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## Designing Language Proficiency Tests: Linguistic and Socio-Cultural Considerations

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*Abstract-* Language proficiency tests for first, second or foreign language are designed for various purposes. Firstly, they may be part of the curriculum of a school or a university where students have to fulfill the requirement of the academic programme they have chosen. Secondly, they may also be a requisite in getting a particular type of job, and such like. In most of these tests, especially in the second type, the focus is on the candidate's linguistic ability, whereas the social and cultural factors which form part of language usage is often sidelined. This paper discusses the significance of these three factors – linguistics, social and cultural - in the formulation of language proficiency tests. An illustration is given in the proficiency tests for Malay for foreigners intending to study or work in Malaysia, consisting of three groups - the professionals, the students, and the workforce. The tests are designed against the backdrop of the socio-cultural milieu of Malaysia. Principles taken into consideration in the design of these tests are simplicity versus complexity, the choice of domains and register, authenticity, and sensitivity.

*Keywords:* attainment, skills, proficiency, code, appropriacy, context.

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# Designing Language Proficiency Tests: Linguistic and Socio-Cultural Considerations

Asmah Haji Omar

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Language tests are carried out for various purposes. For citizens or permanent settlers in a country, these tests are part of the educational system of that country, where a pass in the language paper at a certain level of attainment is a prerequisite for admission into a certain level of employment or academic study. In many parts of the world language proficiency is required of foreigners who stay as non-permanent settlers for the purpose of working in industries or studying in educational institutions in the countries concerned. The most widely known language proficiency tests are those of English, designed for foreigners who intend to study in educational institutions in English speaking countries, especially the US and UK, for example, TOEFL (Tests of English as a Foreign Language) for the former, and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) for the latter. This is not to say that other English speaking countries do not have their own qualifying tests for the language, but that they are less well-known compared to the two mentioned above. For example, Malaysia has her own English qualifying tests for local as well as foreign students seeking admission into universities in the

country, and this test is known as MUET (Malaysian University English Tests).

The focus of this paper is the designing of tests for proficiency in the Malay language, for foreigners working or intending to work in Malaysia, as well as for students applying for admission into universities and colleges in the country. The need for such tests has been motivated by the transformation undergone by the country in various aspects of its socio-economic and educational development.

## II. MEETING OF COMMUNITIES

The process of one community influencing another in terms of language and life style has been going on since mankind came into being, forming ethnolinguistic communities all over the surface of the earth. There have always been movements of people crossing the shared borders of their communities, either for a short stay for some social or commercial purpose, or for a longer sojourn motivated by the attraction of job opportunities and better living conditions which are available in the other community.

Malaysia is a very good example of a country whose history of socio-economic development has its beginning with the opening of rubber plantations and the tin mining industry; the former bringing in Indians mainly from South India, and the latter Chinese from main land China. Their arrival towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century forming their own ethnolinguistic communities all over the Malay Peninsula, or Malaya, marked the first phase of a linguistic and cultural landscape that was never seen previously in this part of the world. (See Asmah Haji Omar, 1992, particularly Chapter 1).

As permanent settlers and citizens, the Chinese and the Indians, and even groups that arrived after them, became absorbed into the systems in the governance of the country, and one of these was the education system. In carrying out their day-to-day life, the early immigrants of one particular group managed to communicate with members of the other group as well as with the native Malays, using the Malay language, the main lingua franca not only of Malaysia but also of insular Southeast Asia. The system of education in Malaysia beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the days of British colonial rule through to the Malayan independence in 1957, provided for the establishment of schools using three separate vernaculars, namely

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Malay, Chinese and Tamil, each with its own language medium and curriculum. In this sort of situation, there was no necessity for children of the Chinese and Tamil vernacular streams of education to learn to speak Malay, the language of their adopted country, Malaya.

In addition to the vernacular schools, there was the English school, an elite educational institution, which was supposed to be a meeting place of all the three races. But contrary to this objective, this institution was selective in its policy of student intake, in that entry was possible for those living in the urban areas and with financial means to meet the high fees and subscriptions incurred. The implication of the situation was that there was an imbalance in the proportion of the racial mix, such that a majority, about 80%, of students of English schools were Chinese, while the Malays and the Indians together made up the remaining 20%. Malay was not taught in these schools until after the Second World War, when it was incorporated in the secondary curriculum as an elective teaching subject for Malay students.

All this goes to show that in the governance of the country before the Malayan independence there was no requirement for any level of proficiency in the Malay language for the placement of an individual in the system of education and in the job sector. There was an exception to the rule during the British colonial period imposed by the British colonial government on their officers working in the Malayan Civil Service, who had to pass every single one of the three stages of proficiency in the Malay language, in order to get a promotion in the government service<sup>1</sup>.

### III. THE NEED FOR LANGUAGE TESTS: ACADEMIC MOBILITY, EMPLOYMENT, AND CITIZENSHIP

The need for a qualification showing one's proficiency level in Malay was only realized when Malaya became independent in 1957. It was then that Malay became a compulsory subject in all government and government-assisted schools. Levels of attainment in the language were determined for examinations at the end of three significant phases in the education system: Primary school (6 years of education), lower secondary school (3 years after the primary school), and upper secondary school (2 years after the lower secondary school). Those seeking jobs in the government service had to take examinations designed by the Public Service Department, as a pass in the language examination at a designated stage of attainment would ensure their permanency in the service and rise in rank. Such requisites were imposed on everyone, native and non-native speakers, without exception to the rule. This may be interpreted as a method of integrating government staff who are citizens of the country so that they could function in their workplace using a common language

medium, as well as in socialisation within as well as outside their work environment. Special tests in the Malay language as prerequisites in the government service such as these had been made redundant and were pushed into the pages of history when the national language policy in the schools and universities was fully implemented in the first half of the 1980's, which means that the main medium of instruction in these institutions was Malay.

The above is a delineation of the institution of Malay-language tests as requisites for two categories of needs prior to the present situation. One was academic mobility, and the other was in the employment sector where recruitment and rise in rank in the government service stipulated a designated level of proficiency in the Malay language. In the first category of needs, the designated level of language ability was described in the objective as given in the common curriculum of the schools, which had to be attained at the end of the three phases of the students' school career. As for the latter category, the objective was more of an ability to use the language as a medium in office administration and in dealing with clients. While the tests thus described were designed in compliance with the national language policy in upholding the Malay language, their *raison d'être* was to integrate the population of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in such a way that they could connect with one another in a country which they called their home.

At this juncture it should also be mentioned that at the time of the Malayan independence in 1957, a great majority of the Chinese and Indian settlers were not yet citizens of the country. In order to become citizens, one of the stipulations was that they had to have "an elementary knowledge of Malay" as stated in Article 17 of the Constitution of Malaya 1957. (See also Asmah Haji Omar, 1979: 7). This means that they had to be able to write their name and simple sentences in Malay in the Roman script, and were able to read simple texts which were equivalent to those used in the primary school.

### IV. NEW WAVE OF ARRIVAL OF FOREIGN SPEAKERS

In the 1980's about a century after the beginning of the first phase of the arrival *enmasse* of non-native speakers of Malay in Malaya, from China and India, there came another wave of foreign arrivals in the country. This time, they came, to use a Malay metaphor, from "every direction of the wind". Their arrival was in response to the "internationalisation" of Malaysia, which was a programme of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia (1982 – 2003). This programme is given in great detail in his speech, *The Way Forward: Vision 2020*, tabled at his presentation of the Sixth Malaysia Plan in 1991. The

speech contains measures that should be taken by the country to arrive at the ultimate objective which was to transform Malaysia into “a fully developed nation”. He identifies nine objectives which have to be achieved in order to arrive at the ultimate objective, and the one that is relevant to the discussion in this paper is the ninth, which is “establishing a prosperous society, with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.” This type of economy is described as follows:

A diversified and balanced economy with a mature and widely based industrial sector, a modern and mature agricultural sector.... (www.wawasan2020.com/vision) in the education sector meant that universities and colleges had to open their doors to foreign students.

This led to the establishment of private universities which could use English as a medium of instruction (a diversion from the national language policy), whereas before this there was no such institution. Among these private universities are branches of well-established universities of other countries, for example those of the United Kingdom and Australia, which draw students from all over the world to Malaysia. The attraction is not just due to quality education these universities offer, but also that the cost of living in Malaysia as students, even in the big cities, is much cheaper than in the homelands of these universities.

With this reform in higher education, public universities, i.e. those established by the government, were given a relaxation in the strict implementation of the national language policy in that English could be used in teaching their courses, especially those popular with foreign students. However, at the point of admitting the students both public and private universities do not have any regulation that stipulates that these students should have a level proficiency in the Malay language. To compensate for this lack, foreign students have to take a course in Malay and pass in the examination for the language before they completed their degree programme, to enable them to be awarded their academic degree. Each institution is given a guideline for the Malay language course, but as each is free to adopt its own level of attainment of proficiency among its students, there is no standard benchmark that applies to foreign students studying in Malaysian universities.

In the economic sector, internationalization has transformed Kuala Lumpur, the capital of the country, into a meeting place of multinational conglomerates and financial houses with headquarters and branches beyond the shores of Malaysia. This situation has given rise to an increase in the density of the use of English specifically in the city areas where grand high-rise buildings are to be found. The speakers of English comprise a mixture of locals and foreigners who are in

the professional class, i.e. managers, engineers, architects, bankers etc. This group can go about doing their business in Malaysia without any necessity or motivation of learning the local lingua franca, Malay. It is safe to assume that after five years of staying in Malaysia, the knowledge of Malay among foreigners of this class does not go beyond the restricted code, to use Bernstein’s term, in greetings and a few other types of linguistic routines. (Bernstein, 1966: 259).

The process of transforming Malaysia into an industrialised country as envisioned in *The Way Forward* included making Malaysia a car manufacturer and exporter, an undertaking which was never dreamt of prior to the 1980s. This is one of the developments which have attracted the work for cefrom foreign lands to come to Malaysia in large groups. This group consists of workers in factories, plantations (of rubber, oil palm, pineapple, and cocoa), the hospitality sector, and industries (building, manufacturing, and timber). Also included in the workforce are office cleaners and housemaids whose presence in the demography of the country cannot be ignored.<sup>2</sup> Except for the Indonesians who speak *bahasa Indonesia*, which is a variety of Malay, foreign workers in these categories may not know a word of the language at the time of their arrival in Malaysia. Their form of verbal communication is English, but the level of proficiency varies among them based on their country of origin. Those workers who are from countries where English is spoken as a second language, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines, are able to function in the workplace and to socialise with the local population using some form of English. Others might have attainment levels according to the education backgrounds in their home countries before coming to Malaysia; the code they use may just be restricted to greetings and simple sentences of making statements and requests, and asking questions.

Foreigners in the workforce are placed in environments where they are surrounded by locals (Malays and other indigenous groups, Chinese, and Indians), who interact in Malay and Malaysian English. The latter speech system is a creolised form of English, featured by English words with a sprinkle of Malay placed in Malay, Chinese and Tamil structures, and it is this form of communication that can be said to assist them in their communication with the locals before they acquire Malay. Another channel which has come their way in the recognition of words and phrases in Malay is the Malay-English code-switching, known locally as *bahasarojak*, which can be freely translated as “fruit salad language”. While Malaysian English is common among Malaysians whose school education does not reach the post-secondary level, the *bahasarojak* is used in informal interactions traversing all social classes.<sup>3</sup> These two lingua franca substrates, Malaysian English and *bahasarojak*, are frowned upon by language educators, but in reality they prove to be of



some assistance to first-time foreigners arriving in Malaysia with some knowledge of English and without a word of Malay.

Employers have been silent on the question of the need of the ability of their foreign employees to speak in the local lingua franca. In general there has not been any move on their part to provide Malay language classes to their foreign workers. It appears that there was no necessity for such a provision for the workforce as they were not going to be permanent settlers, and that their type of job did not require a formal assessment of their ability to fulfill their job descriptions. The workers, who usually get an initial two-year contract which is renewable to a further term of two years or more, seem to acquire the Malay language as a result of interaction with the local people in their job environment, places of worship, shopping and service centres etc.<sup>4</sup>

Foreign managers in the multinational firms and financial houses, whose stay in Malaysia is for a relatively short period, are a class of their own, and with their fluency in English they would not want to waste their time in learning Malay, unless they are linguistically inclined. As for the students, although they enter the country on student visas, and are likely to return to their home countries after their graduation, they have to fulfill the Malay-language requirement in order to be awarded the degree for the programme they registered for, as stated above.

In sum, of the three groups of foreigners under discussion, the professionals and the workforce appear not to have any necessity of having some level of proficiency in the Malay language in carrying out their jobs. The third group, comprising college and university students, are bound by a requirement that they should pass the level of the test prescribed by their place of study.

## V. THE IDEA OF HAVING STANDARD PROFICIENCY TESTS FOR MALAY FOR FOREIGNERS

Having a standard assessment in proficiency in the Malay language among foreigners came into being in 2012 with the appointment of Datuk Dr. Awang Sariyan as Director General of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of language and Literature). This institute, established as a department in the Ministry of Education in 1956 (the eve of the Malayan independence from British rule), has been entrusted with the development of the Malay language so that as national language it can be used as the official language in government departments, and the main language of instruction in all spheres of education. (Asmah Haji Omar 1979). Dr. Awang Sariyan was concerned with the disparity in the standard of proficiency attained by foreign students graduating from Malaysian universities.

Hence, at the beginning the idea was to have a single standard set of tests for these students, but as discussions developed it was decided that assessment of Malay language proficiency should be extended to the other two groups, the professionals and the workforce. The decision was made based on a projection that there could be requests in the future from employers and individuals for some form of Malay language assessment for some purpose or other.<sup>5</sup> This means that the tests had to take into account a broad spectrum of foreign speakers of Malay.

## VI. SURVEY OF EXISTING STANDARD TESTS

As mentioned above, there had not been standard proficiency tests for the Malay language for any purpose whatsoever that are similar to TOEFL and IELTS. At the end of 1990's, Malaysia introduced her own standard test for English for all students applying to enter universities in the country. This is the MUET, already mentioned above. It is administered by the Malaysian Examination Council of the Ministry of Education, and is recognised only in Malaysia and Singapore.

TOEFL, IELTS, and MUET have been designed with a clear profiling of target candidates who are non-native speakers of English, and who have had formal teaching of English during their school days. TOEFL and MUET each has one version which has to be taken by candidates at one go, for all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The attainment levels of students are placed in band scores in both tests. For TOEFL, the scores range from 9 (the highest) to 0 (the lowest).<sup>6</sup> MUET has six band scores, from 6 (the highest) to 1 (the lowest), each with its own description of the target level of proficiency.<sup>7</sup>

IELTS has two versions. One is the academic version meant for those who wish to enroll in universities and other institutions of higher education as well as for professionals, for example medical doctors and nurses who intend to study and practise in an English-speaking country. The second, which is the general training version, is meant for those planning to undertake non-academic training or to gain work experience, or for immigration purposes. There are nine band scores from 9 (the highest) to 1 (the lowest).<sup>8</sup>

## VII. DESIGNING A FRAMEWORK FOR THE TESTS

The three groups of the projected population of candidates for the Malay language tests as delineated above differ one from the other in all aspects of social and educational backgrounds, as well as in the irpur poses in being in Malaysia. To arrive at a suitable model, the first step was to re-examine the three groups would-be candidates based on their knowledge and

needs for Malay. The following factors were taken into account:

- i. The groups vary greatly in terms of levels of educational background.
- ii. Almost all of them came to Malaysia with very little knowledge of Malay or none at all.
- iii. Their needs for Malay vary according to the requirement of their place of employment or study.
- iv. All the three groups would need to have all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Factors (i) – (iii) indicate that there could not be one test for all the groups, as the case is with the TOEFL, IELTS, and MUET which are directed at a more or less uniform category of candidates. At the same time, having three sets of tests would bring about complication in their administration. A close examination of factors (ii) and (iii) shows that the types of code required by the groups differ in varying degrees one from the other. Given the situation of language use in Malaysia among professionals as described above, one could not say that they needed a higher form of Malay compared to the workforce, or that those in the workforce may not want to achieve a level of proficiency beyond speaking in simple sentences in Malay with their colleagues or neighbours. On these grounds, the concepts of restricted and elaborated codes are found to be useful as the basis for the design of the model. An explanation as to the meaning of these codes is given by Bernstein, the originator of these concepts, as follows:

These two codes may be distinguished on the linguistic level in terms of the probabilities of predicting, *for any one speaker*, which structural elements will be used to organize meaning. In the case of an *elaborated* code, the speaker will select from a relatively extensive range of alternatives, therefore the probability of predicting the pattern of organizing elements in *any one sequence* is considerably reduced. If a speaker is using a *restricted* code then the range of these alternatives is severely limited and the probability of predicting the patterns is greatly increased. (Bernstein 1966: 259a).

The term *restricted code* was coined by Bernstein to replace *public language* which he used in previous writings. Why he calls it public language is that,

... it is marked off by the rigidity of its syntactical structure and the limited and restricted use of structural possibilities for sentence organization. It is a form of condensed speech in which certain meanings are restricted and the possibility of their elaboration is reduced. (Bernstein, 1966: 252b).

He goes on to explain that in a restricted code “the lexicon is wholly predictable and therefore, also, the

organizing structure”. (*Ibid.* 259a). This means that in this type of code it is not only the same vocabulary items that recur in expressions, but recurrence in such contexts is also a feature of the sentence structure.

Examples of restricted code (or public language) are linguistic routines in interactions when speakers greet or take leave of one another, express felicitations or condolence, and open or close a speech or an event etc. At the same time we can include in this category sentences in discourse that are used by beginners of a foreign language, where in the early stage of their learning it is the same set of simple sentence structures that recur with vocabulary items belonging to the same systems or subsystems functioning in these structures.

Among the features of elaborated code, previously named by Bernstein as formal language, structures are more complex and are not easily predictable in their usage. There is a “discriminative selection” from a range of vocabulary items. “Accurate grammatical order and syntax regulate what is said.” (*Ibid.* 253b). It is obvious, then, that this code is a property of expressions used by speakers who are already proficient in the language, compared to those using the restricted code.

With our understanding of the restricted and the elaborated codes, we had to figure out the candidates’ needs for the Malay language. The hypothesis was that all of them had experienced the early stages of Malay language learning, by which they were able to acquire the restricted code. Some may not be interested to go beyond using this code, but there may be others who are interested in acquiring a higher level proficiency, as a requirement for a job or for admission into an academic programme of study.

With the professionals and the academics, English is the main language in their workplace, academic institutions, and their social milieu. The professionals may want to acquire the ability to make small talks in Malay with Malays of their own social standing though, as it often happens, conversations in a situation of this nature even among Malaysians would drift to English. If there are among the foreign professionals those who are interested in attaining a proficiency in Malay at a much higher level, it may just be for a purpose of fulfilling a personal interest.

For the academics, levels of proficiency to be attained are determined by the universities and colleges. Whatever the level is, it would be higher than the restricted code, so that they are able to comprehend and interact in lectures and seminars that are delivered in Malay, and may want to refer to texts in their own academic disciplines that are available in Malay.

As for the workforce, the needs for Malay are to survive and function in various situations: in the workplace with employers and colleagues; in the community of neighbours and friends; and in public

places, such as in shopping and service centers. Their attainment level would also have to be higher than the restricted code they pick in the course of their mixing with Malaysians, but may not be of the level of the elaborated code of the academics.

After considering the profiling items (i) – (iv) above, a decision was made to have one set of tests divided into three main levels of proficiency: Beginners' Level; Intermediate Level; Advanced Level. Each of these main levels is again divided into two, which for convenience is labelled as *stages*, deriving a totality of six stages. For passing all the tests in Stage 1 of any level, the candidate is given a statement of attainment. With this statement he can move on to Stage 2 of the same level. A certificate of proficiency for any level is awarded after he passes Stage 2 of the said level, as shown in the schema below:

*Beginners' Level:* Stage 1 (Statement of Attainment)  
Stage 2 (Certificate of Proficiency, Beginners' Level)  
*Intermediate Level:* Stage 1 (Statement of Attainment)  
Stage 2 (Certificate of Proficiency, Intermediate Level)  
*Advanced Level:* Stage 1 (Statement of Attainment)  
Stage 2 (certificate of Proficiency, Advanced Level)

With every statement of attainment and certificate, there is a description of the ability achieved by the candidate in all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

There is no prerequisite which states that a candidate must have the certificate of a lower level of proficiency in order to sit for the tests leading to the certificate of a higher level. This means that if a candidate through his self-assessment wishes to sit for the Intermediate Level, even without the certificate at the Beginners' Level, then he is free to do so. The same goes for one who intends to go straight to the Advanced Level; he does not have to show proofs that he is already in possession of certificates below that level.

With this framework an employer or a head of an academic institution can stipulate that his employees or students should have a certificate of proficiency at a pre-determined level for a particular purpose, such as confirmation in the service of his department, a raise in salary, a renewal of contract, or a requisite for the registration in or award of a diploma or a degree. Employers and institutions are at liberty to benchmark the attainment level of those within their employment or educational institution. The certificates at all levels do not have an expiry date.

## VIII. OBJECTIVE AND DESIGN OF THE TESTS

The objective of the tests is to assess candidates' linguistic competence and the way this competence is handled by them to encode and decode language in the skills tested. This type of competence is generally known as proficiency.

Language is very much part of the social and cultural life of society. In the British school of linguistics, which has its roots in Malinowski's Ethnolinguistic theory, language is defined as follows:

Language is activity, activity basically of four kinds: speaking, listening, writing and reading. These activities entail certain material processes which are observable. When we speak, the bodily movements we perform can be observed and measured .... In writing, the link between the movements and the resulting marks, on paper or blackboard, is fluid: you cannot tell what movements of what organs are responsible for producing certain letters written, still less typed, on a page. In written language therefore it is only the result we are interested in observing.... (Halliday et al. 1964: 9).

The above passage from Halliday et al. provides a guideline to the practical side of arriving at the objectives in assessing candidates' productive or encoding skills: speaking and writing. The material processes mentioned in the passage are the language produced, as well as the body movements that accompany its production in the speaking skill, and the production of the graphics in the writing skill.

The language itself consists of three principal levels: substance, form, and context. The definition for each of these levels is as follows:

The substance is the raw material of language: auditory (PHONIC substance) or visual (GRAPHIC substance). The form is the internal structure. The context is the relation of language which is in fact a relation of its internal patterns, its 'form', to other features of the situations in which language operates. (Halliday et al, *ibid.*10)

These three principal levels are aspects of language usage: the auditory and visual substance (in pronunciation and writing), the form (in morphology and syntax), and the context in lexicogrammar, all of which are tested for proficiency. These are also known as the phylogenetic aspects of language. In the tests, the production of language on the part of the candidates is assessed based on their ability to relate these phylogenetic forms to meaning in sentences and in discourse, while in listening and reading this type of relationship is observed through their ability to decode texts given for the purpose.

Usage of Malay, as that of any other natural language, is also subject to sociolinguistic rules. This means that the forms used in discourse should be appropriate and acceptable in the social and cultural contexts of the community concerned. For example, linguistic routines should be appropriate for the occasions in which they are used. Jargons and slangs may be commonly used for certain informal occasions depending on who speaks what to whom, but their usage may not be appropriate in other contexts.

Languages have their own systems of honorifics, and Malay is a language which has quite a large inventory of honorifics which are based on age difference, relationship (family, professional, acquaintanceship), and rank (in community, politics, workplace). At the same time there is a significant number of people in the Malaysian Malay community who hold various titles which they carry from birth showing their origins as royals or as members of a lineage connected to one of the nine sultanates. On top of this, there are those who are conferred with titles of honour at the federal and state levels every year. To speak proper Malay means to be able to use the appropriate form of address in a given social context.<sup>9</sup> Appropriacy as defined by Grundy (2000: 5) is "One of the features of language use ... in relation to those who use it and those they address." Appropriate behaviour, then, is a reflection of politeness, which is "one manifestation of the wider concept of etiquette or appropriate behaviour." (Grundy 2000: 146).

As human activities are related to culture and social rules, assessment of candidates' ability in speaking the language has to take into account the material processes in terms of physical movements. These are observable in the paralinguistic behavior of candidates in interaction with the tester, in answering questions, and in narrating events or experiences which are given as components of the tests for the oral skill. This means that paralinguistic behaviour is also part of etiquette.

Candidates come from different cultural backgrounds. There are rules of etiquette which they carry with them which are universally accepted, such as using the proper type of linguistic routines when meeting another person or parting from him in a certain context, not cutting off another person's speech in mid-sentence, or looking the other way when a person is talking to him, etc. At the same time, each culture has its features of cultural behaviour which may be considered taboos, but are permitted in other cultures. In Malay culture there are certain body movements which are forbidden in an interaction, for example, pointing at something with one's pointer finger, putting the hand(s) on the hip(s) even in informal conversations, or sitting cross-legged in front of one's superior. Observation of these rules is important in the test of oral proficiency when the candidate comes face to face with the examiner.

## IX. PRINCIPLES IN THE PREPARATION OF MATERIALS FOR THE TESTS

The preparation of materials for the tests take into consideration principles based on the backgrounds and the needs of the candidates, and the sociocultural rules that underlie the use and usage of language. These are simplicity versus complexity, choice of domain and register, authenticity of text, and sensitivity.

### a) *Simplicity versus complexity*

Since the tests were planned for candidates whose knowledge of Malay could be at any of the levels, from the Beginners' to the Intermediate and to the Advanced, the materials and the questions set for the purpose had to reflect this broad spectrum. This means that the materials had to start from the simple restricted code at the Beginners' Level, moving gradually to the most elaborated one. In this sense, there is no visible division between the two codes, made by the gradual movement from stage to stage, and level to level. Movement from simplicity to complexity is applied in all the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in terms of form and structure at the grammatical and lexical levels.

Simplicity and complexity of structure are seen in morphology and syntax. In the aspect of morphology, Malay is an agglutinative language, which makes use of various types of affixes: prefix, infix, suffix, and split affix (i. e. an affix whose components are intervened by the root word). Each of these types may occur in a simple or complex form. This being the case, the materials used in the tests for listening and reading reflect this movement from simplicity to complexity. The same principle is applied in the tests for the productive skills of speaking and writing. Candidates on their part are expected to form their sentences as expected for each level.

Malay syntax is of the typology SVO (Sentence – Verb – Object), except for passive sentences which are of two variants: OVS, and OSV. Movement from simplicity to complexity means that as the level moves upwards candidates have to show their ability to produce and comprehend the more complex structures of the hypotactic and paratactic types, and the combination of both.

The principle of simplicity moving to complexity applies at the lexical level as well. In terms of lexical form, the morphological structure of a word reflects the type of its meaning. The more complex the morphology of a word is, the more complex is its meaning; in this aspect we are looking into the candidates' ability of production and reception of the Malay language in the aspect of lexicogrammar.

### b) *Choice of domain and register*

On the whole, the candidates are tested primarily in their ability to use general language, that is, the language which is not specific in usage to a particular field of knowledge. Since the language concerned is Malay, it is the standard variety that underlies discourses in all situations in all walks of life seen in terms of domains, such as family, social life, workplace, service centres, and gatherings of the community they are in etc. Domains are defined by Fishman as "classes of situations" in a speech network. According to him,



...there are classes of events recognized by each speech network or community such that several seemingly different situations are classed as being of the same kind. No speech network has a linguistic repertoire that is as differentiated as the complete list of apparently different role relations, topics, and locales in which its members are involved. Just *where the boundaries come* that do differentiate between the *class of situations* generally requiring one variety and another class of situations generally requiring another variety must be empirically determined .... Such classes of situations are referred to as *domains*. (Fishman, 1971: 255).

Examples of domains given by Fishman are Home, School and Culture, Work, Government, Church. (*Ibid.* 235).

The varied backgrounds of the candidates regarding their interests, living environments, workplace etc. make domains the basis of the principle of choice. A particular domain may be inclined towards the usage of certain lexical items and sentence structures, and even linguistic routines, more than the other. These linguistic aspects of language usage are generally known as register.

A register is a semantic concept. The definition given by Halliday is as follows:

It can be defined as a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situational configuration, a configuration of field, mode and tenor. But being a configuration of meanings, a register must also, of course, include the expressions, the lexicogrammatical and phonological features that typically accompany or REALIZE these meanings. (Halliday, 1980b: 64).

Based on the definition given above, the market place has certain features of register represented by lexical items and the structures which are used in exchanges between buyer and vendor. The whole exchange is a text which consists of "its grammar and semantics on the one hand and the context of situation on the other". (Halliday, *Ibid.* 62).

The social configuration is realised from the social context of situation which is given a conceptual framework of field, tenor, and mode. (Halliday 1980a: 12). In brief, *field* means field of discourse, referring to what the participants are engaged in; *tenor* refers to the participants, their statuses and roles, and their role relationship; and *mode* refers to "what part the language is playing, what the participants are expecting the language to do in that situation". (Halliday, *Ibid.*) Hence, the concept of field, tenor and mode as given by Halliday is approximately equivalent to domain given by Fishman.

It is necessary that candidates such as those in this broad sociocultural spectrum be given a choice of domain for the four skills designed for the tests, so that

the tests are seen to be assessing the type of language that they need and are likely to use. As far as the target groups under discussion are concerned, their experiences and needs for Malay differ, as are their objectives in coming to Malaysia.

For listening, speaking, and reading, candidates are asked to make the choice at the start of the examination. For writing, the choice is given in the question paper. For example, people working in the restaurant are more familiar with the vocabulary used in this domain, such as names of dishes and utensils, than they are with the names of the tools and activities in the building sector. Giving a choice to the candidates on the subject of a conversation or a narration in the tests means that we are aware of the types of language usage that a candidate is more familiar with. At the same time we are also aware that an individual is able to understand and produce language in more than one domain. When he goes higher in the professional or academic ladder, his repertoire of domains may include one which is characterised by linguistic elements which are the privy of specialists.

#### c) *Authenticity of texts*

Whenever a text is used for the purpose of evaluating the listening and reading skills, authentic texts are used, and these are texts which are published in the printed media (for reading), and in audio or audio-visual form (for listening). This means that texts are not composed purposely for the tests. These texts are properly selected so that they represent the standard (and hence, respected) type of language that is spoken in schools and educational institutions, and in government departments. Care is taken that no element of Bazaar or Pidgin Malay is used in the texts chosen.

## X. SENSITIVITY

The principle of authenticity may pose a problem in that the texts chosen may trigger the sensitivity of certain groups of candidates, in terms of their culture, religious belief, and political ideology. At times it is not just the subject matter that may be taken as sensitive, but also the way language is used in discourse, and this may also apply to texts which are considered as non-sensitive. Sensitivity is not an area that is easy to deal with, especially when the candidates are from a broad spectrum of culture and belief system. But including it as a principle in materials preparation is a show of considerateness towards the candidates.

## XI. CLOSING REMARKS

This paper shows that the purposes of language proficiency tests are social and educational in nature. In the context of foreign users of a language there is no standard need for all the groups, as shown in the Malaysian case. There is an obvious difference between the needs of the three groups of projected

candidates, as well as differences between levels to be attained in each group.

It can also be seen that the choice of domain given to candidates in the test for proficiency results in an overall ability in language usage, not one that is restricted to forming correct sentence structures. At the same time this type of test is relevant to their vocation.

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### Notes

1. The language proficiency test for the British officers in the colonial government consisted of speaking, reading and writing. In reading and writing, they were also tested in their ability to read and write the language in the *Jawi* script. (See Taylor, 2006: 39 – 40; 75 – 76). This script has its origin in the Arabic system of writing and has become part of the literacy history of the Malays. With Western influence, the Roman script was adopted, first as an alternative system to *Jawi*, for writing Malay. But now it has become the main system, with *Jawi* as the minor system used in Islamic religious texts. See Taylor, 2006: 39 – 40; 75 – 76).
2. Malaysian households, especially those of the upper middle class, had always have maids, even before the period under consideration but they were locally recruited from the villages. Socio-economic progress and educational opportunities for local women had opened the doors for them to participate in the development of the country alongside the men. This led to another social situation which sought for domestic help from abroad. And neighboring countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines were in full supply.
3. For a discussion on this topic, see Asmah Haji Omar, 2010: Chapter 13, *Taksonomi Pertemuan Bahasa: Di Manakah Letaknya Bahasa Rojak? [A Taxonomy of the Meeting of Languages: Where is the Place of the Salad Language?]*. See also Elaine Morais 1994, and Maya David 1996.
4. There has not been any formal study on this topic. This information is gathered from my observation of and interaction with foreign maids (hired by friends and neighbours), and workers in the building industry.

5. In Singapore there has already been a stipulation that foreign workers should take and pass a qualifying test in English before they are recruited. For the renewal of a contract, they have to do the same but with a higher level of proficiency.
6. N TOEFL, each skill carries a full mark of 30. For reading and listening, the scores are categorized as High (22 – 30), Intermediate (15 – 21), Low (0 – 14). For speaking: Good (26 – 30), Fair (18 – 25), Limited (10 – 17), Weak (0 – 9). For writing: Good (24 – 30), Fair (17 – 23), Limited (1 – 16). <https://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/scores/understand>, 14 January 2015.
7. The MUET scores are translated in brief into the following levels of proficiency: 6 – Very good user; 5 – Good user; 4 – Competent user; 3 – Modest user; 2 – Limited user; 1 – Extremely limited user. ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian\\_University\\_English\\_Test](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malaysian_University_English_Test), January 6, 2015)
8. The band scores in IELTS mean the following levels of attainment: 9 – Expert user; 8 – Very good user; 7 – Good User; 6 – Competent user; 5 – Modest user; 4 – Limited user; 3 – Extremely limited user; 1 – Intermittent user. ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_English\\_Language\\_Testing\\_System](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_English_Language_Testing_System), January 6, 2015)
9. For a comprehensive typology of Malay honorifics, see Asmah Haji Omar, 2009: Chapter 4; 2004.

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