

## Ten Years of the Communicative Use of English Examinations - Reading

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The CUEFL (The Communicative Use of English as a Foreign Language) examination was probably the first in Britain to apply to language testing the principles of the communicative approach to language teaching. CUEFL consists of four sub-examinations, Reading, Writing, Listening and Oral Interaction, all of which can be taken independently. This paper discusses the issues and problems of composing the Reading part of CUEFL.

### BACKGROUND

It is 10 years since the pilot tests for the Royal Society of Arts' Examinations in the Communicative Use of English (CUEFL) were first constructed and administered and eight years since the first exam. The exams, now administered by UCLES (the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate), are currently nearing the end of a major review. This seems to be an appropriate time to look back over the history of the reading mode of the CUEFL exams. Both authors have been involved as Chief Examiners for the Reading Examination for a number of years.

The series of examinations came about as a result of a conscious effort on the part of the RSA to develop new testing procedures to match the developments in the communicative teaching of EFL. At this time, in the mid-seventies, most public examinations in the UK tested ability in English by testing some of the sub-skills involved in a candidate's use of English. While there were some examinations available that tested, for example, speaking and listening, or academic English more communicatively, (e.g. the ARELS Examinations in Spoken English, the Joint Matriculation Board Tests in English [Overseas]) there were none that attempted to test the communicative use of all four skills.

There was also a conscious desire by those involved in developing CUEFL to encourage more widespread use of communicative teaching practices in the classroom i.e. to achieve a "positive washback effect" on teaching approaches. A report was commissioned from the University of Reading in 1976, (Morrow, 1977) and, subsequently, a working party was set up to oversee the construction of a range of communicative tests. The general principles and specifications were formulated on the basis of the commissioned report and were agreed by the

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Working Party, and with minor modifications, these are the principles and specifications which will operate until the review recommendations take effect from the November 1990 series.

## **CHARACTERISTICS AND SPECIFICATIONS OF THE EXAMINATION**

The examinations are offered at three levels – Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. At each level, four independent tests are offered: Reading, Listening, Writing and Oral Interaction, so that a candidate can, for example, enter for Advanced Reading and Listening, and Intermediate Writing in the same series of examinations. The designated audience are students of English currently in Britain, intending to visit Britain, and/or being taught in a communicative way.

The two main characteristics of the exam are that it is operational in nature, and that great importance is placed on authenticity of material. ‘Operational’ is defined in the specification as

“intended to measure whether or not the candidate can do certain things in English. The things they are asked to do are specified at each level and represent authentic tasks of the sort which confront language users in real life.”

These operations include:

Basic Level – “Scan text to locate specific information”.

Intermediate Level – “Skim text to obtain gist”.

Advanced Level – “Study text to assess the implications of content”.

Also specified are the degrees of skill for each level, under the headings of size, complexity, range, speed, flexibility, and independence. Test types and forms for each level, and content areas of use form part of the specifications as well. The areas of use are common to the examination as a whole, not just the Reading, and are given below.

- a. Social interaction with native and non-native speakers of English.
- b. Dealing with official and semi-official bodies.
- c. Shopping and using services.
- d. Visiting places of interest and entertainment.
- e. Travelling and arranging for travel.
- f. Using media for information and entertainment.
- g. Medical attention and health.
- h. Studying for academic/occupational/social purposes.

## **THE EXAMINATION PROCESS**

The reading examination process consists of the Chief Examiner selecting the texts,

setting the tasks/writing the questions on these for the three levels. The texts, tasks and analyses of the operations that are being tested in the questions are then moderated by a committee containing representatives from centres offering the exams, in addition to the examiners and representatives from the Examining Board. Amendments are then made and a marking scheme agreed. After the exam has been run, centres fill in a feedback sheet, commenting on the paper – administration, timing, content and proportion of students using dictionaries. The latter is permitted in the reading exam by the specifications.

Some of this process will be discussed in order to show how the specifications are interpreted and how the problems arising, both theoretical and practical, are tackled.

## **THE TEXTS**

### **Sources and selection**

Perhaps the main criteria for text selection are that the texts should be appropriate and of interest to the designated audience: male and female, aged 16+, 'general English' students, and that the texts should preferably be of a type that a foreign student in Britain might encounter. In addition it was decided that the selection of texts should not favour students studying in a particular geographic area of Britain. Neither should a use or understanding of the text require a detailed knowledge of British 'life and institutions'. Thus, for example, a text source related just to Brighton, or to photography or requiring knowledge of the British parliamentary system was eliminated, as were those with very topical reference, given the delay between the setting of the exam and its use. The other main criteria are that the texts selected should cover several of the specified content areas of use, and offer a range of text form and type.

In the exams of the first three years, the texts were taken from only one or two sources e.g. 'The Radio Times'<sup>1</sup> in the June 1981 series, two West Country Tourist Board booklets in May, 1983. The thinking behind this decision to use a limited source was that candidates should not have to confront a greater variety of changes in text subject matter than a 'real reader', and the editor of the source material made that decision, rather than the Examiner. However, one or two sources of material rarely fulfilled all the criteria outlined above. In the November 1984 series, a compilation of texts from a variety of sources was used. These were based around a theme – health, and included the following text forms: a medicine bottle label, National Health Service form, advertisements, newspaper and magazine articles, student advice leaflets. These two traditions of source material, (a) a compilation or (b) most texts from one source, have continued to the present. The difficulty of getting the right balance in meeting the criteria is ever present. More recent

<sup>1</sup> A British magazine giving details of BBC radio and television programmes.

examinations use an Examiner-written postcard or informal letter to provide a framework for the texts as well as presenting a text-type that is hard to obtain from published sources.

## **PRESENTATION**

It was hoped, in the early days, that candidates could be given a 'real' text e.g. the relevant copy of 'The Radio Times'. Regrettably, it was soon realised that this was impracticable: it would have involved obtaining sufficient copies of a booklet, magazine etc some time after it had been published, organising and financing the collation and distribution of several leaflets, brochures etc. Instead, the texts are selected and photocopied in black and white, and then collated into a RSA/CUEFL 'magazine' – the size –A3, A4, A5 – varying from series to series as do the number of pages. In all series, each candidate, regardless of level, receives the same 'magazine'.

Another decision that had to be taken was whether a newspaper article that contained misprints should be used "warts and all". It was agreed that the article should appear as it was first printed, as this was the text that intended readers of the text had to confront. The print size and clarity of print in the original text, for example those of classified advertisements, was also taken into consideration when deciding whether to choose a text, as photocopying often reduced the contrast between print and background.

## **NUMBER OF TEXTS**

The question of the number of texts to be included has never been resolved. It has always been a guiding principle that some texts should be used at two or three levels, but used for different tasks, so some texts are exclusively for one level, some for two or three. Thus there are always texts that are irrelevant for a particular level. As the ability to locate a required text was felt to be part of a reading ability, a relatively large number of texts was not considered to be a drawback initially. In recent years, the thinking has changed. It is now thought that being confronted by a large quantity of reading material might be daunting for lower level candidates. It was also decided that asking students to find one text from a collection that does not contain a contents guide or index is unrealistic and too demanding. In the last few series, the pages or texts in the CUEFL magazines have been numbered, and lower level candidates in particular, have been directed to a text through a page number.

## **AUTHENTICITY OF TEXT**

The question of what constitutes an authentic text is obviously an area that has caused a lot of discussion. What is considered paramount in the CUEFL Reading Examinations is the authenticity of purpose and construction, so that texts that

have been specially written or simplified for students of English as a foreign language are rejected. The exception to this principle in later years has been the covering postcard/letter described above.

The reproduction of a text through photocopying – especially where the original was in colour – is a reduction in authenticity of appearance. Another aspect to be considered is that of selection. What is the ‘authenticity status’ of one article or advertisement taken out of the context of the original newspaper or magazine, and more crucially, what is the status of just part of a text e.g. an extract from a novel or from a long article? The practical issue of the amount of text material that could reasonably be placed in front of a candidate is one deciding factor for the use of extracts. Those extracts that have been used are chosen so that they are as self-contained as possible in terms of the flow of discourse and assumed knowledge, so that they tend to be from the beginning of an article rather than the middle.

However, it is the role of the contextual setting for the task(s) set for the text that is very important as this can provide a justification for the use of an extract, as frequently in ‘real’ reading only part of an article or magazine is read – this being due to lack of interest or lack of time.

### AUTHENTICITY OF TASK

It is this need to provide an authentic purpose, context and task for reading which is the essence of the exam. ‘Authentic’ here means that the task should replicate one which native speakers in the real world might carry out for a real purpose. Admittedly a test, even more so than classroom practices, can only simulate rather than replicate the experience of ‘real’ reading – simulating the *why* and *what* adult native speakers read and trying to evaluate how they read and what they get out of it. The candidate in an exam reads the texts not because he or she chooses to out of interest but because the reading of the texts is required in the exam that the candidates have chosen to do. However, the test designers can try to get close to some of the features of real reading, in that they can provide a purpose and a context for the reading and also potentially interesting reading material.

For example, the candidate may be asked to find the time of a train from a timetable, the cost of a hamburger from a menu, or the relevant details of an outing e.g. (November 1987 Basic).

*You are now studying English in Hastings. You see a notice about a trip to Canterbury on the notice board.*

*When is the Trip?*

*Write the day and the date in the answer column.*

A more advanced task would be to appreciate irony in a humorous piece, or to

summarise the main points of an argument in a newspaper editorial e.g. (November 1987 Advanced)

*Read the article about the government's policies towards universities.*

*What points does the article make in each paragraph?*

- a. *Suggestions for improving the efficiency of universities and saving public money.*
- b. *The effects of the government policies on specific universities in Britain.*
- c. *The imbalance between our living and our educational standards.*
- d. *Reasons for academics wanting to visit Britain.*
- e. *The apparent reasons for the government cuts.*

*Write the number of the paragraphs beside each letter in the answer column.*

These tasks involve candidates in certain operations e.g. reading for specific information, reading for gist and reading for inference. As might be expected, some text types like timetables and notices lend themselves easily to tasks while others, like editorials and extracts from novels, do not. Some of the operations listed under the advanced level, like tracing the development of an argument, or appreciating a poem, have yet to be tested successfully.

Every attempt is made to reproduce an authentic reading context and purpose for each task, Native speakers rarely come to a text 'cold'. There is usually a reason for reading which mentally prepares the reader for the text in question and increases their 'text attack'. However, with certain types of longer texts, it is less easy to concoct plausible reading contexts. People read the leader in the *Times* out of habit as much as out of interest; and they may read magazine articles in doctors' and dentists' waiting rooms out of sheer boredom. Arguably it is less important at the Advanced Level to set a context. Feedback from centres indicates that this is not a problem area.

## **ANSWER FORMATS AND MARKABILITY**

One of the distinguishing features of the examinations is that they set out to test each skill separately. In the case of the reading exam, this implies that it should test only the students' ability to read, and not their ability to do other things like write, draw diagrams or speak. To enable the marking to be as objective as possible and to ease marking procedures, the question formats have been of a certain type: Yes/No, True/False/Don't Know, multiple choice or one-word written answers. However, the desire for a positive wash-back effect in the classroom implies that the type of texts and tasks set should reflect what goes on in a 'communicative classroom'. Clearly there is a conflict here. In the classroom, reading tasks usually involve either question and answer work and/or some form of written production on the part of the students: it may be form or chart filling, answering questions,

making notes or lists, writing notes or letters, drawing a diagram, underlining phrases and so on. Most teachers regard multiple choice questions as something associated with testing not teaching. Part of the reason, quite understandably, is that multiple-choice type answer formats do not reflect an authentic native speaker response to a text. The question of how to satisfy the need for a discrete-skill reading test and the desire for authentic and varied tasks is still under discussion.

## QUESTION TYPES

A typical question type used at Intermediate and Advanced Levels is a variation of the ‘True/False/Don’t Know’ category. Whereas at Basic level candidates are only expected to distinguish between True and False, it is assumed that higher level candidates should be able to read a text and decide whether or not certain information is included. However, many centres criticised the label ‘Don’t Know’ as misleading and unfair, the objection being that students are not always sure whether the examiner means ‘Don’t know personally’ – or ‘Don’t know – no evidence’. It appears, too, that some students are disinclined to register on the paper that they ‘don’t know’ something. The label was consequently changed in 1987 to ‘It doesn’t say’. However, even this has its problems. The following is a reprint of part of a text and part of a question based on an extract from an Agatha Christie novel (November 1988).

*Standing with his back to the window was a man. His hands were round the throat of a woman who faced him, and he was slowly, remorselessly, strangling her.*

Question (edited)

*g. The murder victim was young. Tick (✓) True, False or It doesn't say as appropriate below.*

The supposedly straightforward answer here was ‘It doesn’t say’, as the age of the woman is not mentioned anywhere in the text. However, some candidates interpreted ‘woman’ as somebody young, others as somebody middle-aged. This is a clear example of a reader’s subjective interpretation of a text in the light of their knowledge or experience of the world. One can hardly mark somebody ‘wrong’ for subjective interpretations. The only answer is to phrase the task or question in such a way as to eliminate any ambiguities and to make the examiner’s intentions absolutely clear. In the revised form of the examination, other categories may be considered like ‘Possibly’ and/or ‘Probably’ but even these seem potential minefields.

## DIFFERENTIATION OF LEVELS

Another fundamental question is how the three levels: Basic, Intermediate and

Advanced are differentiated. The original specifications outline four areas of grading:

### 1 Grading of operation

It was assumed at the outset that some reading operations can be expected to be handled only at Intermediate and Advanced but not at Basic level. For example, according to the present specifications 'search text to locate specific information' is a Basic operation; 'skim text to obtain gist' and 'skim text to identify text type' are Intermediate Level operations; and 'study text to decide on an appropriate course of action' is an Advanced Level operation. However, reading and drawing conclusions are processes which go on at every level of reading. To relegate searching and scanning to Basic Level, skimming to Intermediate and studying to Advanced is making arbitrary divisions between what are natural reading operations at any level.

### 2 Grading of text type

The existing specifications offer the following division of text types into three levels:

| Form                       | Type                    |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Basic level</b>         |                         |
| <i>Leaflet</i>             | <i>Announcement</i>     |
| <i>Guide</i>               |                         |
| <i>Advertisement</i>       | <i>Description</i>      |
| <i>Letter</i>              |                         |
| <i>Postcard</i>            | <i>Narration</i>        |
|                            | <i>Comment</i>          |
| <i>Set of Instructions</i> |                         |
| <i>Diary entry</i>         | <i>Anecdote/joke</i>    |
| <i>Timetable</i>           |                         |
| <i>Map/plan</i>            | <i>Report/summary</i>   |
| <b>Intermediate level</b>  |                         |
| <i>Newspaper report</i>    |                         |
| <i>Newspaper feature</i>   | <i>(as Basic Level)</i> |
| <i>Telegram</i>            |                         |
| <b>Advanced level</b>      |                         |
| <i>Novel (extract)</i>     |                         |
| <i>Poem</i>                | <i>(as Basic Level)</i> |
| <i>Newspaper editorial</i> |                         |



The problem is that in real life, the division of levels is untenable. Some postcards are quite difficult to read and interpret. The handwriting may be illegible, the writing tightly condensed into note form, and containing innuendos and colloquialisms. Advertisements also cut across levels. Some are a monument of subtlety. At the other end of the scale, a newspaper report about a motor accident may be understood quite easily by a Basic Level student.

### 3 Grading of task

In general, it is expected that the difference between levels will be more in terms of task than of text. In other words, at Basic level the task may involve only surface comprehension whereas at Intermediate level the task based on the same text will be more complex and will demand closer reading. For example, the following text was included at both levels but with different tasks attached (November 1987):

#### *BOOKING INFORMATION*

*Course Registration Fee: £25 – not refundable.*

*Accommodation Booking Deposit: £35 – credited to your accommodation account.*

Basic level question.

*How much is the registration fee?*

Intermediate level question.

*Apart from the registration fee, how much more do you need to send if you would like the school to arrange your accommodation?*

Naturally, extremes are avoided. Students and teachers expect certain levels of difficulty in terms of text type, regardless of task. For example, to include at Basic level a long and complicated piece of journalism about the problems of the shipping industry and ask 'Is this text about ships or cars?' would be considered inappropriate – as indeed would the task. Likewise, certain types of very simple scanning exercises, like finding the price of an article in an advertisement, although a relevant task – are not included at Advanced level.

### 4 Grading of skill

Perhaps the most important area of grading is that defined in the degree of skill required at each level. This was originally divided into five areas: size, complexity, range, speed and flexibility. In other words, at one extreme, a Basic Level student can be expected to handle, within an allotted time, a limited number of short texts of simple construction, whereas at Advanced Level students are expected to handle a range of longer and more complex texts. The purpose of this is to provide examiners and markers with a useful guideline as to levels achieved.

It seems then that the specification of what constitutes a Basic/Intermediate/Advanced Level operation and text type should be left looser and that the grading

of the different papers be made on a range of criteria e.g.

- the complexity of the language and text structure.
- the complexity of the task.
- the level of comprehension required.
- the length of the texts (although 'long' does not always mean 'difficult').
- the number of texts which have to be read and processed within a prescribed time.

### **The Advanced Level**

The general assumption is that the higher the level, the more detailed the level of comprehension expected. Indeed, candidates at this level expect to be asked to study texts in depth. For this reason, texts and questions at the Advanced Level have involved a fair amount of intensive reading and close interpretation of text. However, native speakers often read at very superficial levels of comprehension: very few people study articles intensively unless they have a specific interest or purpose in reading them. People often content themselves with a quick skimread and a glance at the headline and subheads, or perhaps they will read the first couple of paragraphs to get the main points and ignore the rest. In other words, the sort of detailed in-depth comprehension questions normally associated with Advanced Level tests require more intensive reading than a normal reader would give a text in real life. To get away from the drier question formats associated with this level, there will in future be a greater emphasis on texts with real life tasks attached. This suggests that there may be some element of skills integration to enable a more natural context for measuring reading ability.

### **PASS LEVELS**

The CUEFL test is intended to be criterion-referenced, i.e. the aim is to assess whether candidates can perform specified operations successfully, not to find out how they compare with other candidates. This raises the problem of the pass mark. One could argue that in a criterion-referenced test, the criterion of pass mark is 100%, i.e. in an emergency, the pilot either demonstrates his understanding of the instructions for his ejector seat or he doesn't. However, this strict interpretation seems to be at odds with the nature of a reading test covering several text types and topics. Perhaps we should be able to say of a candidate that he/she has demonstrated the ability "to skim text to identify text type" on a newspaper advertisement warning about accommodation but did not demonstrate the ability "to skim text to identify status of part or the whole" in relation to an advertisement for a health product. However, such profiling sentences based on the analysis of operations and text types and topics would seem to be over-cumbersome. Instead, a decision was taken to use 60% as a pass mark, in the belief that to achieve this percentage, the candidate would need to demonstrate the ability to handle a range

of operations, text types and topics, if not all of them. Hence the importance of the examination moderation procedures where one of the duties of the moderators is to ensure the balance and range of the text content.

## CONCLUSION

As this paper suggests, writing a perfect communicative reading exam is far from easy. When the communicative revolution first made impact on the EFL scene, there were many who claimed that to devise a genuinely communicative test was impossible. After ten years we would say that, though not impossible, it is certainly challenging. By November 1990 the CUEFL exam will have undergone a major spring-clean and many of the ideas discussed in this paper will have been firmed up. There is every indication that the exam will emerge more communicative, more authentic in terms of the natural reading process, and more realistic in terms of students' needs and expectations. Like British Rail, we are getting there.

## REFERENCES

- The Communicative Use of English as a Foreign Language*. Booklet, University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate.
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