BOOK REVIEWS

NELSON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTS
(4 vols: Text Books 1, 2 and 3 + Teachers Book)
W. S. Fowler and Norman Coe
Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd, 1976

Both teachers and administrators usually view test-writing as the bane of their existence. It is a time-consuming activity that often as not results in a less than satisfactory, if not totally useless product. Help in this bothersome, if indispensable, area is most welcome.

Fowler and Coe present a battery of 50-item multiple-choice tests, covering structure, vocabulary and pronunciation. The 40-test battery is divided into ten sets of four tests, each of which is "related to what an average student can be expected to cover" in a 50-hour block over a range of 50 to 500 class-hours. The components of each set are deemed to be "of equivalent difficulty."

Basically, only three types of items are used in all of these 40- to 50-minute tests. Structural and lexical items are tested in fill-ins, either in single sentences or in continuous prose passages. "Idioms" are tested by asking the students to choose a synonymous phrase; pronunciation, by asking him to identify rhymes, or homonyms which are suggested in crossword-puzzle- like synonym/definitions. Each item type is used in varying degrees, according to the testing level.

According to the authors, the tests are suitable for placement, diagnosis and/or progress evaluation. They suggest that they might also be made a part of end-of-course examinations, although they wisely indicate that this kind of exam "should normally consist of more than one type of test." A chart is given to show how, for placement purposes, the tests might be related to any particular school's program, with special emphasis on those that are keyed to the Cambridge First Certificate and Proficiency levles. Progress evaluation (as well as program-success or - consistency evaluation) is made possible by tests' sequential nature. The authors have supplied another chart that shows the relationship between adjacent-level tests, thus increasing the battery's usefulness in cross-course testing.

Like all examinations of the multiple-choice type, these tests exclude any evaluation of certain language skills, most notably those directly concerned with production (speaking and composition), as well as aural comprehension to a large degree. Reading skills, in the fullest sense, are also left for other exams.

The pre-testing has, as the authors claim, produced unambiguous items (the greatest pit-fall in multiple--choice tests) in the majority of those items aimed at structure. Whether weaknesses are to be found in the "lexical" items or not, would depend largely on what any given group of students has been taught, just as it would for "idiom" items. Besides those items that might have to be eliminated because of the nature of a specific program, some should probably be eliminated on general grounds for students trained from a textbook that emphasizes American English, especially if the majority of their teachers have used, or emphasized, that same dialect, as well. Other items that might well have to be eliminated, or edited, depending on the students' training, are those like (Test 450B, item 40):

He ..... his engagement just before the wedding.

A. broke out of B. broke away from
C. broke off D broke up

Both the British and American native speaker would choose "C. broke off" as the obvious answer. Nonetheless, the item evaluates, more than anything else, the non- native's familiarity and experience with most frequent usage, not his understanding of particular lexical items. Although GROUPS are broken away from, ENGAGEMENTS (=pre-marriage contracts) are broken off, but other ENGAGEMENTS (=appointments or pre-marriage contracts) are simply broken, and MARRIAGES are broken up (whether by a spouse or by a third party). Almost any form of CONFINEMENT (?=an engagement) is broken out of. Unless the non-native student has had considerable meaningful experience with these differences, he might easily find that the messages communicated by answers C and D, and possibly even A, were the same. If that same student had been encouraged to interpret meaning from inherent clues, the item could easily be considered unreasonable. If the item was aimed at testing control (production) of common vocabulary, it would seem that other vocabulary related to socially significant relationships could have been found.

From this same point of view, both types of pronunciation items are very weak, unless the examinee has been consistently trained by teachers highly proficient in Received Pronunciation. Again, both the British and American native speaker would agree that the non-rhyme is found in D of the sequence (Example throughout):

A. go B. So C. show D. do

but no such agreement is possible for (test 250C, item 45):

A. force B. sauce C. horse D. worse

which, for many American-English speakers, has only one rhyme (force/horse). Sauce would most often be pronounce with [a] or occasionally with American-dialect [ɔ]. Worse would most often be pronounced as [wrs].

The homonym exercises (a good deal more difficult because they require imagination) offer no reprieve. The sample used throughout the tests for this type of exercise is as good an illustration as any. The student is expected to choose the item that refers to a homonym of the headword.

STALK

A. fixed
B. a bird
C. compartment for an animal
D. supply in store

Most American-dialect speakers --who do not use [ɔ]--would choose "D. supply in store" (=stock); those who do use [ɔ] (but only if they are avid collectors of esoterical) might choose "B. a bird" (=auk) which would be the correct answer for the purposes of the test, even though the authors had "B. a bird" (=stork) in mind.

Nevertheless, both the rhyming and homonym exercises (judiciously used) are excellent ones that could easily be adapted for classroom, if not test, use.

The structural items seem to be the ones that could be used with the least editing although, again, each test should be carefully checked. The single-sentence items are of the standard

type used in literally hundred of tests and, as such, offer many of the same problem points. "Eye-tricks" (e.g. Jim's hat vs Jims' hat vs Jims hat) make for more or less reasonable items for courses that put a heavy emphasis on spelling. If the student has been given a heavy dose of oral work, and little or no spelling, these items are objectionable. Punctuation tricks, such as (Test 100 A, item 2):

Kate .....

A. gave to Peter the pen
B. gave the pen to Peter
C. give to Peter the pen
D. give the pen to Peter

rely on the student's not reading a comma into the item (again, quite possible for the student well-taught in an oral course), to read "Kate, give the pen to Peter."

One of my own pet peeves appears occasionally, as in (Test 100 A, item 1):

There are ..... in the classroom, but only one teacher.

A. many people B. much pupils
C. a lot of people D. a lot of pupils

The assumption that only pupils, and never people (="just folks") can be in a classroom with a teacher seems to me totally unwarranted, especially if one considers the average PTA meeting in any school in any country.

Another type of item that would have to be considered in the light of what the student has truly been taught is exemplified in (Test 050 B, item 47):

140 is .....

A. One hundred forty B. one hundred fourteen
C. one hundred and forty D. one hundred and fourteen

for which there is no general agreement among natives as to which (A or C) is "correct." Personally, I would have missed this item because I was taught, years ago, that "one hundred and forty" was a barbarism.

The continuous prose passages are a particularly good idea for this kind of test, although I think they would be better presented in an "exploded" format, i.e. with the choices presented at the point in the text where one of them should appear, rather than in a separate section of the page, below the text itself. In my own practice sessions, I found that the format was both confusing and exhausting. Some of these exercises are much better written than others, of course, and I think that the tests would be better served if the number of choices per passage were reduced, to prefer those that would require the student to use the passage's context to make his decision. As they stand, many of the items I checked are not substantially different from the single-sentence ones.

These tests should, I think be most useful to program coordinators, in that they offer already pre-tested examinations related to a known standard (Cambridge) which can be both administered and scored quickly and easily. When used to test very large groups, they would need little or no editing, since scores could be judged relatively. For the classroom teacher, or administrator, faced with writing a test that will be applied to a small group (or a test that will effect the students' course grades), the tests seem to be more promising as occasional sources of test sections or, more often, as sources of individual test items. In all cases, these tests, like all tests, should be judged very carefully against what the student has actually been taught; "what the average student can be expected to cover" is much too loose a term for most purposes.

Harold Ormsby L.

Centro Mexicano Americano
de Cultura del Valle, A.C.
Mexico City