



Designing an ESL Assessment Test for Intermediate Students

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Abstract

As with all forms of testing, language testing performs a variety of roles, from representing levels of performance to social gatekeeping functions (McNamara, 2000). This paper will present a summative test for a specific group of learners in context. Moreover, the paper will provide the justification behind the choices made in item and task selection for the test. Hughes (2003) presents essential procedural guidelines for test construction, the first of which notes that the test purpose and type must be clearly defined. The test presented in this paper was an achievement test designed for first year Japanese polytechnic students in Kyoto, Japan, aged 18-20 who were studying English as either an elective subject or as a mandatory component of their first-year studies. The test contains four sections: Listening, Vocabulary, Grammar, and Writing. The test items are intended to expand, both in theme and content, on textbook and classroom activities; thus making them familiar enough to students to reduce test day anxiety, but challenging enough to make a valid assessment.

Other Reports

Keywords: Assessment, ESL, language learning, language testing, Japanese

1. Introduction

In Language education exists three important elements, these being teaching, learning, and assessment (Çimen, 2022). The purpose of an achievement test is as a means to accumulate evidence of language progress during and at the end of a course of study (McNamara, 2000), and this definition fits well with the purpose of the test in this context. Additionally, assessments affect student learning as they tend to spend a great deal of time on the materials that will be assessed (Baleni, 2015; Köroğlu, 2021). Regarding this study, students who passed the course would go on to English II in their second year. Those who failed may have been required to take English I again if it was a prerequisite for their course; however, it was not essential for those students who choose English I as an elective to repeat the course if they failed. Furthermore, it was unlikely that students who failed to pass English would be prevented from graduating, so in this sense, it was a fairly low stakes test. Lastly, a passing grade for the course was set at 60%.

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The textbook chosen for this study was the Oxford published American Headway 1 (Soars & Soars, 2010), a textbook with an instructional focus on the productive skills of speaking and writing. Students received one 90-minute lesson per week in a course which was divided into two terms, each containing 15 lessons, for a total of 30 lessons a year. The test domain for this pencil and paper achievement test was set at the first 6 units of the course book, covered in approximately 22 hours of teaching in the first term of a university academic year. Additionally, the majority of assessment was made up of two achievement tests given at the conclusion of each term, additional assessment was conducted within the lessons through quizzes, task participation scores, and homework. The aim of the course was the development of four language skills, specifically, reading, listening, speaking, and writing. There was, however, a classroom focus on the productive skills and development of both active and passive vocabulary, with students required to maintain a 'personal dictionary' of new vocabulary throughout the course. Class instruction followed a lexical approach to language learning which concentrated on developing learners' proficiency with lexis, phrasal chunks, and collocations, this was reflected in the test format with the inclusion of a vocabulary section. Additionally, a great deal of class time was available for speaking tasks and oral proficiency development which made up part of the course assessment; therefore, the progress achievement tests were centered essentially on listening, vocabulary, grammar, and writing. Reading skills were taught to a limited extent during the course, mainly as a means of reinforcing vocabulary retention. Due to the low priority given in the particular curriculum, a reading section was not been included in the test.

2. Test Item Rationale

This section will focus on the rationale behind the choice of test materials used in each section of this test, taking into consideration their authenticity. Because agreement around a definition of authentic assessment remains elusive, the definition of authenticity employed in this paper will refer to that which is meaningful to the students, and relevant to their needs. This being a test of ESL (English as a Second Language), efforts were made to make it meaningful to learners by using English which would be encountered in 'real-world' situations. As this was a summative test designed to assess the achievement of students after one semester of instruction, it was inevitable that some parts would be more or less authentic than others. Additionally, when determining the level of authenticity for an assessment it is necessary to consider the educational level of the learners. The students who took this test were for the most part at the false beginner to low intermediate level in their English communicative competence; therefore, it was necessary to employ a degree of objective assessment whilst making every effort to make the assessment as authentic and meaningful to the learners as possible. Regarding a definition of a false beginner, these are students who have previously studied English but for various reasons are studying the target language from the beginning again (Herusatoto, 2018, p. 124). As McDowell (1995) points out, students need to see a link between the assessment task and their own interests before they can perceive the task as meaningful. Additionally, metacognition awareness is important in test-taking as critical mindfulness as both learner and thinker aids in problem-solving (Farahian, 2015). Therefore, it is clear that "perceived relevance or meaningfulness will differ from student to student and will possibly even change as students become more experienced (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004, p. 74). Moreover, as this experience is gained, students should continually receive support from instructors regarding the reasons for why they are learning English such as to get a job (Tam, Mohd Don, & Chue, 2019) or better transition from face-to-face learning to online learning (Ramsin & Mayall, 2019).

2.1. Listening Section

Course goals for the development of listening skills can be roughly broken down as the development of skills for understanding specific information, listening for gist, and deducing meaning from linguistic clues from short talks or dialogs (Weir, 1993). The listening section of this test assessed these skills using the content from the course book. Buck notes that although a test is 'not an authentic communicative

situation' (1997), listening tests should, however, utilize characteristics of natural authentic language (p. 72). Therefore, the listening scripts (appendix 3) included features common in 'real-world' oral communication such as 'fillers and hesitations' as a means to convey a sense of reality to the dialogues (Buck, 1997, p. 66). The listening questions varied in degree of difficulty and listening skill requirement. Opening questions required listening for specific information with the later offering more difficult questions requiring examinees to infer meaning not overtly stated.

A fixed response format using multiple choice questions (MCQ) that were unambiguous yet did not directly guide examinees to the correct answer was adopted in this section. It is well known that MCQs have particular drawbacks; factors noted by Weir (1997) include the influence of distractors on a candidate's ability to choose the correct answer, the problem of guessing, and the possibility that examinees can improve scores on MCQs through advancement of exam techniques. The use of MCQs for assessing receptive skills derives from the need for a fair and objective method of assessment and although MCQs may not satisfy hardline authenticity supporters, where audio dialogs are repeated for example, it could be argued that they are a valid choice when incorporated with other integrative test items (Carrol, 1961, as cited in Farhady, 1979).

2.2. Vocabulary Section

The vocabulary section combined both decontextualized discrete point items like word-definition matching with more context rich gap filling test items and short answer questions. Opponents of discrete point testing argue that answering individual items regardless of their communicative function holds little merit (Farhady, 1979), but the inclusion of such test items can be validated by the relatively consistent reliability. As this test amalgamated a variety of testing methods it was feasible that these 'sub-tests' would likely give a clearer indication of the test takers language abilities (Farhady, 1979, p. 356).

The test design included an easy introduction while still including more difficult questions to recompense those students who had put into practice a lexical approach through creatively assembling their own original sentences. As mentioned above, in-class instruction followed a lexical approach which encouraged students to extend and develop their vocabulary by keeping a 'personal dictionary'. The adoption of a lexical approach promotes learners to explore new words and assimilate a large vocabulary extending beyond the limitations of language supplied by the course book. In this way, a foreseeable positive 'backwash' effect is a shift towards student centered language learning as students extend their lexical command through their development of personal dictionaries. Moreover, backwash being how a test effects teacher instructional methods and student learning progressions (Salmani Nodoushan, 2021).

The short answer questions (SAQ) in part 4 are intended to provide a clear distinction between students who have an understanding of the vocabulary item and those who did not. Weir notes that one of the advantages of SAQs as opposed to MCQs in reading tests is that when students get the answer right it isn't likely to be by guessing. Although arguably a test of writing as much as vocabulary comprehension (Weir, 1997) the test item makes use of language skills that the students should have worked on through the duration of the first semester; therefore, linking the test to the curriculum.

2.3. Grammar Section

As grammar is given a lesser weighting in curriculum goals and with a rather limited range of grammatical items introduced by the course book in units 1 to 6, the grammar section makes up a smaller part of the test. A modified cloze test was used to assess comprehension of prepositions of time, direction, duration and place. Although the discrete point format adopted was perhaps crude and unlikely to draw on integrative language skills, it did however provide useful diagnostic information on the student's grammatical competence given the limited grammatical content being tested.

2.4. Writing Section

The writing section linked more closely to the curriculum and was given a significant amount of class time, including ideas such as ‘brainstorming’ and organization of ideas in relation to paragraph writing such as topic sentence, supporting sentences, and concluding sentences. The writing section included themes and genres that had been introduced in the course book from units 1 to 6, requiring students to undertake writing tasks that they were familiar with, such as completion of a personal information chart, writing a letter, and writing a paragraph about a given topic. Parts 2 and 3 were extended writing tasks that reflected more realistically social and academic writing, therefore giving greater construct validity (Weir, 1993). Weir points out that practical constraints on language testing, such as timing, can affect student performance particularly on ‘written work, composed under restricted time conditions’ (Weir, 1993 p. 130). Additionally, consideration was given not to overburden examinees with a heavy writing section. Moreover, an attempt was made to include writing items that were long enough to yield an adequate sample of the students writing ability without intentionally over stressing participants due to time restraints. The writing tasks related closely to the textbook and therefore presented the students with a chance to demonstrate their knowledge of lexical items and subjects taught in the first half of the course. Additionally, these demonstrations of academic knowledge go beyond assessment as writing ability is important in professional contexts as well (Drid, 2018, p. 292).

Lumley concedes that the rating of written language is ‘still not well understood’ (Lumley, 2002 p. 246), McNamara follows suit by suggesting that rater-mediated judgments of language performance may have a number of ‘pitfalls’ (2000, p. 35). To facilitate scoring of the students written work, ‘controlled’ writing tasks were selected for which the theme and scope was made clear to the examinees (Weir, 1993).

3. Test Administration Instructions and Scoring

The real-time administration and invigilation of this test was to follow similar guidelines as other pencil and paper tests. Pre-test preparation required invigilators to be familiar with all parts of the test and informed by course administrators on the correct protocol for dealing with obvious cheating. Copies of the test and CDs/tapes were to be checked the day before the test with extra copies ready in case of misplacement or malfunction. Test invigilators were to refer examinees to the instructions on the front page before the test commenced and announced that the listening section would start 5 minutes after the test officially started.

Preparatory discussions by course tutors were necessary to agree on item difficulty, rating criteria, and point allocation. Lumley notes that rating written work is particularly problematic as raters’ interactions with and application of rating scales would unavoidably lead to inconsistencies (Lumley, 2002). Therefore, markers were encouraged to consult with each other to establish clear guidelines for text interpretation particularly in section B part 4, in which markers were encouraged to be sympathetic in treating grammar and spelling mistakes. Where possible raters were to work in pairs to allocate points and iron out any areas of subjectivity while using the rating scales provided (appendix 3: Tables 1, 2, and 3).

The item rubrics in part 4 of the vocabulary section and all of the writing section attempted to give examinees a clear explanation and guidelines of what the tasks required of them. Even then there was no absolute guarantee that test takers would not misinterpret the item (Hughes, 2003). The nature of scoring written work is obviously a complex affair in which there appears to be ‘...no easy answers’ (Hamp-Lyons, 1990 p. 82 as cited in Weir, 1993). Moreover, scoring scales that were not overly complex but still provided clear and practical guidelines for scores who worked cooperatively in allocating points was possibly the only feasible option.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

This paper presents an achievement test for the specific context of tertiary students studying at a polytechnic institution in Japan. This summative test evaluated candidates' understanding of material covered in the course book and tied in classroom teaching methodology. Both fixed response and constructed response questions had been adopted in an attempt to install reliability and validity as examinees were required to participate in a variety of test tasks. The listening section, with a natural sounding dialog, and the writing section, which offered a chance for meaningful language use, provided elements of authenticity in an attempt to close the gap between the 'test' and the 'real world'. A 'candidate friendly' layout, simple answer sheet, and ample time was believed to reduce the amount of test stress and any chance of disruptions during the test (Weir, 1993 p. 25).

As an achievement test at the end of the first term of teaching, the test arguably attained its goal in giving an indication of how well students assimilated the skills covered in the syllabus as well as reinforced those skills by testing them. Next steps would be to begin a detailed research study to collect both quantitative and qualitative data using the test in this paper.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Test paper and answer sheet.

Note: The answer sheet has been completed with correct answers

English I: First Semester Final Examination

QUESTION PAPER

Sections A ~ D

Time: 90 minutes

- Attempt every question
- Write clearly
- Do not use a dictionary

A LISTENING SECTION PART 1 (10 POINTS)

~ The listening section will begin in 5 minutes. Read all questions carefully ~

You will hear two people talking about directions. Choose the best answer - A, B, C, or D to complete each sentence. Write your answers on your answer sheet. Each conversation will be played twice.

1. The man wants to go...
 - A. to the school.
 - B. to the post office.
 - C. far from here.
 - D. to the bank.
2. It is...
 - A. quite far from here.
 - B. across from the school.
 - C. very far from here.
 - D. near here.
3. The man needs to...
 - A. turn right at the first block.
 - B. take the first right.
 - C. walk three blocks and take the first left.
 - D. walk two blocks and take the first left.
4. It is...
 - A. near the Italian restaurant
 - B. by the Chinese and French restaurants.
 - C. next to the French restaurant.
 - D. next to the Chinese restaurant.
5. It's going to take...
 - A. under 30 minutes.
 - B. over 30 minutes.
 - C. 13 minutes.
 - D. 3 minutes

PART 2 (10 POINTS)

You will hear two people talking in a cafe. Choose the best answer - A, B, C, or D to complete each sentence. Write your answers on your answer sheet. Each conversation will be played twice.

1. What does the customer want to drink?
 - A. tea
 - B. milk
 - C. mineral Water
 - D. coffee

2. Which juice is **not** on the menu?
- A. apple
 - B. tomato
 - C. grape
 - D. orange
3. The customer orders...
- A. two drinks.
 - B. just a drink.
 - C. a drink and a tuna sandwich.
 - D. two drinks and a chicken sandwich.
4. The customer gives the waiter...
- A. \$50
 - B. \$5.55
 - C. \$5
 - D. \$55
5. How much change is there?
- A. \$14.55
 - B. \$4.45
 - C. \$45.55
 - D. \$45

B VOCABULARY SECTION PART 1 (5 POINTS)

Match the word (1~5) with the meaning (A~H). Write the answers on your answer sheet.

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------------------|
| 1. awful | A. job designing buildings |
| 2. luxury | B. for keeping food cool |
| 3. upstairs | C. very large |
| 4. accountant | D. expensive, gorgeous |
| 5. refrigerator | E. job checking finances |
| | F. terrible, very bad |
| | G. outside area |
| | H. second floor |

PART 2 (5 POINTS)

Choose the best word to complete the sentence from A, B, C, or D. Write the answers on your answer sheet.

1. There are a lot of pictures on the walls but there aren't any _____ .
 - A. photographs
 - B. rooms
 - C. armchair
 - D. living room

2. One of the most _____ cities in America is New York.
 - A. tourist
 - B. unusually
 - C. famous
 - D. leisure

3. He _____ people for a TV news program.
 - A. talks
 - B. translate
 - C. interviews
 - D. likes

4. Summer is one of my favorite seasons, I just love _____.
 - A. sunbathe
 - B. sunbathing
 - C. beach
 - D. skiing

5. I'm a terrible cook, but _____ my husband is wonderful at cooking.
 - A. hardly ever
 - B. lovely
 - C. thanks
 - D. fortunately

PART 3 (10 POINTS)

Complete the table using adverbs of frequency. Write the full word in the space provided on your answer sheet.

100%	1.
80%	2.
60%	Often

50%	3.
40%	Occasionally
30%	Rarely
10%	4.
0%	5.

PART 4 (10 POINTS)

Write an example sentence that explains the meaning of each word. Write your answers in the space provided on your answer sheet.

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. expensive (adj.) | 2. manager (n.) |
| 3. fantastic (adj.) | 4. suddenly (adv.) |
| 5. save (money) (v.) | |

C GRAMMAR SECTION**PART 1 (10 POINTS)**

Match the word (1~10) with the meaning (A~J). Write your answers in the space provided on your answer sheet.

- | | |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Why | A. often do you play tennis? |
| 2. Which | B. is this CD, \$1 or \$10? |
| 3. What | C. is the station from here? |
| 4. Where | D. is her last name? |
| 5. How many | E. do you play soccer with? |
| 6. When | F. do you like, beer or wine? |
| 7. How far | G. times have you been to Nagoya? |
| 8. Who | H. do you like English? |
| 9. How much | I. do you live? |
| 10. How | J. does the game start? |

PART 2 (10 POINTS)

Complete the sentences with one preposition (in, on, for etc). Write your answers in the space provided on your answer sheet.

- I like listening.....music.
- We live.....Kyoto.
- I work.....Sundays.

- 4. He works.....a computer company.
- 5. Where does she come.....?
- 6. What’s this.....English?
- 7. I live.....my parents.
- 8. Turn left.....the bus stop.
- 9. This is a photo.....my dog
- 10. I go to school.....bicycle.

D WRITING SECTION PART 1 (10 PONITS)

Complete the personal information form with information about yourself. Write your answers in the space provided on your answer sheet.

- Full Name: 1.
- Nationality: 2.
- City: 3.
- Date of birth: 4.
- Married? 5.
- Family: 6.
- Hobbies: 7.
- Skills/abilities: 8.
- Reason for studying
- English: 9.
- Future goal(s): 10.

PART 2 (10 POINTS)

Write a letter to a friend or family member telling them about a home stay experience. If you’ve never done a home stay, imagine a home stay experience in an English speaking country. Use a letter style format. You may write about the home stay family, the city, the school, the food etc. Use the space provided on your answer sheet.

PART 3 (10 POINTS)

Write a short paragraph about your favorite season. You may write about the weather, sports, cultural events, food. Use the space provided on your answer sheet.

ANSWER SHEET ENGLISH I : FINAL TEST

Full Name:.....

Student ID number:.....

A LISTENING SECTION**PART 1 /10**

1	2	3	4	5
B	A	C	C	A

PART 2 /10

1	2	3	4	5
D	B	D	A	C

B VOCABULARY SECTION**PART 1 /5**

1	2	3	4	5
F	D	H	E	B

PART 2 /5

1	2	3	4	5
A	C	C	B	D

PART 3 /10

1	2	3	4	5
always	usually	sometimes	hardly ever	never

PART 4 /10

1. expensive: _____ * SEE APPENDIX 2
2. manager: _____ * SEE APPENDIX 2
3. fantastic: _____ * SEE APPENDIX 2
4. fortunately: _____ * SEE APPENDIX 2
5. give: _____ * SEE APPENDIX 2

C GRAMMAR SECTION

PART 1 /10

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
H	F	D	I	G	J	C	E	B	A

PART 2 /10

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
to	in	on	at/for	from	in	with	at	of	by

D WRITING SECTION

PART 1 /10

1	* SEE APPENDIX 2
2	* SEE APPENDIX 2
3	* SEE APPENDIX 2
4	* SEE APPENDIX 2
5	* SEE APPENDIX 2
6	* SEE APPENDIX 2
7	* SEE APPENDIX 2
8	* SEE APPENDIX 2
9	* SEE APPENDIX 2
10	* SEE APPENDIX 2

PART 2

/10

* SEE APPENDIX 2

PART 3

/10

* SEE APPENDIX 2

Total score: /100

Appendix 2: Scoring scales for the vocabulary and writing sections

Table 1: Vocabulary Section / Part 4

Part 4	Points	
	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incomprehensible and/or irrelevant answer
	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Demonstrates clear understanding of the word ● Uses incorrect grammar or spelling
	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Correct use of the word in a full sentence ● Uses correct grammar and spelling

Table 2: Writing section / Part 1

	Question	Points			
Part 1	1	0	Name in Japanese	1	First name /last name in English
	2	0	Any irrelevant answer	1	Japanese or other
	3	0	Any irrelevant answer	1	In English with capital letter
	4	0	Any irrelevant answer	1	Numerical or written. (dd/mm/yy)
	5	0	Any irrelevant answer	1	Single / married / engaged
	6	0	Any irrelevant answer	1	Roles and /or names
	7	0	Any irrelevant answer	1	‘.ing’ form
	8	0	Any irrelevant answer	1	‘.ing’ form / I can...
	9	0	Any irrelevant answer	1	Full comprehensible sentence
	10	0	Any irrelevant answer	1	Full comprehensible sentence

Table 2: Writing section / Part 2

Part 2	Points	
	8-10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Correct letter layout (address / date / title) ● Correct spelling and sentence structure

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use of sentence connectors (but / and / so) ● Text relates well to context
	5-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Letter layout with mistakes ● attempted full sentences ● some spelling and grammatical errors ● Text relates generally to given context
	2-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Improper letter layout ● few full sentences ● errors in spelling and grammar ● Inadequate level of relevance to the context
	0-1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Few words ● Incomprehensible sentences

Table 3: Writing section / Part 3

	Points	
Part 2	8-10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strong paragraph structure ● Use of topic, supporting and concluding sentences ● Correct spelling and sentence structure ● Text relates well to context
	5-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Moderate use of paragraph structure ● attempted full sentences ● some spelling and grammatical errors ● Text relates generally to given context
	2-4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Little or no obvious paragraph structure ● few full sentences ● errors in spelling and grammar ● Inadequate level of relevance to the context
	0-1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Few words ● Incomprehensible sentences

Appendix 3: Listening script / Part 1 and 2

Narrator: *This is the beginning of the listening section.*

Part 1: You will hear two people talking about directions. Choose the best answer - A, B, C, or D to complete each sentence. Write your answers on your answer sheet. Each conversation will be played twice.

A: Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to the post office from here?

B: Sure. The one near the park, right?

A: Umm...yeah....that's right. Is it far from here?

B: Let's see...er...yeah....it's pretty far. What you need to do is go straight about...ah...3 blocks, and then take the first left. You should see a...ah....a Chinese restaurant or maybe a French restaurant...yeah, sorry, it's next to a French restaurant.

A: Great. Thanks a lot. About how long does it take to get there? Half an hour?

B:Umm...no, not that long. A little under maybe, but not 30 minutes.

A: Ok, thanks. I better get going, have to be there by 3 o'clock.

B: You're welcome.

Narrator: *Now listen again.*

Narrator: *Part 2: You will hear two people talking in a cafe. Choose the best answer - A, B, C, or D to complete each sentence. Write your answers on your answer sheet. Each conversation will be played twice.*

A: Hi there. Can I have a coffee, please?

B: Sure. Milk and sugar?

A: Ah...no thanks, black please. Do you have any juice?

B: Yeah. There's a lot to choose from. There's orange and apple and....er...we've even got some grape juice too.

A: I see. Ok...I'll have a grape juice and a chicken sandwich too, thanks.

B: Alright. So...that's \$1.55 for the sandwich, \$1 for the juice and \$2 for the coffee.

A: All I have is a \$50 bill, ok?

B: That's fine, no problem. Let's see...ah....that's \$45.55 in change. Thank you.

Narrator: *Now listen again.*

Narrator: *This is the end of the listen section.*