



AN OVERVIEW OF LANGUAGE TESTING

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Abstract:

Scholars have stated that it is “*challenging to describe proficiency*” (Goundar, 2020). One of the issues that teachers, researchers, students and language testers encounter is defining “*what it actually means to be proficient in an L2*”. Language proficiency “*is the extent to which an individual possesses the linguistic cognition necessary to function in a given communicative situation, in a given modality such as listening, speaking, reading or writing*”. It can be implied that proficiency is often discussed in the context of L2 acquisition, usually measured with test-scores. We conduct language tests in order gauge a learn proficiency. Therefore, it is crucial to first get an overview of the field of language testing. The aim of this paper is to briefly outline what has transpired in the field of language testing over the years.

Keywords: language testing, examination, CPE, TOEFL, IELTS

1. Introduction

The field of “*language testing can be traced as back as 1,500 years*” (Goundar, 2020). During the “*Sui Dynasty (581-618) in China, formal testing began in order to identify individuals who were most suitable within the empire for crucial positions in the administration, without any bias of their social class*” (O’Sullivan, 2012, p.9). However, “*modern English language testing only appeared on the scene from the 20th century*” (Goundar, 2020).

In order “*to test the language performance of persons from the British colonies who wished to pursue education in the UK, the Cambridge Proficiency Examination (CPE) was introduced in 1913*” (O’Sullivan, 2012). The examination was designed “*on a coherent philosophy of language learning developed by Henry Sweet*” (1899) and for this reason “*Sweet is attributed as the founder of Applied Linguistics*” (Coombe, Davidson, & O’Sullivan, 2012, p.11).

The developers of CPE prepared the first examination in 1913 using Sweet’s method as is depicted in Figure 2 on the guideline of the content of a test.

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Part 1: Phonetics (teaching of & practical application) 'start with the spoken language'

Part 2: Grammar; Vocabulary; Study of Texts; Translation; Conversation

Part 3: Essays on language & languages

Figure 2: Henry Sweet's Rationally Progressive Method
(O'Sullivan, 2012, p.11; Goundar, 2020)

The first 'CPE in 1913 measured the candidate's language performance that set a precedent for the approach to assessment, which is still dominant in Britain and much of Europe' (Goundar, 2020). Figure 3 reveals the content of the first Cambridge Proficiency Examination where similarities can be observed between it and Sweet's (1899) method such as "*phonetics, translations, and grammar as well as conversation*".

Writing:

- Translation (English to French or German): 2 hours
- Translation (from French or German to English) + English grammar: 2 ½ hours
- Essay: 2 hours
- English Literature: 3 hours
- English Phonetics: 1 ½ hours

Oral:

- Dictation: 1 ½ hours
- Reading & conversation: 1 ½ hours

Figure 3: Contents of the 1913 Cambridge Proficiency Examination
(O'Sullivan, 2012, p.11; Goundar, 2020)

On the other hand, "*the United States were interested in standardizing students written performance*" (Goundar, 2020). Thorndike (1911, 1912) "*developed the first standardized examination in 1908 whereby he collected a large sample of students' handwritten essays and asked 200 teachers to organize the scripts in order of legibility*". He then created "*a scale upon which he placed a set of exemplar scripts after which he asked the teachers to compare the samples with the ones on the scale and the closest match would indicate the level*" (Goundar, 2020). Further, "*using the same methodology Hillegas in 1912 designed the first standardized scale for written composition and in 1914 Courtis compiled the first standardized examination of English language*" (Goundar, 2020). Courtis (1914, p.391) explained that "*on the basis of these tests and the requirements of the school it is possible to conclude that an eighth-grade child of standard ability should be able to write an original story at the rate of 18 words per minute and that legibility of the writing should be 60 on the Ayres scale (this measured the relative accuracy of judgments of handwriting), and there should not be more than five mistakes in punctuation per hundred words, two spelling, and two in syntax*". In addition, "*in careful reading the rate should be 230 words per minute, and that in the reproduction of the material, 12 of the original words should be used per minute and that these words should constitute 50 percent of the words used in the reproduction*" (Goundar, 2020).

2. After the 1960s

In the early 1960s, *“another milestone was reached in this field of English language testing, when in the United States the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) was implemented”* (Goundar, 2020). After the *“introduction of TOEFL, the development of general proficiency examinations continued for another three decades”* (O’Sullivan, 2012, p.14). 1979 saw *“the introduction of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) in response to a request from the Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry for the purpose of testing of language for business contexts”* (Goundar, 2020). The validity of TOEIC test can be argued upon as the test focuses on general English and result reporting using a norm-referenced reporting system. According to O’Sullivan (2012, p.14), *“a norm-referenced reporting system reports the performance of each individual in terms of the rest of the candidature”*.

3. In the 1980s

In the UK, ‘by the early 1980s, the formation of the English Language Testing Service (ELTS) addressed the issue of testing language for specific purposes. Soon, ELTS became the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) which is still prevalent in many countries and used extensively for migration and immigration purposes’ (Fulcher, 2004, p.262; O’Sullivan, 2012, p.14). *“IELTS is considered more of a holistic approach to testing language proficiency which is one of the major reasons why it has become more marketable”* (Goundar, 2020), similar to the TOEIC.

4. Conclusion

Finally, *“by the 1990s the use of IELTS grew from a few thousand candidates per year to over a million”* (Goundar, 2020). Due to this growth *“there was a decline of other tests such as the Cambridge ESOL Main Suite in the early years of the 21st century”* (Goundar, 2020), which implied a shift in emphasis from general to specific purposes testing. As a final point on the overview of language testing, recent years has witnessed the emergence of TOEFL iBT (Internet-based TOEFL) that can be classified as *“more acceptable for performance and criterion-referenced test analysis”* than the *“traditional classical test statistics”* (O’Sullivan, 2012, p.15).

About the Author

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