

# ARE THE TESTS AVAILABLE TODAY OUR SERVANTS OR OUR MASTERS?

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My brief for this conference was quite simple: to talk about testing in general. It may indeed be a simple subject but, of course, an impossible one to try and tackle on those terms. So I have chosen to focus on my main interest in testing; that is, the effects of tests on classroom teaching and learning. Even here, I cannot hope to do more than skim the surface and perhaps provoke some thought and debate.

It was clear to me that my subject should be English Language testing; I was not asked to report on the efficiency of driving tests, swimming tests or to comment on the way my optician prescribes for me. Yet, when I came to think about it, such tests do have similarities to some of ours and perhaps a brief consideration of them can help to focus our ideas. Take, for example, the driving test in Britain. Driving instructors will tell you that you will never drive like it again after you have taken your test. In addition, certain vital things are missing from the test; for example, you do not need to learn to park the car. People go to a driving school because they want to pass the test; what is taught is generally only what is needed to pass the test, whether or not this is relevant to what is needed to be a competent driver. The analogy with some of the external examinations which our students have to sit is obvious enough. And one can continue to get analogies from other types of tests. The swimming test, for example, is a survival test, task-based and eminently practical in its most basic form. It is less useful when it becomes more elaborate and "difficult". Blood tests provide an interesting analogy for tests setters in that they can only look for specific things; the tester has to be fairly sure of the target area otherwise the test will not reveal the relevant facts and a further test will have to be taken. Perhaps my optician's efforts provide the best comparison of all, however. He uses a range of techniques; these include the use of the most up-to-date scientific instruments and the old-fashioned "reading from a card" test. But above all his tests all require co-operation from his patient and understanding of what he wants. Only if he gets this can he

capitalise on the scientific advances that are being made in his field. The net result of all this is a prescription which enables me to see clearly. We, as teachers, are much in the same position as the optician. In the world of E.F.L., testing techniques have advanced vastly over the last 20 years or so. In the late sixties and early seventies the greatest greatest advances were in the field of reliability. Multiple choice and close testing linked to computer marking could produce tests which were, in testing terms, highly "reliable"; in testing terms only, however, since employers and others soon realised that they could not "rely" on such tests (using the word in its non-technical sense) to tell them very much about the language abilities of students. In other words, such tests eliminated human error but also eliminated most of the useful information which we expect to gain from a test. I should emphasise that this kind of development was above all motivated by a desire to be "fair" to the student; that the scope of "fairness" was extremely limited did not become immediately apparent to the testers. The concentration was on "marker reliability"; to eliminate the subjective element was seen to be of prime importance.

More recently, however, the question "Is it fair to test that sort of thing?" has been raised in conjunction with the communicative revolution in the way we programme our syllabus and our attack on the language learning process in general. This has had a substantial effect not only on what we test but how we test it. Good tests, whether they are progress tests, diagnostic tests or external examinations have become more pragmatic, often skills based, and include at least some subjective, but criterion-based marking. The material used in such tests seems to promote good classroom teaching rather than obstruct it; more importantly, teachers themselves are taking an increasing part in the devising of tests, and aiming to make them more "candidate-centred" just as teaching itself is becoming more and more "student-centred". An excellent example of this process of development can be seen in aural/oral examining where we have moved from interviews and listening tests read aloud with multiple choice answers, through examinations on tape and on to group testing of oral interaction with the potential of using video technology both to test receptive and productive skills in a more "natural" way.

However, aural/oral testing is very far from being satisfactory. For one thing, most tests of this type are given no more than 20% weighting whereas 80% of classroom time is engaged in teaching and practising these skills. So although the techniques

of testing have advanced, the entire philosophy of language testing can be called in question. For since, as we admit, at a basic level there is a similarity with the driving test and students come to us to learn only what they must know to pass the tests, we are unable to teach in the way we think is most relevant, worse still we are unable to teach what we think most relevant, and worst of all we are unable to show by regular progress tests that specific aural/oral objectives are being achieved by our students. In fact, many text books and course books pay only lip service to the setting of such objectives. Promoting themselves as "communicative" they duck the issue of a planned and systematic approach to the most vital area of communication. And they cannot be blamed for it is up to the testers to tackle the problem and lead the way and so far they have shirked the most difficult tasks in this field.

The main concerns in all aspects of EFL testing should be these:

1. The language we want to test and the most effective means of doing this.
2. Ensuring our students are fairly represented and that they gain maximum benefit from both teaching and testing.
3. Ensuring that those who administer the tests know what they are doing. Ensuring above all that tester/marker/examiner training is as essential as teacher-training.
4. Ensuring that test setters understand what is practicable, fair and necessary.

I am not saying that no progress has been made in these areas. Especially in the first two, there have been substantial advances. However I personally should like more emphasis placed on:

1. Continuous assessment.
2. Progress test ( a check-up system like a kind of linguistic "medical").
3. Profiling (with the aim of producing a linguistic "portrait" of the student).

Where I feel there has been the least progress, and where, certainly, there is a sad dearth of information is on the subject of the training of examiners and the briefing of test setters. There is a mystery surrounding the backroom boys and girls of public examinations. We assume they are "experts"; we hesitate to challenge their judgements yet who are they and how are they trained? Who gave them the

right to influence our teaching to the really remarkable extent they do? Are we involved enough in this or are we content to abrogate the responsibility and leave it in the hands of the applied linguists and other academics who are remote from the chalk face and whose priorities may be completely different from our own and those of our students?

My feeling is that the time has come for teacher-participation at the highest level in all aspects of testing. I am not talking about "consultation" but having the most influential voice of all in the decision-making which affects us all. Only in this way can testing go forward to be a beneficent influence on our syllabus design and our teaching. Only in this way can we be truly "fair" to our students. Only in this way can the tests be our servants and not our masters.