hour slot, it is common for lecturers to allocate one hour for listening and another for speaking.

1.1 Construct of the BEL 260 Test

This paper will focus on BEL 260 i.e. *A preparatory course for MUET*. The oral component of BEL 260 emphasises the following outcomes:
- Asking for and giving information
- Expressing opinions and supporting them
- Expressing agreement/ disagreement
- Making suggestions and recommendations
- Stating and justifying points of view
- Presenting an argument
- Drawing conclusions
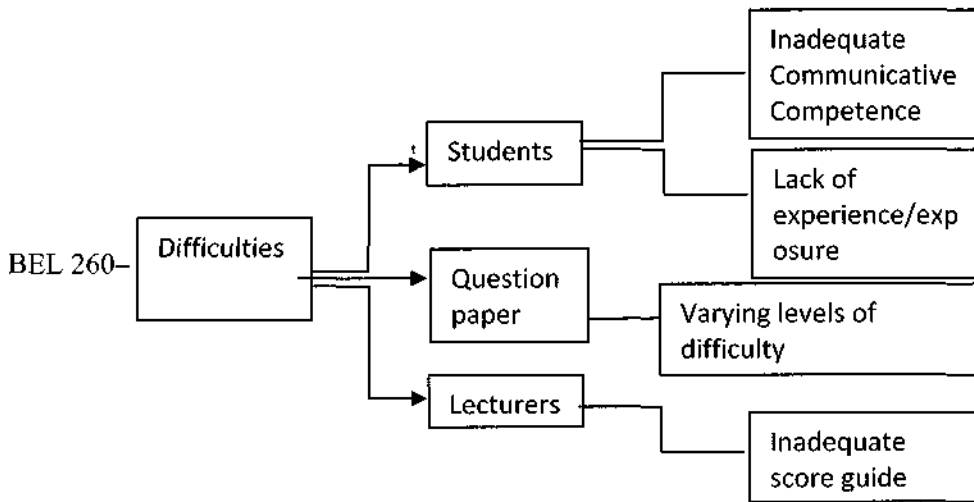
Figure 1: Difficulties pertaining to BEL 260

The BEL 260 Preparatory Course for MUET was introduced in December 2007 for Semester two diploma students at UiTM. Paper 2 consists of a Speaking Test and was first conducted in March 2008. The Test was designed to evaluate the ability of the students to put forward opinions individually and later engage in discussions on various current events and social issues in Malaysia. Halliday (1970) puts it this way: 'language serves for the expression of 'content', that is, of the speaker's experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness." In doing so, the students are required to demonstrate communicative competence. The test is supposed to observe a number of characteristics. According to Morrow (1977), in a communicational event, the use of language is interaction based, it is unpredictable, it takes place in a context, has a communicative purpose, it is authentic and is behaviour based.

1.2 Construct of MUET Oral Test in Tertiary setting

The MUET Oral Test utilises wholly written elicitation cues. The role of the examiners are to conduct the test without giving any clues to the students. However for BEL 260 Oral exam, the role of the two examiners is often not just minimal and limited to assigning the different tasks to the examinees only. Since this is a Preparatory course for MUET, the examinees are allowed to ask the meaning of unfamiliar words which may otherwise hamper their participation in the test altogether. The examiners are allowed to merely give synonyms to the word asked or briefly explain the meanings of key words which the examinees do not understand.

The examiners do not interrupt the examinees once the test begins and remain detached. They become silent observers and award the necessary marks upon completion of each speaking turn

The elicitation techniques used in problem-solving task consists of two tasks - Task A: individual presentation, and Task B: Group discussion. In Task A the four students are given a situation with four different suggestions to solve a particular problem. They are given two minutes to prepare their individual response and two minutes to present individually. They are also required to listen to the others while they are making their presentations and take down notes for the group discussion in Task B. Once Task A is completed, the four examinees are given two minutes to prepare points to support or oppose the other candidates' views in Task B. In the ten minutes group discussion, the examinees have to evaluate each other's points and then come to a general consensus regarding the best way or suggestion to resolve a specific situation.

1.3 The MUET scoring system in tertiary setting

UiTM utilizes its own scoring system in assessing the students for the BEL 260 Oral test. According to the score guide, students are to be awarded marks on three areas – Task Fulfillment, Language and Communicative ability. This follows the criteria set by the Examination Syndicate of Malaysia. However, this is where the similarities end. The UiTM score guide awards a student a maximum of 6 marks for Task Fulfillment, 6 marks for Language and 3 marks for Communicative Ability (see Table 1)..

Table 1: MUET scoring system in tertiary setting

SCORE / COMPONENT	6	5	4	3	2	1
TASK FULFILMENT (6 MARKS)	**Fulfils task very competently**	**Fulfils task Reasonably well**	**Fulfils task satisfactorily**	**Fulfils task modestly**	**Fulfils task in a limited way**	**Does not Fulfil task**
Score	6	5	4	3	2	1
LANGUAGE	**Displays very**	**Displays reasonab**	**Displays satisfacto**	**Displays modest**	**Displays poor t**	**Displays very**

	confident control of language	ly confident control of language	ry control of language	control of language	control of language	poor control of language
Score	3	2.5	2	1.5	1	0.5
COMMUNIC ATIVE ABILITY	Shows ability to communi cate very compete ntly	Shows ability to communi cate compete ntly	Shows ability to communi cate satisfacto rily	Shows ability to communi cate modestly	Hardly shows ability to communi cate	Does not show ability to communi cate

For Task Fulfillment, 1 mark is awarded for non-performance of task. If the students fulfil the task in a limited way, they are awarded 2 marks. A modest performance is given 3 marks while a satisfactory fulfillment of the task could be given 4 marks. If the students do reasonably well, they can be given 5 marks while a competent student can be awarded the maximum 6 marks.

For Language, 1 mark is given to a student who displays very poor control of language, 2 marks for poor control of language while a modest control of language can be given 3 marks. Those who display a satisfactory control of language can be given 4 marks. Those who display a reasonably confident control of the language can be given 5 marks while those who display a very confident display of language will be awarded 6 marks.

For Communicative ability, 0.5 mark is given to those who do not show any ability to communicate. Those who hardly show any ability to communicate are given 1 mark. Those who show a modest ability to communicate are given 1.5 marks while 2 marks are given to those who communicate satisfactorily.. A communicatively competent student could command a maximum of 2.5 marks while a very competent student can be awarded the maximum 3 marks.

2.0 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study aims to provide information concerning the difficulties in the MUET Preparatory Test for the Speaking Component in the tertiary setting. The report is focused on three questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions on the difficulty of the MUET Oral Test in the tertiary setting?
2. What are the students' preferences in speaking activities in the MUET Oral Test in the tertiary setting?
3. What are the lecturers' perceptions on the difficulty of the MUET Oral Test scoring system in the tertiary setting?

3.0 PARTICIPANTS

Six groups of 4 students each, who sat for the test at UiTM Samarahan, consented to be observed and interviewed. Ten of the students were from urban areas and the other fourteen were from rural areas. Six of the students were from Peninsular Malaysia and the rest were from Sarawak. All the participants learned English for 11 years in school, obtained SPM credit for English and have passed BEL 100 in November 2008. Four lecturers who conducted the Oral test were also interviewed separately.

4.0 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

To answer research question *What are the students' perceptions on the difficulty of the MUET Oral Test in the tertiary setting?* , two hours of focus group interviews were conducted with 6 groups of 4 students each, who sat for the test at UiTM Samarahan. The data from the interviews were collected based on 10 questions (see Table 2). All interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. The interviews and audio taping were conducted on one Friday afternoon between 2-4pm when all the students were free.

Data to answer the second research question: *What are the students' preferences in speaking activities in the MUET Oral Test in the tertiary setting?* was obtained from a questionnaire. This was a rating activity to investigate students' ideas of their preferred speaking learning activities. The students had to rate the usefulness of the five dimension speaking activities on a scale of 1 to 5. One (1) being the least useful and Five (5) the most useful. The dimensions were activities related to i) Practicing pronunciation in class; ii) Participating in public speaking; iii) Conversation in groups; iv) Acting in English; v) Conversation in pairs. There were 24 questions, with 6 questions for each dimension (see Table 3).

Data to answer the third research question: *What are the lecturers' perceptions on the difficulty of the MUET Oral Test scoring system in the tertiary setting?* was obtained from face-to-face interviews with four senior lecturers who conducted the exam. Their responses were recorded and similar responses were noted.

The data from the survey was analysed using SPSS for mean and standard deviation and from interviews, frequency counts and percentages were used. The common responses from the focus group interviews were analysed based on two aspects i.e. selection of topics and language used in the question paper itself. The focus group interviews which lasted for 2 hours were conducted over 6 separate sessions. Basically, the researchers went through the six sets of questions with the students in class and obtained feedbacks from them. The 6 Speaking groups were interviewed separately so that they would not influence one another. Major themes were identified based on the frequency of similar responses made by the students and lecturers from the interviews. The themes were deduced based on responses related to the following prompts:

a) Comparing difficulty level between BEL 100 and BEL 260
b) Duration of BEL speaking Test to prepare for MUET speaking
c) Understanding the task given
d) Understanding the language use
e) Knowledge of the topic given
f) Readiness to sit for MUET
g) Format of BEL 260 speaking
h) Scoring system use for BEL 260 speaking

5.0 FINDINGS
The findings from the questionnaire and face-to face interviews are presented below to answer the three research questions sated above.

5.1 Students' perceptions on the difficulty of the MUET Oral Test in the tertiary setting

The findings from the interviews are presented below.

Table 2: Percentages from Interviews

Questions and Responses from Interviews	Yes %	No %
1) Is there a big difference in difficulty between BEL 100 and BEL 260?	100%	0%
2) Do you think two hours of Speaking and Listening for one semester is enough to prepare you for MUET?	15%	85%
3). Do you find the question easy?	2%	98%
4). Can you understand all the words in the question	6%	94%
5). Can you understand the task given?	87%	13%

6). Do you have much to say on your topic?	40%	60%
7). Do you have much knowledge on the topic?	27%	73%
8). Are you ready to sit for MUET now?	7%	93%
9). Is the format of the exam too free for discussion?	65%	35%
10). Should the same scoring for MUET be used in UiTM ?	90%	10%

Table 2 clearly shows that all the respondents stated that there was a big difference in difficulty between BEL 120 and BEL 260. About 85%of the respondents also thought that two hours of Speaking and Listening for one semester is not enough to prepare them for MUET as compared to 15% who thought otherwise. The majority or 98% of the respondents stated that they did not find the questions easy compared to only 2% who said otherwise. About 94% of the respondents who did not understand all the words in the question compared to only 6% otherwise. A large majority or 87% of the respondents could understand the task compared to only 13% otherwise. About 60% of the respondents also stated that they did not have much to say on the topic given compared to 40% otherwise. A large majority or 73% said that they did not have much knowledge on the topic compared to 27% otherwise. A total of 93% of the respondents stated that they were not ready to sit for MUET compared to only 7% otherwise. A total of 65% of the respondents stated that the format of the BEL 260 paper was too free for discussion as compared to 35% who stated otherwise. Lastly, a large majority or 90% of the respondents were of the opinion that that the same scoring for MUET should be used for BEL 260 exam as compared to only 10% who did not agree.

5.2   Students' preferences in the MUET Oral Test in the tertiary setting

The students, being participants in the speaking process, came into the classroom with their own perceptions, conceptions, and ideas about how they wanted to learn speaking. It resulted in a variance with those held by their lecturers; a situation which did not enhance or maximize learning was resulted. Investigating learners' ideas or perspectives on learning how to speak effectively was therefore an attempt to bridge the gap between learning and effective instruction so that teaching could equate learning. Table 3 shows the useful speaking activities as rated by students. Analysis on the speaking activities Table 3 shows that conversation in groups is deemed the most useful activity to prepare for MUET exam (mean score 3.81), followed by practicing pronunciation (mean score 3.75), conversation in pairs (mean score 3.69), participating in public speaking (mean score 3.57) It seems that students do like acting in English, if given a choice (mean score 3.21).

Table 3: Students Feedback: Useful speaking activities

No.	Useful speaking activities as rated by students	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Practicing pronunciation in class	3.75	0.81
2	Participating in public speaking	3.69	0.97
3	Conversation in groups	3.81	0.86
4	Acting in English	3.21	1.0
5	Conversation in pairs	3.57	0.93
	Overall	**3.46**	**0.59**

5.3 Difficulties faced by the students when sitting for MUET Oral Test in the tertiary setting

The main areas of difficulty for students are the short class duration, difficult questions, lack of background knowledge on topic and dissimilarity of the test format compared to MUET. However, two aspects which need to be highlighted are:

i. Inadequate Communicative Competence. The students did not have the shared knowledge of the topics discussed. Some of them spoke better than others and did not have a shared linguistic proficiency of the ideal speaker-listener set in a situation where speakers and listeners could understand one another completely. In many instances, there were lot of pauses and requests for repetitions in order to understand what the speaker was saying. Thus, the lack of communicative competence affected their performance. They were not able to apply the language to present their opinions. The students' inability to express themselves in oral English made it difficult for them to perform the task effectively. Although all of the respondents obtained a minimum C6 for SPM English, they were still unable to communicate well in English.

ii. Lack of experience/exposure. Many of the respondents did not have much to say about the topics. Some claimed that they had no idea what was expected from them

as the topic was too much narrowed down. This had made it difficult for them to expand beyond one or two sentences of their utterance. Although the topics given were relatively common topics, the students lack of reading and even updating themselves with current issues showed their lack of knowledge. Most of them were not bothered to read newspapers and to listen to news so as to know what was happening in the country.

iii) Difficulties with speaking topics/tasks. The goal of the Oral Test is to encourage students to speak freely on a topic familiar to them and they are then assessed on the basis of their oral presentation. Therefore it is necessary that the topics and tasks set should be within the (a) analytical/ cognitive ability and (b) linguistic capability of the students who are taking the test.

When a topic is too specialized in nature or scope, it can hinder the student as she/he may have a limited world view of the issue or subject, even though the situation may be within the broad purview of his/her subject or discipline, and consequently she/he cannot talk sufficiently on the issue concerned (Yong and David, 1996:90). The topics given for the Speaking Test exam were too specific. Focus group interviews conducted with the examinees after the test revealed some of their responses.

When the topics are too restricted the students face difficulty, for e.g.:
Respondent 22 says:
'I don't know much about selfish drivers. I walk to school before and stay in hostels. Now at UiTM, there is no traffic problem and I also stay in hostel. I don't have experience about this kind of topic (Set 2). The news about accidents don't interest me"

Respondent 24 says:
'It's a good topic (Set 2) but I don't have many ideas about it. My task is to suggest imposing heavy fines on offenders. I don't know what kind of fines exist now. What to talk about. I don't know much about fines and whether it is considered heavy or not.'

When students do not have experience of modern transportation, they face difficulty with the question for e.g.
Respondent 6 says:
'My task for Set 3 is to suggest that commuters use an online ticketing system to buy bus tickets. I never buy tickets online myself. I don't know how to go about buying one and how do you expect me to speak for two minutes giving suggestions. So I just talk. Maybe some of my points are correct. Not fair.'

Respondent 16 says:

'My experience is important when I want to say something. I don't think I can speak much for my task (Set 3). I've tried but nothing logical comes to mind. The topic is so boring. It's common sense that public will buy their tickets from ticket counters. They will only buy from those selling illegally if they cannot buy from the counters. Who wants to buy more?'

On the other hand, when topics or tasks which are too specific definitely could give one student an advantage over another for e.g.

Respondent 4 says:

"I'm lucky I got Set 2. I'm from Kuala Lumpur and there are a lot of traffic problems and I always hear people complaining about it since I was in primary school. Even my teachers at school talked about traffic problems."

Respondent 5 says:

'When I go back to my hometown, I have to take express bus. You know the bus station in Jalan Duta during Raya is always full of people. Sometimes my brother just buys illegal tickets. So when my question is about illegal ticket, I know what to say. Many ideas'

The researcher found from the interviews that students from the urban cities who talked about modern transportation did significantly better than those from who had to imagine what traffic congestion was like or buying tickets from online or from illegal operators. On top of that the options for the four students in each set were not of parallel difficulty. Hamp-Lyons and Prochnow (1991) talking of difficulties in writing assessment, state that the writing prompts must be of parallel difficulty. The same argument holds for the oral prompts .The above examples illustrate this point and the speaking test is therefore, not a valid and fair test of knowledge and experience. The test question must, therefore ensure that the various options presented to the four students must be comparable. The students should be deemed to have comparable world knowledge or prior knowledge of the issue involved.

iv) Difficulties with language. The words used in the questions were beyond the comprehension of many students who were interviewed. The students said that they had to ask the lecturers to explain some keywords before they could understand the questions. Even though most of the questions had difficult words, students were not allowed to use dictionaries. The students were quite frustrated when they could not get a satisfactory answer from the lecturer and many of them just guessed the

meanings, hoping for the best. Below are some examples of expressions provided by the students during the interviews as found in the questions, which required clarification from the lecturers:-

abduction, strategies, commuters, operator, ticketing, intense, over-heated, reluctant

Respondent 4 says:
*'I can ask the lecturer to explain the meaning of the word **abduction**. I can understand it after that. Maybe because I never used that word before, so when presenting my points I didn't use it.'*

Respondent 7 says:
*'I don't really know what the meaning of **strategy** is although I know that word exist. To think in English is difficult. Somehow the words seem more difficult in English.*

Respondent 11 says:
*'I have to ask the lecturer to tell me the meaning of the word **commuter**. I have never heard it before'.*

The language in the question paper was too wordy. Too much information was also provided in the question sheet. Many students did not have enough time reading and preparing for their presentation within the two minutes given. As a result, many of them could not elaborate more than one point even though the students were taught in class to give at least three points for individual presentation. A number of students could not deliver after two minutes of preparation.

v)   Difficulties faced by the lecturers with the scoring system

The difficulty which examiners face in using this scoring system is that the descriptors are very vague. For example, for Task Fulfillment, the only difference in how marks are awarded is how the examiners interpret the words 'modestly', satisfactorily, 'reasonably well' and 'competently'. It is not often that a speaker can be clearly compartmentalized into the categories given based on those descriptions. Sometimes they exhibit a little of two categories. However, the marking scheme does not allow for this grey area.

The Examination Syndicate of Malaysia interprets a 'modest speaker' Task A as one who 'shows a fair understanding of the topic given and develops ideas but with some

effort.' The description of the response given by the student is that 'Response for most part relevant to the task given, but does not touch on points adequately.' On the part of Language the descriptors for a modest speaker are; "many errors in basic structures, but can manage a few correctly. Uses appropriate and varied vocabulary fairly well." And "some problems in pronunciation, stress and intonation but these do not cause serious misunderstanding". As for Communicative Ability, the descriptors outlined are; "Able to keep communication going although speech is uneven, hesitant and marked by some unsuccessful groping for words". And "Not much confidence in delivery". Following the description given for a modest speaker, the range of marks that can be awarded is between 7 – 9. All the other categories of speakers are also given precise descriptors in the three criteria stated. For obvious reasons further details cannot be released without prior written permission.

The UiTM scoring system needs detailed descriptors which can help the examiners gauge the capability of the students and pitch the students' performance at the right level. One word descriptors cannot allow for an accurate and fair awarding of marks. The four lecturers interviewed said that many of the students failed the speaking component because of poor communicative ability. Many of these failures were unable to express their ideas coherently and paused after speaking for less than a minute. Some of the students' language was so bad that they had to speak English intermittently with Bahasa Melayu. When this happened, the lecturers had to award the low marks even though their content was quite relevant. The scoring system is so rigid that it expects students to speak in proper English in order to pass the Oral test. Hence, there were cases of students who failed because they could not communicate well using proper English eventhough they showed quite a fair understanding of the subject.

6.0. Pedagogical implications which are applicable to oral tests

The following points should be taken into consideration when writing test questions for tests of oral communications.

1. There should be a consistency of the level of difficulty within a particular test.
2. The language used and the topics should be pitched at the level of the examinees concerned.
3. The sets of topics should be of parallel difficulty i.e. they should all carry the same theme or variations of the same theme, so as to ensure that the language input of examinees is similar , if not the same.

4. The language should be simple, concise and to the point. Extraneous information would distract the speaker from his intended task and role in the test.

5. The marking criteria should be revamped. There should be a way by which marks could be awarded in a fair and reasonable way. Perhaps UiTM could follow the marking scheme of the Examination Syndicate of Malaysia. Alternatively, a way need to be sought by which a range of marks could decide the student's performance.

6. Conclusion

The Speaking test is one of the most feared tests in the English course. Every student who is presumably prepared feels apprehension and anxiety in sitting for the test. Students in UiTM have far less time allocated to the learning of English than students in the mainstream school system (Form Six). The English courses are a boon to the students who need the extra help in improving their English proficiency. However, the courses need to be carefully tailored to suit the level of competency, experience and proficiency level of the students. It would help if the papers set were of the level of the students' ability. It may be argued however that, in the MUET exam the topics given are wide and varied and therefore requires wide reading on the part of the students. This is true and a valid point. What the writers are proposing is that preparation for MUET should be done in a more systematic and progressive way with a much longer duration of time for preparing the students.

The examiners too feel a sense of inadequacy when assessing the students. Even though the exams have the benefit of two examiners, it is nevertheless difficult to make accurate and fair assessment based on the present scoring system. For lecturers, it is important that they find out how their learners learn best, their learning preferences and see how their learners make sense of their learning. With this knowledge, they can better understand their learners; thus adapting and modifying their teaching to better suit their learners' needs. Such concerns will ensure effective teaching in the classroom. The current emphasis on learner-centred approaches implies the need to take into account the learners' needs and perceptions. For the lecturers, gaining better knowledge of one's learning is a manifestation of the reflective approach to effective teaching which will help lecturers in their self-development as educators.

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