

The 4-Skill English Language Test in the Singapore Education System

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ABSTRACT

Singapore's language identity is unique in that there are four official languages, English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil, with English as the working language. Singapore's bilingual policy in a culturally blended environment means that students entering our education system have a range of ability in speaking, listening, reading and writing English. The standard of English Language as the nation's working language and medium of instruction in schools is at the standard of a first language level. The national curriculum aims for our students to communicate in internationally acceptable English.

This paper examines the use of the 4-skill English Language tests for Grade 10 students in two different streams, the GCE O-Level and the GCE Normal (Technical) streams to show how assessment is done to achieve the learner outcomes in an education system where students are required to learn at least two languages and come from different home language backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

It is well known that Singapore has four official languages. What may be lesser known is that the ethnic and cultural diversity in the country is complex. For instance, the official mother tongue language of the Chinese in schools is Mandarin while the language spoken at home could be English, Mandarin or one of a number of Chinese dialects that include, but not exhaustively, Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese, Hakka, Hokchiu and Shanghainese. For the Indian community, languages used in the community include languages such as Tamil, Hindi, Panjabi, Gujarati, Bengali and Urdu.

English is one of the official languages and is the official working language and the language of instruction. It is the language that students use regardless of ethnic background.

This paper will provide a brief overview of the language landscape in Singapore homes and present the aims of the English Language curriculum and the rationale for the four-skill English Language test in the Singapore education system. Details of the GCE O-Level and GCE Normal (Technical)¹ Level writing, speaking, reading and listening tests will be provided in our discussion of validity issues.

¹ Secondary school students sit the GCE O-Level and GCE Normal (Technical) Level examinations at the end of four years of study in secondary school. The two examinations place students into the next course of study according to their results. GCE O-Level students generally go on to polytechnic or pre-university education. The GCE Normal (Technical) curriculum prepares students for a technical-vocational education at the Institute of Technical Education.

LANGUAGE MOST FREQUENTLY SPOKEN AT HOME

While English is the language of instruction and taught as a subject, the proportion of students using English at home varies by ethnic group and age group.

From the 2010 census, English as the most frequently spoken language at home for the different groups [between the ages of 5 and 85 (and over)], are as follows:

- Chinese: 32.6%
- Malays: 17%
- Indians: 41.6%

By age group, the statistics vary, with generally an upward trend for younger Chinese and Malays. The Indian community has a generally high percentage of between 48 to 55% for young Indians from age 5 to 24.

Table 1: English as the Most Frequently Spoken Language at Home by Age Group (ages 5 to 29)

Age Group (Years)	Chinese	Malays	Indians
5 - 9	55.0%	27.9%	48.6%
10 - 14	49.2%	24.0%	52.3%
15 - 19	44.3%	18.9%	54.7%
20 - 24	36.7%	16.8%	49.4%
25 - 29	28.7%	16.3%	37.9%

From data given in *Census of Population 2010*

Note: Data exclude persons who are unable to speak, and those in one-person households and households comprising only unrelated persons.

The language background of students in the school system will be made up of the group familiar with English, the language of instruction, and the group which speaks one of the other official languages or another language. The languages spoken other than English are diverse. The 2010 census record the Chinese community (aged 5 to 85 and over) as having 47.8% speaking Mandarin most frequently at home, 19.2% speaking one of the Chinese dialects and 0.4% speaking other languages. For the Indian community, the mix comprised Tamil (36.7%), Malay (7.9%), other Indian languages (13.2%) and other languages (0.6%). The Malay community was less diverse, with 82.7% speaking Malay most frequently at home and 0.3% speaking other languages.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

An underlying principle in the development of the English Language syllabus is the importance of equipping students, notwithstanding home language background, with a proficiency in the English Language to enable them “to

access, process and keep abreast of information, and to engage with the wider and more diverse communities outside of Singapore” (English Language Syllabus 2010).

This command of the English Language encompasses the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing of internationally acceptable English for good engagement with the communities within and outside of Singapore.

The syllabus aims of the English Language syllabus are that, by the end of secondary education, students will be able to communicate effectively in English as a result of their development in three areas:

1. **Listen, read and view** critically and with accuracy, understanding and appreciation a wide range of literary and informational/functional texts from print and non-print sources.
2. **Speak, write and represent** in internationally acceptable English (Standard English)² that is grammatical, fluent, mutually intelligible and appropriate for different purposes, audiences, contexts and cultures.
3. **Understand and use internationally acceptable English (Standard English)** grammar and vocabulary accurately and appropriately as well as understand how speakers/writers put words together and use language to communicate meaning and achieve impact.

With the diverse language background of learners, teachers are advised through the syllabus that the achievement of the Learner Outcomes within each year level does depend on the entry profile, needs and abilities of students. Teachers are also provided with guidelines on how to differentiate instruction and assessment to cater to the needs of the learners.

GCE O-LEVEL AND GCE NORMAL (TECHNICAL) LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXAMINATIONS

As placement tests, the GCE O-Level examinations place eligible students in post-secondary institutions such as polytechnics and junior colleges³ where students can proceed to university thereafter, whereas the Normal (Technical) examinations place the students in technical institutions for vocational training. While the demands of the English Language examination syllabuses are different for these two cohorts of students, the overarching aims of the teaching syllabus, as mentioned above, are the same. Table 2 illustrates.

From Table 2, it can be seen that teaching and assessing of students’ writing, reading, listening and speaking abilities regardless of the cohort they are in articulate the importance Singapore places on nurturing a citizenry competent in using internationally acceptable English. As part of Singapore’s language planning and policy, English is established as the country’s First Language even though it is not our mother tongue because it is an “instrumental

² “Internationally acceptable English that is grammatical, fluent and appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture refers to the formal register of English used in different parts of the world, that is, Standard English.”(English Language Syllabus 2010)

³ In junior colleges, students undergo pre-university education and sit the GCE A-Level examinations.

language by virtue of the socio-economic advantages it affords” (Stroud and Wee,2010).

Table 2: Articulating Construct Representation via Assessment Objectives and Schemes of Assessment

Aims of the Teaching Syllabus	GCE O-Level English Language				GCE Normal (Technical) -Level English Language																																																			
	Assessment Objectives	Scheme of Assessment			Assessment Objectives	Scheme of Assessment																																																		
<p>1. Listen, read and view critically and with accuracy, understanding and appreciation, a wide range of literary and informational/functional texts from print and non-print sources.</p> <p>2. Speak, write and represent in internationally acceptable English (Standard English) that is grammatical, fluent, mutually intelligible and appropriate for different purposes, audiences, contexts and cultures.</p> <p>3. Understand and use internationally acceptable English (Standard English) grammar and vocabulary accurately and appropriately as well as understand how speakers/writers put words together and use language to communicate meaning and achieve impact.</p>	<p>(i) speak and write in internationally acceptable English</p> <p>(ii) respond, in speech or writing, to a variety of written, spoken and visual texts</p> <p>(iii) speak, read aloud and write to suit purpose, audience and context</p> <p>(iv) speak and write using appropriate register and tone</p> <p>(v) speak and write clearly, effectively, relevantly and coherently</p> <p>(vi) plan, organise and show development of ideas</p> <p>(vii) use varied sentence structures and a wide and appropriate vocabulary with clarity and precision</p> <p>(viii) use correct grammar, punctuation and spelling</p> <p>(ix) show understanding of a variety of written, spoken and visual texts at the literal, inferential and evaluative levels</p> <p>(x) show understanding of how use of language achieves purpose and impact</p> <p>(xi) identify main ideas and details in written, spoken and visual texts</p> <p>(xii) synthesise, summarise and organise information</p> <p>(xiii) read aloud a given text with accurate pronunciation and clear articulation</p> <p>(xiv) read aloud a given text fluently with appropriate variations in voice qualities, i.e. pace, volume, tone and stress.</p>	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Paper Description</th> <th>Marks</th> <th>Weighting (%)</th> <th>Duration</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td> 1: Writing <u>Section A:</u> Editing Candidates identify and edit grammatical errors in a short written text. 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While testing the four skills may be motivated by socio-political considerations, it also ensures that we achieve the content aspect of construct validity, which Messick (1996) defines as “evidence of content relevance as well as representativeness as well as technical quality (e.g. appropriate reading level, unambiguous phrasing etc).”

CONTENT ASPECT OF CONSTRUCT VALIDITY

In his definition of the content aspect of construct validity, Messick (1996) indicated that the technical quality of items contributes to the content aspect of construct validity. The sample items from the GCE O-Level and GCE Normal (Technical) tests below illustrate the considerations in item design to achieve the content aspect of construct validity and to elicit evidence of students' ability to use internationally acceptable English.

Assessing Listening

Students listen to recordings of texts and respond to items. To minimise construct irrelevant difficulty introduced by foreign accents, such as American, British or Australian accents which may be unfamiliar to students, Standard English delivered in Singaporean accent is spoken in the recorded texts. Using an accent which is familiar to and widely accepted by Singaporeans would be fair to students in multi-cultural Singapore.

In the design of the items, care is taken to ensure that no lengthy written responses are required as writing is not a construct assessed. Using item types such as multiple-choice questions, matching items and items requiring short answers in both the O-Level and Normal (Technical) examinations reduces the need for extensive writing, thereby minimising interference with the listening construct assessed.

In the past, listening was not assessed in the O-Level examinations, which could cause teachers to give less attention to the teaching of listening skills, although it is within the teaching syllabuses. Now that it is assessed in the national examinations, it has encouraged teachers to dedicate the rightful attention and resources to the development of this skill in students. The inclusion of listening as an examinable skill has fostered positive washback on teaching and learning. Samples of listening tasks are at Annex A.

Assessing Reading

To achieve construct representation, the O-Level and Normal (Technical) reading comprehension passages and items are designed to elicit evidence of reading comprehension skills, i.e. comprehension of literal, inferential and evaluative meaning, expected of the respective cohort.

As Normal (Technical) students are weaker in their language abilities, evidence of understanding is mostly elicited through items which do not require extensive writing, such as matching items, selection items, thus reducing interference with the construct measured (see Annex B). However, as the GCE examination is a placement examination, there are a couple of items which require a slightly longer response to enable discrimination of students' abilities.

Normal (Technical) students are likely to engage in vocational training in their next level of study, where the learning is more hands-on and the educational materials more information-providing in nature. To assess their readiness to understand such texts, informational passages are used in the Normal (Technical) Reading Comprehension test.

In contrast, the purpose of the O-level examinations is for placement of students eligible for pre-university education. In alignment with the syllabus intent of exposing these academically stronger students to a greater variety of text types, informational and literary texts are assessed (see Annex B), thus achieving construct representation, which contributes to construct validity.

Assessing Speaking

The Spoken Interaction component assesses the ability to engage in conversation using a photo stimulus for the O-Level students and a video stimulus for the Normal (Technical) students (see Annex C). The photos and videos used are based on contexts accessible to students so as to cater to students from different social and cultural backgrounds. This contributes towards reducing construct irrelevant difficulty, a threat to validity.

As the use of video stimulus is a more recent development in our national examinations than the use of photos, the focus of this segment will discuss the considerations in the task design of the video stimulus to minimise construct irrelevant difficulty of the assessment.

Subtitles are not provided in the videos as this is not a reading test, thus minimising interference with the construct assessed. Students are not required to listen to or demonstrate understanding of the spoken text, if any, in the videos as listening and comprehension are not assessed. To avoid interference from listening, the videos have minimal or no spoken texts. Spoken texts, if present, are not key to understanding the videos and not assessed.

Assessing Writing

Assessing the ability to write in internationally acceptable English includes eliciting evidence which support inferences made about the ability to write in a way that suits purpose, audience and context.

Compared to the O-Level examination, Normal (Technical) students are given more scaffolding in order to produce a written piece of about 80 words (see Annex E). In the task for O-Level students in Annex D, they are to utilise information from a visual text to address task requirements in a piece of writing of at least 250 words. To minimise construct irrelevant difficulty, the visuals avoid the culturally sensitive, and are accompanied by explanatory texts so that students do not need to rely solely on making sense of the visuals in order to utilise the information.

Besides the abovementioned task, O-level students are also required to write a continuous piece of at least 350 words by selecting one of four given topics. The four topics are designed to elicit text types other than the narrative, with questions such as *“Time flies...”*, *“Do you use your time wisely?”*, *“Are there any ways in which a teenager can contribute to the development of a civic-minded society?”*

In the early stages of conceptualising this O-Level Writing task, it was intended that the text types vary year on year so as to motivate teachers to teach all the text types in the syllabus instead of just focusing on a few, in particular narratives. Informal feedback from the ground suggests that our task design intent has resulted in positive washback, which is “an instance of the consequential aspect of construct validity” (Messick, 1996).

In comparison, there is greater task support in the writing tasks meant for the Normal (Technical) students (see Annex E). This enables them to produce writing that would be evidential of their writing ability. While students are required to understand the context in which the task is situated, interference from reading comprehension is minimised by establishing the context and task requirements as succinctly as possible using simpler language suitable for these academically weaker students.

CONCLUSION

The 4-skill English language Test pushes the curriculum agenda of having standards in the four skills that meet the requisite level of command of the English Language to “access, process and keep abreast of information and to engage with the wider and more diverse communities outside Singapore” (English Language Syllabus 2010).

The GCE O-Level English Language examination is recognised for application to post-secondary courses around the world, and this suggests confidence in the validity of the test scores of this four-skill test.

Feedback from Singapore’s post-secondary institutions – the Institute of Technical Education, the polytechnics and junior colleges – are obtained at every review of the various English Language syllabuses for information to look back on whether the aims of the syllabuses are met and the learners can engage well with their course of learning after the Normal (Technical) and O-Level courses; and to look forward in the planning of revised English language syllabuses so that language development in the education system would continue to prepare learners to have a level of command of the language that is needed in the country.

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3. Messick, S (1996), "Validity and Washback in Language Testing", May, Research Report, Educational Testing Services, Princeton, New Jersey, www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/RR-96-17.pdf
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Sample Listening question for GCE Normal(Technical) students

Dialogue 3

3 Which picture shows Amy's choice of arts festival event?

A



B



C



D



[1]

Sample Listening question for GCE O-Level students

You will hear recording about holiday jobs. For Question 13, choose from the list (A-F) four pieces of advice which are stated or implied in the recording.

Put a tick (✓) for each piece of advice. No marks will be awarded if you tick more than four pieces of advice.

You will hear the recording **twice**.

		Stated / Implied in the text
A	Look for work before the end of the school year.	[.....]
B	Try to get a job using skills you already have.	[.....]
C	Many hotels have extra jobs available in the summer.	[.....]
D	It is possible to find work on farms.	[.....]
E	Registering with a recruitment agency is the best way to look for work.	[.....]
F	Holiday jobs can be hard but enjoyable.	[.....]

[Total: 4]

Annex B

Sample Reading Comprehension question for GCE Normal (Technical) students

For Questions 54 and 55, read the information under the sub-heading ‘Competitive cycling’.

54 Choose the piece of advice which summarises what each expert says about competitive cycling. Write the correct letter A–E next to the name of each expert. You will not need to use all of the options provided.

Advice	
A	You must check that your bike is in good condition.
B	You must train regularly to build up the power you need.
C	The way you think will affect whether you win or lose.
D	Make sure you enter a competition that’s right for your level.
E	It’s important to find out what the right diet is for your needs.

- (i) Stella Lawson
- (ii) Carol Stevens
- (iii) Sarah Craig

[3]

Sample Reading Comprehension question for GCE O-Level students

<p>Paragraph 4 begins ‘From this daylight nightmare I was awakened ...’</p> <p>What is unusual and effective about the phrase ‘daylight nightmare’?</p> <p>.....</p> <p>...</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>[2]</p>

Sample Speaking Task for GCE O-Level students



Study the picture.

PART 2 – SPOKEN INTERACTION

3

Examiners should use all the prompts to engage candidates in a discussion. Examiners should also pursue any points which the candidate may mention.

- (a) How do you feel about the elderly taking part in the activity in the picture?
- (b) What kinds of activities would appeal to the elderly in your community?
- (c) Some people say, “Life is what you make it to be and should not depend on your age.” Do you agree?

Sample Speaking Task for GCE Normal (Technical)-Level students

Candidates watch a short video clip and are then asked the following prompts.

- (a) If you were one of the swimmers in this competition, how would you feel?
- (b) Tell me about a sports competition you have taken part in or have watched.
- (c) Do you think people should only take part in sport for fun? Why, or why not?

Sample of GCE O-Level Writing Task

You are advised to write between 250 and 350 words for this section.

You should look at the printout of a webpage on page 3, study the information carefully and plan your answer before beginning to write.

Your 16-year-old cousin and your elderly aunt and uncle live in London. They have seen this webpage on a Singapore website and have decided to pay a visit to Singapore. They will stay at the Fullerton Hotel and visit some of the places of interest nearby.


Write a letter to your cousin suggesting:

- two places of interest shown in the webpage printout that you might enjoy visiting together
- two places other than those shown in the printout that may interest them
- why you think they will enjoy visiting the four places you have chosen.


Write your letter in clear, accurate English and in a welcoming, enthusiastic tone, to encourage your cousin to look forward to the visit.

You should use your own words as much as possible.

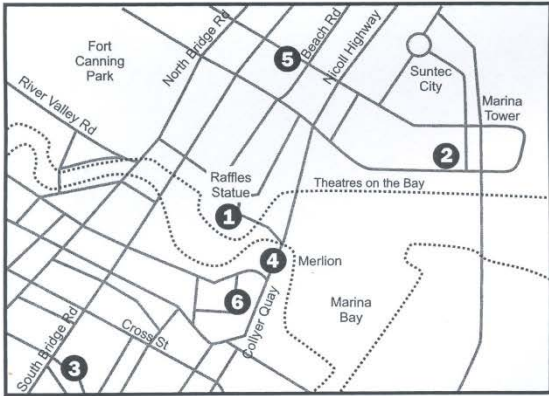
Guide to Destinations in and around Marina Bay, Singapore




1 ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM
This museum's five galleries tell the history of the wider Asian region and offer a fascinating insight into Singapore's cultural roots. For more information click [here](#).




2 KENKO REFLEXOLOGY AND SPA
Popping your feet into a pool of "doctor fish" and having them nibble away at your dead skin will boost circulation. For more information click [here](#).




6 ONE ON THE BUND
On the landmark Clifford Pier is One on the Bund, a restaurant for Shanghaiese cuisine, such as crispy lamb ribs and egg-white fried rice. For more information click [here](#).






4 FULLERTON HOTEL
On the edge of Marina Bay is this elegant, five-star hotel. For more information click [here](#).



5 AH TENG'S BAKERY
Located on the corner of the Raffles Hotel, Ah Teng is a modern bakery rooted in tradition, serving such delicacies as pandan chiffon cake, sugar biscuits and pies. For more information click [here](#).



3 THE HILL
An alternative to the mega-malls of Orchard Road is The Hill, a district of independent fashion stores among the skyscrapers of the financial district. For more information click [here](#).

Sample of GCE Normal (Technical)-Level Writing Task

Read the information in the advertisement below about a job at the *All You Need Supermarket* and complete the tasks in Part 1 and Part 2.

Looking for a Job?	
Job Title	: Retail Assistant
Company Name	: <i>All You Need Supermarket</i>
Company Sector	: Retail
Pay	: S\$5 per hour
Job Description	
<p><i>All You Need Supermarket</i> requires a Retail Assistant for our new store. You will be required to maintain stock in one of the store's many departments, assist customers with their enquiries and operate the checkout counters. A comprehensive training programme will be provided.</p> <p>We are looking for outgoing, hardworking and reliable applicants. Hours are flexible but a minimum of 10 hours per week is required. The post would be suitable for a school/college student.</p> <p>If you would like to join our happy and dedicated staff, please fill in our job application form and send a letter of application to Miss Tracy Tang, Head of Human Resources at <i>All You Need Supermarket</i>.</p>	

ALL YOU NEED SUPERMARKET	
JOB APPLICATION FORM	
N.B. This form must be completed in full. If some details are omitted, the company reserves the right to reject the application.	
Position Applied for:	*Part-time / Full-time
Location of Branch:	
Particulars of Applicant	
Name of Applicant:	NRIC No.:
Home Address:	Age:
Contact No.:	Date of Birth (DD/MM/YYYY):

Please provide the following information.	
1.	State the days you are available for work:
2.	State the hours you are able to work:
3.	(i) Have you undergone any surgical procedures in the last 12 months? *Yes / No
	(ii) If the answer to 3(i) above is 'Yes', please give details below:
4.	State the date you can start work:

N.B. Where an asterisk* is used or alternative answers are provided, cross out the word(s) that do not apply. **DO NOT** use any other method of indicating your answer.

Now write your letter of application to Miss Tracy Tang, Head of Human Resources at *All You Need Supermarket*. In your letter, explain why you think you would be suited to the job and state any relevant skills or previous work experience you may have.

You should use the information on page 2 and include ideas of your own. You are advised to write in complete sentences and in paragraphs.

Begin your letter with 'Dear Miss Tang'. You should write **about 80 words**.

