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A Review of Speaking Component in SPM and Malaysian University English Test (MUET)

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to present a comparative study of two major oral tests that are being conducted in Malaysia which are the SPM Oral Test and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Speaking Test. The focus is on the procedures and main features of these oral tests while the aim of this paper is to discuss the extent to which these tests can be regarded as suitable and valid instruments for the assessment of students' oral performance and the examiners' perception of the SPM Oral Test and MUET Speaking Test. The comparison and interviewees' responses show that SPM Oral Test needs to be reviewed and reassessed on its procedures and validity.

1. Overview: English Language as a Subject in the Malaysian Examination System

English is placed as the second language in Malaysia in line with the education policy of the country (Gill, 2002). According to Thirusanku and Melor (2012 p.2), English language is made a compulsory subject at all levels of education implying its existence "side by side with strong indigenous languages, wide use in speaking, and international outstanding, sometimes official functions, as the language of politics, the media, jurisdiction, higher education, and other such domains".

In Malaysia, English language is not only taught as a compulsory subject in the National Curriculum at both the primary and secondary level, but it is also one of the compulsory subjects assessed in all examinations. All four language components - writing, reading, listening and speaking are tested in the examinations. In primary level, all students are required to sit for Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) at the end of Standard 6. Assessment for oral skill in the UPSR English paper is conducted through the School Based Oral Assessment (SBOA). The SBOA is an on-going process that is conducted by all the school teachers. As for secondary level, starting from 2013, lower secondary students are no longer required to sit for a public examination since Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) was abolished and has been replaced by Pentaksiran Tingkatan 3 (PT3). The main difference is PT3 will be implemented throughout 3 years at school level, unlike PMR which was implemented at national level as a standardized test by the end of Form 3. Regarding the format, the English language subject now will include an Oral Test (listening and speaking). In the upper secondary, the students will sit for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), before they exit formal schooling at the age of 17. In 2002, a new standardized national scale school-based Oral English Test (OET) was introduced to Malaysian schools which will be carried out as a form of continuous assessment of students from Form 4 to Form 5 as they will be assessed twice in Form 4 and once more in Form 5 (Zaitun, Arshad & Malachi, 2011).

The result obtained through SPM examination is used by the students to apply for places in universities or other higher learning institutions. However, for those who decide to continue studying in school, they are required to sit for Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) examination. MUET is a proficiency test compulsory for all pre-university students intending to further their studies at public universities. From the curriculum and examinations mentioned above, it is apparent that much emphasis is placed on English language when it comes to education in Malaysia.

2. Issues in Oral Test

Oral production is commonly said to be the most complex ability to test, due to its specific features and the transient nature of the speech act. This is mainly because the difficulty in constructing the appropriate instruments that match the testing goals. The issues surrounding oral testing are complex and often controversial. An oral test, like any test, essentially comprises an elicitation technique and a scoring procedure (Alderson, 1993). In addition, large-scale testing of oral English proficiency is complicated to execute due to several factors such as the procedures and time-allocation. This is particularly relevant to Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Speaking Test which is conducted at the same date and time throughout the country. This is one of the

issues in second language speaking assessment which is conducted live and requires the presence of an examiner, thus it affect the cost and time-efficiency (Foot ,1999). Thus, MUET employs group discussion test as a solution to large scale oral testing. This is an efficient method of judging the oral ability of large numbers of students in a short time (Bonk &Ockey, 2003).

The validity and reliability of a speaking test depends on the quality of the speaking performance and the scoring criteria (Hyung Jung Kim, 2006). The SPM oral based assessment lacks the quality mentioned above, as it is done in a mass manner in the classroom, during the English lesson itself. Thus, the validity and reliability of the assessment can be questioned. But for the MUET oral based assessment, the exam is conducted in a separate room with external assessors whom the students do not know of, and this ensures more quality, as the students will not be helped during the assessment. In this way, the speaking performance is not affected.

3. Methodology

Structured interview was used in this comparative study. A total of ten oral assessors, 5 SPM oral test assessors and 5 MUET oral assessors, were involved in the interview. Based on a list of interview questions, the assessors gave their opinions on the oral test that they are involved in. The interview was conducted in two different sessions, one with SPM oral assessors while another with MUET assessors.

4. Comparison of Both Speaking Tests

The SPM Oral Test and the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Speaking Test show similarities and differences on areas such as test procedure and grade contribution, tasks, scoring procedures and assessors. Below are comparisons on various areas of both examinations' oral component.

5. Test Procedure and Grade Contribution

The following figures show the overall test procedure of SPM Oral Test and Malaysian University English Test (MUET) Speaking Test to give a clearer picture on what both the examinees and examiners do throughout the test.

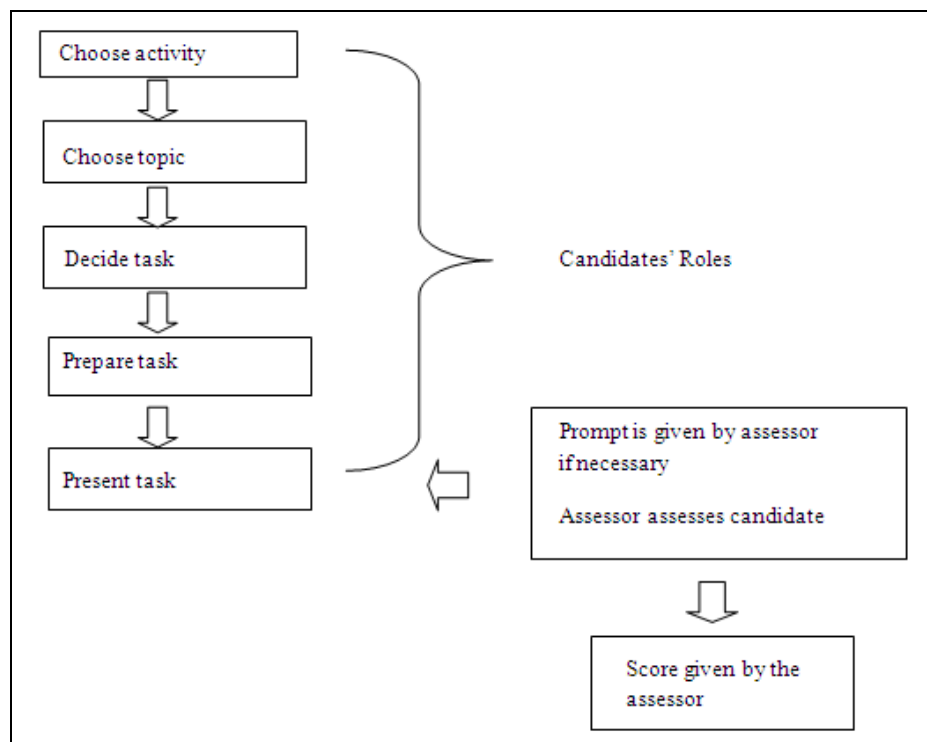


Figure 1: Flowchart of SPM Oral Test Procedure

For the SPM oral English test, it is carried out throughout a span of two years and four models of oral assessment are offered. The candidate will be assessed using Models 1 and 2 in Form 4 and Models 3 or 4 in Form 5. Model 1 is an individual task where the candidate will present a chosen topic. Model 2 is also an individual task but with the teacher as prompter. As for Model 3, it is pair work involving 2 candidates interacting while teacher assesses them. Lastly, Model 4 is group work where a group of 3 to 4 candidates interact with each other in discussion. From the flowchart of test procedure above, it can be seen that the candidate will first choose his own activities from the given list based on given model and then decide on the topic and task. The candidate will be given time to prepare the task before he is being assessed. By the end of Form 5, only the task with the best grade is accounted for and it will be given to the candidate in the form of certification signed internally by their respective school principals instead of from the Examination Syndicate. In short, it does not affect or contribute to the official grades of the candidate's SPM English subject.

One thing to be taken note of is there have been arguments claiming that the SPM oral component grades contribute to 10% of the overall SPM English subject grades. However, unlike MUET, there is no official document to support this statement and the contribution of the speaking component grades are not stated in guidelines manual and official result slip issued by the Examination Syndicate. Therefore, the statement claiming that the SPM oral component grades contribute to 10% of the overall SPM English subject grades is questionable and yet to be verified. If SPM speaking component does indeed contribute directly to SPM English subject official results, then the transparency of its mark distribution is an issue that needs to be addressed at and looked into.

On the other hand, in the MUET guidelines manual it is clearly stated that the speaking component of MUET carries the weightage of 15%, which is 45 out of the total score of 300. The duration of speaking test is 30 minutes. In MUET speaking component, the candidate has two speaking tasks based on the contemporary issue given by the assessor promptly. As shown in the flowchart of MUET test procedure above, firstly the candidate will be given a contemporary issue and 2 minutes to prepare, then 2 minutes to present an opinion on the issue. After that, in a group of 4, the candidate is required to discuss further on the issue with other candidates for 10 minutes while 2 external assessors monitor the discussion and grade the candidates. The MUET results which consist of scores for all four language components are presented in an official result slip issued by Examination Syndicate.

6. Tasks

Many assessments now reference against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). CEFR is an internationally acknowledged framework used worldwide as a reliable benchmark of language ability. This framework describes six levels of language ability from A1 for beginners up to C2 for those who have mastered a language. According to Council of Europe (2001) in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), speaking tasks should have an aim / goal, some kind of result or end-product. The participants should be able to make use of their own ideas, experience and opinions. "Tasks are a feature of everyday life in the personal, public, educational or occupational domains. Task accomplishment by an individual involves the strategic activation of specific competences in order to carry out a set of purposeful actions in a particular domain with a clearly defined goals and specific outcome" (CEFR, Chapter 7 p.157). In addition, "communication is an integral part of tasks where participants engage in interaction, production, reception or mediation, or a combination of two or more of these" (CEFR, Chapter 7 p.157). CEFR also emphasized on "real-life, target or rehearsal tasks", and these "tasks are chosen on the basis of learners' need outside the classroom, whether in personal and public domains, or related to more specific occupational or educational needs" (CEFR, Chapter 7 p.157).

Thus, by referring to the above definitions, it could be seen that Module 1 and Module 2 in the SPM Oral Test do not really fit this description. In Module 1 and Module 2, it is individual presentation with no interaction between the candidate and others. The assessments are only based on what the candidate says and presents. Besides that, candidate is given time to prepare for the task beforehand, allowing them the opportunity to memorize their prepared text, thus defeats the aim of assessing the authenticity of candidate's speaking skill. However, for the MUET speaking task, the candidate is required to speak and give feedback in discussion on the given contemporary issues. This task requires communication skills and is more "real life" based, which in turn, fulfils CEFR criteria better in assessing the oral skill. Further descriptions on both tests will be given below.

7. Scoring Procedures

In both the SPM Oral Test and MUET Speaking Test, a rating scale is developed and used to assess the students' speaking ability. Two related issues here are the criteria selected against which the students are to be rated and, given these criteria the number of bands or categories in the rating scale which can be justified. This is essential since the extent to which the scores can be generalized is closely associated with consistency of ratings

For the SPM oral English test, students are assessed in 5 constructs: converse with appropriate responses, speak fluently with acceptable pronunciation, speak coherently, use wide range of appropriate vocabulary and use correct grammar. For each assessment, students will be awarded up to a total of 30 marks. By the end of Form 5, the assessment with the highest marks will be accounted for in the form of a certification. However, for MUET, emphasis on fluency is given as it is included in one of the scoring criteria along with accuracy, appropriacy, use of language functions, managing a discussion, task fulfillment, coherence and cohesion. This is quite similar to the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Speaking Band which covers fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy and pronunciation.

As explained above, Module 3 involves pair work involving two candidates. O'Sullivan (2000) states that familiarity between candidates tends to enhance test performance in the paired oral. He came to this conclusion after finding consistently higher scores given by independent trained assessors to pairs where there was supposed to be close familiarity between the two candidates. This provides to be an advantage for SPM oral test candidates for they have mostly known each other since Form 4. In addition, research conducted by Norton (2005) finds that familiarity allays anxiety, enhances fluency and interactive communication, leads to better task achievement, equal participation, and more talk.

As for MUET Speaking Test, it employs method in which a group of candidates are given issue or subject to discuss and the assessors only assess the language they produce without intervening. Since there are four candidates involved in the discussion, there might be a situation where the candidates were concentrating on producing their response rather than listening to another's opinion and reacting to it.

8. Assessors

In terms of assessors, previously the service of external examiners was used for the oral test in SPM. However, due to a shift in the trend in testing, alternative assessment such as school-based assessment has been implemented with the belief that teachers who teach the students are more well-informed of students' oral skill based on students' daily performance in classroom. Therefore, the assessor for the current SPM oral English test would be the candidate's English language teacher during the year and the test is carried out throughout a span of two years. According to Zaitun et al. (2011) "the examiner, i.e. the teacher, is the person closest to the student and therefore is able to assess the actual capability of the latter in terms of speaking skills". However, since teachers have the advantage of knowing the student they are assessing, they have the tendency to provide more prompts to the weaker students. This practice is underestimating the students' ability without giving them the opportunity to speak with minimal guidance from teachers. This lack of objectivity may lead to teachers assessing students' performance based on their whole knowledge of that student, not on the student's performance in the oral alone. Ahmed, Pollitt and Rose (1999 p. 1) states that "if we are aiming to assess students' overall ability then we need not worry about teachers taking into account performance throughout the course, as long as all teachers do this consistently. However, if we are assessing the student's performance on the particular task then judgements must be made on the task alone."

An external assessor, on the other hand, would not have the objectivity and consistency issue. For MUET, it employs two assessors in the room who individually rate all four candidates. They observe the discussion and do not interact with the students during the discussion unless in exceptional circumstances where a candidate does not participate at all or participates so little that the assessors feel that the candidate has not provided a rateable sample of language, then only would the assessors give minimal prompt to the candidate. Foot (1999) states that "the presence of two examiners, it is argued, reassures candidates, because it removes their fear of individual examiner bias, and ensures greater marker reliability."

Furthermore, in the SPM oral test, it is scheduled with classmates or scheduled to be rated by their current teachers. This could cause discrepancy in assessment due to acquaintanceship or assessors allowing prior knowledge of the candidates and/or perceived ideas about their level of proficiency to influence ratings given.

As mentioned above, Model 2 involves teachers' participation as a prompter and they are allowed to give minimal guidance during candidates' presentation. Among the suggested activity for this model are asking and giving instruction, giving descriptions and interviewing. However, one main concern in this model is the way in which the teachers ask the questions and the verbal prompts that they give to the students. Some teachers might be flexible with the way in which they ask the questions and use a variety of approaches when prompting the students such as rephrasing the question into a more structured form, giving the student extra information; or repeatedly ask the questions until the students understand the task presented to them where some teachers might be strict and not as accommodating. This inconsistency and variation can be considered as one of the aspects that affect the candidate's language output, thus it influences validity and reliability in oral tests. This has been proven in the research by Ross and Berwick (1992), which reveals that interviewers tended to over accommodate to candidates at lower levels of proficiency. Pertaining to this issue, Utley, Mitchell, & Phillips (1983) suggested that it is necessary to have a clear policy for prompting in order to ensure reliability.

9. Discussion on Interview

From the analysis of responses given by the teachers during interviews, it was found that SPM and MUET oral assessors have different views towards the oral test that they are involved in.

In general, the MUET oral assessors who were interviewed gave positive responses about the speaking test. They feel that the instruments, guidelines, constructs and marking criteria given by the Examination Syndicate are sufficient and able to show the actual proficiency level of students. Most of the assessors are satisfied with the implementation method of MUET speaking component and commented that the duration of the whole speaking test are "just nice and not too lengthy". One assessor, however, did express her concern over students' lack of background knowledge affecting their performance during the speaking test as topics in the test are usually contemporary issues which require facts. She mentioned:

I don't think the marks fully reflect students' actual proficiency level because the questions sometimes need background knowledge of the issue posed.

Another assessor suggested that more time should be given during the interval between individual presentation and group discussion for assessors to discuss and finalize the marks to ensure fair grades.

As for the SPM oral assessors who were interviewed, despite some positive responses towards the aim of school based assessment, they raised several concerns and issues about SPM oral English test. The first concern is on how well the marks reflect students' proficiency level. Students are assessed using 3 different models that require different speaking contexts yet only the assessment with the highest marks is accounted for by the end of two years; therefore the SPM assessors think that it does not reflect students' speaking ability. Most students attain highest grades through Model 1 and Model 2 which require only presentation instead of interaction and are often presented as well-memorized texts. This defeats the purpose of oral assessment and the ultimate goal of second language acquisition which is to communicate effectively with others in the target language.

Second concern is the credibility and validity of test results due to the objectivity of assessors. One of the Ministry's reasons for implementing SPM oral test as school based assessment is to be able to assess students' ability to use English language in everyday life, thus appointing English subject teachers as internal assessors to assess own students. However, there are several factors that affect the objectivity of English subject teachers when assessing their own students such as pressure by respective school administrators, personal favouritism, interpretation of the given guideline and grading criteria, etc. One of the assessors stated:

I feel that the grading criteria are very vague and general. The criteria are not explained in depth. We tend to give marks based on our own impression. It's very subjective.

Findings in a study by Malakolunthu & Kwan (2010) concurred with this issue on subjectivity where the teachers expressed their difficulty to assess objectively. Another assessor said that:

Although it's based on the same grading criteria, but my understanding of the criteria differs from my colleagues who are teaching the other classes. Plus, my school admin never accepts results less than 15 out of 30. If students do not get a total of at least 15 for each assessment, we must redo the test model and help the students until they get more than 15. Sometimes, when I do not have enough time to keep redo it with the student, I will just award him/ her 15.

Under such circumstances, internal assessors are prone to higher possibility of awarding marks subjectively compared to external assessors.

Another concern by SPM oral assessors is the amount of time needed to carry out the test. The large number of students in each class and assessing students during lesson make the implementation of SPM oral test not only very time consuming but also at the cost of students' learning in class. With regard to this, the same result was also found in a study by Omar & Sinnasamy (2009) which states that some teachers find the school-based oral assessment too time consuming because it takes up too much of their classroom teaching and learning time. In addition, the findings of the study show that teachers are facing with not only the challenge of time constraint, but also handling large number of students in the assessment. Sidhu, Chan & Mohamad (2011) also found half of the teachers having problems with the scoring criteria and feel the oral test lack reliability and validity. These correspond with the feedbacks from most of the SPM oral assessors during the interview.

10. Conclusion

In this comparative study attempting to find out the similarities and differences between the SPM oral test and the MUET speaking test, a number of differences have been found between both assessments. Effective assessment as claims by Wakeford (2003) must reflect truthfully some combination of an individual's abilities, achievement, skills and potential and be valid, reliable and fair. Policy makers and assessors need to have a clear understanding of these constructs to ensure the credibility of oral assessment for certification purposes. Thus, based on feedbacks from the interviewees and comparative analysis, it is highly recommended for current SPM oral test to be reviewed and improved. By doing so, it ensures a more valid and reliable assessment of students' speaking proficiency. It is also hoped that this study has provided a new starting point for further studies and efforts in terms of putting more desirable testing method of oral English ability into practice in Malaysian curriculum setting.

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Appendix

Interview Questions for MUET/SPM oral Examiners:

- Are you a MUET or SPM oral test examiner?
- How many years have you been a MUET/SPM oral test examiner?
- Are you familiar with the guidelines provided by Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia? What do you think of the given guidelines?
- Do you think executing this oral test is time consuming? Why do you say so?
- What do you think of the test format/models' suitability in assessing students' proficiency level?
- What do you think of the marking criteria/ descriptions' efficiency in assessing students' proficiency level?
- Do you think more/less time should be given to students to prepare for their oral task?
- Do you think the marks reflect the actual proficiency level of students? Why?
- Do you think students should be notified beforehand of the criteria used for the assessment? Why?
- What do students think about the oral assessment?
- How do students of different proficiency level react during the assessment?
- Who would you prefer to carry out the assessment to ensure validity of the result? External or internal examiner?
- Do you have any suggestions to improve the implementation of SPM Oral Test / MUET Speaking Test?