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## DESIGNING LANGUAGE TESTS

### The Test of Interactive English

By Gronia de Verdon Cooney

Teachers know about tests – they are part of their arsenal. Some teachers know more than others, but then, some teachers are more attack-minded than others. They can call up tests as reinforcements against learners who refuse to toe the line, or keep them in reserve as a hidden threat, an ambush to be unleashed on the recalcitrant. Friday tests, unit tests, end of term tests – these are the side-arms of the teacher's kit, often supplied primed and ready for use by the publishers, while the big guns are provided by the monumental Examination Boards. Most students, faced with an internationally recognised, universally available language examination, have no trouble identifying with the six hundred: *Their's (sic) not to reason why, Their's but to do and die, Into the valley of Death ...* If you think this is going too far, ask yourself why we talk about a 'battery of tests'.

Tests, of course, come in many shapes and sizes. **Placement** tests do just what the name asserts: they enable administrators to group students in more or less appropriate classes. They are frequently fairly blunt instruments, but this does little harm because learners can usually be moved very quickly to a more suitable group if necessary. All a placement test does is string students out like birds on a telephone wire, some closer together and some farther apart. In itself, it tells us relatively little about students as individuals.

To find out about students' strengths and weaknesses, we need a **diagnostic** test. This tells us what the learners can, and more importantly for the teacher, can't do. Placement tests rarely have a diagnostic function; one exception is the *Oxford Placement Test*.

Familiar to many teachers is the **achievement** test, taken on Fridays, or as a progress test after five units, or some such interval. This kind of test measures whether the students have learned what the teacher has been teaching, or, more to the point, whether the learners can reproduce it accurately enough to satisfy

the teacher that they know it, which, as we all know, is not always the same thing.

Then there is the **proficiency** test, which extrapolates from a sample of language the learners' ability to use the language. These tests are usually independent of particular courses; they ask not '*How well can the students remember the contents of book x?*' but rather '*How well have the students mastered the systems of the language?*' – although it is sometimes hard to differentiate between these two questions!

The final category of test types is the **performance** test, which asks '*What can we see and hear the students do with the language in a given situation?*' Workplace related tests usually fall into this category.

When teachers have to write tests, they are usually progress or achievement tests for a particular class. The teacher knows all the students individually and any anomalies in the final mark can be massaged by using continuous assessment or discretionary marking. Few teachers have the chance – or even desire – to be involved in designing a test to be available on a national level for large numbers of unknown students. This is what I want to talk about now.

In 1995 the Advisory Council for English Language Schools in Ireland started a test development project. The stated aim was to design a test that would be available to all students taking EFL courses in Ireland, encourage students to interact with the local environment, and encourage 'best practice' in classroom teaching methods; and that would facilitate both learner autonomy and lifelong learning as promulgated by the Council of Europe. For six months after the initial meeting (a weekend seminar with Richard West) the discussion raged. Hotly debated questions included:



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- *Who is the test for? Young learners? Teenagers? Adults? University students?*
- *How long does it take?*
- *What age group is it suitable for?*
- *How many sub-test are there? How many 'papers'?*
- *Are there multiple choice questions?*
- *Are there reading and listening comprehension questions?*
- *How do we test grammar?*
- *How many levels does the test discriminate?*
- *Are there separate tests at Beginner, Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced levels?*
- *Can we have separate versions for ESP?*
- *Who writes the descriptors and marking schemes?*
- *How many test items do we need?*

Gradually it became clear that the group shared certain ideals:

- Grammar tests are bad;
- Discrete-point multiple-choice questions induce anxiety; furthermore, the examiner is always right!
- Tests don't have to be traumatic;
- Students know why they are learning English – we don't.

This realisation led to the development of a single, learner-centred, interactive, task-based, student-led test of language performance – the **Test of Interactive English (TIE)**. All candidates enter for the same test and carry out the same tasks; their result is like a rung on a ladder – their performance is assessed and the result is expressed in terms of the six bands of the CEF scale.

Most teachers nowadays seem to subscribe to a 'learning by doing' philosophy of language learning, so instead of saying that '*candidates must learn certain things*' we decided that '*learners must do certain things*' – in other words, a task-based test that is congruent with the tasks and activities of most language classrooms.

- The candidates **read** a book. This is not a set book: the candidates may choose any book of interest or relevance to their life and studies.
- Then, candidates **follow** a news story in the English language media over a short period

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of time (most students come to Ireland for less than four weeks).

These two tasks involve students in reading and listening, and they are motivated to persevere because they have chosen interesting topics.

- Finally, candidates **investigate** something that has attracted their attention, which may be local history or an Irish aspect of something they already know. This 'project' usually involves interviewing people, using research resources (libraries or internet) and any other activities that are relevant to the task in hand.

Thus the students have employed the skills of reading, listening and speaking, and recorded the results in writing in a dossier or log book which is evidence of exam preparation. We chose these tasks because these are the things students do naturally when they come to Ireland to study. We wanted the test to be relevant to the real, day-to-day lives of our potential candidates.

Now, readers who are still thinking in terms of traditional language examinations will be asking themselves how we write comprehension questions for all the books that candidates might present, or how we manage listening comprehension on all the news media. The answer, of course, is that we don't. In fact, we don't actually test listening and reading at all. It is sufficient for the purpose of the **Test of Interactive English** that the candidates have done them. What we do test is speaking and writing: the candidates talk and write about their personal responses to the materials they have prepared, with the aid of their dossiers (because we are not testing their memory but their ability to use language). While our consultants Richard West and Dave Allan have enthusiastically endorsed this decision, people more familiar with traditional tests find the TIE format somewhat radical. Students, however, love it! This brings me to a description of the test itself.

The test is in two parts – oral and written. The **Oral Test** is a 30-minute interview in which an interlocutor guides two candidates in a discussion of the materials they have prepared. Candidates are expected to interact with each other. This is another function of the dossier: it serves as a starting point for conversation. Half an hour may seem a very long time, but this was a conscious decision that has been vindicated as we



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have conducted the test in the last few years. In the first place, 12.5 minutes per candidate (allowing 5 minutes for interlocutor management talk) is not such a long time, and secondly, some candidates are so nervous at the start of the test (*into the valley of Death*) that it takes them 15 minutes to relax and start performing to the best of their ability.

The **Written Test** lasts an hour, during which candidates write two texts of approximately one page each, one on their prepared topics and the other an unprepared authentic-type text such as a letter or an article, on a topic of general interest.

In both parts of the test the emphasis is not so much on getting the answer right as on communicating effectively on topics of interest, importance or personal relevance. And how is all this marked? We were fortunate in the timing of our project because the Council of Europe had just produced *'Modern Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. A Common European Framework of Reference'*. This document became our bible, not least because it contains descriptors of 48 or so elements that are part of language ability, set out on a 6-band scale.

A large proportion of the test development process involved our selecting the criteria that we wanted to measure in the TIE. Our advisors told us that examiners could not comfortably remember more than five or six criteria, so we selected five for each part of the test (Oral and Written) of which two are common to both. These criteria are:

<b>Oral Test:</b>	Interaction Communicative Effectiveness Phonological Control
<b>Written Test:</b>	Production Task Achievement Orthographic Control
<b>Common:</b>	Accuracy of Structure and Lexis Range and Complexity of Structure and Lexis

As we trialled and piloted the test, we modified the descriptors until we were happy that they described accurately the elements of language performance that we expected from candidates at the 6 levels in the Common European Framework (A1-A2-B1-B2-C1-C2, also known as Breakthrough – Waystage – Threshold – Vantage – Effectiveness - Mastery).

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The Advisory Council, who established the **TIE**, operates under the aegis of the Department of Education and Science in Ireland, so in effect the **TIE** is run on behalf of the state education system. At the moment (autumn 2000) it is available to all students following an EL course in Ireland. It takes an average of 10-14 days to prepare, though students who are here for longer may spread the preparation over a longer period. This does not affect the outcome of the test since what is being measured is language performance, not depth of subject knowledge. Certificates are sent out about two weeks after the test date.

The easy part of designing the Test – being inventive and creative - is now behind us, and it has taken five years. Ahead of us lies the ongoing developmental work – marketing and financial planning; explaining to teachers how the test fits in with their teaching; and recruiting, training, monitoring and retraining examiners, as well as the day to day administration of actual tests. We also have to look at systems for recording tests in case of queries from students or teachers, and we need to start in-depth statistical analyses so that we can be absolutely sure that the test continues to be valid and reliable.

The original test development group has almost dissolved as the members have gone on to other things, and business management structures are being put in place. From one point of view, the 'fun' part is over; from another, the challenge is only beginning. Either way, all the people who were involved in the first five years of the Test of Interactive English can rest assured that, far from adding to the battery of tests mentioned at the beginning, they are responsible for putting the rose in the barrel of the testing rifle. English language tests will never be quite the same again.

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