

## **Assessing the Teachers: The Way Forward**

*By*

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### **Abstract**

The declining standard of English in Malaysia raises the question of ESL teachers' language competency. Are the teachers up to the task? This paper suggests that one way that can be utilized to improve the standard of English is through teacher testing. It proposes that all ESL teachers, aspiring as well as currently employed, be tested on their language proficiency.

This paper will highlight the importance of having such a test for the teachers. It will focus on the characteristics of the test, which among others include its construct and other issues related to test development activities. The paper will also discuss the possible ramifications of the proposed test.

### **Introduction**

With our youths' grasp of the English language going downhill, teachers should emphasize the usage of the language

But few readers have a good command of the language. I used to have several teachers who always got their grammar wrong and stuttered when speaking, struggling to find the proper words in their heads.

Masami Mustaza  
Shah Alam

Source: The New Straits Times, April 16, 2002

According to Allison (2000), in many situations around the world, English teachers come in for criticism when falling language standards are discussed in letters to the editor or in political debates over language policy. The focus is on issues of spelling, punctuation, grammatical concord and so forth. There have also been instances in which teachers who write notes in the students' books filled with misspellings and grammatical errors. Based on the complaints from parents as well as students, it appears that many of the teachers

do not even have a basic grasp of the language and ignorant of simple grammatical principles. Instead of teaching the right language, these teachers are probably doing more harm than good.

According to Jamali Ismail (1991:8), "Some of them do not even have any TESL training and are specialists in other disciplines". Datuk Abdul Aziz Shamsudin, Deputy Education Minister, similarly admitted that in certain schools in the rural areas English was being taught by teachers who were not specialized in teaching the language (New Straits Times April 22, 2002:9). It is apparent that in some situations, the students are taught by teachers who are not even majoring in English. This definitely has had serious repercussion not only on the quality of teaching but also the quality of students we produce. Hence, the dubious quality of teachers that we have in the system is a major factor contributing to the low standard of English in Malaysia.

The declining standards of English among the students in Malaysia has also raised the question of the language competency of the English language teachers or rather the lack of it. Chin (2001:18) questions " Are the teachers themselves up to the task? They may have been performing the tasks of an English language teacher but are they really qualified to do a proper job?" He maintains that in the campaign to improve the standard of English in national schools, one key factor is the availability of qualified teachers who have been trained to carry out this function.

The lack of proficiency is evidently reflected in the students' poor performance in the English language test in the 1999 and 2000 Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) examinations. As seen from Table 1, more than 36% of the total number of candidates (367,373) failed the English language paper in 1999 compared to less than 8% for other subjects such as Geography and Mathematics.

TABLE 1  
PMR 1999 Results Analysis

<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Passes</b>	<b>Failures</b>
Bahasa Melayu	93.6 %	6.4 %
Geography	92.4 %	7.6 %
Mathematics	92.3 %	7.7 %
Science	91.9 %	8.1%
<b>English</b>	<b>63.9%</b>	<b>36.1 %</b>

Source: The Star, 1999. 30 December: 9

There is also a further decline in the English language paper in the 2000 PMR examination. Table 2 illustrates that out of 389,741 students who sat for the test 156,530 of the students failed the test. This means 40.2% of the students failed the PMR test.

TABLE 2:  
PMR 2000 Results Analysis

<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Passes</b>	<b>Failures</b>
Bahasa Melayu	92.5%	7.5%
Geography	92.8%	7.2%
Mathematics	91.5%	8.5%
Science	95.1%	4.9%
<b>English</b>	<b>59.8%</b>	<b>40.2%</b>

Source: The Sun. 2000. 21 December: 7

The low proficiency among students is also mirrored in their performance in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English language paper. As seen from Table 3, there is a gradual and consistent decline of the number of the students who passed the paper. The percentage of students who passed the English language paper at the SPM level for the year 1999 has gone down to 61.7 % from 62.1%.

TABLE 3:  
Percentage of Students Who Passed the SPM English Language Paper

<b>Year</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>1998</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	61.7 %	62.1%

Source: The Star. 2000. 5 April 5: 4

The continuous decline of the standard of English has prompted Ministry of Education to take drastic and concrete steps to stop this decline. To address these concerns, Najib Tun Razak, former Education Minister has outlined 10-point plan to improve the learning and teaching of English, which among others included:

1. Making available effective and proficient English language teachers
2. Adopting progressive teaching-learning strategies
3. Curriculum assurance and support
4. Upgrading and diversifying learning resource
5. Providing for effective monitoring of students' progress
6. A more innovative and progressive assessment system
7. Fostering a more favorable school climate
8. Establishing smart education partnership
9. Strengthening infrastructure
10. Supporting research and development at all levels

(Source: The New Strait Times, May 19.1998 p.2)

One of the points outlined by the former Minister of Education is to make available effective and proficient ESL teachers. According to Bahagian Pendidikan Guru (2002), 18,356 English teachers at that primary level and 11,399 English teachers at the secondary level need teacher professional development programme in English. The problems stated above have shown that there is a need to do something about the quality of teachers who are admitted into the teaching profession. Harmer (1991) maintains that a teacher must 'know' the language that he is to teach his students. Knowing the language here means that the teacher should be able to use the language himself and also to have an insight into the rules that govern its form and its use.

### **The proposed solution**

In view of this, this paper suggests that one way that can be made use of to upgrade the standard of English is through teacher assessment. This paper proposes that a competency test be designed and developed by the Ministry of Education specifically, Bahagian Pendidikan Guru. The test should be made compulsory for all English language teachers, aspiring as well as currently employed, to ascertain whether these teachers are qualified to teach English. In addition to assessing the teachers' proficiency level, the test could also be used by the Ministry of Education for certification purposes if the ministry decides to do so in the future.

According to Goodnough (2000; 18) "... although it is not perfect, the exam seems a necessary gate keeping device for a profession whose purpose, after all, is imparting knowledge". Latham (2001) in similar vein maintains that testing with higher standard holds great promise for ensuring the teachers that are academically able. In addition to having quality teachers, teacher assessment can be a valuable tool for improving instructional effectiveness.

The proposed competency cum proficiency test for ESL teachers if adopted will not run contrary the objectives of Bahagian Pendidikan Guru (BPG). The main objectives of BPG are:

1. Mengeluarkan guru permulaan yang mencukupi untuk sekolah rendah dan menengah.
2. Membina guru berakhlak mulia, berilmu, kreatif, ikram, dan berdaya tahan yang boleh mendidik murid dengan cekap dan berkesan.
3. Meningkatkan pengetahuan dan kecekapan guru terlatih secara berterusan
4. Mengembangkan institusi perguruan sebagai pusat khidmat rujuk dalam bidang perguruan.

### **Characteristics the test**

This section focuses on the salient features of the proposed competency test for ESL teachers. Some of the characteristics that the proposed test needs to have are as follows:

1. **The test to be used must be a fair proficiency test.**

The test must be a proficiency test (Proficiency is defined what the teacher knows about the language and how the teacher uses the language in the classroom) intended to show whether the teachers have reached a given level of general language ability for teaching purposes. It should not be an achievement test for it will be measured against training programmes. Proficiency of the proposed test as such must be clearly defined. With regard to proficiency in teaching, Pearson (1980) suggests that it meets these criteria 1) What standards must a teacher meet to teach satisfactorily rather than minimally 2) What skills are required in general for a person to perform at this level 3) Does the person in question have these requisite skills.

## **2. The test must provide proficiency in listening, reading, writing and speaking**

The test must be manifested in the performance of tasks involving some combinations of the skills. There should not be one component of proficiency-based test because this will lead to more indirect test of teachers. The test tasks moreover should be **authentic, direct, integrated** and must have **profiles** of the test takers' ability. Although there are criticisms with regard to breaking down of language ability, it is nonetheless serves a modest role as checklist to ascertain whether the test is giving various facets of a complex set of abilities (Allison 1999).

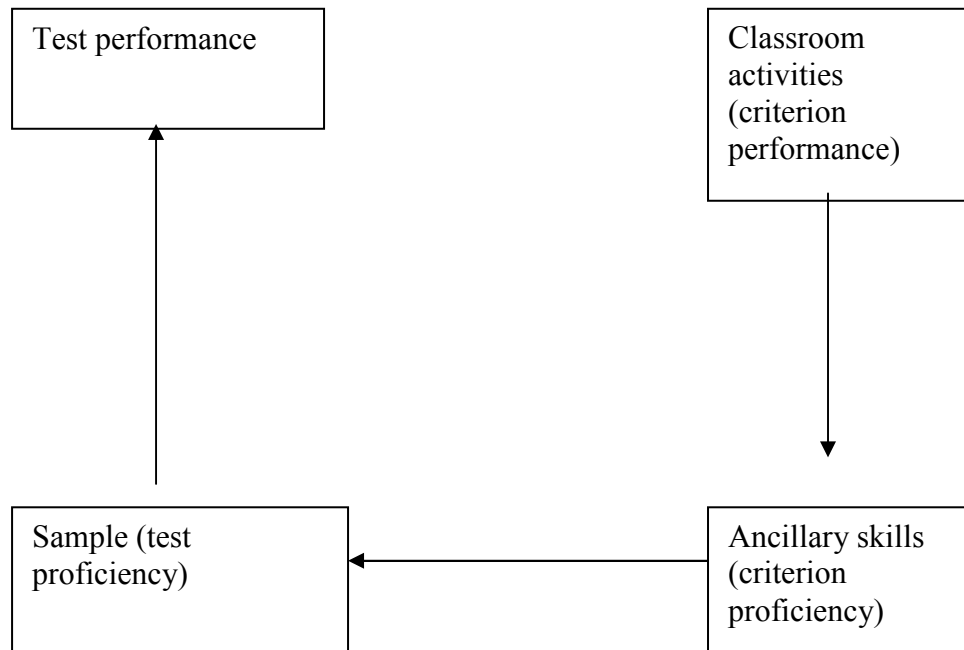
## **3. The test must be a high stakes test.**

The Ministry of Education must ensure that the proposed test is a high stakes test with specific decision to be made. The Ministry should not use a low-stakes test for High –stakes decisions because the decisions to be made based on the scores would far-reaching implications. (The ramifications of the test are discussed in the later sections) As such, the test ought to be designed and developed by Bahagian Pendidikan Guru taking into consideration the local settings. The Ministry of Education should not use commercially available tests such as Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) because these tests do not meet the measurements and the instructional requirements of competency testing within the Malaysian contexts. The tests have different aims and are not suitable for competency testing of ESL teachers.

## **4. Proficiency must be defined clearly**

Proficiency needs to be defined sufficiently precise. The way proficiency is defined becomes the basis for the kinds of inferences we make from the test performance. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), language ability can be defined from a number of perspectives such as from the syllabus to a theoretical model of language ability. However, for the purpose of the test, the construct of the proposed test must be the proficiency as used in the target language use domain (Baker 1989: 102). The diagram below describes the construct of the test.

Figure 1



##### **5. Results of the test must be correctly interpreted**

We must provide adequate justification for any interpretation of the test. In making the judgement, the raters must be concerned with deciding if the candidates are ‘good or competent enough’ to teach English to the students. This can be done in various ways but most commonly through the use of band descriptor scales. This involves deciding what the scores mean. In addition, the raters/scales must establish what a candidate with a particular score can actually do.

##### **6. The test must be criterion- referenced.**

Criterion referenced tests assess learners performance to “a defined behavioral domain” (Carroll and Hall 1985:180). Norm-referenced tests (NRT) on the other hand, place learners on the curve. They do not show what the teachers have mastered and need to study. In the NRT, the test results are interpreted of each candidates relative standing among other candidates. Criterion-referenced test (CRT) however, tells in specific performance what an individual can do without reference to the performance of others. The test performance is very similar to the criterion performance and the test must be regarded as a near simulation of the criterion activity. According to Baker (1989), success in performing the test task directly implies that the performance is satisfactory. In view of this, the test should not be validated against training programmes.

**7. The test must be valid and reliable**

The two most important characteristics of a well-constructed test are validity and reliability. Henning (1987:89) defines validity as follows: “Validity in general refers to the appropriateness of a given test or any of its component parts as a measure of what it is purported to measure. A test is said to be valid to the extent that it measures what it is supposed to measure”. The test must be validated against performance requirements. Gronlund (1993) maintains validity refers to the degree to which test scores serve the intended use. Since the proposed test is a performance test, it must be validated primarily qualitatively. Quantitative data, however, can be used to corroborate qualitative data.

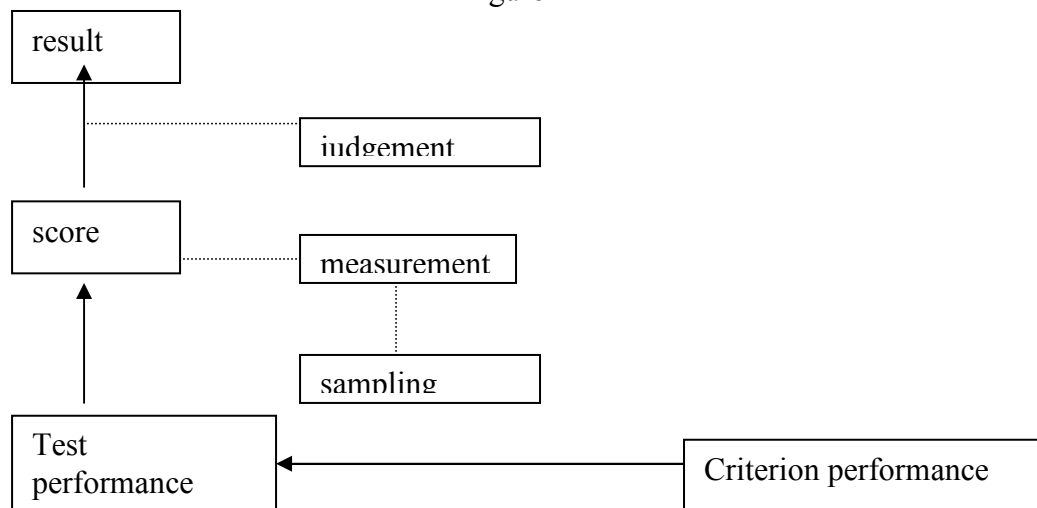
**8. The test must have a comprehensive description of test specifications**

The test specifications must provide a detailed official statement about what the test tests. The test takers need “to have clear statements about who the test is aimed at, what its purpose, what content is to be covered, what methods are to be used, how many papers or sections there are, how long the test takes, and so on” (Alderson et. al 1995:10). The detailed information available in the test specifications document will ensure that that test has construct and content validity.

**9. The test must be a performance-based assessment**

The test must be performance referenced test that involves near simulation or potential activities and the results of the test can be used to predict the candidate’s ability to perform similar task in the future. The figure below shows the stages of the development of a performance based. The figure was adapted from Baker (1989: 80).

Figure 2



### Significance of the test

The development of the proposed test is pertinent because of the reasons stated below:

The test could be used as a tool to identify the incompetent teachers. According to Maya Khemlani-David (1991:61), “there are teachers who are linguistically incompetent but they feel they are competent. Those can’t be helped except to be helped out of the system”. It is critically important to students that their ESL teachers have strong language backgrounds. Ferguson (1999) has shown that the quality of the teacher as reflected in test scores, level of education and education accounts for 43% of the difference in math scores of students in grades 3 to 5. According to Chaika (2000), in a 1998 Education Trust Fund study found that teacher quality was the single most important factor in student achievement.

In addition to identifying and weeding out the incompetent teachers, it also marks the first time that the Ministry has embarked on teacher testing. At present there is no known teacher-testing instrument in use by Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia to assess English language competency of ESL teachers at teachers training colleges or at the universities. Entry into these colleges is partially based on a qualifying test (Ujian Kelayakan Latihan Perguruan), which is conducted in Bahasa Malaysia. The test assesses essentially the ability of the incoming candidates to think logically and to use their cognitive ability in the process of electing and determining and answer or response. As such, there is no testing of English language competency of the incoming teachers for teacher training colleges (Siti Rohani Kassim 1982).

Until today the competency of the university trained teachers of English is deemed to be sufficient if they graduated from universities recognized by Public Services Department

(JPA). Typically an ESL teacher in Malaysia must complete an approved programme of teacher education in a university, have a certain minimum grade point average and complete a specified number of credit hours in the relevant courses mostly education courses to be certified as a teacher for life.

In short, the prospective teachers who have graduated from the colleges and the universities are not required to pass a competency test of skills in order to teach. They just need to meet some general requirements set by the department. There are no such tests or instruments to identify and weed out those who lack the proficiency to be good teachers. It seems that the ministry tends to focus more on the inputs rather than the performance. It judges these potential teachers by the subjective opinions of lecturers and professors in colleges and universities. It is the view of the writer that ESL teachers should be measured against their competency and their performance. One way this could be done is through teacher testing.

Another important aspect of the proposed test is that it gives opportunities to non-English option teachers to teach English if they meet the minimum proficiency level of the test. It is not uncommon that non-ESL teachers are often assigned to teach English outside their teaching field because of shortages of teachers in the subject. By taking and passing the test, it somehow shows that the teachers have the minimum requirement to teach English to the students. This is also particularly important in view of the government's policy to use English to teach Science and Mathematics.

Another significance of the test has to do the ministry having control over the universities that offer English language programmes. The Ministry of Education through Bahagian Pendidikan Guru can now control the quality of students the colleges and the universities are producing. The standards will now be set by the Ministry in terms of what teachers should know and able to do. As such, appropriate changes can be made upon instructional materials, teaching strategies as well as the evaluation instrument at these colleges and universities. Although no simple formula exists for measuring teacher's proficiency, the test can be used to identify the strength and the weaknesses of the incoming teachers language ability. The competency test in short can also serve as an exit test.

### **Ramifications of the Test**

Even though the proposed test is intended to identify the incompetent teachers and to retrain them, it is not without consequences.

For one, there is the possibility that the testing of ESL teachers could result in the ministry losing teachers of English. This testing activity might further aggravate the already acute shortage of ESL teachers especially in the rural areas. The pool of about 30,000 teachers might decrease as a result of the test. The English –option teachers might use the excuse of lack competency in English to teach other subjects.

On the other hand, this test could also be used as an avenue for those non-English option teachers who want to consider taking the test to teach English. With the availability of the test, these teachers might be given the option to teach English.

Another possible negative ramification could involve those who fail the test. The in service teachers as well as those aspiring teachers who fail the test should not be asked to leave the profession but to be given another opportunity to take and pass the test. They must also be given adequate resources and opportunity to learn. However, after the third attempt and they still could not make it, they should improve themselves in an enrichment programme run by the BPG (This is a newly setup Malaysian English Language Teaching Centre or MELTC could be used as a center to retrain these teachers) in which they will be required to complete successfully a number of proficiency courses and professional development activities. Among the functions of METLC are

1. Menjadi pusat inovasi pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris
2. Menerajui bidang penyelidikan dan pembangunan (R&D) serta aplikasinya dalam pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris
3. Menyediakan kursus-kursus jangka pendek dan jangka panjang yang terancang dan berfokus untuk guru-guru/Pegawai Perkhidmatan Pendidikan yang mengutamakan aplikasi penemuan baru dalam proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran
4. Menetapkan piawai dan pensijilan latihan pengajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa Inggeris bagi memastikan keberkeasannya
5. Menyediakan perkhidmatan kepakaran bertujuan bagi peningkatan berterusan (continuous Professional Development) untuk guru-guru bahasa Inggeris di peringkat kebangsaan.

### **Limitations of the test**

There are always bound to criticisms with regard to the use of test. Ebel (1957:83) for one claims that “test themselves are imperfect. Indeed some are seriously flawed. They are sometimes used unwisely, misinterpreted, over- interpreted, or handled as weapons rather than as tools. They reflect particular perceptions of the goals of education which not all educators share”.

However, one has to bear in mind that whatever one does, there will always be criticisms from some quarters. In the final analysis, the relevant people in the Ministry of Education (MOE) must make up their mind and decide their priorities of what is best for the ministry and ultimately the students.

Some people will also question the wisdom of using a single test as the sole measure of teacher’s language ability. The opponents might argue that it should never be used as a sole instrument but only part of the evaluation. The test should be used in conjunction with other measures such as teacher portfolio assessment (Seldin et al. 1993, Vavrus et al. 1991 and Winograd et al. 1993).

Caution must also be made with regard to the predictive validity of the test. Success in the test does not necessarily mean success of the students in the classrooms. So far no major studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between success in the test and students achievement in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Despite some reservation about the effectiveness of the instrument, it is agreeable that the Ministry of Education urgently needs a competency test to sieve the potential teachers and to weed out the incompetent ones. It is insufficient just to rely on the products produced by the teachers' training colleges or the universities. It is apparent that the assumption by the MOE that the quality of teachers produced by these so called 'recognized' universities and the training colleges is sufficient to ensure an adequate level of teacher competency is clearly a wrong assumption. Based on the numerous complaints received, it is apparent that some of the teachers in the system are deficient in the basic skills. In view of this, it is pertinent that all ESL teachers should be required to take the test.

Having said that , it has to be recognized also that a competency test alone cannot assess key teaching skills such as classroom management or rapport with the students. Nonetheless, it is obvious that the Ministry of Education (MOE) still needs to develop a model competency cum proficiency test for the ESL teachers because the current practice of evaluating potential teachers is clearly insufficient. This is important because we want to ensure that our students have access to highly capable teachers.

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## **Biodata**

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