Assessing Oral Skills of Pre-Tertiary Students: The Nature of the Communicative Act

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Abstract

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was recently introduced to gauge English proficiency of students entering Malaysian universities. This exam arose as a result of a gap between the years of exposure to learning of the language and preparatory years prior to entering university. The test aims at preparing pre-university students’ competency in the four language skills. Among the components of the exam is a test of oral skills, claimed very often as the most desirable proficiency. Given this premium, there exists a need for comprehensive methods of assessment accurately establishing or describing levels of proficiency attained by the students. This paper investigates test impact in the form of students’ response to the test of speaking and also analyses the test design as a communicative test of oral skills. Responses are partial indicators of test validity and offer information about related issues on test usefulness. The problems and concerns are noted in test design to facilitate improvement. Findings would be relevant for classroom practitioners, especially in test material preparation as a move towards achieving reliability and validity of a communicative test.

Key words: MUET (Malaysian University English Test), Communicative Test, Methods of assessment, Language Proficiency

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, competence in English among learners has been on the decline since a change in language policy in which the language of instruction in schools was changed from that of English to Malay (the official language) in 1970. The policy amendment was a reaction to the British colonial dominance in Malaysia, which lasted for more than 200 years. To grasp the Malaysian English language dilemma, certain historical perspectives are in order. Similar to many other ‘new’ world countries, Malaysia experienced a period of colonization. As of the eighteenth century, the British established their presence in the country; among the many natural ‘imports’ was their language. Schools established as part of the educational effort by the British accommodated existing cultures of different races, principally Malay, Chinese and Indian. The British saw a need to accommodate sentiments related to mother tongue use. As a result, vernacular schools sprang up side by side with government and government-aided schools established by missionaries and the colonial government.
Language of instruction was English for these schools, and it also functioned as the language for administration and other government matters. For many years, English was a dominant language, learned and used right up to the university level. It became the *lingua franca* of the educated: at that time a first-grade secondary school certificate could only be obtained with the prerequisite of passing the English course.

Winds of change, however, swept through the English-dominated system when the Japanese conquered Malaya in 1942: use of English was sidestepped and it did not regain a similar footing even when the Japanese surrendered. Sentiments by then had changed, and an emerging wave of nationalism had a direct bearing on English language policy, if there was one. These nationalists questioned the need for a colonial language, especially in the context of self-determinism that had become the new tune for progress. The legality of the language change was formalized in the National Language Policy Act in 1970, whereby a transition period was instituted to replace English with the national language, Malay (*Bahasa Melayu*). Consequent to the development, the new educational policy focused on molding a national identity with a common language as a unifying tool. The English language was thus relegated to a subject status, which is taught from primary to secondary school level with a weekly 200-minute exposure in class. A generation of students who had completed 11 years of formal schooling after this change in policy exhibited a drastic decline in English competency.

Today, the need for English as a global language is recognized unequivocally. Malaysia, in quest of global participation and recognition, acknowledges the importance of English, particularly in development of competent professionals (especially scientists) who should be able to communicate efficiently in English. Many believe that the training ground begins with education imparted in English, yet Malaysia has embarked along a “middle” path in which English is actively promoted. In fact, from 2003 onwards, the learning of Mathematics and Science in English had been made mandatory right from the primary years. In keeping with the spirit of national identity, use of the national language prevails for the rest of the curriculum in national-type schools. However, to provide for multicultural demands, vernacular languages (Mandarin and Tamil) are still used as the medium of instruction on the primary level in national schools, as well for teaching Mathematics and Science, thereby consciously promoting dual language instruction in “important” subjects in the primary years. Thus, in tandem to the effort of promoting use of English, schools have experienced curricular change in terms of additional language training and exposure, of which MUET is an example.

**The Malaysian Examination System**

Some elaboration on the Malaysian public examination system is warranted in order to locate the MUET as part of the system (Chan, 2000). In Malaysia, the first public examination (*Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah, UPSR*), is taken when students reach age 12 in primary
Assessing Oral Skills

grade 6, the next in secondary 3 (Penilaian Menengah Rendah, PMR) at age 15, plus one other in upper secondary 5 (Sijil Pelajaran Menengah, SPM), when students exit formal schooling at age 17. This final examination is taken by students progressing to the sixth form (Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Menengah, STPM), the examination considered for entry into public tertiary education. Sixth form takes two years to complete, and the MUET is compulsory in the STPM.

The English paper in fact has long been a compulsory subject for the UPSR, PMR, and SPM, but prior to 2000 a two-year gap had existed at the pre-university stage, during which English was not taught at all. In the university, however, many reference materials are in English. Given the scenario, Malaysian universities generally have to provide English proficiency classes, especially for students who have not attained a desired level of competence to enable them to cope with the demands of academic life, but this effort was seen as inadequate and not meaningful.

The situation gave life to the Malaysian University English Test in the STPM as the realization of the importance of English gained momentum; it was introduced in 1999 and fully implemented in 2000. It has the value of a subsidiary paper in the Higher School Certificate examination.

The Malaysian University English Test (MUET)

This research explores response to the oral test, one component of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), used as a standardized test to gauge the proficiency of English of pre-tertiary students. It also examines and evaluates test design used to elicit information about oral performance. The Malaysian Examinations Council, entrusted with implementation of MUET, stated clearly that the MUET syllabus seeks to bridge the gap in language needs between secondary and tertiary education. It supplies a context for language use related to academic experience and also for enhancement of communicative competence. The MUET is further seen as a means of developing critical thinking via competent use of language skills (Malaysian University English Test: Regulations and Scheme of Test, Syllabus, and Sample Questions, 1999).

The syllabus aimed at the learning of necessary skills in four modes: oral, hearing, reading, and writing. Reading skills were considered most essential, followed by writing, listening, and oral, respectively. This unequal weighting is seen as giving extra value to particular language components believed central to the curriculum or to the concept of proficiency (Alderson, Clapham and Wall, 1995: 149), as shown in Table 1.
Table 1. Weighting for the Various Components of the MUET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Mode of Test</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>800/1</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Centralised 15 MCQS</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800/2</td>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Centralised In groups of 4. Two-level assessment</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800/3</td>
<td>Reading Comprehension</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>Centralised 50 MCQS</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>888/4</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>1 hour 30 minutes</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Centralised One essay and one summary</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AGGREGATED SCORE 300

MUET Scoring Systems

To enhance adequate reporting of test performance, scoring systems were devised for each of skill used. Where skills are assessed subjectively, further scoring systems were designed to guide reliable responses. Individual scales are then translated into a macro six-point scale with descriptors for interpretation of aggregated scores (Table 2).

Table 2. Band Description for MUET Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aggregate Score</th>
<th>Band</th>
<th>User</th>
<th>Command of Language</th>
<th>Communicative Ability</th>
<th>Understanding</th>
<th>Task Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>260-300</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Very Good user</td>
<td>Very good command of the language</td>
<td>Highly expressive, accurate and appropriate; hardly any inaccuracies</td>
<td>High level of understanding of the language</td>
<td>Functions extremely well in the language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>220-259</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Good user</td>
<td>Good command of the language</td>
<td>Expressive, accurate and appropriate, with minor inaccuracies</td>
<td>Good level of understanding of the language</td>
<td>Functions well in the language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>180-219</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Competent user</td>
<td>Satisfactory command of the language</td>
<td>Generally expressive and appropriate, with occasional inaccuracies</td>
<td>Satisfactory level of understanding of the languages</td>
<td>Functions reasonably well in the language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140-179</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Modest user</td>
<td>Fair command of the language</td>
<td>Fairly expressive usually appropriate but with noticeable inaccuracies</td>
<td>Able to understand but with some misinterpretation</td>
<td>Able to function but with some effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-139</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Limited user</td>
<td>Limited command of the language</td>
<td>Lacking expressiveness and appropriateness: inaccurate use of language resulting in breakdown in communication</td>
<td>Limited understanding of the language</td>
<td>Limited ability to function in the language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 100</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Extremely limited user</td>
<td>Poor command of the language</td>
<td>Inexpressive and inaccurate use of language resulting in very frequent breakdowns in communication</td>
<td>Poor understanding of the language</td>
<td>Hardly able to function in the language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assessing Oral Skills

Testing the Oral Skills in MUET

From the MUET syllabus issued by the Malaysian Examinations Council, it is clear that the chief aim of the speaking component is to enable students to participate in social and academic contexts of language use. Broad descriptors are provided to indicate areas deemed crucial in the development of oral skills—e.g., sensitivity to registers and formality of language use, appropriate discourse, enunciation, intonation and stress, cohesion/coherence, and grammatical accuracy. To assess oral skill, students are tested on enabling and productive skills. Mode of testing is based on individual presentation, along with interactive engagements in the form of a discussion. The test paper provides stimuli in terms of a variety of given situations which purportedly reflect language use contact within the realm of students’ experience.

Designing the Test of Oral Skills as a Communicative Act in MUET

In exploring the construct of communicative language ability (Bachman, 1990), it was pointed out that some encompassed features do not lend themselves to traditional assessment practices like multiple-choice questions. As mentioned by Miller and Linn (2000), negative effects are associated with multiple-choice assessment, among them the notion that such testing methods restrict learning and teaching. Teachers teaching to a test may neglect many processes and processing that contribute to understanding of situations that demand language use. This holds especially true for a skill considered as productive, open-ended, and constructive. Emphasis is on language application and use in authentic situations. Montgomery (2002) defines these situations as those that include “the holistic performance of meaningful, complex tasks in challenging environments that involve contextualized problems”. In addition, she sees the tasks as multidimensional involving higher order cognitive skills, such as problem-solving and critical thinking.

In tracing the development of a performance test, McNamara (1996) sums up the steps as answering the question: Who wants to know what about whom, for what purpose? From the answers, one can derive a useful test specification to guide test construction. In selecting content that forms the test, McNamara recommends that test constructors would benefit from consultation with expert informants and performing literature search into related works. To mirror authentic situations and use of authentic materials, much could also be gleaned from observation and collection of texts from the target language use environment. Needless to say, piloting of test materials and interpretation of initial results would help in test refinement.

Still, to capture communicative language performance in a test situation, a number of constraints arise. A key concern is time taken in designing and assessing appropriate tasks. Also, students and teachers may not be too skilful in responding to open-ended or interpretive tasks. Students may take longer to cultivate these productive skills, and raters need training to
minimize subjectivity plus handle language among test takers that exhibit traits hard to evaluate, such as guessing and beating round the bush when testing. In designing a performance test, problems encountered are real and valid. As pointed out by McNamara, simulating authentic communication process under test conditions is difficult. A test developer is often forced into making decisions that may involve sacrificing some degree of validity. Yet these obstacles should not be viewed as insurmountable. If it is seen that language ability comes with built-in complexities (Bachman, 2001), then it is the duty of language instructors as well as testers to capture as closely as possibly actual language use. Recognizing this need in assessment would contribute to contemporary test development anchored on a multifaceted approach, rather than just relying on a narrow traditional choice of test methods.

Over the years, integrative performance and communicative competence have been much discussed. Early works by Caroll (1972) showed concern for test methods that require “an integrated, facile performance on the part of the examinee,” leading him to recommend that tests focus on “total communicative effect of an utterance”. Savignon (1972) also eschews traditional test approaches as failing to reflect a student’s ability to function in an authentic communicative context and proposes a model of communication centered on discussion, seeking information, talking on a topic and description. Her criteria of evaluation are, however, seen as inexplicit; the premise rested on a notion of general proficiency and thus was considered under-theorized for performance-based tasks (McNamara, 1997). McNamara views performance tasks as having two versions, weak or strong; most second language performance belongs to the former, where concentration is on sampled language use instead of task performance itself. The latter necessitates the inclusion of other facets impacting success in performance, including non-linguistic elements like personality and attitudes of involved parties in the test.

The MUET oral test is a variant of a communicative test that Brown and Hudson (2001:74) would classify as a constructed response item based on performance. This type of item “generally requires students to perform some more-or-less real-life, authentic task using the language…” It also falls within the weak version of a performance task. Oral ability is sampled based only on two tasks, oral presentation and group discussion. Along the continuum, a scale of 1 to 5 to indicating performance-based testing, the MUET oral test is likely placed somewhat to the leftward one-third from the controlled situation to a totally authentic communicative act.

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1 | MUET | 5
Controlled | Authentic Communicative Act
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Figure. Placement of MUET Oral Test as a Communicative Act
The MUET oral test can be seen as somewhat compromised. In justifying the test as a communicative act, aspects of validity merit attention. Content standards must be aligned to the construct, and expert judgment is called on to determine that the tasks are located in the curriculum domain, which states skills and content to be learned. Number of tasks and prompts for these tasks could yield inference on the adequacy of content sampling. The substantive aspect calls for a fit between processes test takers undergo and achievement of a task. The processes involved must also be relevant and representative for task realization.

Thus, questions that can be asked to check the validity of the oral test are:

- Is performance reflective of competence?
- Can total performance be elicited?
- Are test items representative of given ability?
- Can there be a perfect “fit” between difficulty of items and ability level of test takers?
- Can a test design be totally objective?
- Can a test be administered without any element of subjectivity?
- In taking a test, is the test taker free from subjectivity?

In evaluating the MUET oral test based on the above criteria, it would appear the test is restricted and rather domain-specific, confining itself mainly to two skills tested. It cannot claim to reflect total oral competence, nor can it elicit total oral performance. Nonetheless, the test represents to a great extent abilities stated in the syllabus content, while judgment of whether there can be a perfect fit between item difficulty and ability level of test takers can hardly be objectively assessed. There are in fact varying levels of abilities among test takers. No oral test can be free from bias, in that some topics more familiar to students than others (based on varying degrees of prior knowledge a student may possess). Given a “real world” situation, the test at best satisfies pre-set conditions governing its design. Yet working within its conceptual framework, the test attempts to meet its specifications, measuring oral skill along the following defined features traceable to Bygate’s (1987) description of speaking:

**Test format: Oral Presentation**

*Testing information routines on an individual basis*
- conveying facts, explanations, justifications, preferences or decisions

**Test format: Group Discussion**

*Testing information routines and interaction routines for a group*
- Negotiating meaning to monitor understanding
  - conveying facts, explanation, justification, preference or decision
- Asking for clarification, asking for and giving information
- Managing the interaction
- controlling over content and development of content
- introducing topics for discussion
- taking on a turn
- letting others to have a turn
- bringing discussion to a close

Weir (1993:32) comments: “information routines can be catered for in test tasks such as oral presentations which cater for long turns, but they may also form part of interactional routines…” For talking in short turns, reciprocal ability to use receptive and productive skills both in continual encoding and decoding of developing message(s) is involved. He further tells reciprocal communication “involves due observance of accepted routines and the continuous evaluation and negotiation of meaning on the part of the participants.”

A sample question from the 2000 December MUET paper illustrates test format and principles adopted in its design.

**Situation:**
Today, an increasing number of students are under stress at school and at college level. Suggest programmes that the school or college should carry out to help students manage stress.

**Task A:**
**Candidate 1**
Your suggestion is for the school or college to have sports and fitness programmes made available to the students. You may also want to talk about the types of facilities that should be made available.

**Candidate 2**
Your suggestion is for the school or college to offer counselling programmes. You may want to talk about how these programmes should be conducted and how the programmes can help reduce stress.

**Candidate 3**
Your suggestion is for the school or college to introduce time management courses to show students how to manage their time efficiently. You may want to talk about how these programmes should be conducted and how the programmes can help reduce stress among students.

**Candidate 4**
Your suggestion is for the school or college to organise music and drama as forms of relaxation. You may want to talk about how these activities can help reduce stress among students.
Task B:  
Candidates 1, 2, 3 and 4  
In your group, discuss the factors that contribute to stress among students and the importance of managing stress.

Scoring of the MUET Oral Skills

Scoring of performance is another problematic area where unresolved difficulties abound; these difficulties relate to test variables, which can affect scores obtained. The first may be linked to design of rating scales, which exert crucial influence in orientating raters to different facets of test performance. Next is the raters themselves, which can never be held constant; research shows enormous variability among scorers (McNamara, 1998:17). As such, we have to be wary of scores obtained from use of the rating scale. We must “remain skeptical about interpretations of test scores and do everything we can to improve our understanding of what scores mean, primarily in the interest of fairness …” (ibid., p.21). In the MUET, the following scoring guide is used for oral tests:

Components

1. Task Fulfilment
   - understanding of the topic
   - development of ideas
   - presentation of view points
   - treatment of topic

2. Control of Language
   - meaning conveyed
   - vocabulary use
   - linking of ideas
   - grammatical accuracy

3. Communicative ability which is characterized by
   - fluency
   - pronunciation, stress and intonation
   - delivery

4. Contribution to discussion
   - manner of interaction
   - ability to maintain a discussion
   - display of initiative and interest
From the scoring procedure, valid and reliable inferences can be made about the construct. To this end, two raters are used and they also undergo training provided by the Malaysian Examinations Council. This practice reflects use of well-tested procedures in a testing event. However, other problems require attention – e.g., logistics and expenses involved in administration of a nation-wide examination. On top of that, the Council has deliberately kept examination fees low (only RM50.00) so as not to burden test takers.

Test Impact and Feedback on the MUET Oral Test

Following more than three years of MUET implementation (semiannually), it was deemed timely to evaluate test impact to obtain some feedback on its progress and use. Test impact, according to Bachman and Palmer (1997), can be examined from two levels: micro level realized by individuals and macro level realized by society at large, including the educational system. They further elaborated that as a form of impact, test takers may be affected by the experience of taking a test or through preparation for the test. In this study, questionnaires were administered to obtain information about test experience via preparation that ultimately will reflect test usefulness. Test usefulness may be viewed from many standpoints, of which impact plays a key role. Others, as defined by Bachman and Palmer (1997) are reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactivity and practicality.

Questionnaires were divided into two sections, one on general information about the respondents, the second on specifics about oral components in the MUET.

The bulk of the 140 students who responded to the questionnaire had grades 3 to 6 in their English language SPM paper (considered credit passes). Those with distinctions were few, while a fair number (about 39 %) tallied 7 to 9 (9 is a failure). This spread of scores affirmed these students were representative of the STPM population who will be MUET candidates. Students answered questionnaires upon completion of the MUET training in school, which entailed simulated test situations.

Responses indicated strong agreement about MUET as an avenue that extended opportunities to use English, particularly in an institutional setting. In the data students confirmed the importance of MUET for upward mobility, especially for tertiary education. As to importance of MUET for overseas education, it appears many students did not see themselves as having a chance at overseas education and thus did not regard MUET as having an impact for that purpose.

A significant portion of the subjects (35.7%) were unable to decide on whether hours spent on MUET were adequate preparation for the exit test. Those who agreed that sufficient time was allocated for MUET preparation fell only within 48.6%; confidence level prior to taking the examination was none too high among students reflecting their lack of command of the language. In general, students agreed that time spent on MUET is worth its when

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compared to that spent on other subjects. Hence it can be concluded that most respondents realized the importance of language proficiency aside from mastering content courses which would determine their career path. However, 13.6% held the opposite view; these are likely the very proficient students who did not see themselves as needing language improvement.

Opinions about adequacy of MUET frequency (twice in a year) appeared rather divided: about 50% were satisfied with the arrangement while a large portion expressed uncertainty, the rest feeling more test sessions should be held. Many seemed to welcome the idea of multiple chances to gauge their ability.

Opinions were also sought about whether MUET tested general language ability or otherwise; 61% felt that it did. To them, the test seemed less than specific in terms of preparing them for academic English. The purported aim of the syllabus did not appear to have strongly impacted the students. The academic slant may not have been clearly conveyed through test content.

However, a sizeable number (60%) felt they would not perform well on MUET without explicit teaching at schools or institutions of higher learning. These pre-university students generally believed that a formal course is necessary to prepare for the MUET examination.

Thirteen questions were asked about two main issues with regard to MUET oral component. The first issue focused on the skills purportedly promoted by the MUET syllabus, the second dealing with difficulties students might encounter in speaking. They confirmed that the MUET experience had impressed on them elements of speech fluency when speaking on a variety of topics in social and academic contexts. They also felt they had become more confident when interacting with group members in discussion, and the MUET experience had honed their public speaking and oral presentations skill (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speak more fluently on a variety of topics in social context</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak more fluently on a variety of topics in an academic context</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interact more confidently with group members in a discussion</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve my public speaking skill</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve my oral presentation skill</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, students felt they had not reached a level of ability whereby they would be able to say that they faced little difficulty in language performance under situations spelt out in the MUET syllabus. The range of ‘not sure’ responses (27.1-40.0%) towards the matter of facing difficulty in using English suggests students were undecided about gains that
they might have made after the MUET experience. The 12-18 months of preparation might have been too short for the students to feel they had made a noticeable improvement (Table 4).

Table 4. Observing Social Conventions, Public Speaking and Oral Presentations in MUET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items:</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have no difficulty in using English in the following situations when learning English for MUET:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing social conventions e.g. making greetings, taking leave, and taking turns to speak</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public speaking</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral presentations</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

About 18.6 to 37.1% of the students were unsure of whether they had difficulties using oral skills to communicate based on MUET parameters, especially with reference to correcting oneself in a discussion. The majority agreed that they had no trouble with speaking skills required in discussions. However, based on teacher feedback, students were found still weak in discussion skills. It could then be surmised that the ‘not sure’ proportion had difficulties in oral English. Their ability reflected in the range of answers to having difficulty (24.3-45.7%) could be seen against the national level that had been reported, which is an average score of about 47.4% since the MUET implementation. (Malaysian Examinations Council, December 2000, December 2001). (Table 5).

Table 5. MUET Discussion Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items:</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In group discussions, I have no difficulty in using English in the following situations when learning English for MUET:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting a discussion</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing a discussion</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing a discussion</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making interruptions in a discussion</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correcting oneself in a discussion</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION

Language testing poses many dilemmas to both constructors and users. Among them is the incomplete notion of communicative competence, as debates have been made and are still made in argument that there are no direct ways of measuring performance. As Widdowson (2001: 17) says, “One begins to have doubts as to whether any model of communicative competence can be made pedagogically operational as a framework for language testing.” The construct of language use is hardly amenable to discrete analysis, and as such, the performance test is yet able to capture real life language use. However, it is not seen as a waste of time if efforts are continued to reach for a greater reflection of communicative reality in language testing. The goal of performance tests cannot be used solely to tap the regurgitation of rehearsed roles. Far from it, the test, in tandem with instructional objectives, should aim to enable students to realize “meaning potential” (Halliday, 1978, in Widdowson, 2001:20), which is “a general linguistic capacity for communication leading to learners” autonomy in language use.

Caution, as always, should be exercised in the use and interpretation of test scores. Review is necessary, such that decisions made are truly based on valid judgments reflective of ability in language use. We cannot but look forward to improvement in existing tests and their use. Innovations in test methods add to the cycle of improvement. As in the case of MUET, it is due for a review to further enhance test validity, fairness and ethics of testing which invariably will form the main review ingredients. The social implications of the MUET are slowly being realized, as it is now entrenched as one of the national standards for language performance. It has also put the importance of English at the forefront, especially in training tertiary students who would be the professional agents of change. Oral ability, though given less weight than reading and writing, nonetheless is of paramount importance; students often cite it as the most desirable language skill. Oral ability appears to be a yardstick indicator for general language ability and also functions as a vital impression marker. Ability to speak and interact confidently and efficiently is often seen as one of the hallmarks of success.

Meanwhile, MUET oral performance and feedback have proven how students are impacted by task demands as they are graded for their ability and given reports on their status. Students generally reacted positively to the MUET experience and established MUET as a worthwhile course at pre-tertiary level. They also felt that MUET should be taught, implying that it would have been difficult to learn the language skills on their own. However, they did not perceive MUET as a test of academic English, though it is the intention in the syllabus to prepare students for that purpose. On the whole, the MUET experience had made them more confident in using oral skills though the duration of the experience may have been inadequate for noticeable improvement.
General ranking of MUET scores has been that of band 2 to 3 for a large number of examinees (Malaysian Examinations Council (December 2000, December 2001). Translated into benchmark descriptions, they are typed as limited to modest users of the English language. However, backwash appears positive, as results in the most recent sitting of the MUET (2003) had shown some improvement in performance. Implications are clear: a majority of Malaysian tertiary students had to face the reality that skills in the English language are highly valued. In fact, proficiency in English has become a necessity rather than a luxury in the modern workplace. The MUET has indeed served to ground further awareness and consciousness of the educated Malaysian towards being an efficient bilingual if not multilingual, if they desire to function optimally upon exiting tertiary institutions. As a high stake test, due attention should be given to the test design and the assessment of the performance in order for the test scores to be given a valid and reliable judgment.

REFERENCES


