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# Revisiting the Writing Competencies Expected by Industries in an Exit Test

Anie Attan & Nor Liza Ali

Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 54100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Hadina Habil, Mahani Stapa, Zanariah Md Saleh & Abdul Halim Abdul Raof

Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

## ABSTRACT

The writing component of the Test of English Communication Skills for Graduating Students (UTM-TECS) measures competencies of understanding of task and situation, critical creative thinking, analysis and evaluation of task, choice of lexis, accuracy and clarity of expressions and coherent flow of ideas. Five years into its implementation, a revisit of the requirements was made to reassess the validity of this measurement. The methodology comprises two stages. First, it involved test design, assessment of scripts and sampling of the different levels by the language practitioners– as had previously been established. Second, interviews with the workplace professionals from diverse specialisations. The procedure involved showing selected scripts to workplace professionals for them to evaluate the adequacy of the test and to assess the quality of the writing as they deem satisfactory and acceptable in their work settings. Interviews were then conducted after the evaluation session to elicit the workplace professionals' views and expectations of writing competencies in their respective organisation. Qualitative analysis of the data revealed adequacy of the test but recommendation were used to re-design the UTM-TECS Test of Writing to meet the new expectation of the workplace professionals.

*Keywords:* Writing competencies, test design, workplace expectations

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Test of English Communication Skills for Graduating Students (UTM-TECS) was first implemented in February 2011 to measure the university graduates' readiness to communicate in English at the workplace. The test results served a three-pronged use: first, to assist employers to make decisions on the suitability of a candidate; second, to enable the students to report on their ability to use English upon graduation as required in the workplace and to serve as a target to motivate themselves to improve their communication skills in English; and thirdly, to enable UTM to use it as benchmark or standard for auditing and quality control in line with international best practices and to enhance the marketability of the UTM graduates. There are two components to the UTM-TECS, the oral and the written.

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*Correspondence to:* Nor Liza Ali (email: norlizaa.kl@utm.my)

When the initiative for the development of the written component of the test was first attempted, critical issues of the specific writing abilities required for effective communication in the workplace environment, criteria to be applied for assessment of the quality of the written texts, minimum requirement expected for the written texts to be considered as meeting 'acceptable standard' within the organisation, and consideration of from whose perspective should the design of the test and measurement of the quality of the written texts be determined were addressed (Attan, 2012a). Implications of the earlier study for the design of the written component of the test and measurement of the quality of the written texts, based on the rating scales developed and evaluated by the industry experts, revealed the importance and relevance of collaborative effort between the language practitioners and industry experts in areas of type of tasks to be performed and the essential qualities of knowledge of subject, skills and attitudes needed for the effective fulfilment of the tasks (Attan, 2016b).

Five years into its implementation, it is deemed timely for the team to review the written workplace language and communication construct and the writing rating scales that had previously been collaboratively developed by the two parties, to meet the challenges of globalisation and stiff competition in a tight labour market, fast-changing state of information technology and higher work demands placed on the new graduates. The aim of the study is to make revisions to the construct of written communication and the writing rating scales, deemed appropriate, as a move to ensure that the new graduates are equipped with the required workplace skills and to remain employable and relevant in the job market.

Based on this scenario, two important considerations have prompted the team to conduct the review study. First was the urgent need to revalidate the instruments that had been developed for measurement of the true communicative ability of the graduates. Second was the critical need to review the employers' expectations of graduating students' communicative ability in light of their active participation in the workplace environments. In this paper, we first present the human resource personnel's assessments of the quality of the TECS scripts and rating scales, next we present their overall views on the new graduates' communicative ability, and finally our discussion and recommendations for further action and study. Two research questions have guided us in the conduct of the review study to re-evaluate the writing competencies expected in the Test of English Communication Skills for Graduating Students (UTM-TECS). They are:

Research Question 1: What criteria do employers adopt when evaluating the quality of the written output?

Research Question 2: What is the minimum acceptable level expected by employers for completed written tasks in the workplace?

## 2.0  REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Written communication plays important roles in organisational processes. Written texts, such as reports, minutes of meetings, contracts, memos, emails, work manuals and work orders have significant roles in initiating or causing actions. They participate, like the other agents, in the daily

execution of organisational life. Attan (2012b) in her study noted how written texts, such as work manuals, daily reports, technical reports, rework reports and trouble-shooting reports have helped shape the processes and procedures for the participants' assembly of car-audio components in a Japanese multinational assembly plant. Additionally, written texts in the form of signage, notices, posters, brochures and pictures were in turn found to be shaped by the work culture of the organisation, as shown in the employees' display of their internalisation of the shared values, beliefs, norms, thinking and expectations of the organisation in their written texts. Specific forms were found to be used in relation to the specific functions performed at various stages of the production process. It was noted that for all these to be effectively conveyed, clarity of expression, accurate use of accepted conventions and conciseness of message are emphasised (Attan, 1998).

The importance of written language and communication skills for those seeking to gain employment has been well disseminated. Job seekers have been alerted, in advertisements, of the importance of specific languages and communication skills expected, such as high proficiency in English, preferred high proficiency in writing and a good command of a third language, besides good interpersonal skills, IT skills and leadership quality. These skills, better known as 'soft', 'non-technical', or 'employability' skills include higher-order thinking skills, teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, task-related skills, managing resources skills and communication and interpersonal skills, deemed necessary for securing, keeping and excelling on a job (Bush and Barrick, 1987; Robinson, 2000; Zinser, 2003).

With rapid globalisation and fast changing information technology, the need for these employability skills to secure a job is all the more critical. In a needs analysis study of the use of English among process integration engineers at a leading semi-conductor manufacturing company in Taiwan, Spence and Liu (2013) found that the Taiwanese engineers lacked effective communication skills in English despite their frequent engagement in numerous communicative events such as writing emails, reports and memos as well as participating in teleconferencing and meeting and making presentations. In view of the poor performance of the engineers in communication in English, both written and oral, Spence and Liu suggested that ESP instructors and course designers review the curriculum to include authentic training in genre-specific writing, such as writing emails, reports and memos. It is clear then that a revamp of the learning curriculum is required if institutions are to remain relevant in meeting the changing demands of the job market.

This mismatch between language and communication training and expectations of competencies at the workplace confirmed earlier findings of studies done in the Malaysian contexts (Attan and Louis, 1993; Lee, 2003; Singh and Choo, 2012; Stapa, 2005; Stapa, 2008). Attan and Louis (1993) in an early investigation of interns on practical training during their final year of study in discipline-related industries found the internship experience not meeting the skills training expected by the interns nor the tertiary institution. As a consequence, the would-be graduates did not receive appropriate training, deemed relevant, to prepare themselves for the workplace. On a different perspective, Lee (2003) in a study found many employers expressing dissatisfaction with their hired engineering graduates, who, although had technical skills, lacked soft skills, such as problem solving, interpersonal communication, planning, people management, team management and cost control to enable them to perform work effectively. Besides, the hired engineering graduates were also found lacking in written and oral communication skills, especially in making presentations, engaging in informal discussions, making public speeches and involving in interviews. Stapa *et al.* (2005) similarly

found that graduates were ill-prepared for the job market in terms of giving ideas and expressing clearly as evidenced in their written texts. Their findings in a later study, (Stapa, 2008) highlighted the additional challenge that current new graduates had to face; i.e., not getting employed eventhough they had the qualifications,  reason being their weak writing ability. Like Spence and Liu, they also suggested equipping prospective graduates with the necessary workplace writing skills in English at school level before they embark on their professional careers. In a more recent study of the Malaysian manufacturing industry, Singh and Choo (2012) found similar findings of employers' poor perception of the English language proficiency of new graduates.

Following the lack of 'employability' skills in the new graduates, attempts to uncover the oral and written workplace communication competencies expected by the industries were initiated by a group of UTM researchers in a move to bridge the gap in communication training at the learning institutions, and attributes and skills expected in the workplace. Information regarding required written competencies are found in the UTM-TECS for Writing which include knowledge of topic, focussed and critical analysis of the task, coherent flow of ideas and correct use of expressions (Attan, 2016b; 2013; 2012) while the oral competencies expected are found in the UTM-TECS for Oral which include knowledge of topic, interactive ability, correct use of lexis and expressions and confident, positive image (Attan, 2016a; 2016b; 2015; 2013).

## 3.0  METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis similar to that previously attempted, i.e., joint collaborative effort between the language practitioners and workplace professionals involving informal discussion and interview on matters related to design of the writing test, assessment of the written texts and opinions and views on the quality of the test, rating scales and written texts (Attan, 2012).

Three groups of related parties participated in the study. First was a group of three language practitioners with between 25 and 30 years of teaching and marking experience. Second was a group of seven workplace professionals from diverse industries of oil and gas, engineering, plantation, property development, customs, construction and media industries. They held positions of General Manager, Director, Head of Corporate Communication, Senior General Manager, Human Resource Executive and Team Leader in their respective organisation. Third was a group of 100 final year engineering students of almost same age but of different ethnic backgrounds and levels of English language proficiency.

The data collection procedure comprises two stages. In the first stage, the test of writing was designed and administered to the sample of final-year students. Next, all written scripts were marked by the three trained language practitioners, using the writing rating scales previously developed based on the inputs of the language practitioners and the workplace professionals (the writing rating scale descriptors had earlier been revised to be more user-friendly). From the marked 100 scripts, six were selected, as had previously been adopted, believed to represent the different levels ('Level 6 Very Effective', Level 5 'Effective', Level 4 'Satisfactory', Level 3 'Functional', Level 2 'Limited' and

Level 1'Very Limited') of the quality of the scripts. Scripts, believed to represent the lower level abilities (Level 3 'Functional', Level 2 'Limited' and  Level 1'Very Limited') were, however, not found in the sample and were thus not represented in the assessment. A probable reason for the non-representation of the levels of proficiency could be that the sample of students had all met the university English proficiency minimum requirement when they first joined the university. The six selected scripts were again reviewed by the three language practitioners to ensure that they come to an agreed common score.

In the second stage, the data collection involved the workplace professionals. The six scripts together with the writing rating scales were shown to three workplace professionals who became the assessors for the assessment of the scripts. Each assessment exercise with the different workplace professionals was conducted separately. They were required to give their rating and opinion on the quality of the scripts and the rating scales. The interview phase which aimed to elicit the opinion of the workplace professionals as regards their assessment of the quality of the scripts, the criteria used to assess the quality of the scripts and the minimum acceptable standard of the quality of script expected in the workplace followed soon after. Seven workplace professionals participated in the exercise. Following were some of the interview questions:

Q1. How do you view new graduates' English proficiency in general?
Q2. What is your expectation of the new graduates' English language proficiency?
Q3. Which position in your company requires the new graduates to be proficienct in writing?
Q4. What is the nature of the tasks that they have to perform?
Q5. What are the employers' expectation with regard to the new graduates' writing skill? Do they expect them to be able to analyse data, provide solutions to problems?
Q6. What is your minimum expected level of writing competency?

The data collected were then analysed qualitatively for similarities and differences in the assessment made. In addition, the interview data were further studied to elicit the workplace professionals' opinion of the quality of the test, their criteria used to assess the scripts and their expected minimum level of acceptable standard of writing.


## 4.0  RESULTS AND DISCUSSION


The analysis revealed that all workplace professionals agree to the adequacy of the writing test and the writing rating scales to measure the higher order critical-thinking ability of the new graduates. Requirements of the need to analyse information, to show the link between relevant information and to synthesise related information into a coherent report using skills of recognition, discrimination, analysis, application, synthesis and evaluation of given information, as well as use of appropriate vocabulary, correct sentence structures and proper organisation were elicited in the writing test and assessed in the rating scales.

Table 1 depicts the results of Stage 1 assessment of Part A of the writing test by the language practitioners.

**Table 1** Assessment of Data Analysis Task by language practitioners

| Script | Score (Language practitioner 1) | Score (Language practitioner 2) | Score (Language practitioner 3) |
|--------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| A | Level 6 | Level 6 | Level 6 |
| B | Level 5 | Level 5 | Level 5 |
| C | Level 4 | Level 4 | Level 4 |
| D | Level 4 | Level 3 | Level 3 |
| E | Level 4 | Level 4 | Level 4 |
| F | Level 5 | Level 5 | Level 5 |

With the exception of Script D, all three language practitioners were similar in their ratings of the six scripts. Script A was rated the best, at Level 6 while Script D was rated lowest, at Level 4 and 3. Language practitioner 1 had awarded Script D a Level 4 for clarity of expression and vocabulary and adequate analysis and link between the two prompts. However Language practitioners 2 and 3 believed that although language was clear, the analysis of the content was merely a modest effort. On the other scripts, B, C, E and F, the raters were unanimous in their ratings, as shown in the above table.

Table 2 depicts the results of Stage 2 assessment of Part A of the writing test by the language practitioners and workplace professionals.

**Table 2** Assessment of Data Analysis Task by language practitioners and workplace professionals

| Script | Score (All Language practitioners) | Score (Workplace professional 1) | Score (Workplace professional 2) | Score (Workplace professional 3) |
|--------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| A | Level 6 | Level 4 | Level 4 | Level 3 |
| B | Level 5 | Level 6 | Level 4 | Level 4 |
| C | Level 4 | Level 4 | Level 4 | Level 3 |
| D | Level 4 | Level 3 | Level 3 | Level 2 |
| E | Level 4 | Level 3 | Level 5 | Level 3 |
| F | Level 5 | Level 3 | Level 4 | Level 4 |

As shown in Table 2, the language practitioners had come to an agreement to award Script D a Level 4 score. It was also noted that the language practitioners had given higher scores to the six scripts compared to those by workplace professionals 1, 2 and 3. Except for scripts B and E in which one workplace professional had rated a script slightly higher than by the others, the workplace professionals were consistently rating the scripts lower than those of the language professionals. Script D which was rated as 'Satisfactory' to the language practitioners, fell short of meeting minimum expected proficiency at Level 2 by workplace professional 3, if not a modest attempt as rated by

workplace professional 1 and 2. Similarly for Scripts A, C and F, they were consistently rated lower by the workplace professionals than by the language practitioners.

The discrepancies in the assessment of the written texts by the language practitioners and the workplace professionals were noted. While the language practitioners had been generous in the award of marks, with justifications of presentation of more than adequate number of points of analysis anad synthesis and keeping to the appropriate structure of a report, the workplace professionals, on the other hand, were more demanding in terms of flow of ideas and tone of report. More appropriate language depicting persuasiveness of a report and commitment to the 'issue' identified in the non-linear texts seemed to carry more weight in the workplace professionals' assessment. As an example, a writer who has the capability to analyse, able to identify the issue in the data and is able to maturely make the connection between the issue and causes in a profound manner is said to be a committed writer, whereas a writer who merely attempted to analyse the data contained in the two non-linear texts without showing the link in information presented was considered a 'lazy' writer and the written text as of below the minimum level expected in that organisation.

Responses of Stage 2 interviews with the workplace professionals explained further the workplace professionals' stance on the quality of the new graduates and their writing. Many were of the opinion that the new graduates' level of English proficiency were below their expectation. They were found to lack confidence and ability to express with clarity. This finding confirms the views expressed by Spence and Liu (2013) and Stapa *et al.* (2005) of the new graduates' proficiency. In meetings, in which the language of negotiation is English, it was revealed that not all were comfortable to speak in English; instead they opted to speak in Bahasa Malaysia to better convey their message, similar to evidences of Singh and Choo's (2012), Stapa *et al.*'s (2005) and Lee's (2003) studies. Despite the new graduates' limited level of English proficiency, some companies still hire them for their knowledge of subject-content and technical skills on the job. To these companies, these graduates were still employable, so long as they have the right attitude to the job, are willing to learn from their seniors and are not shy to speak their mind. To compensate their lacks, some companies provided in-house training to enhance the new recruits' confidence and speaking ability; for example, one company provided re-training for up to a maximum of twelve months under the 'One Malaysia Training Scheme'. This step was taken with the belief that the new geaduates' communication skills can be enhanced with the on-the-job training session. Since these new graduates joined the organisation at mid-executive level as engineers and junior engineers in which they would be working with higher level managers, they are expected to be able to express themselves with clarity. In negotiations, day-to-day interactions and briefings, they are expected to be able to speak with confidence, be able to contribute to discussions in meetings and to not be shy to present their views. These are the soft skills deemed important to enable them to perform and excel in the workplace (Abdul Raof *et al.*, 2017; Robinson, 2000; Zinser, 2003).

At this mid-executive level, too, more so for the new graduates in the front line customs service and the oil and gas sectors, they are required to write reports (sales, progress, proposal, feasibility, technical) and office correspondences. Office correspondences include writing memos, letters, emails and briefs. They also sometimes need to write problem-solving reports involving writing up a chronology of events leading to the problem, complete with photographs and captions and a proposed solution to the problem. All these require strong insights into the issue being discussed, accurate analysis of events and a feasible proposal to solving the issue. These are essential writing skills new

graduates should possess, as proposed by Spence and Liu, (2013). In the case of the plantation sector, for example, new graduates are also required to translate reports from Bahasa Malaysia to English and vice-versa, thus having good translation skill is an advantage. For those in the construction sector where readily formatted templates are made available for ease of completion of reports, a 'Functional' Level 3 command of English was considered sufficient.

Organisations' expectations of the communication skills of new graduates vary with positions and tasks to be performed. In the media sector, the new graduate is expected to be able to analyse data, develop ideas and solve problems by suggesting workable solutions. In the property development sector, the new graduate must be able to give a chronology of events leading up to a problem, identification of the problem, parties involved and providing solutions to the problem. In the plantation sector, the new graduate should be able to present a proposal report based on his field study of the feasibility of a project. In the oil and gas and customs service sectors, for example, the new graduate must be able to analyse data, review complaints made by the public and make comments and recommendations in line with the terms of reference. For all these tasks, the new graduates need to master specific language skills to serve specific writing functions of presentation of information and explanation and persuasion, as found in Attan's study (2012b; 1998). It is also because the reports go through many levels, from lower to upper levels involving several phases of editing before approval is made.

Employers have placed higher demands on the writing ability of the new graduate in view of stiff competition from eligible applicants and changing demands of knowledge and skills expected in the workplace. A 'Satisfactory' level is now the minimum preferred level in most organsations, in which the written piece should show more mature analysis of data, relationship between the data, and logical conclusions about the data in the test. In the oil and gas and customs service sectors, where high expectations of good writing skill is the norm so as to meet the high writing standard expected at international level, a Level 5 or 'Effective' level, is expected. On the other hand, in the construction sector, a Level 3 or 'Functional' level would suffice, as long as the intended message in the writing is conveyed.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The workplace professionals were in agreement with the adequacy of the writing rating scales. The descriptors of abilities in the respective levels are adequately and appropriately set to match the performance at the workplace. Since problem–solving is a component being repeatedly emphasised by many employers as a required component to show the new graduates' writing ability, it is suggested that this should be included in the writing descriptor. It also follows that the problem-solving ability should be included in the test which would enhance the strength of the writing test and that would relate well with the problem-data analysis component contained in Part A of the test. It was suggested that Part B task could be substituted with a problem-solving solution task in relation to the analysis of the problem and data presented in Part A, to replace the argumentative essay writing task

based on a prompt as previously assessed. This modification in task would show more connectedness in the two parts of the writing test.

The findings also indicate a shift in expected minimum acceptable level of writing proficiency from Level 3 (Functional) to Level 4 (Satisfactory), revealing the higher writing competency expected by the industry.  It follows then that specific writing lessons, such as writing emails, memos, problem-solving reports, proposal reports and technical reports should be emphasised in the classrooms at tertiary level. There is an urgent need to expose students to the format of a report and to teach them the appropriate language used in reports.

The present findings are limited to only the industries targetted in the study to match the needs of new graduates being produced by the institution. It is recommended that more studies be done to include other industries so as to meet the needs of other groups of new graduates.

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