

Testing with a human face



Dianne Wall, Trinity College London's head of examinations research and development, argues that there is more to assessment than statistics and scary jargon

scripts, tape recordings and historical data. But it's a two-way process – researchers can feed results back to the boards, helping them to develop their exams even further.'

Dianne's interest in testing dates back to her teaching days at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, where she attended a series of guest lectures by Professor Alan Davies, one of the foremost figures in the field. 'Like many teachers I had found myself writing tests, but I hadn't thought about the principles of what I was doing.' Davies' lectures made her ask a lot of searching questions. How does testing relate to teaching objectives? What are the best

ways to test the skills you are trying to teach?

Dianne's own specialist research area is exam washback, the impact of high-stakes examinations on the way language is taught in the classroom. Her PhD was on the washback of a new exam system in Sri Lanka, and this is one of the kinds of research that she is keen to do more of at Trinity. 'We have some evidence of the washback of GESE (Graded Examinations in Spoken English) and ISE (Integrated Skills in English) exams in the field, but we want to learn more about how teachers and learners react to them and how we can promote positive washback even further.'

Trinity College London is of course best known for the speaking component of its exams and as Dianne is quick to point out, oral exams are probably the most interesting, and the most complicated, to research. 'First of all you have to decide what you are looking for, because there is so much more to speaking than competence in the language. There is the sociolinguistics element, the pragmatics element, strategies. You need to design tasks that represent all parts of your construct, tasks that elicit the kinds of behaviour you want to judge.'

Take as an example talking on the telephone in English. Clearly it is of vital importance for workplace English and it makes different demands on both the speaker and listener than talking face to face. For its new suite of exams, Spoken English for Work (SEW), Trinity has introduced a telephone task, the kind of authentic activity for which it is famous. 'However, a single task will only give you one kind of information. It's the combination of tasks that is critical,' Dianne says. It's a challenge to decide what kind of tasks to include in tests in the future. 'As the world of work changes, what are the new things we will need to assess?'

Another feature of the SEW exams is that they test skills that



are common to all areas of professional life, rather than the type of language which is specific to a particular profession. This is surprising to some, but not to Dianne, who has worked with many teams who are assessing peacekeeping English. Specialist jargon was not a problem for those who needed English to work together in the military field. It was communication skills that were needed. In SEW the candidate provides the work context – talking about their own work experiences and ambitions, regardless of the sector. The role of the examiner is to assess their ability to operate in English in that context. 'A human examiner can adjust a test to candidates in a way no computer can. They can probe to check that they have not just learned their presentation parrot-fashion. They can calm the anxious candidate and challenge the over-confident. They can inject into a speaking exam that most difficult aspect of spoken English: unpredictability.'

'I think it is in exams like Trinity's that we see the best use of

the human examiner,' says Dianne. 'It's a role that requires careful training, continuous monitoring and very special ability. The ability to listen not just to the content of what the candidates say, and not just to the language they are using to say it, but to listen at a deeper level to the skills and strategies they are using to get their message across.' Dianne adds, 'It is incredible what the examiners do. Getting on a plane to some remote part of the world, testing a business executive one day for SEW and a seven-year-old for GESE the next. It takes a lot of skills.'

Not unlike, I say, the kind of skills needed by a good complementary therapist to diagnose and treat a person. 'Treating the whole person,' Dianne agrees, 'a holistic approach. A holistic way of testing. That's what teachers need to realise about testing. There is more to it than just statistics and scary jargon. It can have a very creative, very human side.'

Melanie Butler is managing editor of the EL Gazette.



Dianne Wall is a self-confessed learning addict. She has two MAs, one in Latin American literature from the National Autonomous University of Mexico and one in Tesol from the University of Lancaster. Then there are the diplomas in reflexology and aromatherapy, not to mention a PhD in language testing. She studies the healing properties of herbs and t'ai chi in her spare time, between her two jobs as senior lecturer in language testing at Lancaster University and as head of examinations research and development for Trinity College London.

Dianne, who started working for Trinity last autumn, relishes the way the two jobs look at the same issues from two different perspectives and how her position enables her to take the problems that arise at an exam board like Trinity and reflect on them back in the university environment with the help of her colleagues and her PhD students. It's a perfect symbiosis.

'The material generated by exam boards provides rich research possibilities for the applied linguistics community: