

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

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1.1 Background of the Study

A language test is a set of questions, exercises, or practical activities to measure someone's skill, ability, or knowledge in a certain language (Longman Dictionary, 2001). A test can have a very important role in language teaching programs. It is used to measure learners' mastery of the target language. The result of the language test can serve different functions for language teaching programs. It can be used to help administrators and teachers to make program level decisions. The decisions include how much skill, ability and knowledge that students have, and which class the students should belong to. It can also be used to help teachers to make classroom level decisions. The decisions are about who achieves the most in the class or who achieves the least in the class.

The focus of this thesis is about tests used to help administrators to make program level decision, or *Placement Test*. A placement test is a test which is used to reveal the knowledge or skill that students have so that they can be grouped together in the same ability levels (Brown, 1996). The benefit of conducting a placement test is that the classes will contain students with relatively the same ability levels so that teachers can focus on the problems and learning points for the level of the students. Therefore, a placement test must be specifically related to a given language instruction program, so that it efficiently separates the students into the levels that they should belong to.

Unfortunately, many language courses still do not take the placement test seriously. Some courses even use the language proficiency test or the Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) as the placement test. TOEFL may be a popular language test used worldwide; however, the question as far as a placement is concerned is whether TOEFL is valid for the language course's programs and how the language course will divide the students' levels with TOEFL scores. If the language course gives TOEFL materials to the students, TOEFL test may be valid but if the given material is general English, there surely is a mismatch between what TOEFL measures and what the course teaches the learners. Brown (1996:13) has warned that if there is a mismatch between the placement test and what is taught in a program, the danger is that the groupings of similar ability levels will not simply occur. As a result, teachers will have difficulties in focussing the problems and the learning points because some students may be weak in a certain skill while some others are not. Some students may be weak in tenses while some others may not. Thus, the writer believes that a more specific placement test is needed.

From the writer's experience in teaching students in a language course "X", he often found that students did not belong to the proper level. It is because they are tested only for their ability in grammar, while the focus of the programme is not only teaching grammar to the students, but also teaching other language skills like listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The test used as the placement test is only a multiple choice test which includes only grammar and reading comprehension questions. As a result, for some language skills like grammar and reading, the students could understand the subject that he was going to teach even

before he started to teach. However, in other linguistic skills, like listening and speaking, the same students perform very poorly. This kind of placement will of course cause confusion to the teacher. This opinion is also confirmed by the director of the language center, who said that the test has never been subjected to any content validation.

More interestingly, there seems to be a rare effort in trying to see whether a test, a placement test, is valid or not. It can be seen through the scarcity of studies analysing the validity of placement tests. It is very difficult to find a thesis about a language test. Theses concerning content validation of tests in Surabaya are even more difficult to find, not even in language testing journals. Thus, against the backdrop of the two conditions above, the writer proposes a study on the content validity of a placement test of language course "X" at a university in Surabaya.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The writer is interested in analysing the content validity of a placement test used at language center "X" at one of the universities in Surabaya. He tries to answer the following question:

To what extent do the items on the placement test at language center "X" represent the contents of the lessons?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The focus of this study is to determine the extent to which the items on the placement test at language center “X” represent the contents of the lessons.

1.4 Significance of the Study

By showing the content validity of the placement test, The writer hopes that this study will be useful for the language center “X” as an assessment so that they are aware of the content validity of the test and able to develop the quality of the placement test. He also hopes that this study will help other language centers in generating valid placement tests.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study

The scope of this study is about the content validity of the placement test of a formal language course “X” at one of the universities in Surabaya. The writer limited the analysis only on the materials of level 1 and 2 because those are the materials which are covered the most by the placement test. Moreover, the materials of level 3, 4, and 5 are mostly domain specific.

There are some limitations to this study:

1. The instrument (questionnaires) given to the experts did not undergo a pilot stage.
2. The experts were not given the complete lesson materials of the language program; rather, they were given only overall

descriptions about the materials, which include lesson objectives and learning tasks.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

This study is based upon some theories that include the types of tests based on the function and types of validity. In order to give an overview, each of them is discussed briefly.

1.6.1 Placement Test

Hughes (1989) states that placement tests, as their name suggests, are intended to provide information which will help to place students at the stage of the teaching program most appropriate to their abilities. Brown (2004) also adds that a placement test usually includes a sampling of the material to be covered in the various courses in a curriculum.

1.6.2 Test Validity

According to Brown (1996), validity is an important issue to be considered in constructing a test. A test may be consistent or reliable, but it does not guarantee that it will give a beneficial result when it is applied to a particular purpose. He also defined *test validity* as the degree to which a test measures what it claims to be measuring. There are three main types of validity of a test that teachers may want to establish, namely, construct validity, criterion-related validity, and content validity.

According to Brown (1996), construct validity is used to measure the appropriateness of a test to suit the students psychological construct. A psychological construct is an attribute, proficiency, ability or skill defined in psychological theories. The second type of validity is criterion-related validity. From the name 'criterion-related', it can be seen clearly that this type of validity compares a test to a criterion. The criterion is a test which is a well-established measure of a construct/something to be tested. The third type of validity is content validity. "A test is said to have content validity if its content constitutes a representative sample of the language skills, structures, etc. with which it is meant to be concerned" (Hughes, 1989, pp. 22). In other words, content validity is the decision whether a test is a representative sample of the content of whatever being measured by the test.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

In order to help the readers to understand what is being discussed in this study, the writer will give some definition of key terms as the following:

1.7.1 Content validity: content validity is a conceptual or non-statistical validity based on a systematic analysis of the test content to determine whether it includes an adequate sample of the target domain to be measured. An adequate sample involves ensuring that all major aspects are covered and in suitable proportions. It may require making reference not only to the content of the test in terms of linguistic skills, but also in terms of conceptual content and the candidates' test responses (Davies, 1999).

- 1.7.2 Placement test: A placement test is a test which is used to reveal the knowledge or skill that students have so that they can be grouped together in the same ability levels. (Brown, 1996).
- 1.7.3 Language center: Language center is a place or a building which is used for the process of learning and teaching language. (Longman Dictionary, 2001)
- 1.7.4 Panel of experts: Panel of experts are those who can be considered as expert in the field of study; in this thesis, they are an experienced teacher from “language center X” and a language testing expert.

1.8 Organization of the Study

This thesis is divided in to five chapters as follows, the first chapter of this study is the introduction that consists of background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, scope and limitation, definition of key term, and organization of the study. The second chapter is about the review of related literature that consists of the review of underlying theories and the review of related studies. The third chapter will describe the research methodology that includes the research approach, source of data, instrument, data collection procedure, and data analysis. The fourth chapter will present the findings of the research, and the fifth chapter will conclude the result of the research.