

Kate McPherson

In recent years at the University of the South Pacific (USP), there has been a growing awareness of the need to provide students with English language skills support. This is a need not unique to this university - it is an issue with which numerous universities around the world are grappling. On this campus, as on others, poor writing skills and lack of grammar awareness are the problems most frequently mentioned by USP staff. In an effort to address these difficulties early on in a student's academic career, a new strategy is currently being implemented by the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT). This consists of a two-pronged approach: a diagnostic English language test, taken by all new first year students during their first week on campus, followed by tailored language support programmes.

This article focusses on the processes that we at CELT have been working through in order to implement this strategy. Three areas are briefly covered:

- the rationale for putting the test in place,
- the approach to test design,
- the follow-up options currently being considered.

Test Rationale

Currently, we have much anecdotal evidence – from the academic staff and the students themselves – concerning standards of English language competence here at the USP. From the students I work with, I am learning to appreciate the range of significant language problems which prevent these students from realising their full potential in their study programmes. However, we need to have concrete, irrefutable data to show us the true extent of these problems – both in terms of the number of students requiring assistance, and the kind of assistance they require. Having all new students take, on entry to the USP, a

diagnostic English language test is one way in which such data can be obtained. With such data available, we can plan for putting in place targeted support mechanisms; we are also in a stronger position to acquire backing for fully resourced long-term English language support.

Test Design

In the initial planning stages, we had high ideals. We wanted a test which would provide a clear picture of each student's ability in the four macro-skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, it soon became apparent that the administration of such a test to over 1000 on-campus students in an already densely-packed first week of semester would be a much bigger challenge than we were equipped to meet. We needed to compromise. The test had to provide us with an accurate measure of a student's English language competence in terms of the language requirements for university study, and we also needed to ensure that the test was relatively straight-forward, not only to administer, but also to mark.

Although it was a difficult decision to take at the time, we agreed that the testing of listening and speaking skills at this stage was just not possible. However, we are hoping to produce a test of listening skills at a later stage. Working from the scaled-down objectives for the first version of the test, our test-design procedure went ahead and a draft version of the test was piloted.

The version of the test used at the beginning of this year consisted of the following sections:

- **Reading:** three extracts from a general interest text were selected. Each extract lends itself to specific reading tasks, for example, identifying main ideas, distinguishing general from specific information,

differentiating fact from opinion, using contextual clues to understand unfamiliar vocabulary. The tasks are constructed so that only short answers are required – the student's writing skills are not the focus of attention in this component of the test.

- **Grammar:** we wanted to incorporate a separate focus on grammar in the test where control over specific grammar items could be measured. Examples of these items are:
 - the use of prepositions,
 - subject/verb agreement,
 - noun/pronoun agreement,
 - gender agreement,
 - verb forms and time reference,
 - the use of modals such as *could* and *may*,
 - the use of articles.

In order to obtain this measurement of students' grammar control, two types of cloze (gap-filling) tests were used.

- **Writing:** in order to test competence in different writing genres (and thereby obtain a more reliable writing test score), two writing tasks were used. The first task was based upon a set of statistical information, and the student was required to construct a brief description of this data. The second task was a longer personal piece requiring narrative, introspection and

justification. Again, the content for this task was clearly defined.

• Future Directions

With the tests marked and the results analysed, there are now two major challenges:

- to cater for the students achieving results below a predetermined minimum score, and
- to review the design of this test in response to feedback from the invigilators, markers and the test-takers themselves in order to work towards improved versions of the test.

In terms of test follow-up, our plan had been to work with groups of students with similar problems, following tailored programs. This proved unworkable in terms of timetabling. While some students are currently making the time to attend one-to-one sessions, this is not a viable option in the long term. An alternative approach is being sought. This involves working collaboratively with the Schools in the hope that it will be possible to timetable provision for English language support as a compulsory component of a student's study programme. We at CELT feel strongly that integrating English language development into the USP curriculum will provide the strongest form of support to our students.