NEW TRENDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXAMINING

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A paper on what is often thought of as a tedious subject only on the fringe of E.L.T. work calls for some justification. It has even been suggested that an interest in examinations is in itself somewhat unhealthy and indicates a refusal, perhaps an inability, to think about more vital issues. There is the resentment we all naturally have for examiners and those interested in their cult, a resentment which perhaps has its origins in our own experience of examinations. Who can consider the whole question of examinations objectively? Even the very word 'objectively' is charged with connotations.

I shall take as a justification for this paper the following quotation from Mr. George Perren, Director of the British Council Centre for Information on Language Teaching in London, writing in a book entitled Language Testing Symposium published by Oxford University Press last year:

> 'At present language teaching could be helped more
> by efficient tests than by almost any other agency.'

Although some may consider this an overstatement of a case, I think that at certain levels of language learning it is very true, particularly at the level I have in mind in this paper, namely, secondary schools where English is the second or third language and at the same time the medium of instruction. This is the situation in Papua and New Guinea, of course, and in other places in the Pacific as well as in many African countries. Until a few years ago not very much thought was given to English language examining at secondary school level in these countries and school-leaving examinations were of the traditional type. Work on language testing carried out in the United States from the time of the Second World War only began to have some influence on examinations of the kind I am dealing with six years ago when D. W. Grieve wrote his Report of an

Inquiry into English Language Examining for the West African Examinations Council. This has resulted, over the years, in considerable changes not only in the West African School Certificate but even in examinations taken as far away as Papua and New Guinea. We must never cease to question and revise our examining techniques as more knowledge of both the language learning process and the validity and reliability of different types of test becomes available. It seems that a great amount of research into examining - especially the examining of spoken English - is waiting to be done.

In Papua and New Guinea there seems to be rather more reluctance to examine students and more faith in teachers' assessments than in similar situations elsewhere. I therefore would like to answer the question 'Why have language examinations in any case?' Firstly, pressure on university places and the general value of a school certificate in a developing country demands a selection system that is, and can be seen to be, valid. Teachers' assessments presuppose two factors:

(1) that teachers are competent to make the assessments, and
(2) that those who receive the successful candidates for further studies or employment are prepared to accept these assessments.

Experience in other developing countries would suggest that as the number of students completing secondary education increases so does the demand for a certificate based on a standardised examination. Certainly I know of some countries where no reliance at all could be placed on teachers' assessments since the use of bribes would upset such a system completely.

The second reason for having language examinations is that they can be used for diagnostic purposes. It is coming to be accepted more and more that at the remedial level an attempt should be made to individualise language teaching. This is the approach I understand is being used in some language laboratory work in this University, and it is the approach we plan to use in our newly installed language laboratory at Goroka Teachers' College. In order to decide which students should be given remedial work in which areas diagnostic tests are essential. It is unwise to rely on hunches, as many teachers do. It is my impression that a great deal of language teaching in schools, colleges and universities is quite unnecessary. Although I am not unaware that overlearning a language is essential, there soon comes a point at which

overlearning gives way to sheer boredom and this results in unlearning - a rejection by the mind of what is associated with unrelieved tedium. Good diagnostic tests would enable us to avoid such situations.

Apart from the achievement test, which is usually the type that comes in for criticism from pedagogical progressives, and the diagnostic test, the value of which I have just described, tests can also be of the proficiency and aptitude type. At various stages in the career of a child learning a language these tests are useful. Unfortunately shortage of time will oblige me to deal almost exclusively with achievement tests this afternoon, but I felt that it was necessary to point out that tests have other uses. Indeed, the largely objective test I am going to recommend as part of a school-leaving examination could be used for diagnostic purposes.

I do not propose to spend much time on the subjective versus objective debate. In fairness to both sides I shall, however, give two quotations. The first is from Robert Lado's classic, Language Testing (1961) and is well-known, having been quoted in several articles on this question:

> 'The ability to write a good composition does not run parallel with the ability to speak, understand, read and even write a foreign language. If a student cannot write a good composition in his native language - a perfectly common case - we cannot expect him to write a good composition in the foreign language even if he has progressed a good deal in it.
> Furthermore, a good composition can be written without using a single question pattern or a single request. That is, a composition is often a very poor sample of the elements of a language.
> Finally, compositions are difficult to score and time consuming in whatever scoring is possible...
> This is not intended to condemn essay tests for all purposes. Essay tests are probably most effective as tests of ability to write essays rather than as measures of proficiency in a foreign language.'

The second quotation is from Jacques Barzun's The House of Intellect (1959) :

> 'Even if tests were constructed with impeccable draughtmanship and were free from all ambiguities and errors, they would, in my opinion, still have serious defects as testing instruments, especially when applied to creative persons and to some of those people who, despite impressive gifts, do not shine at parlor games. For multiple choice tests, by their very nature, tend to favour the pickers over the doers, and the superficially brilliant over the creatively profound. And the use of these tests has a baleful influence on teachers and testing.'

Whatever may be said against the use of objective tests in other subjects - and possibly Barzun has a good case - I think it is true to say that it is agreed by all who have given serious thought to the problems of testing language that objective tests have a vital role in a comprehensive examination of mastery of a language. They must be carefully written and thoroughly pre-tested. (Much criticism of objective tests comes, I have noticed, from people who have used unreliable questions - usually written by themselves.)

Nowadays we have come to acknowledge that both objective tests and tests of the ability to produce a piece of continuous writing have their place in an English examination at secondary level. The objective tests ensure a thorough coverage of all the structures we expect the candidate to know: the continuous writing test ensures that we know something of his ability to communicate in writing. There are two main reasons for the increasing use of objective tests of English language. Firstly, we have many more candidates to test than ever before and it is administratively more convenient to use such tests. Secondly, objective tests have been shown to be both valid and reliable - whereas several experiments have shown that unless four or five examiners each mark a piece of written work it is almost impossible to arrive at a fair grade. For these reasons an objective element has been introduced into public examinations in many parts of the world. Ethiopia has gone further than any other developing country I know in the direction of making the secondary school leaving examination in English

predominantly objective. (This examination is outlined in an appendix.) The correlation between the results of this examination in 1968 and English performance of successful candidates during their first year at Haile Sellassie I University (September 1968 to June 1969) was .69. In 1963, when a traditional English examination consisting largely of essay, precis and written comprehension was used the correlation ranged from a low of .21 to a high of .46 in the various faculties of the University. I think that the information we receive from Ethiopia in the next few years as they evaluate their new English examination might be as useful to examiners elsewhere as the Grieve Report was six years ago. Particularly interesting will be the backwash effect of an examination with such a large objective element. So far the evidence is that the backwash effect has been to make teachers concentrate on the task of teaching essential structures at the expense of practice in uncontrolled essay writing.

I turn now to the testing of spoken English - a task which the pioneers in Addis Ababa have not yet found it possible to tackle. Unfortunately, the most important aspect of language is the most difficult to test. It is most essential to develop good tests of spoken English and incorporate them in public examinations if we are going to persuade teachers to give oral work the important place it deserves in their teaching. There is a realisation of this need. Although it is regrettable that the British Civil Service English examinations of the nineteenth century were used as the model for the traditional English examination in developing countries, we could learn a lot from the foreign language examinations set by the British Civil Service nowadays: 50% of the total mark for these examinations depend on the oral section. The United Nations Organisation allows 75% to oral proficiency in their examinations for post-graduate foreigners who wish to study in English-speaking countries. But many of the English examinations set at secondary level in developing countries contain no section devoted to spoken English or only an optional section for which a small percentage of the total mark is allocated. This is due to some extent to the tradition of treating language as written, but it is also due to the great difficulties encountered in trying to test anything but written language. We cannot easily isolate the elements of spoken English for testing purposes. This is certainly the area of language testing in which there is the greatest need for research.

Nevertheless spoken English can and must be tested if we claim to give a comprehensive examination of a student's ability to use English in the various ways he has

to use it as an educated Papuan or New Guinean.

It is possible to test auditory comprehension. Students can listen to a sentence and then answer multiple choice comprehension questions on it. These can include sentences the meaning of which is affected by intonation, although such questions are very difficult to devise since the number of good distractors one can think of is very limited. So that we examine the students in a meaningful situation we should - as far as possible - try to base some of our questions on continuous passages that are likely to be of interest rather than on a number of isolated sentences. A very carefully prepared test of this kind - I should not like to have to devise it - might include some points that could be comprehended only if the candidate could distinguish between certain sounds, e.g., /i:/ and /i/ in'leave there'and'live there'. (The problem is, of course, that the context will nearly always tell us the meaning and the phonemic distinction is not of very great consequence - which perhaps implies that we should not pay very much attention to such matters in our teaching.) One of the passages might be a talk on a subject of interest, and another a conversation which candidates would be expected to follow but not take part in.

It is when we come to testing oral production that we are confronted with what often appear insuperable problems. Some examiners have used the so-called Paper-and-Pencil tests to discover if the candidate knows where pauses occur (which the student marks on a printed sentence) and also if he can distinguish between phonemes by asking him to indicate which ones rhyme in a printed list. (For example, lip, leap, deep, reap.) Research undertaken to show the validity or otherwise of such tests has produced conflicting results.

The Modern Language Association of America has tried various means of stimulating oral responses such as questions about pictures. Sentence repetition, conversion and construction have also been used. The criticism made by Rebecca M Valette, a well known testing expert, of these tests is that

> 'it does not necessarily hold true that a test in which a student speaks a certain number of utterances provides a valid measure of his global speaking ability.'

The McCallien Oral Test, used by the West African Examinations Council for several years now, is open to similar criticism. Even more serious a criticism of this test, as pointed out by Alan Davies in Language Testing Symposium, is that the percentage of candidates obtaining a pass varies very much from year to year (e.g. Sierra Leone 31.8 in 1962, 73.6 in 1963 - surely the standard of spoken English could not improve to that extent in one year!). Dr. Davies therefore questions the McCallien Test's claim to objectivity.

Oral communication, it is generally agreed, will have to be tested subjectively until other tests are invented. The examiner engages in conversation with the candidate and places him on a 3, 4 or at most 5 point scale. David P. Harris in his most useful book Testing English as a Second Language, published earlier this year, gives a Sample Oral English Rating Sheet (p. 84) listing the qualities to be looked for.

In my opinion, the reading aloud of a passage should not form part of this test since reading aloud is a very specialised skill, and we are only bringing into our test another complicating factor - we are testing yet another skill when we are already bedevilled in testing oral communication by the problem of having several skills - pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension - to analyse at one time.

On the other hand, reading aloud one speaker's part in a dialogue can be useful, as J. A. Roemmele has suggested in an article in 'English Language Teaching' (Vol XXI No. 1, October 1966). He writes:

> 'The examinee can take the part of the second speaker (of a dialogue, say from a modern play) and the same piece can be used for subsequent questions on comprehension. In this way we can be sure he is not merely reading parrot-fashion but appreciating the full meaning of the dialogue, which can only be grasped by understanding what both speakers are saying. Here we have the living image of an interchange of ideas, which is vital to all conversation, and the most potent example of a real life situation.'

For a test of oral communication of this kind to be at all valid a great deal of care must be taken with the briefing of examiners.

The most that we can hope to do in testing oral production in the next few years, I should think, would be to improve our subjective testing techniques.

My own personal view is that an English examination taken at the end of the secondary course in a country like Papua and New Guinea should be on these lines:

Part One At least three hundred multiple-choice and constructed response questions - all of them compulsory - covering all the structures one could reasonably expect a student to have mastered by this stage, that is, all but the most advanced structures of the language. As far as possible this part of the examination should consist of continuous passages of some length (rather than isolated sentences) so that candidates could be tested in as realistic a situation as possible.

Part Two Three or four short pieces of guided writing on topics relevant to the candidates' experience. There should be no choice of questions since it has been shown that students write well on one topic but badly on another, and the only way to ensure equal chances is to have all the candidates write on all the subjects.

I believe that if Part One is carefully prepared, Part Two will not tell us anything else about the students' competence in handling English structures. At least that has been the experience in Ethiopia. But since we cannot be sure that restricting ourselves to an all-objective examination might not result in the complete abandonment of all forms of continuous writing in schools, and since - after all - students will be required to do such writing at institutions of higher education, we had better retain the composition test, at least in this modified form.

As the number of students increases the problem of marking these pieces of writing will become overwhelming - at least that has been the case elsewhere. The solution - once we are satisfied that Part One of this examination is giving a true picture of our students' ability (and I think we will be) - might be to mark only some of the papers of Part Two - borderline cases. Since only a limited number of papers will be marked, it will be possible to have each one marked by four or five examiners and in this way a fair mark can be arrived at.

Part Three of the examination could consist of comprehension and lexis questions based on a number of short passages. Here again a large number of questions would be necessary, and I can see no reason why they should not all be objective. Indeed they should be since here we are testing comprehension rather than expression, and a cardinal principle of testing is surely that we try as far as possible to test one skill at a time. Included in this part of the examination could be a test of the ability to pick out the salient points of a passage - the note-taking skill. This, too, could be done objectively. One passage at least should be administered in such a way that a test of speed reading is possible.

Part Four This would be the aural/oral section. It would consist of an auditory comprehension test and a conversation test, both of which I have described already. (I would not include paper-and-pencil tests of oral production.)

What would be the backwash effect of such an examination? Part One would, I believe, encourage much more intensive work in all the structures than is done at present. Part Two would ensure that those teachers who mistakenly believe that structures can be learnt without practice in written expression did not abandon the teaching of continuous writing. Part Three would lead to more work being done in comprehension and speed reading. Part Four would, I hope, result in oral work of the kind required in second language learning getting the attention it deserves.

APPENDIX

THE ENGLISH EXAMINATION OF THE ETHIOPIAN SCHOOL LEAVING CERTIFICATE 1968

A/ Structure Paper (2 hours)

i. Slashed sentences on structure and usage.

(Example: In most of the following sentences there are mistakes of grammar (but none of spelling, punctuation or capitalisation). In the blank at the left, write the letter of that part of the sentence in which the mistake occurs. If there is no mistake in the sentence, place E in the blank.

.....There[A] were no any/letters[B] for me/ when I went[C] to the post office/ before coming back[D] to school this afternoon.

ii. Slashed sentences on mechanics.

iii. Constructed response questions. This short section will consist of sentences, each of which contains a blank. The context will determine what word is to be added. The needed word will be an article, a conjunction, or an auxiliary verb. Students write the word in a blank at the left of the sentence.

iv. Multiple-choice questions on structure and usage.

(Example:

.....She is so old.....

a. that she will never get married.

b. enough that she will never get married.

c. so that she will never get married.

d. to never get married.

e. for never to get married.

B/ Comprehension and Controlled Essay Paper ($1\frac{1}{2}$ hours)

i. Comprehension and vocabulary questions based on two prose passages.

ii. Questions designed to test the student's ability to understand the meaning of individual sentences.

iii. A piece of controlled writing. Students will have to supply appropriate prepositions, conjunctions, articles, tenses, etc.

In each case only one answer will be possible. The entire passage is to be written out in longhand.

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6. Rebecca M Valette : Modern Language Testing : A Handbook (Harcourt, Brace and World) 1967

B/ Articles

1. Ronald Forrest : 'English Language Teaching Versus the Examiners' in English Language Teaching Vol XXII No. 2 January 1968
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5. David Shillan : 'Fresh Thinking About Oral Examinations' in English Language Teaching Vol XVIII No. 3 April 1964