

Industries' Requirements and Expectations of Graduates: A Revisit

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ABSTRACT

Graduate employability has become more rigid nowadays whereby industries demand not only for graduates' academic qualifications but also their ability to communicate in English. However, there is hardly any exit test instrument available in higher learning institutions that could gauge the graduates' communicative competence before graduation. Thus, to address this matter, the Test of English for Communication Skills (UTM-TECS) was developed aims to provide potential employers with a more accurate measure of graduates' readiness to function in the workplace. Given that the demand of English in the workplace is continuously changing through time, it is therefore important to ensure the assessment scale used to assess graduates' oral competency takes into account the latest and up-dated requirements and expectations sought by industries. Hence, this study was conducted to investigate the current criteria that the industries adopt in recruiting new graduates. Besides that, the study also aims to compare the industries' assessment criteria with the criteria used in the UTM-TECS scale. This study utilized interviews as the data collection method and eight Human Resource personnel from different firms in Johor Bahru and Kuala Lumpur were involved. The study reveals that academic degree is needed for screening purposes; i.e. to shortlist the potential employees. In addition to that, soft skills which comprise of communication skill especially the English language speaking skill, team work, attitude, professional image and critical thinking ability are amongst the criteria used to select graduates for employment. It was discovered that the criteria listed by the respondents were almost similar to the criteria found in the scale except for one criterion; attitude which is not present in the UTM-TECS assessment scale. The respondents also viewed professional image as the highest of importance as compared to the UTM-TECS assessment weightage. The findings from the study could be useful in re-validating the UTM-TECS oral interaction scale so as to ensure its quality and to improve it to become a better yardstick for graduates' employability and marketability.

Keywords: UTM-TECS, oral interaction scale, employability

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the years, integrative performance and communicative competence have been much discussed (Richards, 2006). Though communication is crucial for students, it is indeed an area of transition that has received very little attention and where students appear to be unprepared (Crosling, n.d). The universities expect students to be able to express themselves orally but this aspect of students' development receives very little emphasis in terms of assessment. In Malaysia, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is perhaps the only test meant for testing students' English

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language proficiency level after they have finished their secondary education; it is now used for admission purpose to tertiary education institutions. Apart from the educational expanse, industries also lamented the paucity of English language test that could be used as a yardstick to gauge graduates' oral competencies and their readiness to compete with the target language usage (TLU) in workplace. In the effort to address this insufficiency, UTM has developed a Test of English Communication Skills for graduating students (TECS) which is meant to measure graduating students' English language competencies before graduation.

The Test of English Communication Skills (TECS) was developed for graduating students in UTM upon their final year in the university. It is meant to test their ability to communicate in English orally and in written form. It aims to give objective measure to graduating students and potential employers on the students' English language proficiency level. Since TECS is developed in collaboration with various human resource management personnel, who were experienced in recruiting potential workers, the test can be a yardstick for students' employability and marketability in the workplace. Not only that, the test results can also be used by the students to gauge their language ability for necessary improvements in the future.

As a measurement tool to assess students' oral competencies in a test, an oral descriptor would contain specific assessment criteria to adhere in order for a candidate to be awarded an appropriate level of language ability that reflects his language proficiency. Having said this, the UTM-TECS oral descriptor is now being used as a rating scale to assess students' oral interaction ability so as to gauge their English language proficiency level. Since the descriptor is being used as a sole measure of students' speaking ability, the validity of the constructs need to be re-validated from time to time so that it will produce a precise measurement of the students' language capacity. However, since 2011, UTM-TECS descriptor has yet to be re-validated. The present descriptor has been used for more than four years and some criteria included in the descriptor might not include some qualities that match the industries' new requirements. Given that the demand of English in the workplace remains and continuously changing, it is therefore important to ensure the descriptor used to assess graduates' oral competencies takes into account the latest and up-dated requirements sought by the industries.

Thus, the research aims to re-validate the present UTM-TECS oral descriptors so as to increase its reliability in assessing graduates' oral proficiency. To achieve this aim, the study explored the current criteria that the industries use to assess fresh graduates' oral competencies for recruitment purposes. The criteria were then compared to the existing UTM-TECS descriptor for re-validation purpose.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

English language is becoming increasingly important in the world today. Apart from the implication of the language in pedagogical expanse, English has also been an accentuated facet for employment. With the rapid development in the global environment to date, employability is becoming more rigid. Employers have demanded more than just academic degree. As mentioned by Ezihaslinda *et al.* (2011)

and Crosling and Ward (2002), the ability to communicate orally in English has become an essential trait that employers sought in their potential employee.

Despite the superiority vested in the language, students are still evidently lacking in the area of communication, especially speaking. Saadiyah and Kaladevi (2009) posited that poor command of English had become an alarming issue among students. The deficiency of communicative competence in the country is because of the lack of interpersonal interaction in ESL learning context where English is not fully used as a means of communication. Amizurah *et al.* (2003) in their study revealed that 50% of the students failed to participate in group discussion in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) while the other 50% were just fair users of the language where they only contribute to the discussion when needed. In other words, they showed no effort of initiating the discussion further.

The employability among potential employees has placed so much reliance on the ability to communicate in English so much so that the failure to speak fluently in the language is seen as the major factor of unemployed graduates in Malaysia (Chan and Wong, 2004 and Sulia, 2008). Not only that, Masura *et al.* (2011) in their study revealed two factors causing the increase of unemployed graduates in Malaysia which are oversupply of graduates from universities (number of graduates exceed the job opportunities in the workplace) and the graduates' deficiency of skills needed by the industry. As a matter of fact, they stated that the latter seemed to have a strong relation to employability than the former. They further argued that having good English language skill in writing and speaking are among the most important skills to be possessed by graduates during job hunting. Unfortunately, despite the professional and formal training given to graduates, there is still a skill gap in relation to the workplace situations. In Malaysia, for example, graduates specifically in the engineering field possess an excellent knowledge in engineering related work but they were reflected as having poor command of the English language particularly in speaking (Ezihaslinda *et al.*, 2011). It is also mentioned that there are significant gaps between the expectations of industries and what the students have to offer. As stated by Kahirol *et al.* (2010), graduates may think that they possess the knowledge and skills that employers look for, but the truth is that the employers actually demanded a whole different skills all together.

2.1 English in the Workplace

The mismatch between what students have to offer and what the industries required indicated that there is still a gap between students' skills and the workplace situation (Kahirol *et al.*, 2010). The traditional approaches in testing that have been practiced for years appear to have their inadequacies in disclosing students' ability to function in an authentic communicative context. Since the workplace settings involve the functional use of the language and the ability to communicate effectively using the language, this entails for a new dimension in language testing which emphasizes on the students' communicative competence.

When using language in the workplace context, the functional aspect of the language is of a great emphasis. It is not about the language itself but how it is utilized to carry out certain tasks. Moslehifar and Nor Aireen (2012), who investigated the needs of English language in the workplace, discovered that good oral communication skill is more important than writing skill. They also discovered that establishing network with clients, conducting discussion, arguing points with superiors or colleagues, and attending workshop are among the workplace events that require good

command of the English language. Apart from that, English is also used in other situations including in formal presentations or when participating in teams and meetings as well as during telephone conversations and informal work related discussions. They also conjectured that students' weakness in the language may cause difficulties in engaging in such activities. Kahirol *et al.* (2010) supported this claim as they found that poor level of English language proficiency will not only cause difficulties in communication in the workplace but it will also eventually affect the organizations' businesses.

2.2 Criteria for Employment

There are indeed certain attributes that employers sought in graduates for recruitment. For instance, Zhang and Zou (2013) in their study on employability among graduates in China revealed that the English language communication ability, humanities knowledge, political knowledge, and economic knowledge were perceived as vital by the service industry employers. Zaharim *et al.* (2009) in their study investigated the engineering employability skills in four Asian countries namely Malaysia, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong. It was found that the former three countries rated communication skill and literacy among the most important skill to be possessed by employees. In the study also, it was revealed that the ability to function individually and in group (leadership skill to be precise as well as successful members in a group) rated the top priority. The next skill needed is the ability to communicate effectively among colleagues and with other people from outside their circle of work. Their capacity to communicate is deemed necessary to complete their work as they will have to negotiate, work in a team, serve and meet customers (locally or internationally), interact and work well with people and solve problems. In Hong Kong however, proficiency is rated fourth. Nonetheless, Lau and Pang (2001) suggested that Hong Kong graduates to build up their confidence through better communication and negotiation skills. These two traits are believed to be the stepping stone for them to make known the talents and achievements they possess.

2.3 Test Validation Studies

The validity of a test is challenged when mix feedbacks were obtained from test takers pertaining to the test's constructs. As explained above, oral constructs in a speaking test can be determined by language experts of a certain institutions. The constructs may or may not be similar to the ones that are sought by the industries in assessing graduates for employment. Given this circumstance, the criteria tested on graduates and what the industries expected may be incompatible (Kahirol *et al.*, 2010). This will somehow challenge the validity of the test itself. From the view of test validation studies, communicative constructs needed in the workplace can also be validated from the test takers' perspectives. A study by Kim and Elder (2014) that examined the test takers' feedback on an English language test in Korea which involved pilots and air traffic controllers, a negative feedback on the test was obtained. Majority of the test takers (76 %) testified that the test does not reflect their workplace communicative competence and almost all of them (98%) believed that it is due to the poor validity of the test. Most of them also regarded the test as a form of formality for its irrelevant constructs as it does not reflect the authenticity of language use for the workplace needs.

On a similar note, Knoch (2014) studied the criteria used by subject specialists, who are native English speaking pilots, in evaluating language competencies of several speech samples produced by their colleagues, who are non-native English speakers. The study shows that the level of technical knowledge, experience and training held the most important roles in the effectiveness of speech sample while pronunciation, comprehension and fluency were rated as second most important aspects. Structure, interaction, non-verbal cues and appropriacy of answer are the subsidiary aspects listed. Hence, these subject specialists (the experienced pilots) gave more comprehensive criteria in addition to the ones prescribed by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). They frequently picked the criteria accentuated on the technical knowledge as they are not trained in the assessment in the language criteria.

The mix feedback on the construct of the test shows that a validation study is crucial to increase the reliability of the test construct. However, at present, the area of testing lamented the paucity of the availability of test validation studies where previous studies revealed only one study that served this purpose; i.e. the study by Rethinasamy and Chuah (2011). Hence, given that the area of test validation is scarcely studied, that study was carried out to address this issue.

3.0 THE STUDY

This study aimed to re-validate the present UTM-TECS oral test descriptor so as to ensure its validity in giving reliable measure of the graduates' oral proficiency level. To achieve this aim, the study examined the current criteria that the industries use to assess fresh graduates' oral competencies for recruitment purpose. The criteria were then compared to re-validate the criteria used in the UTM-TECS descriptor. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the present criteria that the industries use when assessing the fresh graduates' oral interaction competencies?
2. To what extent do the criteria used by industries differ from the present UTM-TECS oral test descriptor?

The study had involved seven HR personnel from different industries in Kuala Lumpur and Johor. The respondents came from the Oil and Gas companies, higher learning institutions and staffing agency. The respondents were chosen among the HR personnel because they are the people who are experienced and are responsible for recruiting staff in their corporations. This research utilized the qualitative methodology where data were collected through the use of semi-structured interviews. The reason for using the interview in this study is because it allows the researcher to obtain detailed explanation of the respondents' responses to the issues covered. The interview guide consists of 17 questions, mainly focusing on two parts. The first part investigated the current criteria that the industries look for in graduates for recruitment purpose and the second part focused on the investigation of how industries rank the sample graduates' communication ability for employments.

3.1 Procedures

The research was conducted following a few stages as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

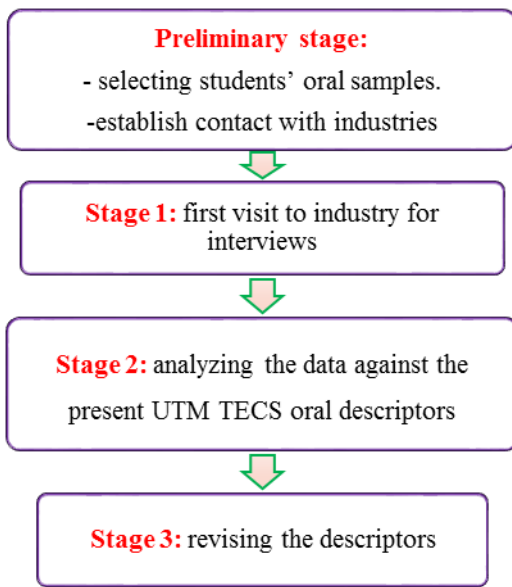


Figure 1 Procedures in conducting the study

In the preliminary stage, the process of selecting a few samples of students' oral interaction performance during the UTM-TECS was done. These samples were used for fieldwork purposes. The duration of the speech samples was about 15 minutes where the graduating students were asked to discuss on 'The Advantages of Internet'. At this stage, contacts with HR personnel from a number of companies were also established concurrently.

After contacts had been established and a consent from each participant had been obtained prior to the meeting, the visit to the industries took place in which marked the inauguration of Stage 1. This stage involved two phases of the study, where two sessions of interview took place. In phase one, the respondents were interviewed on the criteria that the industry looks for in their potential workers. A few questions were prompted during this interview. Phase two, on the other hand, focused on ranking the oral interaction samples. Here, a sample video of the graduating students' oral interaction performance during the UTM-TECS was played for the HR personnel to rank. After watching this, the second interview session then ensued. A few questions adapted from Abdul Raof *et al.* (2011) were asked. All responses for both sessions were recorded and later transcribed.

In stage two, all responses generated from the stage 1 interview session were transcribed and analyzed. Criteria on students' oral competencies that were obtained from the workplace professionals were outlined. Following this, a critical analysis on the collected data was done and the criteria listed were compared against the present UTM-TECS oral descriptors. Similarities and differences were documented.

The process of revising the descriptors was done in stage three and this marked the concluding process of the study.

4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Criteria for Employment

Figure 2 shows the criteria for employment as listed by the respondents. Based on the interview, all respondents were in consensus that academic qualification is the basic requirement that a candidate will be assessed on. In the initial stage of shortlisting the possible employees before recruitment takes place, it is mandatory for all candidates to possess a degree related to the post that they were applying for. As stated by the respondents, the candidates must at least have a degree of related discipline with a minimum CGPA of 3.0 in order for them to be shortlisted. Apart from this, the industry will also look at the involvement of the candidates in running projects in the university in which will be assessed through the certificates or any documents attached in the application resume or CVs. The rationale for taking academic qualification into consideration is to ensure that possible employees are equipped with the necessary content knowledge that is needed in the workplace.

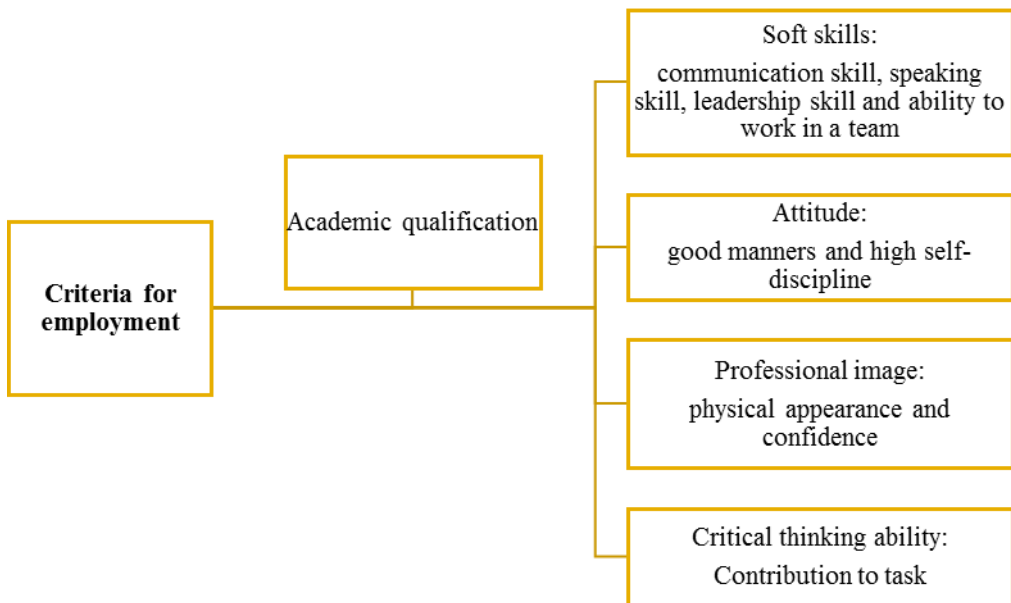


Figure 2 Criteria for employment

Apart from academic achievement, there are other facets of employability that the respondents will look for when assessing their possible employees. One of the criteria deemed important for the graduates to possess is soft skill. Studies done previously had pointed out the role of soft skill as well (Hunt and Baruch, 2003; Nabi, 2003 and Kahirol *et al.*, 2010). The respondents had listed communication skill, speaking skill, leadership skill and ability to work in a team among the soft skills needed. Communication skill is one of the soft skills that the graduates need to have in order to be considered for employment in the respondents' company. They mentioned that applicants have to be able to state their stand and make their points understood by others. They also mentioned that having good communication skill is needed to convince your stand or points to other people so much so that failure to convince others with your point is considered as failure in communication.

With regard to the communication skill, speaking skill is one of the soft skills required by the respondents. Here, having good speaking skill especially in the English language will benefit the graduates in the interview as some respondents testified that they will exclusively look at the ability of the potential employees to speak in English. Similar to the findings of this study, previous studies have also emphasized the importance of speaking skill especially in English. This is probably the most emphasized skill which is pre-dominantly important skill that employers sought in fresh graduates. The ability to communicate especially in English is one of the essential soft skills that the industries sought in graduates. This has been pointed out by various studies that examined the employability skills from the employers' perspectives (Chan and Wong, 2004; Sulia, 2008 and Zhang and Zou 2013). For instance, Ezihaslinda *et al.* (2011) in their study stated that with the rapid globalization pace, graduates' English communicative competence nowadays has a strong influence on their employability rather than just their academic achievement.

The ability to work in a team is also one of the soft skills that the respondents require. The industry usually demands employers to work in groups which the respondents termed as 'department'. Being able to work in a team means the graduates must be respectful of others, helpful in doing group work and cooperative when working as a team. This skill has also been highlighted in previous studies by Pool and Sewell (2007) and Quek (2005) where both studies pointed out the importance of team-working skill as well as leadership skill in order to sustain competitiveness in the global market.

Another attribute that the respondents have listed as crucial is attitude. Although academic qualification and soft skills are important for graduates, attitude also plays a role. The respondents also stated that they would highly consider graduates with good attitudes as their attitude will have a strong impact on the company's reputation when dealing with clients. Challa (2007) has also pointed the importance of attitude in his study. In addition, the respondents mentioned that good manners and high self-discipline are the attitudes that they seek in graduates. Good manners is reflected when a graduate can show respect to others and have pleasant behavior. While discipline is measured in terms of how well the graduates can complete the work assigned to them and how effective their time management is. Graduates who are not punctual will give a bad impression to the company; one of the respondents also mentioned that late comers are not favoured. Pool and Sewell (2007) supported this where they discovered in their studies that time management skill is crucial to maintain good interpersonal skill behavior.

One other important criterion listed is professional image. This is seen as the number one criterion that was listed by the respondents. There are two attributes that come under professional image which are physical appearance and confidence. It is important that the graduates pay attention on their appearance when attending an interview as their appearance will affect the impression of the interviewers. It is mentioned by Costello (2006) that the responsibility to project good professional image becomes greater when a person is to represent his company publicly and the image he carries will eventually shapes the customers' view of the company. Having said this, it is important that each employee projects a good professional image as practiced in the respondents' company when dealing with foreign clients. Thus, appropriate image can influence the view of these clients towards the company.

Another attribute under the professional image is confidence. This is probably one of the most salient attributes that is emphasized by most of the respondents. Almost all the respondents agreed that a candidate should project high self-confidence when being interviewed. Not only does confidence reflect professional image, candidate could also impress the interviewers when they project high confidence in speaking during the interview. People with high confidence level are also needed as they can attract people and can convince others their stance or points. This is crucial as people who work with clients and deal with other people from different country need to project high confidence in order to gain trust from their clients and business counterparts. However, from the data gathered, the respondents mentioned that although confidence is one of the important criteria for employment, young graduates still evidently lacking this aspect and it is often reflected during the job interview. Almost all of the respondents stated that based from their experience recruiting graduates, self-confidence is the aspect that needed to be improved a lot; young graduates still seemed to be very shy when asked to do a presentation and seldom have eye-contact when speaking or responding to the interviewers. These showed that they are lacking of confidence in doing things that they were assigned to and this could be the effect of their poor English language level of proficiency. As Andersen and Rasmussen (2004) argued, good command of English language will boost a person's confidence in speaking and could gain more credibility from co-workers. Additionally, Moy and Lam (2004) stated that good English language communication skill builds a person's confidence when representing a company as it will draw positive reputation of the company.

Critical thinking ability is another criterion that the industry required from graduates. As mentioned by the respondents, this ability will be measured through the problem solving question. In an interview, graduates will usually be given a scenario and a problem to be solved. The ability to solve the given problem will reflect their critical thinking ability. Apart from that, their contribution to the task given is also of great emphasis. The respondents mentioned that the graduate must show their maturity in the discussion and come up with various solutions to the problem given. In industrial works, employees need to be able to contribute to any discussions. As Quek (2005) mentioned, graduates need to transfer their knowledge from the classroom to the workplace when fulfilling their work demands. The ability to transfer their knowledge into practice will eventually show their thinking ability which is crucial in contributing to the task in hand.

4.2 Ranking of Speech Sample

In phase two of the study, the respondents were asked to rank a speech sample taken from a group of students sitting for UTM-TECS. Here, the respondents were required to rank the students based on their performance; by ranking the best student and the worst. The respondents were also asked to nominate which of these students that they would consider for a post in their respective companies and the reasons for their choices. From the analysis of the interview responses, there seemed to be varying views on the ranks of the students' speech sample. Some respondents have ranked student A the highest on the basis of her good grasp of the English language. For instance, three respondents had ranked student A the top as they thought student A has good command of English and can get her points across. Given that student A was ranked the highest based on her ability to speak well in English, this helps to explain the reason why student D was unanimously ranked the last for his limited language capability. This may be due to the fact that the English language has become an accentuated facet in the workplace where most works namely presentations, discussions, meetings, customers services (locally or internationally), interactions and working well with people and problem solving demanded the use of English language (Zaharim *et al.*, 2009). Being proficient in the English language would be a plus point for a graduate to cope with the demand of works that are related to their career path. Likewise, being weak in the language may resort to the incapability of engaging in such activities (Moslehifar and Noor Aireen, 2012).

On the other hand, student B was ranked second after student A by Respondents 4 and 2. Both respondents agreed that this ranked was also on the basis of language proficiency alone. They stated that the reason for this choice was because student B has reasonable English language proficiency and that student A was better than her. Even so, student B had the ability to stay more focused on the topic assigned as opposed to student A and she had the potential to be a project manager in the future. Not only that, respondent 4 had also observed that student B possessed a leadership quality where she could lead the discussion to achieve the objective of the discussion. In addition, when looking at the general attribute, the respondent thinks that student B was better than the rest. However, as far as English language proficiency is concerned, the only weakness of this student was her English language command was slightly weaker than student A. Apart from language capacity, the respondents also viewed other aspects as important in ranking the speech samples. Although most respondents agreed that student C had limited language proficiency, other contributing factors made him the first choice as compared to the rest. For instance, the respondents thought that he had contributed to the discussion by giving related points to the topic discussed. This reflected his ability to solve problems and to stay focus on the objective set.

Interestingly, with the different rankings assigned to the candidates, most respondents stated that neither student will be hired as none of them could meet their expectation if they were to be interviewed. They stated that none of the students had projected good professional images that were expected in an interview. The respondents firmly argued that one has to adhere to a particular dress code when attending an interview as first impression is very crucial. Although this feature has nothing to do with either the language or the academic achievement of the student, this is indeed the most influential factor to determine the acceptance of potential employees. In fact, majority of the respondents (four out of seven) refused to hire such candidates that do not project good image as

shown by the students in the video. They believed that maintaining a smart and neat looking image would project a good professional image and thus would create a good first impression.

5.0 CONCLUSION

From the findings, it can be concluded that all criteria listed by the respondents to assess the fresh graduates are almost similar to the criteria that are in the UTM-TECS oral test descriptor. The only difference is that the respondents listed attitudes as one of the criteria needed which the UTM-TECS oral test descriptor does not have this criterion as one of the constructs in the descriptor. In addition, the importance endowed to each criterion is also different. While the industry puts high prominence on professional image while the UTM-TECS oral test descriptor allocated highest importance to language. This is similar to Anie *et al.* (2014) who discovered in their study that while language practitioners were paying more attention to language aspects in a speaking test, workplace experts demanded more than just language ability. They revealed that thinking ability, interactive ability and professional image are among the criteria that the workplace experts pay more attention to when recruiting fresh graduates.

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