Designing a Syllabus-Based Formal English Test for Non-English Major College Students in Vietnam

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Abstract

This article describes the process of designing a syllabus-based formal English test for Information Technology major freshmen at a university in Vietnam. The following factors are taken into consideration by the test makers: (1) candidates and assessment context, (2) type and purpose of the assessment, (3) task-types, (4) marking scheme, (5) qualities of test usefulness, (6) backwash, and (7) communicative functions.

Keywords: Language assessment, Syllabus-based test, English test, Non-native English learner, Vietnam

Introduction

Language testing and assessment is a crucial part of language education as it can facilitate the tracking of learning progress and providing feedback to improve both learning and teaching (Michell & Davison, 2020; Poehner & Inbar-Lourie, 2020). In Vietnam, the English language has enjoyed its unrivaled and undisputed position as the first most important foreign language which has been taught at every level of education (Nguyen, 2017). Our primary concern is that not all Vietnamese EFL teachers adhere to international standards in test development and quality control. This paper, therefore, provides an example of essential aspects that EFL teachers should take into account when developing a syllabus-based formal English test.

1. Candidates and Assessment Context
A. Characteristics of Candidates
Personal Characteristics

The test takers are the first year Information Technology major students at a local university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. They are all Vietnamese citizens and non-native speakers of English, from eighteen to twenty-two years of age, and from variety of social classes and educational backgrounds. These learners have done different kinds of English tests (listening, speaking, reading, and writing tests).

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Topical Knowledge

The test takers have relatively diverse topical knowledge due to their different social classes and educational backgrounds. In addition, the course has helped these students be versed in everyday situations and various topics such as school, social life, weather, food, travel, vehicles, work and leisure.

General Levels and Profiles of Language Knowledge of Test Takers

The test takers' levels of English proficiency range from Beginner/Elementary to Pre-Intermediate. Generally, these students have little knowledge of English. A great number of them spend more time learning vocabulary and grammar than practising the four basic skills. Most of them regard listening as the biggest challenge in mastering the target language.

Possible Affective Responses to Taking Test

The students will feel comfortable with the test since it is based on the textbook they have been using (New Interchange Book 1, from unit eight to unit sixteen). The contemporary topics introduced in these units are of high interest and relevance to both students and teachers (such as future plans, describing people, and computers). Furthermore, the students have been familiar with the types of similar test tasks in the first eight units in the coursebook.

B. Assessment Context

Institution and Syllabus

The syllabus has been carefully designed and revised by the faculty members including two foreign Assistant Professors and twenty Vietnamese lecturers, who had been trained in English language testing and evaluation. They also have hands-on experience in developing English tests. Only the Dean has authority to approve the syllabus and select good tests for final examinations at the end of each course.

The syllabus covers the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) as well as improving pronunciation, grammar knowledge and building vocabulary. However, the focus is on listening and speaking, and other elements (reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary) provide support for this emphasis. Especially, the listening tasks in the syllabus enable learners to identify purposes for listening and bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world.

After every eight units, the teacher will evaluate the students' progress and decide if any areas need improvement by using tests developed by himself/herself. The teacher only tests what the students have actually learned and practiced in the set of eight units. In other words, only items actively presented and practiced in the textbook (New Interchange Book 1) are tested.

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Each test lasts approximately 45-60 minutes, including listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary knowledge test items. The evaluation of students' oral and writing skills is separately conducted at another time.

Courtesy: https://www.abebooks.com/
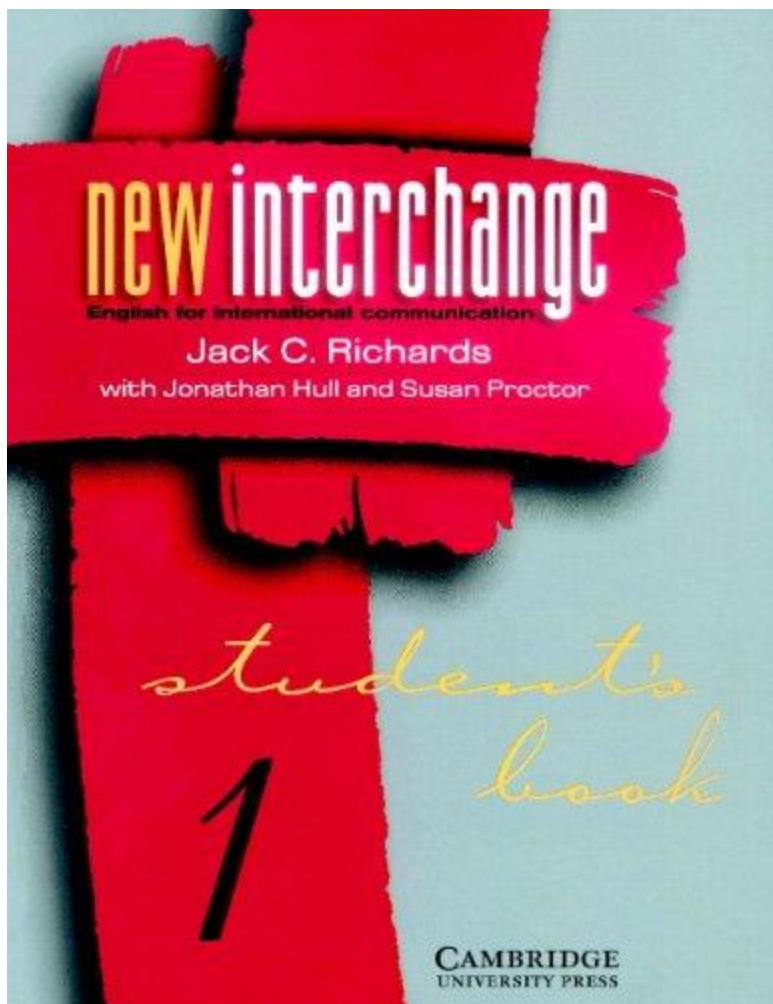
Textbook

New Interchange Book 1 is the textbook on which the test is based. Generally, it is designed for students at pre-intermediate level. The book takes learners through all four English language skills (both productive and receptive ones). However, it emphasizes the Communicative Language Learning by providing a great number of listening and speaking activities. These activities aim to help the students feel confident with their English for use in different everyday situations.

2. Type and Purpose of the Assessment

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The type of the assessment we design is the *summative assessment* which takes place at the end of the course. The purpose is to help teachers (1) track their students' learning progress, (2) check on the mastery of what their students have been taught on specific areas of learning (listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary), and (3) find out the students' strengths and weaknesses as well. The teachers can use the information got from the evaluation to develop future lesson plans to help their students attain the desired outcomes as mentioned in the syllabus.

3. Task-types

Bachman and Palmer (1996) assert that the types of tasks that are included in language tests are very important. We are clearly aware that the way we test language ability affects how our students perform on language tests and hence the quality of the information obtained from our tests.

The test includes three main sections: listening, reading, and grammar and vocabulary. These sections are reported on separate scales so the score on each part is also reported separately. Different task-types based on the topics introduced in the textbook are included in the test.

The listening section lasts about 30 minutes, including time for pauses:

Part	Task Type	No	Task format
A	True/False	10	Test-takers listen to the conversation about people's future plans and answer True/ False questions on the content. Ex: 1. Charlie doesn't want to make future plans. T/ F 2. Charlie wants to buy a new sports car. T/ F 3. Charlie doesn't like a Trans Am. T/F
B	Multiple choice statement completion	5	Test- takers listen to people talking about distance and measurements, and then answer multiple choice questions on the content by choosing the correct information. Ex: New Zealand has lots of _____. a. Deserts b. Farms and mountains c. Rivers and canals
C	Multiple choice questions	5	Test-takers listen to people describing 5 people, and then answer multiple-choice comprehension questions by selecting the best answer.

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		Ex: 1. What does Brian look like?
		a. Brian's pretty tall with long brown hair and a moustache.
		b. Brian's pretty tall with dark brown hair and a moustache.
		c. Brian's pretty tall with dark gray hair and a moustache.

The listening tasks are played twice because the questions ask for details. The texts are clearly and carefully scripted. The recordings are also carefully prepared. There are 20 items/questions in the listening section, and there are only two or three responses to each question.

The second section of the test is reading. Students are asked to read a short text, and then complete sentences by answering multiple-choice items. The following example is taken from the reading section:

Below is an article with incomplete sentences. For each numbered blank space you will see four corresponding responses, marked a, b, c, and d. Choose the best answer to complete each sentence.

Computers are being used with a program (1) _____ to make better use of the Earth's resources.
1. a. described   b. designed   c. fitted   d. reviewed

This type of task is chosen because the topic "*computers*" is of great interest and relevance to the students. The article is adopted from an authentic material and the understanding of the text is crucial to the students majored in Information Technology.

The third section of the test is grammar and vocabulary. The multiple-choice grammar items are written in four different ways. (1) The first type is the incomplete statement. In this task type, each incomplete item is followed by four multiple-choice options. It is an efficient way to test grammar. The following example item is taken from the grammar section:

My brother is _____ his twenties.
a. at   b. in   c. on   d. for

(2) The second task type is considered to be useful for testing short answers and responses.

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> What does your friend look like?
> a. No, he doesn't.
> b. Yes, he does.
> c. She's short.
> d. She likes cats.

(3) The third item type is to check the students' understanding of grammar rules. This task type requires knowledge of some particular syntax that is necessary for understanding of a sentence.

> He began learning English 2 years ago.
> a. He had learned English for 2 years.
> b. He has learned English for 2 years.
> c. He has learned English since 2 years.
> d. He learned English for 2 years.

(4) The last task type is the multiple-choice vocabulary items. The students are expected to choose the best answer which has the most similar meaning to the underlined words or phrase.

> "Where are you going? I'll **give you a lift**."
> a. take you in my car   b. follow you
> c. lift you up   d. give you my car

4. Marking Scheme

As mentioned before, although the course covers all four skills, particular emphasis is placed on listening and speaking. Because speaking and writing tests are carried out separately, the assessment focuses on the listening skill. Other parts (reading, grammar and vocabulary) just support the listening section. Hence, the weight of each area is as follows - listening: 40%, reading: 20%, grammar: 20%, and vocabulary: 20%.

Marking is one of the most time-consuming parts of many teachers' jobs (Harris & McCann, 1994). To make the marking procedure less time-consuming but still objective and reliable, the test developers choose only two task types that are true/false items and multiple choice questions. The correct answers to these question types are unique.

The test makers do not take part in the marking procedure. All responses are scored by other teachers in the faculty after they are supplied with the marking keys by the test developers. This makes sure that the responses are scored consistently and reliably.

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5. Qualities of Test Usefulness

Reliability

As mentioned before, the teachers also use the results of the language test to make decisions about individuals. However, these decisions have relatively minor impacts on the individuals or the program and can generally be reserved quite easily. Therefore, minimum acceptable level for reliability can be quite low.

Referring to reliability, the first thing to consider is the testing environment. It can be said that there will be no variation in setting. The time at which the test is administered is at the end of the eighth week of the course. All administrations of the tests are carried out in the same setting. Noise level is always very low. Temperature and humidity are comfortable. Seating conditions are individual chairs. Lighting is always well lit. Materials and equipment are familiar to students: pens, pencils, paper, and copy of test questions. Those who are involved in administering the test are not always familiar to the test takers and must be trained for proctoring. When carrying out the assessment, the proctors always make sure that the students can not copy or help each other, because the performance of each individual learner is being tested.

In addition, clear and explicit instructions are provided. The instructions are presented both in the target language (in written English) and in Vietnamese orally to insure that the students understand them thoroughly. The text is presented via a video tape player, so the instructions would be also presented on the tape. Because the test includes multiple parts, a set of both specific and general instructions is provided.

<u>**PART 1**</u>: **LISTENING** (40 marks)
A. Listening to the conversation about people's future plans, and circle True (T) or False (F). (20 marks)
B. Listen to people talking about distance and measurements. Check (√) the correct information. (10 marks)
C. Listen to people describing 5 people. Choose the best answer. (10 marks)

<u>**PART 2**</u>: **READING** (20 marks) Below is an article with incomplete sentences. For each numbered blank space you will see four corresponding responses, marked a, b, c, and d. Choose the best answer to complete each sentence.

<u>**PART 3: GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY**</u> (40 marks)
A. Grammar (20 marks) Circle the response of your choice**.**
B. Vocabulary (20 marks) Choose the best answer which has the most similar meaning to the underlined words or phrase.

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The above instructions are efficient and effective because they are simple and short enough for test takers to understand and are sufficiently detailed for test takers to know exactly what they are expected to do.

In terms of structure, the test is well laid out and legible. The presented items are unambiguous. The most important thing is that the students have been familiar with the format and test techniques after taking the end-of-first-eight-units tests. Hughes (2002, p. 36) asserts that "the more items that you have on a test, the more reliable the test will be." However, it is a fact that we can not cover all items. One thing to bear in mind is that there are three main parts in the test (listening, reading, and grammar-and-vocabulary), the additional items are independent of each other and each additional item represents a fresh start for the candidate. The amount time allotted for the entire test is forty-five minutes which is considered to be enough for them to do.

For high scorer reliability, detailed and carefully constructed scoring keys are provided. As mentioned before, we use items that permit an objective procedure. They are quick and easy to score. Moreover, they can be scored consistently and reliably. The responses are scored by some different markers who do not teach the test-takers. The scores then will be passed to the Dean to investigate their reliability. In addition, the identification of test-takers is only made through numbers and codes, which is of high reliability.

Validity

In terms of validity, the test has content validity in some aspects. First of all, the test development is based on a carefully designed TOS (Table of Specifications) or the task specifications. The language ability construct for this test is clearly and unambiguously defined and relevant to the purpose of the test. The construct definition constitutes a representative sample of the listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary test, in which it focuses on listening (the listening test score: 40% out of 100%; meanwhile, reading: 20%, grammar: 20%, and vocabulary: 20%).

As all the tasks are taken and edited from the course book, this test is obviously consistent with what the syllabus intends to cover. However, there are so many things for the specification of skills (that the syllabus intends to cover) to appear in such a test. Therefore, we should accept a fact that the designed test tasks may be short but complex enough to allow the test takers to demonstrate their language ability in some aspects, and the responses are likely to reveal areas ignored in teaching and learning. The most important thing is that main areas identified in the syllabus are presented in the test. Such a test is likely to have a beneficial backwash.

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6. Backwash

Backwash is the effect that a test has on teaching and learning. This test is believed to cause a positive backwash effect on the students' learning. At the beginning of the course, we always tell our students how we are going to test them. It is also clear to them that the test would reflect what we are doing in the class. Moreover, the test would be used after every eight units and would assess students' learning listening and reading skills, as well as grammar and vocabulary.

This test also helps enhance learner autonomy. The students are encouraged to take charge of their own learning. The test helps them adjust their personal goals by identifying their strengths and weaknesses. For example, one student might note that he could have missed important grammar knowledge or productive vocabulary items through the test, and then he would know where he needs to improve.

In addition, the test helps the teachers specify their language teaching results, as well as their students' strengths and weaknesses. For example, through the test result analysis, we identify that many students have problems with not only their listening skills but also the use of articles, tenses (simple present, simple past and present perfect), and word-choice. Our future teaching and learning plan will tackle the genuine problems taken from the test results.

7. Communicative Functions

The main goal of the assessment is to test the students' communicative competence. Therefore, the test items reflect the target language use in communicative contexts rather than in isolation. Nevertheless, the assessment does not engage students in communicative activities in some measure.

As mentioned before, the primary goal of the course is to teach students how to use English in everyday situations and needs. Therefore, the designed test deals with contemporary topics which are of high interest and relevance to both students and teachers. The tasks related to *school*, *work*, *leisure*, and *social life* are designed to bridge the gap between the classroom and the real life.

Furthermore, tasks adapted from authentic sources are used to develop receptive skills (listening and reading). For example, the reading task about *computers*, which emphasizes the correct understanding of the context, is closely related to both the students' major and the testing of terminology.

The grammar and vocabulary points are also extracted in communicative situations. It means that the test generally tests the students' grammar and vocabulary knowledge in situations

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where it is needed. However, it does not mean that the assessment tends to be completely communicative. The language assessment involves testing out hypotheses about how the language works. In testing these hypotheses, the students tend to rely more on grammatical and lexical explanations than others.

Conclusion

The test makers adhere to international standards in the test development and quality control. Hopefully, this paper is helpful for not only teachers of English in Vietnam but also other English teachers who need to design syllabus-based tests for their non-native English learners.

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