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Developing a profile of workplace written communication

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Abstract

This paper reports on our study to determine the expectations of employers in respect of graduating students' written communication. Our study is guided by two research questions: (i) what criteria do employers adopt in evaluating written assignments and (ii) what is the minimum level expected for acceptance of completed tasks in the workplace? Interviews were conducted and samples of graduating students' written works were shown to informants (human resource personnel) from various fields, among others, the automotive, oil & gas, media, medical and higher education, to elicit their responses to performances of these students. The students had earlier on been given a task to analyse information presented in non-linear texts and to write their analyses in not more than 250 words. The informants were expected to give their responses on whether the quality of written analyses is acceptable or not, their criteria adopted in determining the acceptability of the written analyses, their views of good and poor writing and their expected minimum level of written work quality. Additional preliminary information had also been gathered on type, length, evaluation of the quality of written output and criteria used to assess the quality of written output through a questionnaire survey as a basis for the design of the set task. Results revealed that employers place importance on accuracy of reporting, conciseness, correct use of expressions and terminologies and maturity of thought, among others. From these informed responses, a draft rating scale of the expected writing ability of graduating students deemed relevant for the workplace was developed. Further refinement of the rating scale would follow with validation from the potential employers.

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1. Introduction

Accurate measurement of language ability has for too long been a major issue. On the one hand is the problem of defining what it is that we wish to measure, and on the other, of how we intend to measure it.

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Fraught with problems, primarily because of the differing views one has of what it means to know a language, any attempt at developing instruments to measure that ability must involve an understanding of what that construct is and how it shall be measured (Bachman, 1990). In this paper we shall draw upon the works of Spolsky (1968; 1973), specifically that of “what it means to know a language or how do you get someone to perform his competence” and the third of his three-period language testing trend, i.e. the psycho-sociolinguistic era, as the basis for discussion of the development of our workplace written communication rating scale.

The psycho-sociolinguistic era was adopted as the starting point in view of the serious criticism levelled against its predecessor period, i.e. the psychometric-structuralist era, wherein rests the belief that language can be dissected into testable units and measured, and of which it had failed to show that having knowledge of the elements of the language can be equated with knowing how to use the language. The psycho-sociolinguistics’ strong point, on the other hand, lies in its focus of not only in knowing the language but also of putting that knowledge of language to use in a communicative situation. Along with that emphasis on ‘performance’, various models of communicative language ability have been advanced (Hymes, 1972; Canale and Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990; Bachman and Palmer, 1996) to account for how language is being used to meet specific purposeful communicative needs of individuals within distinct domains of interaction. At the same time, too, more accurate and appropriate instruments have been developed for observation and measurement of the test takers’ actual use of the language in ‘real-life’ activities. Performance tests, among others, have been identified as a promising tool to assess what test takers can or cannot perform on account of their linguistic, strategic, discourse and socio-linguistic resources. In performance-based assessments, in particular writing assessment, test takers are observed and evaluated on an agreed judging process, normally using an agreed rating scale.

Just as there are various models of communicative competence, so too are there various interpretations of how observations and measurements of ability can be scored. Rating scales have been developed to meet a variety of specific purposes, for example, placement, selection, entrance, exit, diagnostic; and contexts of testing, for example business, education, engineering, L1 and L2 contexts. Alderson (1991) summarises the various functions of rating scales which have been developed into three categories namely ‘assessor-oriented’, ‘user-oriented’ and ‘constructor-oriented’ to highlight the emphasis made in each construction of the scale as well as providing guidance to raters on how the written output is to be examined. In light of unavailability of a rating scale that would give a ‘perfect fit’ for purposes of giving a comprehensive description of the ability being measured for a particular cohort of test takers, it is crucial that test developers have a good knowledge of designing a rating scale that meets their specific purpose. In this paper, because of an absence of a rating scale that can meet our purpose to assess the exit proficiency of our graduating students, we have explored the procedure for developing a framework of generic exit rating scale for certification of these students’ communicative readiness for the workplace. First, we review the place of rating scales in workplace written communication assessment; next, we discuss the process and procedures that we have adopted for the development of the rating scale; and finally we present our framework of a workplace written communication rating scale that we have developed for assessing the exit proficiencies of our students. Two research questions have been formulated in our attempt to develop a suitable workplace written communication profile for use by related parties. They are:

Research Question 1: What criteria do employers adopt in evaluating the quality of written assignments?

Research Question 2: What is the minimum level expected for acceptance of completed tasks in the workplace?

2. The Place of Rating Scales in Workplace Communication

A rating scale, as defined by Davies et al (1999, p. 153) is:

“ a series of constructed levels against which a language learner’s performance is judged. Typically such scales range from zero mastery through to an end-point representing the well-educated native speaker. The levels or bands are commonly characterised in terms of what subjects can do with the language (tasks and functions which can be performed) and their mastery of linguistic features (such as vocabulary, syntax, fluency and cohesion) ... Scales are descriptions of groups of typically occurring behaviours; they are not themselves test instruments and need to be used in conjunction with tests appropriate to the population and test purpose.”

In formulating a written proficiency rating scale, fundamentals involving what to assess, what criteria to use and how many criteria to include, are addressed by referring to established literature on language, communicative competence and procedures for scale development (Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Weigle, 2002; North and Schneider, 1998). However, the formulation of a workplace written communication rating scale is somewhat more complicated due to additional concerns about workplace demands and expectations which need further contemplation.

One concern pertains to real-world assessment criteria, which essentially is not related to the assessment of language proficiency per se. In our earlier papers pertaining to determining the workplace oral communication construct (Attan, et al, 2010) and development of a workplace oral communication rating scale (Abdul Raof, et al, 2011) we argue that though language proficiency is an important predictor of performance or non-performance, there are other equally important qualities sought after by employers when selecting prospective employees. ‘Interactive ability’, ‘maturity of thought’, and ‘good professional image’ are some qualities that have ranked candidates to be more acceptable than others who merely have high language proficiency. Similarly, for written communication, we believe that there are other equally important traits that employers see in their would-be employees, apart from language proficiency. In another study, Jones (1985), in discussing the role and implications of non-linguistic factors on performance-based language testing argues that some examinees who demonstrate substandard language proficiency may attain good overall scores due to their astuteness in certain areas such as personality traits. On the other hand, some examinees with high language proficiency may receive a lower score due to deficiencies in certain areas. Jacoby and McNamara (1999) believe that separating the linguistic criteria from the test context and content may lead to problems. This notion was made based on a study they conducted in which the language skills of Australian immigrant and refugee health professionals were assessed separately from their medical competence. Despite passing the test, Jacoby and McNamara reported that many of the test takers experienced problems during their actual clinical test due to poor English skills and lack of discourse competence. They thus argue that oral communication performance should not be assessed separately from professional performance as these two aspects are interrelated.

Our next concern pertains to the role that workplace professionals could assume in the written rating scale development process. Since communication performance is entrenched with professional competence, we believe that it would be more appropriate to have some form of collaboration between the test developers and workplace professionals, particularly in the area of content and skills to be assessed. This is to address the many criticisms levelled against current rating scales which are believed to have been constructed based on mere intuitive knowledge of the test developers. Current writing rating proficiency scales represent what the scale developers think they are rather than what they actually are. The same sentiment is also expressed by Turner (2000) who suggests the relative scarcity of information on how rating scales have been constructed. The same point has also been echoed by McNamara (1996), Brindley (1998) and Upshur and Turner (1995). In response to this concern, several studies on oral communication have indeed involved both test developers and workplace professionals, with the latter group engaged in

different capacities. In some studies, the workplace professionals served as co-raters with the language test developers. The aim of such studies was to investigate the correlations between the two groups' judgments on the examinees' proficiency level (Brown, 1995; Lumley, 1998). In such studies, the test developers engaged workplace professionals as informants. Information obtained was then either used to aid in test construction (Douglas and Selinker, 1993) or assessment criteria (Douglas and Myers, 2000; Abdul Raof, 2004). It is with this argument that the present study sought to provide data towards development of an alternative mode of assessing the written proficiencies of these graduating students.

3. Process and Procedure in Developing Graduating Students' Workplace Written Competency Profiles

The project started off with a preliminary stage followed by a four-stage stepladder procedure adapted from a previous study by Abdul Raof (2002). The procedure (see Figure 1) was adapted as its use has been shown to be useful in promoting active and continuous collaboration between two autonomous parties (Abdul Raof, 2004; 2011) which in this case involves the test developers and workplace professionals.

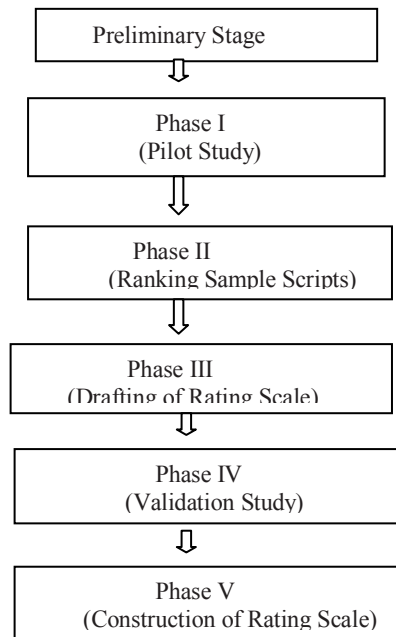


Figure 1: Procedure in Developing Graduating Students' Workplace Written Competency Profiles (Adapted from Abdul Raof, 2002)

The preliminary stage involved several meetings held among the test developers involved in the study. The main aim of these meetings was to deliberate on the nature and criteria of graduating students' written communication construct. This was then followed by the formulation of task sheets to elicit graduating students' written workplace discourse. A sample of a typical task sheet is as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Sample of Task Sheet Used to Generate Graduating Students' Written Discourse

You are advised to spend about 30 minutes on this task.

A survey was conducted to identify workplace requirements for employment of university graduates. Table 1 below shows the main reasons for unemployment among university graduates as reported by employers. Table 2 and Table 3 show the top five skills, attributes and other qualities expected of university graduates in the workplace as perceived by university lecturers and students.

Based on information in the tables and your own knowledge, analyse and discuss the findings.
Write in **not more than 250 words**.

Table 1: Top three reasons for unemployment among university graduates: Feedback from employers

Reason	
•	Lack of communication skills in English
•	Lack of creativity and critical thinking skills
•	Lack of teamworking skills

Table 2: Top five workplace requirements as perceived by university lecturers

Skill / Attitude / Quality	Rank
Communication skills in English	1
Team-working skills	2
Ability to work independently	3
Ethics and integrity	4
Technical knowledge	5

Table 3: Top five workplace requirements as perceived by university students

Topics chosen were to generally relate to the workplace. It was not possible to replicate authentic professional communicative event topics as the assessment scale is targeted at final year students who have yet to start work. Additionally, it should be borne in mind that it is the students' current proficiency upon entry at the workplace that is to be measured.

Phase One involving the scale development stage then ensued. Using the discussion topics, a pilot study was conducted in which volunteers participated in the writing task. Several scripts perceived to represent the different levels of abilities were selected. These scripts had initially been viewed by the test developers and ranked. The result was then compared among the test developers to see if there were discrepancies in terms of ranking and assessment. The scripts were then shown to a number of workplace professionals involving human resource managers, general managers, corporate heads, directors and heads of department, IT experts and consultants. They were also requested to assess and rank the graduating students' written scripts without the use of any rating scale as it was the assessment criteria of the professionals that we were looking for. It was found that there was general agreement in terms of the

ranking of the ‘best’ and ‘worst’ scripts, however there were variability in the ranking of the ‘average’ scripts.

Following the written assessment exercise previously described, each respective participating workplace professional was then subjected to an interview session. This then formed the focus of Phase Two. Among the questions asked in the interview were:

- Which scripts are acceptable to you? Why?
- Which scripts are unacceptable to you? Why?
- Why have you ranked the scripts the way they are?
- What criteria did you apply in your assessment and ranking? Please elaborate.
- What criteria are more important to you? Why?
- What other features would you like to see in the scripts? Please elaborate.
- Why are those criteria important to you?
- What minimum qualities are expected in a piece of writing?

In Phase Two, responses generated by the workplace professionals were then analysed and discussions held among the test developers for grouping of common traits discerned. Once a consensus has been reached, a draft rating scale was then devised. The draft rating scale comprised the criteria and the descriptors for a set of six language competency levels ranging from Level 1 denoting ‘Extremely Limited writer’ to Level 6 ‘Effective writer’. A minimum expected level was disclosed by the workplace professionals approximating a functional level in which at this level the test-taker has clearly understood the task and had modestly fulfilled the task requirement. Given extra assistance and learning time in the workplace, the professionals believe the ‘Functional writer’ could satisfactorily meet the workplace expectations. This functional level was assigned a Level 3 category. In some professions, however, the minimum required level of proficiency is a ‘Satisfactory writer’, one who clearly understood the task and satisfactorily presents the facts and details of the task. There were variations in terms of the acceptability/unacceptability criterion among professions. Some professions insisted on high entry points involving good, sound knowledge of topic as well as good communication skills while some others place greater emphasis on knowledge of topic and critical-thinking skills over language proficiency. While it was generally thought that language proficiency is a clear determinant of acceptance into a workplace, a strong indicator from the interview showed that critical-thinking and problem-solving skills are highly prized qualities in prospective employees.

A number of writing proficiency criteria were identified by the workplace professionals namely ‘maturity of thought’, ‘knowledge of topic’, ‘awareness of audience’, ‘analysis and synthesis of task’, ‘accuracy of language’, ‘ability to express’, ‘ability to distinguish fact from opinion’, ‘clarity of expression’, ‘planning and organisation’, ‘vocabulary’, ‘good grammar’, ‘sentence structure’, ‘good communication’, ‘thinking skills’, ‘critical-thinking skills’, ‘problem-solving skills’, ‘evaluate a situation’, ‘offer of solution’, ‘cohesion’, ‘stance’, ‘sense’ and ‘first impression’. Given the numerous criteria suggested, the test developers met and deliberated on the details of the scale. It resulted in the merging of a number of criteria to form a more manageable descriptor of the competencies of the graduating students. ‘Maturity of thought’, ‘knowledge’, ‘problem-solving’, ‘critical-thinking skills’, ‘sense’ and all cognitive elements contributing to fulfilment of the task were categorised under one entity and labelled as ‘Contribution to Task’ and ‘accuracy of language’, ‘clarity of expression’, ‘planning and organisation’, ‘cohesion’, ‘vocabulary’, ‘grammar’ and ‘stance’ were categorised as aspects of language and writing under the category of ‘Language and Organisation’. Figure 2 shows the process for the development of the

graduating students' workplace written assessment scale involving collaborative efforts of the test developers and the workplace professionals.

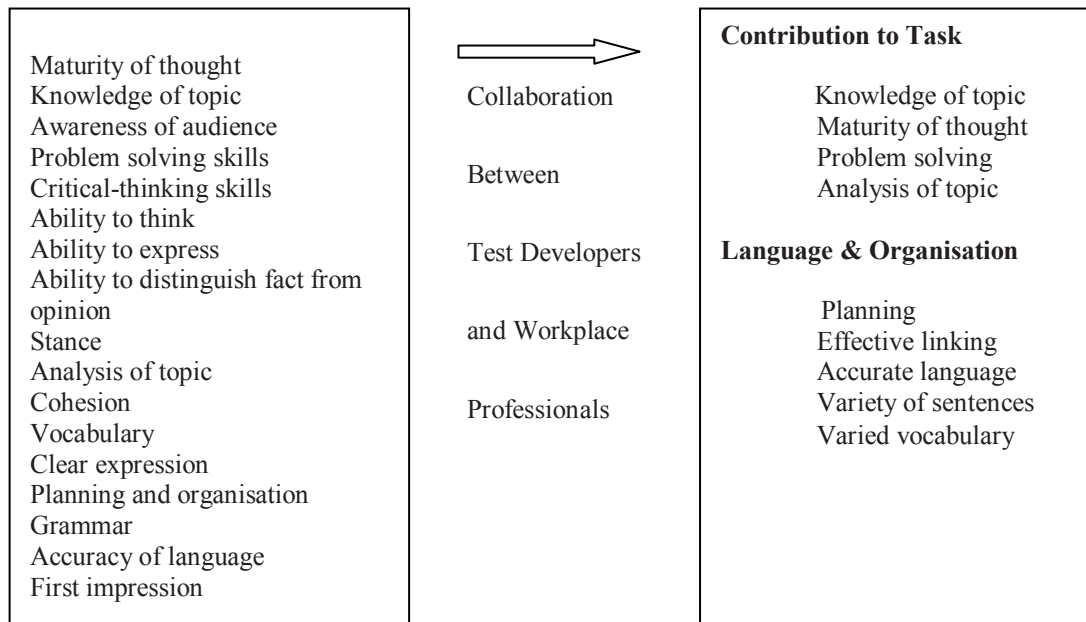


Figure 3: Development of Graduating Students' Workplace Written Assessment Scale

In Phase Three, the draft rating scale generated in Phase Two was submitted to a validation process. The validation process similarly involved the collaboration between the test developers and workplace professionals in which discussion, clarification and feedback on the draft rating scale were obtained. Most workplace professionals generally agree with the levels of proficiencies and descriptors for the different levels with some minor refinements to be made to the scale. This was then followed by Phase Four which is the final stage, involving the construction of the final, refined rating scale.

4. Conclusion

The study has shown that while the language element remains an assessment criterion in assessing graduating students' workplace written communicative competence, soft skills such critical-thinking, problem-solving and offer of solution skills, knowledge of topic, ability to distinguish fact from opinion and first impressions are highly valued qualities that discriminate a successful job seeker from the less successful. Had the test developers not collaborate with the workplace professionals and had they not make inroads into discovering the needs, expectations and demands of the workplace environments their rating scale would not have managed to accurately measure the skills and abilities expected of graduating

students. As one professional pointed out, he looked at the candidate as one of a ‘whole package’ with language being the vehicle for effective performance of tasks at the workplace. The written assessment rating scale discussed in this paper is thus an example of how viewpoints of both test developers and workplace professionals can be operationalised.

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