CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

School-made tests are often constructed without giving much thought for their validity and reliability. Such tests may not be accurate yardsticks to measure the competency in the subject matter. However, in Malaysia, the education system stresses on academic achievement and students are required to sit for public examinations. When preparing to sit for such examinations, students should be able to forecast their ranking by the results of the school tests. In this way, students would be able to work on their weaknesses and improve their scores. Thus, school-made tests should be valid and reliable to allow such comparability.

The English Language syllabus of the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah, KBSM) is primarily communicative. Oller (1979) claims that most of the time teaching English through the communicative curriculum poses problems in language testing. He says that the concentration on the syllabus specifications is too great. Teachers tend to aim to complete the prescribed syllabus before a test is given. As such, students may not have mastered the language before being tested. Thus when the post Malaysian Certificate of Education (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia, SPM) students enter the English Language classes at the Centre of Preparatory Education (Pusat Pendidikan Persediaan, PPP), they find the classes very stressful. This is because the English Language classes focus on the receptive and
productive language skills, namely listening, reading, speaking and writing. The anxiety they feel is a product of their past English language experiences in the secondary school situation. To add to this anxiety, the medium of instruction at PPP is English. Most students find it difficult to express their ideas in English in the other subjects as well. Therefore, mastery in the English Language is crucial in order for the students to excel in their studies at PPP as competence is the key to productivity.

Such feeling of anxiety has caused the students' affective filter to be overactive and inhibits the fluency of ideas and production of language which they have internalised in varying degrees. To defuse this anxiety, students are streamed according to their language ability. This is to ensure the classes are carried out in a conducive and non-threatening environment to build up confidence and encourage a positive attitude towards language production. Therefore, all students who register at the PPP Training Centre, are required to sit for an English Placement Test (EPT) to gauge their entry level for the language.

**ENGLISH PLACEMENT TEST**

In the process of teaching and learning, diagnostic tests have two purposes, i.e. to assess a student's knowledge and skills at a particular point of time and to discover the reasons for his weakness in the subject for remedial (Abu Bakar Nordin, 1986). In this research, the former is focussed. As a result of this test, students will be ranked in ascending order and will be divided into classes of 20 which means the first 20 students will be in one class and the next 20 will be in another class and so on.
The EPT Form I (Appendix A) was designed by a group of teachers who were teaching the English programme at the PPP Training Centre. This test was adapted from the Comprehensive English Language Test for Learners of English (CELT) – Form A, 1986 by Harris, D. P. and Palmer, L. A. Although this test was adapted from an existing English test, the reliability is doubted as it is used on the post SPM students. This EPT Form I is attached in Appendix A. A parallel test was developed by the researcher for retesting. This is EPT Form II which is attached in Appendix B.

Tests, at school or college level, are largely decentralised, that is these tests are developed by the subject teachers as mentioned earlier. Every institution plans and administers its own programme. Although the teachers involved may be very experienced, the reliability of the tests is questionable. An old saying in education is that the single best way to evaluate teachers is to look at the tests they give. Good tests and measures are the foundation of good teaching. The more adaptable and competent one is in measuring student knowledge and performance, the better one’s teaching will be. Skill in constructing and using a variety of measurement methods will greatly increase the overall effect as a teacher. If for every test, the reliability is determined, then we can bravely say that the development of tests has reached its height in professionalism.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To meet the objectives of the study, which is to investigate the reliability of the EPT, the following questions were constructed as a guide:

1. Does EPT Form I have high correlation with EPT Form II?

   (a) Does the Listening Section of EPT Form I have a high correlation with
the same section of EPT Form II?

(i) Do the parts of the Listening Section of EPT Form I correlate with the corresponding parts of the same section of EPT Form II?

(b) Does the Structure Section of EPT Form I have a high correlation with the same section of EPT Form II?

(i) Do the parts of the Structure Section of EPT Form I correlate with the corresponding parts of the same section of EPT Form II?

(c) Does the Vocabulary Section of EPT Form I have a high correlation with the same section of EPT Form II?

(i) Do the parts of the Vocabulary Section of EPT Form I correlate with the corresponding parts of the same section of EPT Form II?

(d) Does the Writing Section of EPT Form I have a high correlation with the same section of EPT Form II?

(i) Do the questions of the Writing Section of EPT Form I correlate with the corresponding questions of the same section of EPT Form II?

2 (a) Do the four sections of EPT Form I correlate with each other?

(i) Do the 3 parts within the Listening Section of EPT Form I correlate with each other?

(ii) Do the 3 parts within the Structure Section of EPT Form I correlate with each other?

(iii) Do the 2 parts within the Vocabulary Section of EPT Form I correlate with each other?

(iv) Do the 2 questions in the Writing Section of EPT Form I correlate with each other?
(b) Do the four sections of EPT Form II correlate with each other?

(i) Do the 3 parts within the Listening Section of EPT Form II correlate with each other?

(ii) Do the 3 parts within the Structure Section of EPT Form II correlate with each other?

(iii) Do the 2 parts within the Vocabulary Section of EPT Form II correlate with each other?

(iv) Do the 2 questions in the Writing Section of EPT Form II correlate with each other?

A valid test is a reliable test, but a reliable test is not necessarily a valid test. This statement suggests that the research questions above are not sufficient to ensure that the EPT is a good test. Although the main objective is to determine the reliability of the EPT, this study would extend itself to look into the predictive validity of EPT by examining the relationship between EPT Form I and the ITM Final English Examination.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This study will show that if the EPT proves to be highly reliable, then it will be a good way to stream students according to their language ability. Teachers will find it easier to teach a class of homogenous ability by selecting appropriate materials and pedagogical methods. Students will be able to learn at a pace comfortable to all and this would help them to achieve better grades in the end of the semester's examination.

Currently, the placement test at ITM is a test of writing ability – one essay (about 150 words) out of a choice of two in an hour, both narrative in nature. Writing is only one of the skills of the English Language and testing on this area alone is not valid as it is
not testing the competence of the language as a whole but merely the competence in narrative writing. This is ironical because the English Language programme is not just a narrative writing course but a course to develop all language skills, particularly reading and writing. So, it is hoped that the EPT will replace the existing placement test at ITM.

DELIMITATIONS OF STUDY

This study only focuses on the reliability of the EPT. Although the predictive validity test was run, it is an additional piece of information to ensure that the EPT is a good test.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

As the main objective of this research is to find out the reliability of the EPT, only two terms have been identified to be defined operationally, reliability and validity. This is because there are many types of estimates for judging reliability and validity.

Reliability, according to Mehrens & Lehmann (1991), can be defined as the degree of consistency between two measures of the same thing. It is a measure of stability and equivalence through a test-retest method for this study. Given the assumption that the error is random and the two distributions have equal means and variance, the Pearson product moment correlation coefficient is a good estimate of reliability.

Meanwhile, validity refers to the appropriateness, meaningfulness and usefulness of the specific inferences made from test scores (AERA/APA/NCME, 1985). We can
make statistical inferences about performance other than that is measured. So, the
criterion-related validity is a type of validity which allows such statistical inferences to be
made empirically. In this study, when validity is discussed, it refers to predictive validity
as we are concerned with the usefulness of the test score in predicting a future
performance.