Improving the Freshman English Placement Test (FEPT): Incorporating New Technology

Phillip D. Barkman, Asia University

The purpose of this paper is to examine the improvements made to the Asia University Freshman English Placement Test, hereafter FEPT, and to consider proposals for its further development.

INTRODUCTION

The foremost strategy before measuring the validity of the FEPT is to improve the aesthetics of the test to ensure that when validity is measured, it is accurate. The goal here is to ensure that the appearance of the test itself is not a distracter.

The current FEPT, which has been used for the past seven years, had a number of problems that needed to be addressed. First of all, the pictures in the current test looked like they were several generations old as a result of multiple copying. It was hard for students to recognize the details of some photos.

The second obvious improvement needed was the audio portion of the test. The audio for the current FEPT was recorded in 1997 on regular audiotape, which is showing its wear from time and is not a crisp recording. Another factor for changing the audio is the fact that the audio is not recorded in a uniform manner. There were many different speeds, unnaturally fast as well as unnaturally slow, at which the student had to listen for information. The FEPT is primarily designed to place lower-level students, which make up the majority of the incoming freshman, rather than higher-level students.

With these two major improvements needed, it became clear that the project of revising the FEPT would be a multi-year undertaking with several different phases. With a long-term vision of making the FEPT computer based, all revisions would need to be digital. This will be discussed later. Phase one included updating the photos and entering the test questions in digital format. Phase two, implemented in 2004, included re-recording the audio portion of the FEPT.

Phase One:

The first phase for the revision was to improve the picture quality in the current test as well as putting the entire test in digital format. The pictures used in the listening portion of the original test were processed on an Apple computer. The backed up data disks, which contained the original photos, were saved using an obsolete program. Since we were unable to retrieve the original photos, it became necessary to retake the pictures.

With more powerful software, it appeared that this task would not be difficult. The first thing we did was to take a series of photos, download them onto the computer, print out the test pages and then have them photocopied. This was done to test the contrast of the photo to ensure that the details come through clearly.

Another task we faced was the placement and appearance of the photos on the page. We decided to make all the photos uniform in size as to not bring attention to any particular photo and skew the test results as well as for aesthetic considerations. Our goal was to give all the photos in the test uniform lighting. This was a challenge because many of the photos were taken in different lighting conditions. With several different individuals taking photos, it was necessary to draw up the following guidelines to ensure uniform picture quality.
• Turn off date/time function on camera.
• Beware of reflections – choose a non-reflective surface to photograph small objects. For example, the tabletops in the outer office give off a lot of reflective glare. Perhaps lay down some non-reflective paper. Also the wall in the eraser photo is giving off a lot of glare and there is a ring of shadow around the eraser.
• Beware of shadows. Dark shadows around an object like an eraser might cause problems in a photocopied image.
• Focus – Beware of blurring in some parts of the image as this might photocopy badly. Give special attention to the details of the picture so they are clear.
• Lighting – Overhead lights, flash, or too much light can all cause image problems.
• The highest resolution setting should be used.
• Dark backgrounds may show up as black in a photocopy. The table on which the clock photos were taken came out very dark and needed much correction using Photoshop.
• Tripods can be useful. Several are available for use.
• Whenever possible, take all the pictures connected to one question at the same time, so that light conditions come out as uniformly as possible.
• For clocks, use a large clock from the supply cabinet that is not satellite calibrated.

The other part of Phase One was putting the entire test in digital format. For this we selected Adobe Pagemaker 6.0 for its ability to align the pictures and text.

Phase Two:

The second phase for the revision was to re-record the audio portion of the FEPT. As mentioned, the current recording was inconsistent throughout in regards to speed and clarity. To keep with the original goal of putting the entire FEPT test in digital format, the recording was completed on MD. Recording the audio on MD not only resulted in a superior quality to cassette, but it also provided the correct format, which would enable editing on a computer. This will be especially useful for future revisions.

A number of Visiting Faculty Members (VFM’s) participated in the recording process. The VFM’s involved represented Australia, Ireland, and various accents found in North America. Given that many of our students are interested in global business and international relations, we thought it advisable to include English accents from around the world and not just one region.

PROPOSAL FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

As a proposal, it would be advantageous to completely computerize the FEPT to be administered in the language and computer labs of Asia University. The following are examples of what could be accomplished by doing so.

• Photos in the listening portion of the FEPT would be color photos, not black and white photocopied prints where contrast and clarity may be compromised.
• Students could use headphones to listen to the audio portion of the test, eliminating numerous distractions including incorrect volume and outside noise. Incorrect
volume affects the test when the student is either sitting too close or too far from the
speaker and may affect the test score.

- Dummy questions being tested for validity could be added to or deleted from any
  point in the test. Inserting dummy questions into different parts of the test disguises
  the identity of these questions. Dummy questions in the FEPT could be tested for
  both the quality of the question as well as the distracters. Such questions would be
  omitted in the grading process.
- Question ordering could be different. Three or four different versions would be used
to cut down on cheating i.e. students sitting next to each other working at the same
pace would be on different questions.
- Any question or distracter in the question could easily be changed. Changes in the
current paper test require the whole test to be recopied, that’s 1500 tests 35 pages each.
- The reading/grammar portion of the test could incorporate video so students would
experience a virtual situation both visually and aurally.
- Results would be calculated efficiently using an entirely paper free electronic process.
This would eliminate answer sheets and allow for initial placement of students the
same day. The elimination of answer sheets would streamline the process, which
currently includes sorting by academic major and student I.D. number, transporting
boxes of answer sheets between several buildings, and involves numerous university
faculty and staff from several departments. This process takes about 24-36 hours to
complete.

By utilizing new technological advancements, the entire placement process at Asia
University could be greatly enhanced.