

 INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC RESEARCH JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE  INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC RESEARCH JOURNAL www.iajournal.com	 INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC RESEARCH JOURNAL
	ISSN :2289-8441
	<b>International Academic Research Journal of Social Science</b>  Journal homepage: <a href="http://www.iajournal.com">www.iajournal.com</a>

## English Exit Test (EET) And Competence-Based English Test (CBET) As Verbal Competence Measures For Employability: A Comparative Systematic Review

Suzana Ab. Rahim<sup>1</sup>, Boon Yih Mah <sup>2</sup> and Zarina Suriya Ramlan <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang, <sup>3</sup>Universiti Teknologi MARA Shah Alam

Corresponding email: [ardecksuez@gmail.com](mailto:ardecksuez@gmail.com)

---

### Article Information

#### Keywords

Competence-based English Test, Exit English test, workplace-readiness, CEFR

---

### Abstract

The issue of unemployment among the graduates is an issue which has come to the attention of the nation so much that it warrants a quick and effective measure taken by the institutions of higher education. The mismatches of expectations from the employers and the graduates' communicative ability have been a contributing factor to why these graduates face difficulty in being employed. Hence, their verbal competence is one of the many indispensable criteria that are sought after by the employers apart from their hard skills. The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges and opportunities in relation to the English Exit Test (EET) and Competence-Based English Test (CBET) Speaking Assessment which are initiated by University Technology MARA and University Kebangsaan Malaysia in gauging the graduates' English language readiness for their workplace. Based on the systematic review analysis conducted, it can be concluded that both competence tests do have their fair share of hiccups and hurdles prior to getting the tests administered and rated without a glitch.

---

### INTRODUCTION

The mastery of English language as an essential soft skill for workplace communication is highly demanded for employability. The lack of soft skills amongst the graduates is a concern expressed by the Malaysian Employers' Federation executive director, Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan (MEF: Lack of Soft Skills, 2015). He lamented that "probably 30%-40% of students are not really employable at the appropriate category for the first six months after graduation". Prior to that, he also stressed that a reason amongst others is due to their inability to communicate in English (Nawwar Firdaws, 2014). Agreeing that English proficiency will boost the graduates' employability, he further emphasized that mastering the language will give the graduates more and better options for their preference of work and the companies they want to serve.

As such, this paper aims to look at examine the available competency tests assessing their speaking performance since there is a need for their oral or verbal skills be at par- in accordance to the requirements of the prospective employers and industry needs. The workplace readiness in terms of verbal competence of these undergraduates is hoped to be measured by the grades that they will be given upon completing the tasks stipulated in the Speaking assessments. The two competency tests under scrutiny in this study are that of the Competence-Based

English Test (CBET) and English Exit Test (EET). It is also the aim of this paper to highlight the similarities and differences between the two.

A majority of the studies conducted have actually highlighted that the highest ranking employability skills from an employer's perspective to be communication skills (Azian & Mun, 2011; Rahmah, Ishak, & Wei Sieng., 2011; Rasul, Ismail, Rajuddin & Rauf, 2010; Zubaidah & Rugayah, 2008). Although it is undeniable that this is one of the many few contributing factors towards our graduates' unemployability, the lack of English proficiency and the lack of communication skills cannot be dismissed as insignificant.

Moreover, it has been reported that most employers have chanced upon perspective workers with poor English oral and written skills ("MEF welcomes policy.", 2014; ). Apart from that, the graduates have also been reported to be lacking in terms of critical thinking skills where interviews are concerned (Rafikul Islam, Mohd Shukri, & Noor Hazilah, 2013). Siti Hamin Stapa (2016) also emphasizes on how the graduates' lack of English proficiency in general and a lack of communication skills in particular are the major contributing factor affecting the unemployment rate among our graduates.

Since oral communication skills or speaking is propagated by the potential employers to be the most sought after skill for graduates to possess, thus, there is a need to look at the ways to how that these graduates can be helped to master it. This move, in identifying their weakness and providing enhancement, would enable them to become graduates who have an advantage over other candidates vying for a position in the organizations or companies.

Hence, this brings us to the role of the university in up-taking the task of preparing these graduates to be competent and marketable. In meeting the demands of the global workforce, the higher institutions of learning have to produce graduates who are globally-competitive and relevant to the workforce with skills that are in tandem with the requirements of their workplace. As such, given the exposure to their workplace needs, these graduates are able to function and meet the expectations of the employers.

Basically there is also another form of assessment conducted by other local university namely the Competent-based English Test (CBET) in University Kebangsaan Malaysia other than the one adopted and administered by University Technology MARA. Similarly, the implementation of Exit English Test (EET) aims at preparing these graduates to be more marketable based on their language proficiency and competence (Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, 2016). In addition to this, it is significant to note that the EET is very much aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which focuses on a range of competences; both general and in particular communicative language competences that are developed by the individuals who are able to put the competences at their disposal "in various contexts under various conditions and constraints to engage in language activities involving language processes to produce and/ or receive texts in relation to themes in specific domains" (Council of Europe, 2001: p9).

The research questions are as below:

1. What is the competence- based assessments adopted by Malaysian Universities?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the EET as opposed to the CBET?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Communicative competence*

Speaking is an issue amongst our graduates due to the typical learner problems as suggested by Richards ( n.d.) which amongst others, include "the inability to sustain spoken interaction beyond short segments, the lack of vocabulary required to talk about common utterances, the inability to participate actively in conversation as well as their awkward spoken English. Apart from this, Richards (n.d.) also cites the lack of communication strategies and poor grammar and pronunciation as part of the common problems faced by L2 learners where speaking is concerned.

Productive skill namely speaking is not an easy skill to master since it requires a lot of effort to produce and perform. Some second language (L2) learners are anxious to perform and produce utterances and as such, studies have highlighted how anxiety has affected the learners where productive skills of writing and speaking are concerned (Hilleson, 1996; Zhang, 2001). Where the undergraduates are concerned, they will have to be expressive verbally or linguistically competent. This is due to the fact that there is a pressing need for these graduates to venture into the working world, prepared for their workplace.

According to Nunan (1999), communicative competence which includes not only linguistic competence but also a range of other sociolinguistic and conversational skills will thus help a speaker to know how to actually produce the right utterances based on its forms and functions. In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), communicative competence propagates the three components including the linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence (Council of Europe, 2001).

#### *CEFR*

Relating to this would be the alignment of the English Exit Test (EET) to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) so that these graduates will be ready for their workplace needs. The CEFR is a Council of Europe initiative, which provides a common basis for language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. It describes what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively (Council of Europe, 2001).

Moreover, the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) “describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn in order to use a language for communication and what actual knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively”. The framework also “defines levels of proficiency which allow learners’ progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis”.

#### *Graduating Students’ Language Proficiency Assessment (GSLPA)*

In fact, prior to EET, a Graduating Students’ Language Proficiency Assessment (GSLPA) (English) which is a reliable and accurate assessment of candidates’ proficiencies in written and spoken English for workplace communication has long been present. The Assessment is administered by the English Language Centre of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. It is geared towards the professional communication that new graduates will face in their careers. The candidates are normally students in their final year of tertiary education. The GSLPA provides potential employers with a clear statement about candidates’ current abilities in English. A project was carried out at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University to explore linkage between the English version of the Graduating Students’ Language Proficiency Assessment (GSLPA) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This input is relevant and has actually helped the Akademi Pengajian Bahasa of Shah Alam to come up with a similar assessment based on the orientations of the CEFR framework.

#### *EET*

The EET is based on the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). This framework is used by international standardized tests which include IELTS and TOEFL. Similarly, EET based its grading levels of CEFR being C2, C1, B2, B1, A2, A1. While C1 and C2 are gazetted as Proficient User, other categories include Independent User for B1 and B2 and Basic user for A1 and A2. Each task is given a score between 1 and 6. Thus, since the EET is developed to help the graduates be ready for their workplace communication, it is of importance that the oral speaking component be highlighted with regards to its assessment. The students will be given three main tasks comprising

- a. Simulated conversation
- b. Job interview
- c. Presentation

Their responses will be recorded on the computer as it is a computer-based test in an allotted time. Their responses will then be rated by two inter-raters according to the benchmark that is based on the CEFR (Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, 2016).

#### *CBET*

CBET is a Competency Exam Based test which comprises of the oral and speaking component conducted in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for its undergraduates. Aims at gauging their productive ability, these undergraduates are given a test similar to that of EET. According to Siti Hamin Stapa (2016) this similar competency test is developed to focus on the workplace readiness. It is known as Competency based English Test (CBET); a criterion referenced proficiency test of oral communicative competence. Similarly, it is based on the six levels of language proficiency that are categorized into three bands as proposed by CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) whereby the following bands of A1 and A2 as basic user, B1 and B2 as independent user and C1 and C2 as proficient user. The test also aims to examine the respective competencies:

- “Discourse competence- holistic impression of speaking ability- persuasiveness, articulateness
- Linguistic competence- fluency and accuracy of language
- Interactional competence- ability to give feedback or comment on another’s ideas without offending
- Strategic competence- ability to recover from mistakes or to think on feet
- Socio-cultural and formulaic competence – expected courtesies as heard in common expressions”

(Siti Hamin Stapa, 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

It is of significance that for one to have a more distinctive and better picture of the gaps and opportunities with regards to the respective field that these processes which entail the mapping, consolidation and evaluation of a specified field or area be conducted (Tranfield, Denyer & Smart, 2003). In line with the research objective, this study opted to conduct a systematic literature review on the features of the EET and CBET, apart from examining their similarities and differences, thus suggesting their areas of strengths and weaknesses.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Both assessments namely the EET and CBET Speaking Assessment focused on speaking and thus, have a similar purpose which is to assess speaking readiness for workplace. The grading levels, both based on the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) have their own band descriptors which underlines the criteria and characteristics of each test-taker; ranging from the basic and independent user to the competent user. The qualitative aspects of spoken language use of the EET highlight these characteristics namely accuracy, fluency, interaction and coherence to help the rater gauge the best level and range of the candidates' speaking competence (Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, 2016). The detailed descriptors distinctively segregate and pinpoint a candidate's ability range, easing the raters to rate and grade them into the bands of 1 to 6, with 1 being the basic user and 6 for the proficient user.

TABLE I  
A COMPARISON OF EET AND CBET

EET	CBET
<p>The EET Speaking Assessment consists of three tasks:</p> <p>Task 1</p> <p>A one minute response of a simulated conversation whereby the candidates talk to the speaker informally giving opinions and information in response to the situation at hand i.e aspects of life</p>	<p>The CBET Oral Assessment is divided into three parts:</p> <p>Part 1</p> <p>Monologue</p> <p>The test takers were required to speak about themselves i.e introducing themselves and their personal interest or any significant details about themselves.</p>
<p>Task 2</p> <p>A two-minute response to an interactive three job-related interview questions whereby the candidate is to record his response before the next question is presented. Designed to elicit short responses to questions on familiar and concrete topics and the rubric is phrased in the 1<sup>st</sup> person to approximate interaction with an interlocutor.</p>	<p>Part 2</p> <p>Description of tables/graphs</p> <p>The test-takers were required to describe orally any form of graphic stimulus illustrating certain data in the form of tables, charts and graphs.</p>
<p>Task 3</p> <p>A three minute presentation of information provided in visual representation (charts, table, graphs, diagrams, maps, processes, itinerary) whereby the candidate is to record his spoken presentation of the task. The task expects to elicit an organized speech bringing about functions such as description, narration, explanation, comparison and contrast and summarizing amongst others. The candidate is also expected to speak in an organized rather detailed and well-structured manner in describing and synthesizing information provided in the visuals.</p>	<p>Part 3</p> <p>Problem solving task (pair work)</p> <p>For Part 3, the test takers were required to converse in pairs whereby a situation is provided to them, requiring a discussion on how the situation or conflict is to be resolved. These problem-solving issues could easily range from resolving a certain problem related to their studies or that of a social problem or issue i.e. child abandonment or the unemployability problem faced by the Malaysian graduates.</p>
<p>The test takers were to record their responses onto a computer in a computer lab assigned by the Faculty involved.</p>	<p>The test takers were required to tape their responses to Parts 1 and 2 of the test using their smartphone, and to send their audio files to a CBET email.</p> <p>For Part 3, the test takers were required to converse in pairs.</p>

While both EET and CBET have their test takers record their voices onto the computer, CBET goes a step ahead by also having the third task session recorded on video. Nonetheless, it is learnt that due to the big files of audio and video, the test-takers encounter problems in uploading the files. The video recording for the CBET was carried out by the faculties where as parts 1 and 2 are audiotaped by the test-takers themselves. While the audios are sent out to a CBET email for the first two tasks, the last part consisting of the video is made available for the raters by the respective faculties involving the test-takers.

The quality of the audio and video have to be very good since they are going to be analyzed and rated by the examiners –cum-inter-raters. Thus, it is best to ascertain that the quality of the audio is not compromised at the initial stage of the speaking assessment to be conducted. Nonetheless, it has to be highlighted that CBET faces a bit of a glitch when some of the audio files recorded by the test-takers on their smartphones are not in the format required and this has hindered the files being assessed by the raters. The recording is not audible and thus, affects the rating process.

Another slight difference between the tasks of EET and CBET is that of the assigned task which requires a pair-work between the test-takers in comparison to the EET whereby only an individual test-taker is assigned to complete all the tasks prepared. It is possible to highlight that while there are students who are comfortable working in pairs, there are also those who shy away, feeling intimidated by the partner and hence, not being able to portray his or her own verbal competence in the Speaking Assessment. Nonetheless, this is possibly not a cause for concern since it only involves the last part of the assessment and will not affect the test-taker's grades that much.

There are also instances of the test-takers not recording their voices onto the computer despite having the other tasks attempted at. Without a doubt, both the EET and CBET Speaking Assessments have these kinds of test-takers and there should be some forms of communication to initiate a response from the test-takers. However, since the nature of the speaking assessments is not interactive between the test-takers and the speaking tasks available, thus, that makes it almost impossible to prompt them into answering or recording to their tasks. CBET on the other hand, styles its part three task to be interactive between the test-takers since the conversation requires the two of them to speak on a problem-solving task. However, the video produced is of poor quality where the test-takers' voice are very soft and the background noise has failed to make the audio more distinctive.

Where the tasks between EET and CBET are concerned, there are some similarities whereby both have a presentation provided in visual representation i.e charts, tables, graphs, diagrams, maps, processes, itinerary. The test-taker is to record his or her spoken presentation of the task and in doing so, is expected to functionally describe, narrate, explain, compare and contrast and summarize the given information. Nonetheless, while this is meant for task three of the EET, this is given as part two for the CBET.

As for task one for the EET, the test-taker is required to give out short responses upon being prompted based on a simulated conversation. Based on a situation given, the test-takers are to give their views and information pertinent to it. The CBET meanwhile, presents a Monologue for part one in which the candidates are asked to introduce and provide some details about themselves.

In addition, task two of the EET requires the test-takers to take part in an interactive interview and responding to three spoken questions on personal/ work related topics. The three questions are presented separately and given an allotted time for preparation and response. Part two of the CBET deals with the description of tables and graphs requiring the test-takers to provide and analysis and synthesis of the visual information.

It is important to note that based on the latest notice given out by the Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan UKM (2016, June 16) CBET administrators, the CBET has underlined its test duration to be of 5 minutes for preparation and another 8 minutes for the test-takers to respond. While the EET has provided a shorter time for the test-takers to prepare and respond for each task and sub-tasks involved, the selected task two has three questions altogether and the response time is increased to two minutes as the difficulty level slightly increases.

For the CBET, some of the problems encountered during the pilot studies conducted on some four faculties include the discrepancy in the number of students who registered for the test and the number of files received apart from the audibility of the audio and video sent and recorded (Siti Hamin Stapa, 2016). The EET has its fair share of problem when it has to ensure all its campuses run the exact test without its validity and reliability being compromised. Although the CBET initial modus operandi in initiating independent learners via the first two parts did not really work out since some of the audio files are not sent back to the CBET committee, there is still room for improvement. As such instead of relying on the smart phone usage in recording the audio, the test

administrators have decided that the test has to be done in the computer laboratories especially for the audio parts to be of better quality and accessible to the raters in assessing them (Siti Hamin Stapa, 2016).

The fact that the CBET was run much earlier than the EET has made it possible that the CBET committee has actually observed and noted of its lacks and needs. Hence, after it has been piloted to some four faculties, it has been recommended and decided upon that the test will still have 3 parts comprising part 1 which prompts the test-takers to talk about themselves, part 2 is now focussed on this particular question i.e. describing an event or incident involving oneself and part 3 which initiates the test-takers to be giving opinions and offering solutions, suggestions and recommendations. The CBET committee also emphasizes on having any significant information pertaining to CBET to be disseminated to the batch of test-takers prior to the date of the test. These include some sample test items outlining the instructions on the mode of assessment (Siti Hamin Stapa, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the comparative analysis of literature, several considerable dissimilarities as well as strengths and weaknesses of both EET and CBET have been highlighted, which offer the instructors in both universities or any other higher education institutions to improvise, adapt and adopt their very own competence-based English test in catering to the needs of the graduates and their future employers. This of course is an undeniably indispensable move in gearing them towards their workplace readiness.

Due to some predicaments encountered by the instructors in these respective universities in administering the tests, especially in terms of logistics and in ensuring its validity and reliability, it is best that these Exit tests are given due attention and concern by the University Administrators since the graduates' future is very much at stake, should they be let on their own, unprepared and definitely unready for their workplace needs and requirements.

## REFERENCES

- Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (2016). English Exit Test. Retrieved from <http://apb.uitm.edu.my/main/index.php/english-exit-test-eet>
- Akademi Pengajian Bahasa. (2016). English Exit Test [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <http://hea.uitm.edu.my/v1/images/stories/faq/EET699%20SLIDES%20FOR%20STUDENTS.pdf>
- Azian, H., & Mun, L. Y. (2011, April 10). English work: top jobs only for those who know the language well. *The Star*, p. 1 & 5.
- Council of Europe. (2001) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Retrieved from: [https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf)
- Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan UKM (2016, June 16). Competence-Based English Test. In Facebook [Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan UKM]. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/fsskofficial/photos/pcb.1057350441014065/1057349584347484/?type=3&theater>
- Hilleson, M. (1996). I want to talk with them, but I don't want them to hear. In K. M. Bailey & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Voices from the Language Classroom* (pp. 248-277). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MEF: Lack of soft skills among issues we hope to address and change. (2015, Aug 10). *The Star*. Retrieved from <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2015/08/10/new-system-for-better-grads-lack-of-soft-skills-among-issues-we-hope-to-address-and-change-says-mef/>
- MEF welcomes policy on English (2014, September 5). *The Star*. Retrieved from <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2014/09/05/mef-welcomes-policy-on-english-move-will-ensure-no-more-spending-on-giving-grads-soft-skills>
- Nawwar Firdaws (2014, September 3). English proficiency will boost graduates' employability. *The Rakyat Post*. Retrieved from: <http://www.therakyatpost.com/news/2014/09/03/english-proficiency-will-boost-graduates-employability/>
- Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching & Learning*. Heinle & Heinle Publishers: An International Thompson Publishing Company, Boston, Massachusetts 02116 USA.
- Rafikul Islam, Mohd Shukri Abdul Hamid, & Noor Hazilah Abd Manaf. (2013). Enhancing Graduates' Employability Skills: A Malaysian Case. *Enhancing Graduates' employability Skills: A Malaysian Case*. In: Academy of International Business (MENA): Third Annual Conference 2013, 12-14 January, 2013, Cairo, Egypt., 1-17.
- Rahmah Ismail, Ishak Yussof & Wei Sieng, L. (2011). Employers' perception on graduates in Malaysia service sector. *International Business Management*, 5(3): 184-193.
- Richards, J.C. (n.d.) Taking Talk Apart: Teaching Spoken English [PDF document]. Retrieved from Lecture Notes online web site: <http://www.cambridge.org.br/upload/news/00001631.pdf>

- Mohamad Sattar Rasul, Mohd Yusof Ismail, Napsiah Ismail, Muhammad Rashid Rajuddin, & Rose Amnah Abd Rauf. (2010). Development of employability skills assessment tool for manufacturing industry. *Jurnal Mekanikal*, 30: 48-61.
- Siti Hamin Stapa. (2016). *Development of Competence-based English Test for Workplace Readiness* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from [http:// www.academia.edu/26968800/Keynote\\_ISELT\\_Siti.pptx](http://www.academia.edu/26968800/Keynote_ISELT_Siti.pptx)
- Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., & Smart, P. (2003). Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review. *British Journal of Management*, 14, 207–222. Retrieved from <http://www.cebma.org/wp-content/uploads/Tranfield-et-al-Towards-a-Methodology-for-Developing-Evidence-Informed-Management.pdf>
- Zubaidah, & Rugayah. (2008). Imperative attributes for graduate employability in manufacturing firms: issues for internationalising Malaysia's curricula. In Sarjit, Morshidi & Norzaini (Eds.), *Globalization and internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia*. Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Zhang, L. J. (2001). Exploring variability in language anxiety: Two groups of PRC students learning ESL in Singapore. *RELC Journal*, 32(1), 73-91.