

## INTRINSICALLY MOTIVATING INTERACTIVE TESTING AND E-TESTING AS INDISPENSABLE COMPONENTS OF A COMMUNICATIVE CURRICULUM

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**Abstract:** The present paper deals with applying ICT to university education in order to increase undergraduates' motivation for systematic work, the role of testing in a communicative curriculum, formal and informal testing, traditional paper and pencil tests, intrinsically motivating interactive tests and e-tests, and creating a coherent testing and evaluation system which would help to stimulate undergraduates towards achieving top results in the English language throughout the study. It also shows the importance to teachers of being aware of an e-testing technique which gives useful information to both the teacher and the undergraduates. By using this technique teachers can increase quality of university education, evaluate teaching effectiveness, measure or judge undergraduates' language competence, promote their autonomy as they confirm areas of strength and areas of needing further work, and, simultaneously, undergraduates can evaluate their progress, set goals for themselves, both before and after a test, do improvements, and build their confidence.

**Key words:** formal vs. informal testing, intrinsically motivating interactive tests, e-tests

### Introduction

Being able to speak English well is seen as a necessary instrument for everyone in a democratic society who wants to move beyond their particular national boundaries. Undergraduates from the largest technical university in Slovakia – Slovak University of Technology, Faculty of Materials Science and Technology study the English language as a compulsory subject for four terms. Due to their different levels of language competence they have to take placement tests, designed in accordance with the *Global Scale* within the *Common European Framework of Reference*, in the first term of their study. They enter the online testing system to be tested and according to their results groups of undergraduates with similar language competence are organized and, consequently, divided into three modules. Depending on the level at which they study, methods of assessment may include a combination of written examination and coursework during the course such as written assignments, extended essays, e-tests and oral, poster and PowerPoint presentations.

## **1 Applying ICT to university education**

To apply ICT to university education successfully, pedagogy has to be put first, technology second. Experienced, enthusiastic and highly motivated teachers look at the teaching practices around them, identify the weakest points, and try to discover how ICT could address these. One of the weakest points in the teaching at most universities is the use of lecturing or conducting seminars with a large number of undergraduates. The common diagnosis of what is weak in this method is the lack of interactivity. We experience this as a feeling that we cannot get any discussion or practice going and so lose much sense of how well the material is going over. A more theoretical view is that because no overt response is required of undergraduates, little mental processing in fact takes place, and hence little learning.

An important case with a highly developed method of proved efficacy in learning English is that of interactive engagement via technology. A multimedia application aimed directly at this gap is the use of the Academic Information System which enables undergraduates to work hard so as to make progress and to be in constant interaction with their teachers.

## **2 Teaching and testing in English language seminars**

In some ways teaching and testing are so interwoven and interdependent that it is difficult to tease them apart. Every instructional sequence has a testing component to it, whether the tests themselves are formal or informal. Whenever an undergraduate responds to a question or tries out a new structure, we test that undergraduate. In our English language seminars we test undergraduates informally as they actually perform the behaviour itself and we also give them praise for strengths as well as constructive criticism of weaknesses. Written work is a test, oral work is a test, reading and speaking performance are tests. How, then, are teaching and testing different (Brown, 2001)?

### *2.1 Formal vs. informal testing*

The difference between testing and teaching lies in what we call formal and informal testing. The above examples referred to informal testing: unplanned assessments that are made as a course moves along toward its goals. Most informal testing is what testing experts call formative evaluation: assessing undergraduates in the process of 'forming' their competences and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth process. Our

success as teachers is greatly dependent on this constant informal assessment for it tells us how well undergraduates are progressing toward goals and what the next step in the learning process might be. Formal tests are exercises specifically designed to tap into an extensive storehouse of skills and knowledge, usually within a relatively short time limit. They are systematic, planned sampling techniques constructed to give teacher and undergraduate an appraisal, as it were, of their achievement. Such tests are summative, as they occur at the end of a term, and therefore attempt to measure, or summarize, what an undergraduate has grasped (Brown, 2001).

Apart from informal assessing the undergraduates we also create intrinsically motivating tests which involve them in cooperative group preparation. They embrace the test as a valid and fair means of measuring their competence. It brings out their best performance, not their worst. It has authentic tasks and provides optimal feedback to them. When creating intrinsically motivating tests we follow four major principles: the principle of giving undergraduates advance preparation, the principle of face validity, the principle of authenticity and the principle of 'washback' (Brown, 2001).

### **3 Types of formal tests**

Tests are a way of life in the educational world. In every learning experience there comes a time to pause and take stock, to put the focal processes to their best use and to demonstrate – either to self or others – accumulated skills or knowledge. Tests can serve positive, intrinsically motivating aims as they spur undergraduates to muster all of their abilities for a particular performance and then provide feedback on their progress toward goals (Brown, 2001). We state that it is obvious that tests have a useful place in an interactive, communicative curriculum. Tests need not violate any of the principles of cooperation and student-centeredness. They in fact become indispensable components of a curriculum which aid learning in a number of ways.

Students are usually given a general 'grade' which shows their ability in English. This does not really tell either the teacher or the student very much unless they know exactly what the grade is based on. It is not very useful to talk in general about 'ability in English': one student may be very good at listening but bad at writing; another student may speak fluently but make many grammatical mistakes, and so on. So, in order to comment on a student's progress, we need to test particular skills and abilities by means of different types of tests.

### *3.1 Traditional paper and pencil multiple choice tests*

As our undergraduates progress through the various courses, they are usually given formal paper and pencil tests at the end of a term or before starting a new course. Creating tests that are constructive instruments of feedback takes some care and effort on our part (Doff, 1988). To understand the role of traditional tests we provide basic definitions:

- placement tests are designed to help us decide what textbook we should use with a particular group of students
- diagnostic tests are intended to learn what further remedial teaching is necessary; they also identify undergraduates' strengths and weaknesses
- achievement tests are directly related to language courses and their purpose is to establish how successful students, study groups or the courses themselves have been in achieving objectives. Periodic achievement tests are a very effective way of tracking students' progress and achievements (Donna, 2000).

Frequent testing and evaluation give our undergraduates a sense of achievement and prepares them for difficult exams such as writing proficiency tests which are designed to measure their ability in language regardless of any training they may have had in that language. They are based on the specification of what the candidate has to be able to do in the language in order to be proficient.

### *3.2 E-tests*

The E-learning Projects application in the Academic Information System is used to register and create materials for the e-learning courses. It is a kit of designer's tool to support the development of the electronic study documents, e-tests and other e-learning materials. We participated in several E-learning projects in order to provide undergraduates with supporting material and e-tests. When creating e-tests we carefully list everything that we think our students should 'know' or be able to 'do' based on the material that they are responsible for (Kováčová, Záhonová, 2009). By means of them we test language – grammar, vocabulary and spelling – to find out what they have learnt. It is very easy to test grammar – there are definite answers, marking is easy, etc. Because of this it is very common for 'writing' tests to focus on grammar. Our e-tests focus on grammar and vocabulary; but if we expect our students to

develop the ability to understand and use English, it is important to test skills as well as knowledge of the language.

After logging in the AIS, they can register to be tested. Their answers in e-tests are displayed and the final results appear automatically. Registered students can only take the test once to guarantee the required validity, objectivity and practicability, while respecting user-friendliness, time effectiveness and learner autonomy.

The two main reasons for giving undergraduates e-tests are: the need to give them confidence to continue learning. Therefore, our e-tests appear regularly: after every unit and they test only the material that has been presented in that unit. What is more, we test it in such a way that the students should get most of the answers correct if they have studied the material adequately. The purpose is not to show them how much there is still to learn but to demonstrate that systematic work brings benefits. If they work systematically, they will get higher marks on the tests.

## **Conclusion**

We create traditional tests and e-tests that have a carefully constructed and well thought-out format, items in them are clear and uncomplicated, directions are crystal clear, tasks are familiar and relate to undergraduates' course work. Regular tests are learning devices through which they can receive a diagnosis of areas of strength and weakness. Their incorrect responses become windows of insights about further work. They also encourage students to take their learning seriously, and give them a series of definite goals to aim towards. We provide our students with e-tests in order to prepare them for final term testing in the test conditions that bring their best performance.

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