

BOOK REVIEWS

COMMUNICATING IN BUSINESS. Joseph Buschini and Richard R. Reynolds. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986. 340 pp. (Instructor's Manual with Tests, 217 pp.; Transparencies.)

Despite the respectable credentials of its authors and consultants (including four from Japan), *Communicating in Business* strikes this reviewer as having been rather hastily thrown together. I do not mean to say that this is a bad book. On the contrary, it contains much useful material. It would, however, have been a much better book had it been prepared a little more carefully.

The content deals with real business situations. The ten chapters cover letters of application, routine correspondence, inter-office communications, customer relations, sales letters and related material, credit inquiries, collection letters, reports, world trade communications, and presentations.

The authors claim that the book represents "a first course in Business English" (ix), but they must have assumed that students will have already attained a rather advanced level of general English ability before starting to use this text.

Buschini and Reynolds also claim that "the text systematically involves students in the communication process by asking them to improve, write, revise, or respond to problems, questions, and practice exercises" (*ibid.*). Each chapter contains at least two lessons, which are arranged as follows: a list of objectives, a model document, a description of "the purpose, strategy and method of composing the communication," two revision exercises, a checklist of main points, a writing assignment, an explanation of some stylistic or structural point, practice exercises, vocabulary exercises, and a grammar/punctuation review. The authors point out that the material does not have to be covered in this order, and, in fact, I found it more effective to cover the revision and writing exercises after all the other material had been completed.

Book Reviews

Now, what did I mean when I said that the text seems to have been put together hastily? I will cite as examples the structure of the vocabulary exercises, the sequencing of material in the "Style and Structure" sections, the authors' failure to follow principles of good writing in their own discourse, and the general lack of proofreading and quality control.

The vocabulary exercises are of two types. The first consists of about 10 isolated sentences, each with one or two words missing. Students must fill in the blanks with one of four choices provided. In the second exercise, students must match five words with short definitions. In other words, the authors take a very traditional approach to the teaching of vocabulary. Are they unaware that the current trend is toward more context-sensitive methods?

I also found that the vocabulary exercises did not always conform to the points of the lesson just covered. For example, in Chapter Four, the authors advise students to avoid unnecessary words. "You can generally avoid wordiness," they suggest, "by following these three rules:

1. Never use two words when one will do.
2. Never use a long word when a short word will do.
3. If it is possible to eliminate a word, eliminate it." (p. 99)

In their own vocabulary exercises, however, the authors seem to have forgotten their own rules. On page 101, we find the following sentences:

- (i) I must _____ you that the ventilation system installed by your employees does not meet the standards specified in our contract.
- (ii) The electronic alarm system you installed didn't operate properly. As a _____, we had to hire a security guard.

Of course, there is nothing actually wrong with these sentences, but if the authors had followed their own advice

about conciseness, they would have eliminated the phrase “I must (inform) you that” and changed “As a (result)” to “So.” These changes would eliminate the vocabulary items being tested (i.e., *inform* and *result*), but surely the authors could have found another way to review this vocabulary without contradicting one of the main points of the lesson.

Two other sentences in the vocabulary exercise for Chapter Four contain passive verbs, while one of the main points of Chapter Three is that students should avoid passive verbs in business communications.

In other words, the vocabulary exercises seem to have been added to the lessons almost as an afterthought. At the very least, they are not well integrated into the text as a whole.

On page 79, we read these two sentences: “If the material is being sent to another person in the same company, the transmittal write [sic] in the memo form. Use the standard business letter format is used [sic] when you are sending something outside the company.” These sentences are probably the result of bad editing rather than poor writing, but they illustrate another problem with the text. Typographical errors and misprints abound, reinforcing the impression that the book was hastily prepared.

Finally, I wish to say a few words about the authors’ handling of gender. Buschini and Reynolds advise students to “avoid using the pronoun he to refer to both sexes” (p. 155). They suggest using the plural form of the noun:

AVOID: If an *employee* is late, ask *him* to explain his tardiness.

BETTER: Ask *employees* to explain *their* tardiness.

or, when appropriate, repeating the noun:

AVOID: When a *programmer* comes up with a solution, ask *her* to write the steps on the chalkboard.

BETTER: When a *programmer* comes up with a solution,

ask *him* or *her* to write the steps on the chalkboard.

BEST: When a *programmer* comes up with a solution, ask *that programmer* to write the steps on the chalkboard.

These alternatives are certainly preferable to the use of “*they*” as a singular neuter pronoun, and I certainly would not criticize Buschini and Reynolds for including them in their text. I do, however, think it is a mistake to imply that the traditional use of “*he*” as a neutral pronoun is no longer acceptable, especially when the trend in many American universities seems to be back toward this style. To be sure, grammatical gender is still a controversial topic, but students should be aware that there is more than one perspective on the issue. Buschini and Reynolds give the impression that they have the definitive solution, and that, I think, is unfair to their readers.

In summary, this book has many useful features, but the material must be used with care. I look forward to the publication of the second edition in the hope that I will be able to use it more comfortably than I have used the first edition.

Reviewed by Robert M. Ingram
Applied Materials Japan, K.K.



The Modern Language Journal

Founded: 1916

Editor: David P. Benseler
Dept. of German
Ohio State University
Columbus, OH 43210

... is recognized throughout the world as the outstanding foreign language/pedagogical research journal in the United States. This popular journal was founded in 1916 by the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations. Topics covered in MLJ include teaching strategies, bilingualism, applied linguistics, teaching of literature, study abroad, innovative foreign language programs, and developments in curriculum, teaching materials, and testing and evaluation.

ISSN 0026-7902

Published quarterly at The University of Wisconsin Press

Subscribe now, or recommend a subscription to your library.
A detailed brochure will be sent upon request.

RATES

Individuals: \$13/yr.
(must prepay)
Institutions: \$30/yr.
Foreign subscribers add \$3/yr.
for regular postage, or \$12.50/yr.
for Airmail delivery.

REPLY TO

Journal Division
The University of Wisconsin
Press
114 North Murray Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53715
USA
(608) 262-4952

A COMPREHENSIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEST FOR LEARNERS OF ENGLISH. David P. Harris and Leslie A. Palmer. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986. Price of complete set of Forms A and B, with question books, tapes, answer sheets, scoring keys, and technical manual, for 50 students: ¥70,700.

General Introduction

The Comprehensive English Language Test for Learners of English (CELT), originally developed in the 1960s, is a typical multiple-choice discrete-point English proficiency test. The 1986 edition is virtually the same as previous editions; it has been re-issued with a new date largely to make it look more modern. The CELT test looks very much like the TOEFL, and is a product of the same theoretical approach to test making. Like the TOEFL, it has all the strengths and weaknesses of that approach; unlike the TOEFL you can take it home and do whatever you want with it.

An evaluation of any test must obviously be based on the purpose for which the test will be used. As it is impossible to do more than simply guess the various purposes of the readers of this journal, probably the most expedient way to proceed is to adopt what Popham (1981, p. 45) calls "the six most essential evaluative criteria," and then consider any remaining issues at the end.

Description of Measured Behavior

The technical manual states that CELT is a test for "measuring the English language proficiency of non-native speakers . . . at the intermediate and advanced levels." No attempt is made to explain exactly what is meant by "English language proficiency;" I certainly don't know, and I suspect the authors aren't very clear about it either. A Japanese leaflet put out by the publisher begs even more questions when it claims that CELT "objectively evaluates English ability," a claim

which is sufficiently vague to be almost meaningless. The manual, however, becomes more specific when describing the behaviors measured in each of the three sub-sections of the test. It describes them as follows:

1. **Listening:** a measure of the ability to comprehend short statements, questions, and dialogues as spoken by native speakers of English.
2. **Structure:** a measure of the ability to manipulate¹ the grammatical structures occurring in spoken English.
3. **Vocabulary:** a measure of the understanding of the kinds of lexical items which occur in advanced reading of English.

So now we know what it is supposed to measure: three important sub-skills of comprehension, but no speaking, no writing, no discourse skills, and no sociolinguistic competence.

Items per Measured Behaviour

The number of items required on a test depends largely on the seriousness of the decisions to be made; the more serious the decision, the more items should be included. Popham (1981, p. 55) suggests a minimum of at least twenty items for each measured behavior if “reasonably important educational decisions” are involved.

CELT measures three behaviors, listening, structure and vocabulary. The listening section has 50 items and takes about 40 minutes. Structure has 75 items and takes 45 minutes; vocabulary also has 75 items and takes 35 minutes. It therefore probably contains quite enough items for serious decision making, but far too many for general classroom use.

Scope of Measurement

A construct such as English language proficiency is of much too broad a scope to be measured in a two-hour test such as this, and the authors sensibly restrict themselves to

Book Reviews

measuring three sub-skills: listening, structure and vocabulary. Knowledge of structure can surely be well sampled in a 45-minute test of this nature. The vocabulary section measures knowledge of words falling from the four thousandth to the eight thousandth frequency ranking in Thorndike and Lorge (1944). Probably too difficult for most Japanese students, but nevertheless it supplies a sensible and measurable target.

The only section I have any doubts about is the listening section. Listening is such a complex process, which involves so many sub-skills, that I feel it is probably not possible to measure it adequately with 50 short multiple-choice items. However, this is not only a problem with the CELT test, but also with most other tests of listening.²

A look at some of the items used on the test might give a clearer indication of what the test measures. However, with a test such as CELT it is important to preserve test security, and so it is not really fair to review items actually used on the test. What does seem reasonable, though, is to present some of the sample items from the instructions. It should be noted, however, that because they are used as examples, they tend to be easier than the items used on the test itself.

There are three types of listening items. In each case testees listen to a recording, select a written response and mark their answer sheets for the appropriate choice.

Listening Item One – responding to a question.

Testees hear: “When are you going to New York?”

- They read:
- (A) To visit my brother
 - (B) By plane
 - (C) Next Friday
 - (D) Yes, I am.

Listening Item Two – choosing the statement closest in meaning.

Testees hear: “George has just returned home from his

Book Reviews

vacation.”

- They read:
- (A) George is spending his vacation at home.
 - (B) George has just finished his vacation.
 - (C) George is just about to begin his vacation.
 - (D) George has decided not to take a vacation.

Listening Item Three – answering questions on a dialogue.

Testees hear:

- (man) “Are you planning to leave for New York next Monday?”
- (woman) “I’m afraid not. My husband just found out he’ll be in a meeting until late that afternoon, so we won’t be able to get started until the following morning.”
- (3rd voice) On what day does the woman expect to leave for New York?

- They read:
- (A) Sunday
 - (B) Monday
 - (C) Tuesday
 - (D) Wednesday

There is only one item type used to test knowledge of structure. This consists of a statement or question, followed by a response. There is a blank in the response, and testees have to choose the option which best fills the blank.

Structure Item – filling in the blank.

“Have you finished the report for Mr. Jones?”

“Yes, I _____ this morning.”

- (A) it to him gave
- (B) gave it to him
- (C) to him gave it
- (D) gave to him it

There are two item types used to test knowledge of vocabulary. The first gives a sentence in which there is a blank. Students select which of four written options best completes

Book Reviews

the sentence. In the second item type students are given a phrase and have to choose which of four written options has the nearest meaning to the phrase.

Vocabulary Item One – filling in the blank.

It must be getting warmer, for the snow is beginning to _____.

- (A) strain
- (B) melt
- (C) burst
- (D) shine

Vocabulary Item Two – matching a definition and a word.
to show the way

- (A) greet
- (B) guide
- (C) guard
- (D) gaze

Reliability

As one would expect, reliability on the CELT, as measured by internal consistency, is extremely high. When tested on second language learners in the USA, reliability for the three sections varied from a low of .82 to a high of .97, and twelve of the fifteen coefficients given are over .90. Of course, this is a different population from that found in Japan, but even if reliability were somewhat lower with Japanese students, it could still be quite high.

As for equivalent-form reliability, the technical manual claims both forms have almost equal difficulty, but the correlation between the two forms of the test is conspicuously absent. This is especially strange when you consider that both forms of the test were given to the same group of students when form B was made. It is inconceivable that the correlation between forms A and B was not calculated. One can only conclude that its absence from the technical manual indicates

that it was unacceptably low, and that forms A and B may not be equivalent forms of the same test. Let the user beware!

Validity

The CELT correlated reasonably closely with similar discrete-point proficiency tests; at .79 with TOEFL and .81 with the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency. No other criteria are given against which the CELT has been validated. The technical manual makes no other attempt to show empirically what it is that CELT actually measures.

It should be noted, though, that the theoretical basis for such tests as this, that language can be cut up into little bits which can then be tested separately, is no longer accepted by the majority of Applied Linguists.³ There is considerable evidence that language is far more complex than this. The problem for the test developer is that it is much easier to make a test composed of a few dozen items, each one testing just one small discrete point of language, than it is to make a test that reliably measures such a complex activity as language in use. And even more to the point, it is far easier for the teacher to administer and score, especially when large numbers of testees are involved.

One thing we can say with certainty is that the CELT is not a test of communicative competence; at best it is a test of linguistic competence, and even then, only certain aspects of linguistic competence. However, it does test certain fundamental sub-skills and it would not be at all strange if those skills correlated quite closely with other important sub-skills not measured; that, though, is pure speculation.

Comparative Data

The technical manual gives quite a lot of comparative data for a commercial English language test. This was collected entirely on second language students in North America who have been accepted for, or who are studying toward, university

entry. This is probably of no value at all to the user in Japan. There is a need for the publishers to provide data collected in Japan, which would be more meaningful than that provided.

Looking at the comparative data provided, the students on whom the test was normed were obviously of a much higher level of English ability than most EFL students in Japan. It therefore seems likely that the CELT will be far too difficult to be of much use to the average teacher here.

Other Considerations

The CELT is reasonably easy to administer, and can be marked quickly with the marking key, and even quicker with a machine card reader.

One disadvantage is that all instructions are in English, and not such simple English either; care should be taken that the instructions are not too difficult for the students taking the test. The publisher should seriously consider issuing a form of the test with Japanese instructions.

Teachers who think that listening materials should be "authentic" will be disappointed with the tape, which is slower than normal speed, lacks many of the phonetic changes characteristic of normal spoken English, and has that monotonous, sanitized quality only heard on teaching materials. However, others may consider this an advantage.

The test is in re-usable booklet form, and so can be used lots of times. Answer sheets are cheap, but test booklets are not. Tests such as the CELT take a lot of time and money to develop, and so, although the US price is not cheap, it is probably fair. Why, though, does it have to cost twice as much in Japan as it does in the USA?

Conclusion

The CELT test was designed originally as a placement test for ESL students entering American universities. As such it is probably almost as good as the TOEFL, and for

the institutional user far more convenient and much cheaper. In a sense CELT is a poor man's TOEFL. It is well made, easy to use, reliable, and probably reasonably valid. However, it is almost certainly much too difficult for most EFL students in Japan. If there are institutions or teachers here that have need for such an instrument as this, surely they could use it with confidence, but somehow, I think, there is little demand for a test such as this in Japan.

Reviewed by Gary Buck
Osaka Meijo Women's College, Osaka

Notes

¹The structure section claims to measure the ability to "manipulate" grammatical structures, but in fact all the items are multiple choice fill-in-the-blank items which only require the student to recognize the correct form.

²Cognitive psychologists and psycholinguists have not as yet provided us with a satisfactory explanation of what listening comprehension is, yet many serious and professionally-made tests try to measure it; perhaps rightly so. However, I can't help wondering how they can accurately measure something when they don't know what it is.

³See Oller (1979:150) for a scathing attack on discrete-point tests.

References

- Oller, J.W. (1979). *Language Tests at School*. London: Longman.
Popham, W.J. (1981). *Modern Educational Measurement*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
Thorndike, E.L., and Lorge, I. (1944). *The Teachers Word Book of 30,000 Words*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.