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PLACEMENT TEST AS AN ATTEMPT TO BETTER HELP STUDENTS IN LEARNING A
SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE: AN INTERVIEW REPORT

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Abstract

Assessment is an essential part in teaching and learning process as it usually provides opportunities both for teachers and students to learn. In the context of second or foreign language teaching, assessment is usually conducted to elicit information regarding students' second language ability. This paper reports and analyzes the results of an interview with a university lecturer in Central Sulawesi who was once involved in the construction of a test to place students in different classroom levels. Although it is apparent from the analysis that there are several weaknesses found in the placement test viewed from the six qualities proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996), there are other essential aspects that need to be learned from the results of the interview by second or foreign language teachers in other teaching contexts.

Keywords: assessment, placement test, washback

Introduction

Assessment is an indispensable part in teaching and learning process as it provides opportunities for learning both for teachers and students (Tomlinson, 2005). In the context of teaching and learning a second language, there are several kinds of assessment that can be done in order to elicit information regarding students' second language ability. One way of assessing students is by testing them regarding their L2 ability. One purpose of doing that is to place students in several language proficiency levels. This paper, in particular, attempts to report an interview regarding a placement test with a lecturer of Tadulako University in Indonesia who was once involved in the construction of a test to place students in different classroom levels. The result of

the test was, according to her, specifically oriented to better help the students in learning their second language (English) in the following time during their study in the university. This interview report is then analyzed based on the six test qualities developed by Bachman & Palmer (1996) covering its reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact, and practicality.

Test Description and Explanation

According to the interviewee the test was actually a proficiency test, as it did not refer to any particular course or syllabus that the students enrolled in the previous time. Specifically, the test was used to measure the students' mastery of vocabulary knowledge in English. The test result was then used for a judgment whether the students were able to enroll or not in some courses called MKDU (general English courses) in their first year studying at Tadolako University. It was conducted under the DUE (Development Undergraduate Education) project of Tadolako University with the guidance from the Indonesian British Council. The reason of testing vocabularies rather than other linguistic related skills in measuring the students' English proficiency is that vocabulary was considered as the most essential skill before the students actually learn other linguistic related skills in English. In addition, according to the interviewee, it was oriented to comply with the national curriculum, which requires the students of English department to master at least five thousand words after graduating from the university, indicating that vocabulary is the most essential knowledge and needs to be prioritized in the teaching of English in Indonesia.

Physically, the test was in the form of conversation texts with a number of blanks that should be filled out by the students with the appropriate vocabularies. There were about a hundred of vocabulary items and in each item there was a clue consisted of one letter or two in order to help and ease the students to guess the words. In addition, according to the interviewee, as it was in the form of dialogue texts, the students were assumed to be able to guess the words from the context of the conversations.

The test was actually designed by several senior lecturers of Tadolako University under guidance from the Indonesian British Council staff in South Sulawesi province who acted as the editors for the purpose of ensuring the relevance to the target language use (TLU). Meanwhile,

the test takers were the Tadolako University students who wanted to enroll for MKDU (general courses) which were compulsory for them to take during their study in the university. Most of these students, basically, have already learned English during their secondary school for about five years. It was expected that the students who were able to pass this test were in their intermediate proficiency level.

According to the interviewee, this test was basically designed based on the teachers' experiences and problems that they faced in the previous academic years. Particularly it was based on their difficulties in providing appropriate techniques and teaching methods as the students were diverse in their English proficiency. For this reason, it would be good if the students could be classified into different classes in order to better help both the teachers and the students to conduct their teaching and learning process. Thus, rather than based on theoretical consideration, this test was much based on experiential perspective. Additionally, according to the interviewee, the issue of motivation was better maintained and raised if the students were classified according to their levels of English proficiency.

There were several stages in designing the test. Firstly, the test designers set up the test purpose under the supervision of the British Council staff. It was then continued to find the appropriate topics for the conversation texts that could be used for the test, which was acknowledged as the most difficult step by the interviewee. It was because the topics that were interesting for the test designers were not necessarily appropriate and interesting for the learners. The next step was designing the conversation texts with several vocabulary blanks as well as their clues, which were then edited by British Council staff in order to suit the target language use. After finishing this step, it was directly implemented. No piloting was conducted.

This test was conducted traditionally without the use of electronic devices such computer and language labs as the students filled out all the vocabulary items within one-hour length. Students also were not allowed to open dictionaries. The results of the test were also scored traditionally as the test designers just counted the right and wrong answers. The number of the correct answers was then consulted to the standard or criteria, which were set previously. Essentially, there were three kinds of criteria: 0-39 was categorized as elementary level, 40-69 was pre-intermediate, and 70-100 was categorized as intermediate level. The consequences for this vocabulary test were that those who were in elementary levels, in different length of time, were required to take the same test in the following time while they were also required to take

extra time to improve their English in the self-access center. Meanwhile, those who achieved the intermediate level were directly able to join the MKDU courses in the provided classes.

When she was asked regarding the problems that she and her colleagues faced, the interviewee acknowledged that there are several problems both while designing and implementing the test. Firstly, the interviewee mentioned that the assessment approach is a little bit inappropriate as judging the students' proficiency just from their vocabulary knowledge is not enough. It is because vocabulary is one of the many aspects of L2 learners' proficiency in L2. In addition, psychological factor might actually influence the students' performance in the test such as nervousness and anxiety. Besides, she also acknowledged that she got difficulty to find out the appropriate topics as what the test designers considered suitable and interesting were not necessarily suitable and interesting for the students. For this reason, they needed to do a lot of editing which, in this case, they were helped by staff from the British Council.

Technically, she and her colleagues encountered a problem. In conducting the test, they were constrained by the limited number of classrooms that were provided by the university. This technical problem, she admitted, was closely related to the political and financial support from the university decision makers. The interviewee acknowledged that she and her colleagues got limited financial support as the university provided only limited fund and media to successfully conduct the test. Even, the interviewee said that the university decision makers might consider that English was not so important that enabled them to provide sufficient funding.

Another problem is concerned with instructional activities as the interviewee acknowledged that there were limited numbers of teachers who will teach after the placement test because the university usually allocated the classes in the same time. The teacher could not change the schedule.

However, when she was asked regarding the test suitability and unsuitability to the curriculum, she was sure that the test corresponded to the curriculum (national curriculum) as she mentioned that Indonesian curriculum for English teaching requires the university students of English department to master five thousand words after finishing their study. This indicates that vocabulary knowledge is very important and should be prioritized in the teaching of English in Indonesia.

Analysis

In order to comprehensively understand the strength and the weaknesses of the placement test discussed above, I would like to analyze this based on the six criteria or the so-called test usefulness proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996) namely reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact, and practicality. The reason for choosing Bachman and Palmer's usefulness criteria is that it is, in my opinion, the most complete criteria in considering the usefulness of a particular language test.

The first criterion is reliability. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), reliability refers to the consistency of the test measurement. A test can be said reliable if a group of test takers take the test in different time and setting; there is a likely that they will get the same score regardless whoever scores the test. Based on this standpoint, it can be said that the placement test explained above is relatively high in reliability because there is only one correct answer for each item of the test. Therefore, there is likelihood that the students who take the test in two different situations will get the same score whoever does the scoring. No rater is required as the scorers just consult the number of correct answers to the standard or criteria of scoring set up previously.

The second measure is construct validity. According Bachman and Palmer (1996), construct validity refers to "the meaningfulness and appropriateness of the interpretations that we make on the basis of the test scores" (p. 21). In other words, the interpretation or the judgment regarding the tasks and the scores of the test should be based on the adequate construct or to use Brown's (2001) term "theoretical construct" rather than simply assert or argue that the test is valid. A test should be really an operationalization of an underlying construct. As it was mentioned by the interviewee that basically the test was oriented to classify the students based on their level of English proficiency for the purpose of helping the teachers to better teach and treat the students in the classroom. This perspective was very much based on the teachers' experiences handling the class in the previous time rather than based on theoretical perspective. Referring to the concept of construct validity proposed by Bachman and Palmer above, it is obvious that the placement test is relatively weak in its construct validity as it is surely not enough to implement a placement test without theoretical background. In addition, the test is also operationally unsuitable with the purpose of the test, which is to classify the students based on their English proficiency levels. Obviously, judging the students solely from their vocabulary

knowledge in order to know their English proficiency is not adequate as vocabulary is one among the many parameters to measure learners' L2 proficiency.

The next criterion is authenticity. Bachman and Palmer (1996) posit that in order to say that a language test is authentic, the tasks within the test should really correspond to the tasks of target language use. In the interview, the interviewee ensured that both the topics and the tasks were very relevant as they were carefully selected from newspaper and other sources. In addition, all the used conversation texts for the test were carefully edited by staff (native speakers) from the British Council regarding their syntax, morphology, semantic, and discourse. Based on this consideration, indeed, it is authentic. However, the way of testing vocabulary by requesting the students to fill gaps with clues is not communicatively authentic because people usually use vocabulary, especially in speaking, spontaneously without clues. In addition, knowing lexically, morphologically, semantically appropriate words is not the only way to successfully communicate in L2 as in speaking people may use their strategic competence through gestures, eye contact, etc. in order to convey their intended meanings. Using this analogy, the placement test above is not authentic.

Another important aspect is interactiveness. Bachman and Palmer (1996) posit that interactiveness refers to the involvement of the test takers in accomplishing the tasks in a language test. In order to be interactive, the test tasks should involve not only the test takers' linguistic knowledge, but also their metacognitive strategies, topical knowledge, and affective schemata. All of these aspects should be involved by the test tasks. Viewed from this perspective, the placement test explained above is a bit problematic. Affectively, it did not really involve the students. The students did not really use the vocabularies in the real communication. Metacognitively, however, this test involved the learners as in order to be able to answer or to fill the blanks, students had to use their genre knowledge or context in which the conversations were usually took place.

Impact or in this case *washback* is the next important criterion in looking at a language test. According to the interviewee, providing this placement test would enable the teachers to teach and treat the students based on their levels of English proficiency. In addition, based on the previous teachers' experiences, classifying the students in different classes could better enhance the students' performances in the classroom because the students can learn and practice their English in their own pace. However, these comments are from the teachers' rather than students'

point of views. As the students were never given a chance to express their view in relation to the implementation of the test, we do not really know whether the test affectively beneficial or not for them. Apparently, the judgment regarding the test score really affects the students particularly those who failed because they had to get extra time just to prepare before joining the same test in the following time.

The last test criterion proposed by Bachman and Palmer is practicality. According to Bachman and Palmer practicality refers to the reasonableness of a particular test in terms of the resources available involving material and human resources as well as the time to conduct the test. From the interview, it is obvious that the test is a bit impractical. As emerged from the interview, the university decision makers did not provide support politically and financially. Sadly, the teachers sometimes had to spend their money in order to conduct the test. Essentially according to Bachman and Palmer, in order to say that a test is practical, the required sources should be balanced with the available sources.

Conclusion

Although it is apparent that there are several weaknesses found in the placement test viewed from the six qualities proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996), it does not mean that it is a bad or inappropriate test. Fundamentally, there is no a single perfect test because the construction and implementation of a language test is much influenced by many factors including the situation under which the second or foreign language is conducted in a particular organization. For this reason, rather than looking at from black and white perspectives, the placement test and its' all limitation explained above should be looked as a process of improving or enhancing the teaching and learning process of second language in Tadolako University. There are three basic fundamental problems that, in my opinion, constrain the creation and the implementation of the placement test: lack of political and financial support as well as the lack of human resources, which are fundamentally interrelated between one and the other. Unless the three things could be improved, the goal of having a better and appropriate language test could never be realized.

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