

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.

Index terms— attainment, skills, proficiency, code, appropriacy, context.

1 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.

2 II.

3 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 mainland China. Their arrival towards the end of the 19th 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 19th 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 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 1 .

4 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 nonnative 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

100 integrate the population of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in such a way that they could connect
101 with one another in a country which they called their home.

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

108 IV.

109 5 New Wave of Arrival of Foreign Speakers

110 In the 1980's about a century after the beginning of the first phase of the arrival enmasse of non-native speakers
111 of Malay in Malaya, from China and India, there came another wave of foreign arrivals in the country. This time,
112 they came, to use a Malay metaphor, from "every direction of the wind". Their arrival was in response to the
113 "internationalisation" of Malaysia, which was a programme of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the fourth Prime Minister
114 of Malaysia (1982 -2003). This programme is given in great detail in his speech, The Way Forward: Vision 2020,
115 tabled at his presentation of the Sixth Malaysia Plan in 1991. The speech contains measures that should be
116 taken by the country to arrive at the ultimate objective which was to transform Malaysia into "a fully developed
117 nation". He identifies nine objectives which have to be achieved in order to arrive at the ultimate objective, and
118 the one that is relevant to the discussion in this paper is the ninth, which is "establishing a prosperous society,
119 with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient." This type of economy is described as
120 follows:

121 A diversified and balanced economy with a mature and widely based industrial sector, a modern and mature
122 agricultural sector?.

123 (www.wawasan 2020.com/vision) in the education sector meant that universities and colleges had to open
124 their doors to foreign students. This led to the establishment of private universities which could use English as
125 a medium of instruction (a diversion from the national language policy), whereas before this there was no such
126 institution.

127 Among these private universities are branches of well-established universities of other countries, for example
128 those of the United Kingdom and Australia, which draw students from all over the world to Malaysia.

129 The attraction is not just due to quality education these universities offer, but also that the cost of living in
130 Malaysia as students, even in the big cities, is much cheaper than in the homelands of these universities.

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

140 In the economic sector, internationalization has transformed Kuala Lumpur, the capital of the country, into a
141 meeting place of multinational conglomerates and financial houses with headquarters and branches beyond the
142 shores of Malaysia. This situation has given rise to an increase in the density of the use of English specifically
143 in the city areas where grand high-rise buildings are to be found. The speakers of English comprise a mixture
144 of locals and foreigners who are in the professional class, i.e. managers, engineers, architects, bankers etc. This
145 group can go about doing their business in Malaysia without any necessity or motivation of learning the local
146 lingua franca, Malay. It is safe to assume that after five years of staying in Malaysia, the knowledge of Malay
147 among foreigners of this class does not go beyond the restricted code, to use Bernstein's term, in greetings and
148 a few other types of linguistic routines. (Bernstein, 1966: 259).

149 The process of transforming Malaysia into an industrialised country as envisioned in The Way Forward included
150 making Malaysia a car manufacturer and exporter, an undertaking which was never dreamt of prior to the 1980s.
151 This is one of the developments which have attracted the work for cefrom foreign lands to come to Malaysia in
152 large groups. This group consists of workers in factories, plantations (of rubber, oil palm, pineapple, and cocoa),
153 the hospitality sector, and industries (building, manufacturing, and timber). Also included in the workforce are
154 office cleaners and housemaids whose presence in the demography of the country cannot be ignored. 2 Except
155 for the Indonesians who speak bahasaIndonesia, which is a variety of Malay, foreign workers in these categories
156 may not know a word of the language at the time of their arrival in Malaysia.

157 Their form of verbal communication is English, but the level of proficiency varies among them based on their
158 country of origin. Those workers who are from countries where English is spoken as a second language, such as
159 India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines, are able to function in the workplace and to socialise with the
160 local population using some form of English. Others might have attainment levels according to the education

7 VI. SURVEY OF EXISTING STANDARD TESTS

161 backgrounds in their home countries before coming to Malaysia; the code they use may just be restricted to
162 greetings and simple sentences of making statements and requests, and asking questions.

163 Foreigners in the workforce are placed in environments where they are surrounded by locals (Malays and other
164 indigenous groups, Chinese, and Indians), who interact in Malay and Malaysian English. The latter speech system
165 is a creolised form of English, featured by English words with a sprinkle of Malay placed in Malay, Chinese and
166 Tamil structures, and it is this form of communication that can be said to assist them in their communication
167 with the locals before they acquire Malay. Another channel which has come their way in the recognition of
168 words and phrases in Malay is the Malay-English code-switching, known locally as bahasarajak, which can be
169 freely translated as "fruit salad language". While Malaysian English is common among Malaysians whose school
170 education does not reach the post-secondary level, the bahasarajak is used in informal interactions traversing all
171 social classes. 3 These two lingua franca substrates, Malaysian English and bahasarajak, are frowned upon by
172 language educators, but in reality they prove to be of some assistance to first-time foreigners arriving in Malaysia
173 with some knowledge of English and without a word of Malay.

174 Employers have been silent on the question of the need of the ability of their foreign employees to speak in the
175 local lingua franca. In general there has not been any move on their part to provide Malay language classes to
176 their foreign workers. It appears that there was no necessity for such a provision for the workforce as they were
177 not going to be permanent settlers, and that their type of job did not require a formal assessment of their ability
178 to fulfill their job descriptions. The workers, who usually get an initial two-year contract which is renewable to
179 a further term of two years or more, seem to acquire the Malay language as a result of interaction with the local
180 people in their job environment, places of worship, shopping and service centres etc. 4 Foreign managers in the
181 multinational firms and financial houses, whose stay in Malaysia is for a relatively short period, are a class of their
182 own, and with their fluency in English they would not want to waste their time in learning Malay, unless they
183 are linguistically inclined. As for the students, although they enter the country on student visas, and are likely
184 to return to their home countries after their graduation, they have to fulfill the Malay-language requirement in
185 order to be awarded the degree for the programme they registered for, as stated above.

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

190 V.

191 6 The Idea of Having Standard Proficiency Tests Malay for 192 Foreigners

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

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

207 7 VI. Survey of Existing Standard Tests

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

213 TOEFL, IELTS, and MUET have been designed with a clear profiling of target candidates who are nonnative
214 speakers of English, and who have had formal teaching of English during their school days. TOEFL and MUET
215 each has one version which has to be taken by candidates at one go, for all the four skills of listening, speaking,
216 reading, and writing. The attainment levels of students are placed in band scores in both tests. For TOEFL,
217 the scores range from 9 (the highest) to 0 (the lowest). 6 MUET has six band scores, from 6 (the highest)
218 to 1 (the lowest), each with its own description of the target level of proficiency. 7 IELTS has two versions.
219 One is the academic version meant for those who wish to enroll in universities and other institutions of higher
220 education as well as for professionals, for example medical doctors and nurses who intend to study and practise

221 in an English-speaking country. The second, which is the general training version, is meant for those planning to
222 undertake nonacademic training or to gain work experience, or for immigration purposes. There are nine band
223 scores from 9 (the highest) to 1 (the lowest). 8 VII. Designing a Framework for the Tests

224 The three groups of the projected population of candidates for the Malay language tests as delineated above
225 differ one from the other in all aspects of social and educational backgrounds, as well as in the irpur poses in
226 being in Malaysia. To arrive at a suitable model, the first step was to re-examine the three groups would-be
227 candidates based on their knowledge and i. The groups vary greatly in terms of levels of educational background.
228 ii. Almost all of them came to Malaysia with very little knowledge of Malay or none at all. iii. Their needs for
229 Malay vary according to the requirement of their place of employment or study. iv. All the three groups would
230 need to have all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Factors (i) -(iii) indicate that there
231 could not be one test for all the groups, as the case is with the TOEFL, IELTS, and MUET which are directed
232 at a more or less uniform category of candidates. At the same time, having three sets of tests would bring about
233 complication in their administration.

234 A close examination of factors (ii) and (iii) shows that the types of code required by the groups differ in varying
235 degrees one from the other. Given the situation of language use in Malaysia among professionals as described
236 above, one could not say that they needed a higher form of Malay compared to the workforce, or that those in
237 the workforce may not want to achieve a level of proficiency beyond speaking in simple sentences in Malay with
238 their colleagues or neigh bours. On these grounds, the concepts of restricted and elaborated codes are found to
239 be useful as the basis for the design of the model. An explanation as to the meaning of these codes is given by
240 Bernstein, the originator of these concepts, as follows:

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

247 The term restricted code was coined by Bernstein to replace public language which he used in previous writings.
248 Why he calls it public language is that, ? it is marked off by the rigidity of its syntactical structure and the
249 limited and restricted use of structural possibilities for sentence organization. It is a form of condensed speech in
250 which certain meanings are restricted and the possibility of their elaboration is reduced. (Bernstein, 1966: 252b).
251 organizing structure". (Ibid. 259a). This means that in this type of code it is not only the same vocabulary items
252 that recur in expressions, but recurrence in such contexts is also a feature of the sentence structure.

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

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

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

268 With the professionals and the academics, English is the main language in their workplace, academic
269 institutions, and their social milieu. The professionals may want to acquire the ability to make small talks
270 in Malay with Malays of their own social standingal though, as it often happens, conversations in a situation of
271 this nature even among Malaysians would drift to English.

272 If there are among the foreign professionals those who are interested in attaining a proficiency in Malay at a
273 much higher level, it may just be for a purpose of fulfilling a personal interest.

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

278 As for the workforce, the needs for Malay are to survive and function in various situations: in the places, such
279 as in shopping and service centers. Their attainment level would also have to be higher than the restricted code
280 they pick in the course of their mixing with Malaysians, but may not be of the level of the elaborated code of
281 the academics.

282 After considering the profiling items (i) -(iv) above, a decision was made to have one set of tests divided into
283 three main levels of proficiency: Beginners' Level; Intermediate Level; Advanced Level. Each of these main levels

284 is again divided into two, which for convenience is labelled as stages, deriving a totality of six stages. For passing
 285 all the tests in Stage With every statement of attainment and certificate, there is a description of the ability
 286 achieved by the candidate in all the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

287 There is no prerequisite which states that a candidate must have the certificate of a lower level of proficiency
 288 in order to sit for the tests leading to the certificate of a higher level. This means that if a candidate through
 289 his self-assessment wishes to sit for the Intermediate Level, even without the certificate at the Beginners' Level,
 290 then he is free to do so. The same goes for one who intends to go straight to the Advanced Level; he does
 291 not have to show proofs that he is already in possession of certificates below that level With this framework
 292 an employer or a head of an academic institution can stipulate that his employees or students should have a
 293 certificate of proficiency at a pre-determined level for a particular purpose, such as confirmation in the service of
 294 his department, a raise in salary, a renewal of contract, or a requisite for the registration in or award of a diploma
 295 or a degree. Employers and institutions are at liberty to benchmark the attainment level of those within their
 296 employment or educational institution. The certificates at all levels do not have an expiry date.

297 8 VIII. Objective and Design of the Tests

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

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

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

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

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

315 The substance is the raw material of language: auditory (PHONIC substance) or visual (GRAPHIC substance).
 316 The form is the internal structure. The context is the relation of language which is in fact a relation of its internal
 317 patterns, its 'form', to other features of the situations in which language operates.

318 (Halliday et al, Ibid.10)

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

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

330 9 (G)

331 Languages have their own systems of honorifics, and Malay is a language which has quite a large inventory of
 332 honorifics which are based on age difference, relationship (family, professional, acquaintanceship), and rank (in
 333 community, politics, workplace).

334 At the same time there is a significant number of people in the Malaysian Malay community who hold various
 335 titles which they carry from birth showing their origins as royals or as members of a lineage connected to one of
 336 the nine sultanates. On top of this, there are those who are conferred with titles of honour at the federal and
 337 state levels every year. To speak proper Malay means to be able to use the appropriate form of address in a
 338 given social context. 9 Appropriacyas defined by Grundy (2000: 5) is "One of the features of language use ? in
 339 relation to those who use it and those they address." Appropriate behaviour, then, is a reflection of politeness,
 340 which is "one manifestation of the wider concept of etiquette or appropriate behaviour." (Grundy 2000: 146).

341 As human activities are related to culture and social rules, assessment of candidates' ability in speaking the
 342 language has to take into account the material processes in terms of physical movements. These are observable in
 343 the paralinguistic behavior of candidates in interaction with the tester, in answering questions, and in narrating

344 events or experiences which are given as components of the tests for the oral skill. This means that paralinguistic
345 behaviour is also part of etiquette.

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

355 10 IX.

356 11 Principles in Preparation of Materials for Tests

357 The preparation of materials for the tests take into consideration principles based on the backgrounds and the
358 needs of the candidates, and the sociocultural rules that underlie the use and usage of language. These are
359 simplicity versus complexity, choice of domain and register, authenticity of text, and sensitivity. a) Simplicity
360 versus complexity Since the tests were planned for candidates whose knowledge of Malay could be at any of the
361 levels, from the Beginners' to the Intermediate and to the Advanced, the materials and the questions set for
362 the purpose had to reflect this broad spectrum. This means that the materials had to start from the simple
363 restricted code at the Beginners' Level, moving gradually to the most elaborated one. In this sense, there is no
364 visible division between the two codes, made by the gradual movement from stage to stage, and level to level.
365 Movement from simplicity to complexity is applied in all the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing,
366 in terms of form and structure at the grammatical and lexical levels.

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

373 Malay syntax is of the typology SVO (Sentence -Verb -Object), except for passive sentences which are of two
374 variants: OVS, and OSV.

375 Movement from simplicity to complexity means that as the level moves upwards candidates have to show their
376 ability to produce and comprehend the more complex structures of the hypotactic and paratactic types, and the
377 combination of both.

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

382 12 b) Choice of domain and register

383 On the whole, the candidates are tested primarily in their ability to use general language, that is, the language
384 which is not specific in usage to a particular field of knowledge.

385 Since the language concerned is Malay, it is the standard variety that underlies discourses in all situations in
386 all walks of life seen in terms of domains, such as family, social life, workplace, service centres, and gatherings of
387 the community they are in etc. Domains are defined by Year 2015

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

395 Examples of domains given by Fishman are Home, School and Culture, Work, Government, Church. (Ibid.
396 235).

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

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

402 It can be defined as a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situational
403 configuration, a configuration of field, mode and tenor. But being a configuration of meanings, a register must

404 also, of course, include the expressions, the lexicogrammatical and phonological features that typically accompany
405 or REALIZE these meanings. (Halliday, 1980b: 64).

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

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

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

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

427 **13 c) Authenticity of texts**

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

434 **14 X.**

435 **15 Sensitivity**

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

442 **16 XI.**

443 **17 Closing Remarks**

444 This paper shows that the purposes of language proficiency tests are social and educational in nature. In the
445 context of foreign users of a language Year 2015 It is necessary that candidates such as those in this broad
446 sociocultural spectrum be given a choice of domain for the four skills designed for the tests, so that there is no
447 standard need for all the groups, as shown in the Malaysian case. There is an obvious difference between the
448 needs of the three groups of projected (G)

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

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

453 **18 XII.**

454 **19 Acknowledgement**

455 I would like to record my appreciation to Dr. AwangSariyan (see the above text) for giving me the opportunity
456 to design the Malay language proficiency tests described above. In this connection, I would like to acknowledge
457 with thanks the members of my team who worked diligently in the preparation of the test materials (1982 -1983):

458 Mardian Sheikh Omar, Norizah Ardi, Nuraihan Mat Daud, Zarina Othman, Siti Saniah Abu Bakar, and
459 Amran Joned. Notes 1. The language proficiency test for the British officers in the colonial government consisted
460 of speaking, reading and writing. In reading and writing, they were also tested in their ability to read and write
461 the language in the Jawi script. (See Taylor, 2006: 39 -40; 75 -76). This script has its origin in the Arabic
462 system of writing and has become part of the literacy history of the Malays. With Western influence, the Roman
463 script was adopted, first as an alternative system to Jawi, for writing Malay. But now it has become the main
464 system, with Jawi as the minor system used in Islamic religious texts. See Taylor, 2006: 39 -40; 75 -76). 2.
465 Malaysian households, especially those of the upper middle class, had always have maids, even before the period
466 under consideration but they were locally recruited from the villages. Socio-economic progress and educational
467 opportunities for local women had opened the doors for them to participate in the development of the country
468 alongside the men. This led to another social situation which sought for domestic help from abroad.

469 And neighboring countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines were in full supply. This information is
470 gathered from my observation of and interaction with foreign maids (hired by friends and neighbours), and
471 workers in the building industry.

472 5. In Singapore there has already been a stipulation that foreign workers should take and pass a qualifying
473 test in English before they are recruited.

474 For the renewal of a contract, they have to do the same but with a higher level of proficiency. 6. N TOEFL,
475 each skill carries a full mark of 30. For reading and listening, the scores are categorized as High (22 -30),
476 Intermediate (15 -21), Low (0 -14).

477 For speaking: Good (26 -30), Fair (18 -25), Limited (10 -17), Weak (0 -9). For writing: Good (24 -30), Fair
(17 -23) ¹



Figure 1: Designing

478

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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)

Figure 2:

Figure 3:

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