Testing Student Language Performance at the Asian Institute of Technology

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AIT

The students at the Asian Institute of Technology come from many different linguistic backgrounds but have to handle all aspects of their Masters degree courses in English. The English Language Centre is at AIT to help students cope with their very diverse communication needs in English. Its approach to this task is process-oriented, learner-centred, which is reflected in the various forms of evaluation used to help select, monitor and place the students.

This paper presents an account of three of ELC's evaluation involvements : 1. a listening test used as part of the selection procedures for Thai applicants to AIT ; 2. a continuous profiling system for learners on the pre-sessional intensive programme and 3. the self-assessment questionnaire completed by all students to help them to decide if they wish to join first-term courses.

1. Introduction

The English Language Centre (ELC) at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) exists in order to help students get more out of--and put more into-their learning and research, all of which is at postgraduate level and in English. It is providing a service, not seeking to impose regulations and standards. It does not have a body of knowledge of its own to impart and its programmes and general policy are a response to the needs of the situation, so they are thought of as an integral part of the programmes of individual disciplines and AIT's overall educational objectives. The notion of "testing" in the ELC must be seen in this context.

It will be readily understood that this perception of the ELC 's role admits no place for the traditional type of graded language testing ; students' linguistic (and other) abilities are tested every day by their performance in their own disciplines-in lectures, seminars, assignments, and so on--and are put to the crunch test in mid-term and end - of - term examinations, where inability to communicate adequately in English necessarily leads to a failing grade.

The "standard" required is thus defined by the demands made on students by their engineering studies, and there is no need for us to name some arbitrary level that will guarantee successful academic performance. We would, in any case, agree with Gene Glass : "Interpretations and decisions based on absolute levels of performance on exercises will be largely meaningless, since judges will disagree wildly on the question of what consequences ought to ensue from the same absolute level of performance, and since there is no way to relate absolute levels of performance on exercises to success on the job, in higher levels of schooling, or in life". (Glass, 1978 : 259)

Such evaluation as we do reflects our general approach to education. Since all our English classes are non – credit and noncompulsory, we have to make sure that students perceive them as useful and relevant, similarly with our evaluations. The language test which we are asked to give to Thai applicants to AIT when they are interviewed by their engineering departments is turned into a learning experience which reflects our own priorities and concerns. (See Section 2, below) (It is not possible to test other nationalities because of the wide geographical catchment area covered by AIT, but English in any case cannot be the major factor in comparing students of different nationalities for possible admission to AIT, as this would unfairly advantage those candidates from countries where English is widely used in secondary and tertiary education.) The evaluation of individual students' strengths and weaknesses on our Pre–Masters programme (see Section 3, below) is designed to help the co – operative process between student, academic advisors and the ELC. And finally, since our programmes are not compulsory, we must provide the students with some means of deciding whether they need to come to English classes at all ; the self – assessment questionnaire which we use is described in Section 4 below.

As in our general approach we emphasise process over product, so the same applies to our evaluations, and insofar as this paper can be seen as a contribution to continuing debate on curriculum development, its importance lies in a real commitment to the process – over – product principle, and a refusal to accept second best compromise. As Stenhouse says : "... compromises could be made between the objectives and the process models in practice, but... the process model implies that the teacher ought to be a critic, not a marker. The worthwhile activity in which teacher and students are engaged has standards and criteria immanent in it and the task of appraisal is that of improving students' capacity to work to such criteria by critical reaction to work done. In this sense assessment is about the teaching of self – assessment." (Stenhouse, 1975 : 95)

2. The Test for Thai Applicants

All Thai applicants to study at AIT are required to take an English language test set by and sat at the Institute at a given date and time.

The avowed purpose of this test is to give some indication to the engineering staff, who also interview the students in English, of the English abilities of the applicants. English is the language of study at AIT but proficiency in it is not the major criterion in the selection of students, engineering teachers being usually more interested in the engineering abilities and technical know-how of applicants than they are in their English abilities.

There is thus no pass or fail in this test. The engineering divisions are told of the results – expressed as a percentage – and make of this information what they will. It is after all not for the ELC to say who should or shouldn't come to AIT.

The test itself consists of a text recorded on cassette by a native speaker of English, of a passage of no particular language difficulty imparting some simple statistical information involving figures, percentages and sums of money, illustrated by a series of examples.

The statistical information is of a rudimentary level – the recording is based on a passage in "Nucleus : Mathematics" (Hall, 1980) – and is intended to present no difficulty of content to these applicants, who after all are applicants to study for a Master's degree in engineering, and can be expected to have some familiarity with the content.

It is our expressed intention that this test should not cause undue difficulty as we are testing, or sampling, neither the student's linguistic knowledge nor statistical or mathematical knowledge, only his or her ability (a) to listen and (b) to read a little and write answers in English.

Simple questions written on a paper are asked about the recorded text, which is played again every time a new question is reached. (There are five questions in all and the test takes about half an hour.)

Persons conducting this test – native speakers of English – are at some trouble to make sure that everyone participating understands what is required by the test in terms of procedure and the form of the answers. Multiple explanations are given because it is our desire that everyone should do as well as they can. We want people to gain confidence from the test, not to lose it. Nevertheless, the experience of being talked at by a group of native speakers can come as quite a shock to the candidates ; for many this is the first time this has happened to them and they are bewildered. The test thus also becomes a test of confidence and dealing

with bewilderment. In the end, perhaps the understanding of the explanations is the most "authentic" part of the test : it duplicates the shock that new students experience on arrival at AIT, where from day to day they will be bombarded by English spoken in at least twenty–five different accents with varying degrees of facility; and it is a test of understanding something "for real" rather than just as an exercise.

A concrete example may be of use here. Question two of the test requires candidates to write down every number they hear mentioned in the recording. There are about sixty of these numbers in all. The person conducting the test explains that with so many numbers there is no time to write them in words and that numerals must be used if people are not to be left miserably behind. An example is illustrated on the board, and the rubric in the examination paper, which says write numbers not words, is referred to. Despite this a proportion of candidates still try to write words and get left behind.

Such candidates would clearly have a hard time if they were to become AIT students, so we feel that the low marks scored when this happens are justified. We are unmoved when candidates complain that they didn't do well because they didn't understand the question, as we feel that failure to understand simple and repeated explanations of this kind is a valid indicator of likely performance, more valid (whatever we may mean by that) than many tests whose "validity" can be "proved" with statistics.

The test certainly takes candidates by surprise ; some are delighted to be given such a short and easy test ; others are dismayed not to be given a chance to show they can do grammar exercises. Occasionally the engineering teachers will join in, in support of candidates they wish to accept on engineering grounds but who have done poorly on our test, complaining that we don't have a proper test with proper grammar questions. We reply that grammar is a fairly useless discipline at AIT (there is after all no School of Linguistics here) whereas the ability to communicate in English is essential if learning potential is to be made full use of.

Some students complain that the test is unfair because they weren't expecting to have to listen to anything, and anyway what happened to the multiple choices ? But this sort of comment tells us more about students' earlier language education than it does anything useful about our test.

This is not to say that the test is beyond criticism. One extremely valid criticism is that the test only tests people's ability to listen to a native speaker of English. Why not present one of the other twenty – five varieties of English on campus ? We have no particular reason for using a native speaker, although it seems relevant, in so far as this test attempts to match the reality of AIT, that there

should be some element of "culture shock" built into it, and using a Thai speaker for the recording, as some candidates have suggested, would not have the same effect. Another criticism might be that a recorded text is unreal (students at AIT are usually presented with live lecturers) and that a live reader would be more authentic, complete with the paralinguistic elements that normally accompany and dramatise the illocutionary force of the living discourse. This appears a valid criticism. A test using a cassette however is easier to organise and administer than one involving live material.

The test under discussion here is clearly not perfect, but all tests flounder in seas of such variables that to claim any sort of "objectivity" for them is a joke.

Tests, despite their unchallenged place in educational systems, can never be the straightforward and honest judgement seats they sometimes get billed as being. Similarly, the intentions of a test-writer, the understanding of a test – user and the use that the results of the test get put to by some third – party – who draws a line indicating pass or fail through results originally intended merely to be giving some modest pointer of ability in a limited field – these intentions may all be so different as to render the test a manifestation of the diversity of subjectivity.

3. Assessment on the Pre–Masters Programme

With the students on the *Pre-Masters Programme* our main means of evaluation again reflects two of the main threads running through this paper. Our first concern is to get a reasonably clear picture of our learners' strengths and problems in order to help them find their ways in the AIT study and living context. Our second is to ensure that the content and approaches of the evaluational processes are in tune with our educational stance. Thus, the emphasis is on continuous assessment, and on the "continuous" rather than the "assessment".

There is not much in the literature on definitions of continuous assessment. What there is emphasises its *formative* aspect, i.e., providing "feedback during pro-gramme implementation" (Glaser and Nitko, 1970), belonging to the progress, diagnosis, course evaluation phase (B. Carroll, 1980). The assessment part of the term is generally assumed to refer to formal tests, though Carroll does concede that observational, or non – interactional measurement techniques and self – assessment ratings can be valuable adjuncts to the more formal and conventional methods of assessing progress.

On the Pre – Masters Programme at AIT, "observational" approaches are much more than an "adjunct" to formal testing methods. For one thing, there is almost no formal testing on the course. (We are working on a pre – /post – test package but this is for programme research purposes and is not seen, or used, as a

means of rating student achievement of "goals" or "objectives".) Our observational approaches are intended to help us develop tentative learner profiles that may help the learners and their engineering teachers, especially their advisors, towards an awareness of characteristics which, in the AIT context, it may be useful to do something with or about. The way this form of continuous profiling (rather than "assessment") is handled and has developed may be of interest to other course designers and teachers.

Accessible to everyone who has a teaching role on our course are loose-leaf files, with a set of category – labeled sheets for each student. Any time a teacher has a comment it is considered in the interests of the learner or of teaching colleagues to record, an entry can be made under the appropriate heading in the file. Of course, what these appropriate headings should be has been a matter of concerned (and continuing) discussion. In our early Pre-Masters days, we had a lot of headings, categories covering linguistic, communicative and attitudinal features of the learners' competence and performance, as well as categories handling some of the study – oriented activities of the programme. Our first set (mid – 1985) consisted of the following :

formal accuracy ; vocabulary ; listening and note – taking ; reading and note – making ; oral interaction ; writing ; specialist field ; research ; attitude, motivation and study habits

These categories were partly derived from Hawkey (1982) : (he had no fewer than 13 categories in his continuous assessment system) but they were found by most teachers to be too analytic and cumbersome. On the latest Pre – Masters course (July – August 1986) the areas for comment have been reduced to three :

critical analysis ; formal accuracy ; attitude and motivation.

There may well be further modification and refinement to be done on our categories, but it should be remembered that what we are trying to establish is a set of headings that teachers find helpful for the clarification and exchange of views on learners' developing approaches, aptitudes and attitudes as they participate in the activities of the course and in their new life at AIT. This form of continuous profiling seems at its best when the comments on a page of the files become a constructive dialogue between teachers on behalf of the learner. This excerpt from the *critical analysis* page for one student typifies the content and tone of our continuous profiling record :

Seems to be on top of what we are doing.... Still has need to become more critical and less accepting of what is presented by others.
22/7, Teacher A

By the end of Week 4, he seemed to have reached a stage where he was looking at texts, involving himself in discussion more critically. Contributions now more substantial.

31/7, Teacher B

Good critical faculty. Making interesting and intelligent suggestions and logic.

1/8, Teacher C

Still doing well – is helpful with students who can't grasp some points in the discussion. Good clarifier.

1/8, Teacher A

This kind of tentative, negotiated information exchange seems richer than the quantitative information that would be provided by formal tests, and less dogmatic than the views of a single teacher. It is, of course, similar to the kind of information teachers exchange orally The sheet system has the advantage, however, of ensuring that such information does actually get exchanged and is usefully recorded. It certainly proves valuable as data informing the end – of – course profiles which are drawn up and then passed on to each student's advisor in his or her division. These profiles have already been helpful, especially in enabling the divisions to take account of the particular strengths or needs of particular students. As the Language Centre covering memo to the advisors says : "The profiles attempt to pin – point strong as well as weak points ; comparing these with the characteristics of optional courses should help in assessing the suitability of the overall shape of each individual's programme." The current format of these profiles, which usually run to about twenty lines on each student, is in three sections : 1. Basic linguistic competence 2. Study- .related skills 3. Attitude. The profiles have helped strengthen professional relation- ships between the Language Centre and engineering divisions, almost certainly to the benefit of the students concerned.

4. The Self—assessment Questionnaire

In common with other universities throughout the world, AIT used to conduct the kind of placement test whereby students on their arrival at AIT would, on the basis of their results, be obliged to attend a certain number of hours of English – anything up to $1\frac{1}{2}$ terms of English calsses. The resentment that "obliga- tion" caused, and the feeling of many students that their test results did not reflect their actual ability, meant that by the end of 1983 "obligation" had been replaced by "strong recommendation" and English classes had been reduced to breakfast-time classes in the first half of students' first term only. At the beginning of 1984, plans were already finalised for introducing three new term – length courses for each academic discipline, two to be run concurrently in first term, and one to be given

in second term. We planned to answer student perception of test unreliability by administering to all AIT newcomers an internationally – validated test, commonly used for assessing English language needs of candidates to English – medium universities. The problems resulting from this decision are dealt with more extensively in Hall and Kenny (1986) ; briefly, they fall into two categories : logistical, viz the length of time needed to administer the test, the fact that not all students manage to arrive for the first day of term and the fact that those that do often find themselves in the test room within hours of stepping off the plane : and motivational – students advised to come to English classes seemed to feel that they had "failed" and that attendance in the ELC was a sort of penance that they had to undergo for not "getting through" ; conversely students who "passed" were given the unjustifiable impression that they were going to have no language – related problems with their studies.

The introduction of a self – assessment questionnaire at the beginning of the following term, despite the misgivings of some of the then members of the ELC and almost all the engineering lecturers we talked to (who felt that students would be dishonest in order to avoid coming to English) transformed this situation. The questionnaire asks students to decide for themselves which courses they wish to follow. This "registration" for classes is done on a separate piece of paper ; the questionnaire itself is taken away by students for them to complete at leisure and remains anonymous. We would not wish to make extravagant claims for the self-assessment document ; it was hastily conceived and hastily written ; it is certainly very far from being comprehensive (compared to, say, the document described in Windeatt (1980) ; and it is altogether a very ad – hoc document. But its format has remained largely unaltered since its introduction because, simply, it seems to work. *More* students now attend English classes than when we did a formal test, and the drop – out rate as work – load pressures build up towards the end of term has moved from disastrous to negligible ; the root cause of this is the change of attitude and motivation brought about by the fact that a student's decision to attend is an own choice and has no reference to an externally – imposed and arbitrary standard.

The purpose of the questionnaire is to divide the incoming students into two populations : those who would be advised to come to English classes and those who need not. The first group is to be further subdivided into those who take both first – term programmes and those who take only one. The questionnaire itself is in two parts, the first for students who have considerable English – medium educational experience, the second for students whose exposure to English is minimal. It is particularly to cater to the latter group that we ask students to look at the questionnaire but not complete it for three or four days ; after all, they cannot be expected to predict the sort of problems they will have before they experience exposure to the problems. Whichever of the two parts students have filled out, an

interpretation is then provided to help them in their decision. For those who decide to come to English, a further self–marked elementary test is provided with a scale indicating whether they ought to think about also attending the more basic of the two first–term programmes.

As might be predicted, students from certain countries (viz. Indonesia, Japan, Korea, People's Republic of China, the Republic of China, Thailand, Vietnam) almost invariably choose to come to classes (whereas when assessment was external, many would "pass" and therefore not come), but students from these countries are by no means our only clients, and it is not uncommon to see students from such strong ESL areas as the Philippines and the Indian sub–continent registering for classes.

Finally, it should be mentioned that we have no similar process for entry to the second–term course (now, for a variety of reasons, switched to third term); by the beginning of this programme students have had time to find their way about and to know what they need, and they have also had time to consult their second year seniors who have already attended the programme. In this case, we simply publicise the programme ("Information–structuring"–See Hall et al., 1987) and students turn up; and even more students attend this course than attend first–term courses.

5. Conclusion

It is important to remember that the tests described in this paper were developed in answer to the particular needs of AIT and are not necessarily suitable for other institutions. We have tried to show not so much how our tests work as how they fit in with our overall educational philosophy, and we would claim that this compatibility will always· be essential in any curriculum.

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