

Examining English Examinations

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This article expresses concern that Secondary School Entrance English examinations in the South Pacific region are not valid tests. Doubts are expressed as to whether the examinations really do what they are supposed to do. Two main areas of concern are the type of tests emphasised in the examinations and the actual content of the tests. It is suggested that new focuses are needed in both areas. Examples are drawn from 1985 Form II and/or Secondary Entrance Examinations from Fiji, Western Samoa and Tonga. Although a small sample, it is felt that these are representative of the English examinations at this level in the region.

The main aim here is not, of course, to attempt to make any definitive pronouncements in a highly complex and ever-evolving area. It is simply to raise a few questions, to attempt to air some issues which are perhaps at least worthy of consideration. Second language teaching, learning and testing is a dynamic field. There are no definites. Linguists and those working in applied fields are still trying to discover more about the first and second language learning processes. Dialogue and discussion aimed at improving learning will surely benefit the children who we all, no doubt, would like to see given the best opportunities to succeed. Although the focus will be on Secondary Entrance examinations, many of the points raised will relate to the testing and examining of English at all levels.

Importance of English

One of the reasons for concern about the quality of English examinations is the paramount importance given to achievement in English at the Secondary Entrance level in particular. In Kiribati, for example, English and Mathematics have been the only subjects examined at this level. A child who does well in the English examination is assured of a place in secondary school. As far as most parents are concerned, this also means he/she is assured of bright prospects.

Those who score well in English examinations are said to be 'good' at English. We have to be very clear, however, as to what we mean by this. We need to ask ourselves whether the examinations actually test general ability to understand and use English. Furthermore, when we say "good at

English" we need to be clear as to which aspects of English the child has shown proficiency in.

An equally important issue is the relationship between the English tested in examinations and the future uses of English the pupils will have. Those who score highly in Entrance English examinations have a ticket to further studies. Their high scores are taken to be predictors of the ability to cope with future studies in English. In fact, English skills required in future studies are not really those which are tested. One fifth of the Form II 1985 English Examination in Western Samoa, for example, was a test of personal letter and imaginative essay writing. While the essay is a more valid test of overall English ability than the popular multiple-choice tests of grammar items, one can question the validity of using a test of personal writing as a predictor of the ability to cope with English-medium instruction in a variety of academic subjects. In doing this it is necessary to consider (a) the nature of tests, and (b) the content of the tests.

Nature of the tests

Oller (1979) points out that there are basically two categories of tests: discrete point and integrative (also sometimes known as global tests). What is discrete point test? In Oller's words it is one "that attempts to focus attention on one point of grammar at a time." (Oller, 1979, 11).

Normally, test items are one sentence in length. Often gaps are left in the sentences and multiple-choice answers are provided. Here is an example from the Tongan 1985 Advanced English Secondary Entrance Examination:

Did you _____ me in town yesterday?

- A. see
- B. saw
- C. seeing
- D. seen

(Section I, Item 13)

Part of the rationale behind this type of test is that it breaks language down into its components so that the learner's knowledge can be tested in detail. This can of course be seen as a disadvantage as much as an advantage. Integrative tests, on the other hand, seek to assess the learner's ability to

use the language as a whole. As Oller puts it, "If discrete items take language skills apart, integrative tests put it back together" (Oller, 1979, 37). Examples of such tests are dictation, cloze tests, comprehension and essay writing.

Which is better? Without going into a detailed analysis of the pros and cons of the two main types of tests, (and those falling in the continuum between two extremes), the balance does seem to fall in favour of certain integrative tests as being clearer windows through which to view the room containing a learner's overall language ability.

There is no doubt that we were aiming at building up pupils' ability to use language as a whole. When we say a pupil is "good at English", our underlying assumption is that he/she is able to understand and use the language well in communicative situations. Certain types of integrative tests have been found to measure this ability effectively. They are far more closely related to real language use than discrete point tests. As Oller further points out, they "attempt to assess a learner's capacity to use many bits all at the same time" (Oller, 1979, 37).

Oller cites two important results of research carried out on the validity of the two types of tests. Firstly, he notes that various discrete point tests correlated more highly with dictation and cloze tests * than they did with each other. Secondly, it was found that although dictation and cloze are overtly very different tasks, they correlate very highly because "both are effective devices for assessing the efficiency of the learner's developing grammatical system" (Oller, 1979, 61). **

The argument favouring integrative tests is very convincing. If it is as valid as Oller claims, then should not English examinations in the South Pacific emphasise this type of test? This is certainly worthy of serious consideration.

* Cloze tests are explained in more detail on page 123.

** For those interpreting cloze scores (assuming that the cloze tests have been constructed in the approved manner), a score of 0 — 34% is regarded as equivalent to the frustrational level of reading, 35 — 49% is equivalent to the Instructional level, and 50+% is equivalent to the Independent reading level. Confusion over these criterion levels still exists in the literature in spite of John Bormuth's monumental study designed to standardise cloze interpretation. See, for example, John R. Bormuth: "Development of Standards of Readability: Towards a Rational Criterion of Passage Performance". Final Report, Project No. 9—0234. Bureau of Research, US Office of Education (1971) — Editor.

The Form 2 or Secondary Entrance Examinations in Tonga, Western Samoa and Fiji in 1985 show more discrete point than integrative tests in the first two countries in particular. The proportion was 70 percent of marks allocated to the discrete point type of tests in both Tongan Secondary Entrance papers (Normal and Advanced), and in the Form 2 Western Samoa examination. Less than one third of the marks were therefore for integrative tests.

Paper I, the sole English language paper of the 1985 Fiji Secondary Schools' Entrance English Examination has a 60 to 40 percent bias in favour of integrative tests. Reservations can be raised about the content of even the integrative tests in this paper, however, since composition testing is the main type. In fact composition (in which are included essay and letter writing) is the most favoured form of integrative test used in the papers looked at. It forms 20 percent of the Western Samoa paper, 10 percent of the Advanced Tongan Entrance Examination paper, 40 percent of Paper I of the Fiji Entrance Examination and 20 percent of Paper II of the same Examination.

Such tests are very easy to set but difficult to mark. In addition, pupils can avoid using language we may in fact wish to test. Moreover, since essay/letter topics largely involve personal writing, there is some doubt as to whether the ever-popular traditional composition test is a really valid predictor of a pupil's ability to cope with secondary school English-medium instruction.

Alternative integrative tests which have been proven to be both reliable and valid are dictation, cloze and translation. Admittedly, there are some practical problems involved in the administration of dictation tests. However, since they have strong reliability and validity, serious consideration should be given to their use.

Cloze tests are extremely advantageous. They involve deleting, for example, every 5th, 7th and 9th word from a paragraph or longer passage. The pupil 'closes' the information gap by filling in the deleted words. Easy to set, administer and mark, cloze tests could receive much greater emphasis in English examinations.

Translation has also been found "to provide valuable information about language proficiency" (Oller, 1979, 50). In the monolingual countries of the region, such tests could also perhaps lead to improvement in the status of the vernacular languages.

Overall then, two suggestions arising from the above are that integrative tests could be given much greater emphasis in English examinations and essay questions could receive less prominence in favour of dictation, cloze and translation questions.

Content of the tests

Appropriateness of the examination content is another important aspect to look at. The main question is one of validity in the sense of whether the examinations test skills which we want them to test. We need to ask whether the examination content is closely related to pupils' future uses of English. This is where a needs-based approach to the whole curriculum (examinations included) seems appropriate.

The suggestion made here is that there is not really a close match between English examination content and pupils' future needs of the language. The types of English skills pupils will require, particularly for further schooling in English, are different from those emphasised in the examinations. This, of course, is a very generalised statement and, although a detailed analysis would take up too much space, some specific points follow, which supports this view.

It is useful to distinguish between listening/speaking and reading/writing skills. As far as the former are concerned, there seems to be no examining of these. No doubt the practical barriers are regarded as too great, although the introduction of some aural-oral testing might be worth considering. For example, dictation (which was recommended earlier in this article) is a 'wholistic' testing procedure that draws on listening skills.

There is no doubt, however, that reading and writing skills are very important at the secondary level. Pupils need to be able to read and understand material in a variety of subjects at the secondary level. In the Entrance Examinations, however, comprehension passages are usually from story books. In the 1985 Fiji Entrance Examination paper, for example, 16 of the 20 questions are based on extracts from fiction. Interestingly, however, the remaining 4 are on a transcript of a news broadcast about prices of market goods. The use of the latter passage does reflect a new awareness, on the part of examiners, that testing comprehension of different types of English is needed.

The emphasis in discrete point sections is on testing grammatical accuracy.

Here are two further examples:

Sione is _____ honest boy.

- A. a
- B. an
- C. the
- D. some

(Item 39, Form II English 1985, Western Samoa)

My mother was very angry _____ me for coming home late.

- A. on
- B. at
- C. with
- D. to

(Item 27, Section E, Fiji Secondary Schools' Entrance Examination 1985, Paper)

There are three queries to raise with regard to these representative examples. Firstly, they illustrate the weaknesses of discrete point testing already discussed. Secondly, emphasis is now on communication rather than total grammatical correctness. The danger in not accepting that mistakes are a natural part of language acquisition is that the learning process can actually be hindered. Finally, and more pertinent here, is that these items reflect an emphasis on English involved in personal narration. The composition questions have the same debatable focus.

In the 1985 Tonga Advanced English Examination, pupils were asked to write a paragraph about either "My favourite teacher" or "What I do in my spare time". The ability to write free composition in a second language is a very advanced skill. Secondly, one cannot help but question the validity of claiming that a pupil who cannot write a personal narrative story is not suited for further academic study in English. Here is the crux of the problem with much of the English examining at all levels in the South Pacific region: pupils are being barred from further study on account of an inability to master English language skills which are not necessarily related to the actual skills needed for such further study! Writing tasks could surely be more closely related to future uses pupils will make of English.

Of course, there are counter-arguments to the above comments.

Nevertheless, it was stated in the introduction that the aim of this article was to raise issues and to seek to spark off discussion which may lead to some modification of English examinations.

Conclusion

To sum up, then, two major suggestions have been made in this article. Firstly, it is suggested that certain integrative tests, such as dictation, cloze, translation and writing are more valid tests of English language ability. Examinations should have a far greater proportion of integrative than discrete point tests. Secondly, it is suggested that the examination content be more closely related to pupils' future uses of English.

These suggestions are made with a view to giving more pupils a chance to continue their schooling. If the aim of an examination is to judge whether or not pupil deserves the opportunity to continue studies in English, then the examination should fairly test skills he/she will really need for this purpose. Before examining the pupils, surely we must first examine the examinations!

References

- Harris, David P. (1969) *Testing English as a Second Language*.
Mc Graw Hill.
Oller, John W. (1979) *Language Tests at School*. Longman.