Computerization and Administration of the Paper-and-Pen Version of the Oxford Quick Placement Test with Recommendations for the Assessment of L2 Literacy

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Abstract— Korean university EFL students are commonly sorted into classes by L2 aptitude. Here I also needed to screen candidates for interview for Gavin Austin's Australian PhD research project on syntactic, phonological and semantic issues of variability in L2 inflectional morphology. The paper-and-pen Oxford Quick Placement Test was adapted to computer-based online-hosted testing using FSCreations ExamView software and their EV Learning and Test Center host site. Problems with host site access led to conversion of the test for hosting on www.Ninehub.com using the popular computer-based leaning management system Moodle. Tests were administered to 317 sophomore students, to obtain suitable research subjects and to encourage general student L2 digital literacy. Difficulties with ExamView led to the conversion to Moodle, and administering of the test on the Ninehub site. Strategies for successful implementation of hybrid use of computer-based Learning Management Systems in L2 tertiary education are recommended. Notwithstanding limitations, computer-based L2 aptitude tests have the potential to provide a convenient measure of student progress in developing L2 fluency as a consequence of classes attended. Such tests also offer a more objective and relevant means of teacher/course assessment than student evaluations, which tend to confuse entertainment value and popularity (which are hardly the task universities should be concerned with) with academic credibility and pedagogical effectiveness (which, in these times of global warming, pollution and economic recession, are sorely needed).

Key words: L2 digital literacy, Oxford Quick Placement Test, Moodle, web-hosted, Internet-hosted, computer-based, literacy test, assessment, evaluation, Second Language, CALL, EFL, LMS, ExamView.

I. Introduction

As Second Researcher of Gavin Austin's PhD research project, *"Variability in L2 inflectional morphology: Syntactic, Phonological and Semantic Issues,"* I interviewed sophomore Korean Sejong University students. To screen candidates, I administered the paper-and-pen version of the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), a test of English language proficiency that assesses Reading, Vocabulary and Grammar, which is quick and easy to administer and ideal for placement testing and examination screening (OUP, 2001). I computerized the OQPT in FSCreations ExamView, and administered it online to students. Because of problems of reliability with their online hosting service, leading to its demise, I then computerized the OQPT using the Moodle learning management system, and administered it online to students.

II. The Oxford Quick Placement Test

1. Administering the OQPT

In Fall 2008, to screen students of intermediate L2 English ability level for interview, and to gauge the level of English literacy of my students, I gave my computerized ExamView version of the OQPT test to seven classes of sophomore students, to General English Zone and Sejong Global Articulation Program (SGAP) class students, and to individual Sejong students who had been recommended by other students. In all, 155 students were tested using Part 1 Version 1. Although not needed, Part 2 (Version 1) was administered to 151 students.

In Winter 2008-09, I gave both paper-and-pen version tests to my class of 23 students, and to another class of 14 students. In Spring 2009, I gave my computerized Moodle version of Part 1 of the OQPT to 162 sophomore students, to develop their L2 digital literacy.

2. Structure of the Oxford Quick Placement Test

The OQPT offers two parallel and equivalent versions, to minimize the risk of cheating. Both versions comprise two levels: Part 1 of 40 questions in 20 minutes is taken by all students; Part 2 of 20 questions in 10 minutes is either bundled with Part 1 for all students, or alternatively is given only to higher ability students (as determined by their performance on Part 1), or to those who finish Part 1 relatively quickly. These four OQPT tests are available in both paper-and-pen format, and as computer-based versions (CBT). The CBT tests include listening tasks and are computer-adaptive, so that the computer presents a question and then assesses the student's response. As students progress through the test, the questions are automatically adapted to their ability until a consistent level is identified (OUP, 2009). Therefore, the question order and selection from question banks varies by student and attempt.

3. Envisaged Advantages of Custom Computerizing the OQPT

The advantages to giving these tests by computers using web-based Internet hosting were:
- EFL students would be given a task to develop their L2 digital literacy, a critical part of EFL pedagogy whose significance is not yet generally recognized (Meurant, 2009a);
- the task was included as part of their course, for which credit would be given;
- although scores were kept, course credit was given on an all-or-nothing basis;
- the test could be quickly and conveniently administered and precisely timed;
- by incorporating class rosters, a convenient database would be generated;
- tests were automatically graded, with the score available immediately on completion;
- recording individual responses in the database enabled later analysis of responses; and
- an informed sense could then be obtained of the level of English literacy of students.

III. Custom Computerization of the OQPT in ExamView

My computerized versions of the paper-and-pen tests were for research purposes only, and to respect copyright have not been distributed further. These tests are not computer-adaptive, so differ in structure from the CBT tests. My adaptations strictly follow the order of questions in the paper-and-pen version, where each of four parts becomes progressively more difficult. The selection of questions and question order for all students is fixed; but answer orders (for any one question) are automatically scrambled, and vary for each student attempt.

After OCR processing the scanned OQPT pdf, I corrected the text files produced, and then first computerized the tests using FSCreations ExamView Pro version 5.0 for the Mac, utilizing the Multiple Choice Question format throughout, recreating illustrations as necessary. Minimal necessary changes to the English language instructions were needed to suit the form-based digital environment, so that for each question, students were instructed to choose one letter from a corresponding drop-down menu. The tests were then published to the online ExamView Learning and Test Center hosted by FSCreations, using class rosters. Publication involved setting class passwords, setting time limits on when the test was available, and enabling an electronic timer that limited the duration of test time for each individual.

1. Administration of the ExamView Custom Computerized OQPT and Problems with Hosting

To administer the tests, information sheets were produced in L2 English instructing the students on how to access the correct test, log-in, perform and submit the test. Class tests were scheduled in a computer lab. Online web-based Internet hosting by FSCreations of exams and tasks published with their ExamView Pro software had before provided excellent

and dependable service. However, this time it did not. As normal, I instruct the class on the procedure, and provide the class password for the online test. I then assist individual students to log-in, clarify the means of answering questions, and remind them to click the Grade and Submit button on completion. As this is a Placement test, it is Closed Book, and students may not consult dictionaries or search online resources. The first two exams were held without difficulty, and students readily adapted to the new L2 digital test environment.

But thereafter, the situation rapidly deteriorated. At the start of the third class test, with a class of students seated and ready to commence their task, we found the FSCreations host website to be unavailable, so the task was postponed and the class cancelled. Next period, the fourth test was similarly affected, and the task postponed. A server in Texas, where FSCreations operates, was unavailable (I wondered whether student hacking may have disabled the link), although from other parts of Seoul, access to the host site was still available. This situation continued for several frustrating days, involving other class tests I had scheduled. Urgent emails to FSCreations to reestablish contact were unanswered (and remain so). For the remainder of tasks for the other classes, it was necessary to postpone the online tests until the server came back online, the best part of a week later. But the difficulties were not over.

2. More Problems with the Online-Hosting Service…

I had been preparing other computer-based tasks for my classes, which were also intended to utilize the web-hosting offered by the FSCreations website. Although I could publish these, when I tried to log-in to test them for myself, before giving these tasks to students, I found that I had exceeded my yearly quota of web-hosted exams. While I had been able to publish the exams (without any warning notices), they had not been validated, so could not be used. I tried to increase my subscription, but the information needed to do this was nowhere to be found on their website. Urgent emails requesting attention on this matter were simply ignored.

It was eventually possible to give the online test to all students, by importing student rolls from classes where the test was unavailable, to those classes where it still was, taking care to remain within the numerical limits of students for each test. For other tasks that had been validated, including Final Exams, I considered it prudent to prepare hard-copy versions of the tasks. A quick determination was made as to whether the test site was available, and when it was not, these back-up paper-and-pen versions of the test were instead administered.

3. … and Still More Problems…

I then discovered that their subscriber-based online hosting service was to be discontinued, though no notice of this had been received. This was disastrous. I had built up an extensive library of question banks, tasks and exams that I hoped to re-administer to future classes, or use as the basis for developing new tasks. Had this pedagogical capital become worthless?

It would still be possible to administer these tests by publishing them to a local network for use with the ExamView Player (which I had not before used), but it required the software used to design and publish the test to be of the same platform as the LAN used to administer the test, so I needed to repurchase the software for use on a different operating system. I was not willing to do this because of the planned closure of the web-hosted service.

IV. Exploration of Alternative Solutions and Migration to Moodle

I therefore explored various options, and in part inspired by Sean Smith's blog (Smith, 2008), settled on the open-source learning management system Moodle. In the Spring semester 09 I moved all of my classes to hybrid use of a Moodle site I created and hosted on the

Australian site Ninehub, at http://rmeurant.ninehub.com. This required converting quizzes, exams and the OQPT placement tests from ExamView format to a format suitable for importing into Moodle. Difficulties in transferring questions from ExamView to Moodle were in part initially overcome by manual recreation. However, I have since exported various ExamView questions from Question Banks and imported them into Moodle, and describe this process in detail elsewhere (Meurant, 2009b), where they only require minimal reformatting.

V. Administration of the Moodle Custom Computerized OQPT

In the Spring Semester 2009 I gave Part 1 of the OQPT via Moodle to eight sophomore classes and two SGAP classes, a total of 162 students. Students first need to create a Moodle account on Ninehub and to enroll for a course there, before they can sit specific tests, and for this I chose Email-based self-registration. I made that activity a task, for which they receive credit (although the Instructor can create accounts and enroll students). This task and problems that arose are described elsewhere (Meurant, 2009b), where I also describe problems of access to the hosting site. This Ninehub site later stabilized and proved dependable.

Setting the OQPT as an online task provided an objective measure of English ability. It proved simple to administer, quick (20 minutes for Part 1, and 10 minutes for Part 2 for advanced students only when required), and convenient (a timer on the quiz automatically terminates it for the individual when time from login to the quiz has expired). Computerization avoided lengthy manual grading, and produced digital results, while requiring students to engage with the meta-language involved in sitting the test. In the process, students develop their L2 digital literacy skills (Meurant, 2009a), and learn how to do online tests in English. As the two versions of the test are designed to be equivalent, they could be used to evaluate improvement in L2 English ability from a course, though not designed for such use.

For the placement tests I administered in Moodle, each student could view their score on the test. However, I then gave students an "all-or-nothing" grade for attempting the test, in part to reduce their stress in doing the test. A disadvantage of Moodle over ExamView is that while grading in Moodle shows which questions were answered incorrectly, the instructor can only determine specifically <u>which</u> incorrect answers were chosen by one student at a time. This is limiting, particularly as regards potentially using the quizzes as surveys, where one is interested in all responses, and 'rightness' or 'wrongness' is irrelevant. However in ExamView it is possible to download in class sets the actual answers chosen, so surveys could readily be conducted, or quiz answers rapidly analyzed to determine common mistakes for feedback.

VI. Computer-based Internet-hosted Assessment of L2 Literacy

Assessing L2 Literacy by means of computer-based internet-hosted quizzes offers substantial advantages. Such tests help develop student L2 digital literacy, which is critically needed (Meurant, 2007). Tests can be integrated into comprehensive learning management systems such as Moodle, and administered as class tasks for credit. Administering literacy tests during a course provides a sense of individual and class L2 aptitude, and of the effectiveness of the course in developing such aptitude. The tests are given quickly and efficiently, and are automatically graded, so students learn their score on completion, while teachers can view the scores online in an integrated grading resource, and download results.

But there are limitations to such online testing to evaluate improvement in L2 ability: Access to the online hosting service must be reliable. Students require prior experience in creating an online account, logging in, and undertaking online quizzes. Question types in an online environment are constrained to favor set answers: true/false, multiple choice, multiple response and matching question types, though open-ended and essay-type questions can be set

and quickly graded. It is difficult to prevent students cheating, by improperly accessing online resources, using instant messaging, or SMS texting. Institutional computer facilities are limited, and the inherent clustering of demand for computer labs for exams will likely greatly exceed the supply. Teachers may coach students for tests and invalidate the results. The OQPT is not suited to repeated use as a progress test, as it is not based on a particular course or syllabus; suitable comparative online tests (such as CASEC) are needed. Moodle does not currently support viewing of actual results by class, though this could be fixed through a patch. Finally, ExamView tests can be quickly automatically formatted and printed as paper-and-pen tests, but Moodle does not support paper-and-pen tests (although question banks can be exported).

VII. Conclusion

I have described computerizing the paper-and-pen Oxford Quick Placement Test in ExamView and in Moodle, together with difficulties experienced therein and with online hosting; and recommended strategies for successful implementation of hybrid use of computer-based Learning Management Systems in L2 tertiary education. Reservations include reliability issues of hosting services, student cheating online, and teachers improperly coaching students. Nevertheless, computer-based Internet-hosted L2 aptitude tests have the potential to provide a convenient measure of student progress in developing L2 fluency. Such tests may offer a more objective and relevant means of teacher- and course-assessment than student evaluations, which tend to confuse entertainment value and popularity (which are hardly the task universities should be concerned with) with academic credibility and pedagogical effectiveness, which, in these times of global warming, pollution and economic recession, are sorely needed.

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