

Post-Course Report from Csoma Katalin
EXAMS PREPARATION AND TASK DESIGN
SUMMER SCHOOL
Dobogókő, 11-19 August 2005

Rationale

As one involved in teacher training and development for almost 10 years, I am constantly seeking newer and newer opportunities to broaden my horizons. Even though my primary research interest in this broad area is related to ICT and teacher training, I became involved in testing and evaluation through my relatively new job at Heller Farkas College of Economics and Tourism. It was at another assessor training course where I met Györgyi this spring and was presented with the possibility to attend this British Council course as a trainer trainee; an opportunity that I took with pleasure.

Organisation

The organisation and the logistics of the summer school were wonderful: we were pampered by great service, food, entertainment and the stunning scenery of the area. The construction in progress on the premises was a somewhat eerie experience at times, but during the workshops, we were safely secluded in the annexed building.

Module Content

Overall, the five modules were all constructed in the same philosophy: discovery learning. It is always refreshing to attend British Council courses as they always have such a relaxed and friendly atmosphere that they are a nice break from the dynamics of a typical Hungarian education institution.

Introduction

The introductory activity (expectation suitcase) set an amiable tone for the rest of the course and its roundup at the end was also a good idea (i.e. things that got into our suitcases after attending the workshops). A general introduction to testing was also necessary as participants came with very different backgrounds. The same applies to the introductory parts to all skills sections: it is really difficult to understand the implications of testing a skill without knowing some background about it.

Receptive skills

Trainees performed fairly well on the receptive skills part due to the fact that in general most teachers feel relatively safe when it comes to administering and assessing reading and listening tests. Partly because of the nature of the items (closed or short answer), partly because in these cases there are no unexpected surprises as there might be in the case of a speaking test. The test texts are all available in advance, the teacher can think way ahead about the feedback she can give, should any questions arise.

As for task design for receptive skills: most teachers are not expected to develop their own tests for standardized exams, but a lot of teachers do develop tests for their midterms. Based on my own experiences, I can see a pleasant shift happening in midterm test design in terms of testing the four skills. Previously, a typical school midterm consisted of grammar, usage and at best writing assignments. Since the widespread introduction of skills based tests, teachers are extrinsically more motivated to give skills tests as well. All these things considered it is a good idea to talk about task design not only administering and evaluation.

Productive skills

Testing the productive skills is of course even more of a challenge. Not only because evaluation is a lot more complex with scales and the human factor involved, but also because in Hungary secondary school teachers are expected to be proficient item writers for the speaking exam.

The course successfully catered to these needs. In my opinion, training for assessing writing was a very strong part of the course in terms of methodology. The jigsaw assessment assignment where either the justification or the benchmark was given, and the justifications matching exercise were very revealing as well as educational by providing valuable models.

Once having acquired the use of content points, specifications and scales in the writing context, the skills attained were a useful foundation to build on at the speaking part, so to me it seemed like less of a burden to master.

For above stated reasons, speaking task design was essential to study in more depth than task design for other skills. Still, I would deal more with writing task design, as teachers do give out a lot of writing tasks during the English learning process and perhaps they could do with more guidance in that department. I think most teachers do have problems with writing clear rubrics, especially when it comes to specifying audiences and content points.

Use of English

Again, this part is fairly easy to administer and assess, as in the case of most exercises there is a clearcut task and a more or less closed set of answers. In my view, in connection with use of English tasks the challenge lies in explaining those acceptable answers to students and giving comprehensible justifications without analysing deep structures or drawing too many constituent structure trees.

Course materials

One can tell by the first glimpse that almost a decade's work lies in the course materials. The pre-course materials contain abundant relevant information about the productive skills, which is necessary to study before the course because of its volume. The contact modules are well founded with the necessary theoretical information; methodologically they have been well developed through an arsenal of activity types and participant management.

Perhaps an improvement that could be done to these materials is one connected to layout. It would give the handouts a more attractive and a more organised look if they all had the same layout and a filing system. I understand that the materials were produced with a versatile focus, so that they could be used in various course combinations, but perhaps a colour coding

system or some number/letter combination of codes could help post-course materials organisation into a ring binder.

Group dynamics

The composition of the participants' group did not leave the trainers without a challenge either: almost all were from either a different school type or a different education system with varying backgrounds in language and teacher education. However, the material always introduced or revised basic concepts as well, thus the group could move along fairly smoothly. The fact that all participants were intrinsically motivated to attend has to be noted, too.

Overall, the group was disciplined in terms of participation and time management; and was also sociable when it came to extracurricular activities.

Training skills of the trainers

The patience and the positive and constructive attitude of the trainers was remarkable. It is also a skill to be learned to know how to point participants to the right direction when their ideas go astray. I observed that the trainers were especially inventive in terms of class management. Perhaps it was the result of careful trainer-candidate screening that trainers with an affirmative attitude were selected.

Social activities

The location in itself was a call for outdoor social activities. The surrounding woods with the astounding view of the Danube Bend were a bonus alone. Let alone the other activities (welcome and farewell nights, films, games, the trip to Visegrád, pool and all). It was rather difficult to get back on track at work afterwards as it is easy to get used to being indulged...

Future plans

My future plans concerning the course are to become a BC approved trainer and to conduct courses at my workplace (KIT or Heller Farkas College) as soon as an agreement is reached between the two institutions.

Concerning testing in general, my long-term goal is to develop or take part in developing such a teacher training course that assists teachers with designing, or locating and grading materials that gradually prepare students for the new types of exams.

POST-COURSE REPORT
EXAMS PREPARATION AND TASK-DESIGN SUMMER SCHOOL
DOBOGÓKŐ, 11-19 AUGUST 2005

1 Reasons for attending the summer school as a trainer trainee

The aims I hoped to achieve were as follows:

- to be trained as a future trainer on similar courses; to see how such a course is conducted both from the professional point of view and from that of logistics and organisation
- to revise and systematise my knowledge of testing and see how it can be taught to others in digestible chunks
- to improve my interlocutor, rater and assessor skills

2 The organisation and logistics of the summer school

The course consisted of three phases:

- a distance pre-course phase (self-study and marking)
- a 7-day live training
- a post-course phase

Before the actual course, participants were sent two introductory training packs with tasks to do before the course, which prepared them for the writing and speaking modules, and also asked them to bring several things (pictures, tasks, course-books) with them to the summer school. They also got an introductory letter with practical information.

The summer course took place in the Manréza Hotel and Conference centre in Dobogókő and lasted for 9 days, out of which 7 were spent with the actual training. On each of these days there were 4 sessions, each lasting for 90 minutes, all of which participants were required to attend.

The course was taught by 4 trainers, each of them doing several sessions. Besides the trainer who was doing the actual training, at least one other trainer was always present and helped her/his colleague out when it was necessary.

The course was well-equipped, and made good use of a variety of technical devices and other teaching aids. The most important ones were as follows:

- OHP, computers (several lap-tops + the computer of the hotel), projector, DVD player, video-recorder, cassette-recorder, flip-chart
- A/4 sheets of paper, OHTs, coloured stickers of different shapes, coloured pockets, flip-chart sheets, pins, marker pens and felt-tip pens
- books on testing, English-language magazines and newspapers – on display for participants
- hand-outs + participant's packs for the speaking module
- films on DVD and video

3 The content of each module

The aim of the course was to prepare teachers for modern European exams and give them some insight into task design. The structure and content of the course was as follows:

1. Introduction into testing and assessment

Course expectations; Reasons for testing; Defining terms; Features of a good test.

2. Assessing reading skills

Ordering the four skills; What do we read and why?; Receptive sub-skills; CU Framework: Overall reading comprehension; Doing 5 reading tasks; Reading task types; Criteria for analysing tasks; Evaluating two tasks written by trainee item writers; Setting home assignment.

3. Assessing Use of English

Terms for sense relations and word formation; Teaching grammar, vocabulary and discourse in course-books; Doing 5 UE tasks; UE task types; Analysing tasks; Setting home assignment.

4. Assessing listening skills

What and why do we listen?; Texts suitable for a listening test; Listening sub-skills; Text-types and task types for teaching and testing purposes; Types of listening; CU Framework for listening comprehension; Doing 5 listening tasks; What makes a good listening test?

5. Assessing writing skills, rater training

Elements of a writing situation; Characteristic features of these elements; Analysing intermediate writing tasks; The writing process; Analysing task from the Intro Pack; Re-marking four scripts from Intro pack; Marking new scripts (gradual training in all 4 criteria) for letters, then for articles; Writing task design: what makes writing tasks good?; Criticising and revising a bad task; An advanced level writing task; Do's and don'ts for markers; Setting home assignment.

6. Assessing speaking skills, interlocutor training, assessor training, task design

Interlocutor's behaviour: standardised and non-standardised; Role-plays (candidate-interlocutor-observer); Arguments for and against having an interlocutor frame; Paired tasks; How to use the analytic rating scale; Marking videoed performances; The marking process: what do we focus on? Advanced speaking tasks; Differences between the two levels; Setting home assignment; What are good interview questions like?; Guidelines for good role-play tasks; picture tasks; Criticising picture pairs and role-play tasks

4 The course materials of each module

The pre-course materials (2 training packs accompanied by a video) aim to start the training of interlocutors and assessors, and raters, to be continued at the live course. Both packs provide an overview of the model speaking/writing examination and set the pre-course tasks. Both packs are well-designed, with a clear structure, and with several features aimed to help participants work through them on their own as efficiently as possible (e.g. FAQs, detailed and clear steps for doing the pre-course tasks, glossaries, etc.)

The live sessions abounded with hand-outs; participants had to work out a system of their own to organise them as they were given out in the process of work, always at the most appropriate time and stage. However, no handout was in vain; they all provided either material for work (e.g. tasks for the sessions) or a summary of what participants had covered, or some further reading. They were well-designed and useful. Perhaps it would have been helpful for participants if the handouts had been marked with the same type of headings - but this is a minor detail.

5 Group dynamics in each module

Careful attention was paid to vary the groups participants had to work in to ensure the right group dynamics. The trainers often planned the way of forming the groups beforehand, taking

into consideration the participants' different backgrounds, experiences, abilities and personalities. Groups were re-formed at least once a day so that participants could mingle. Grouping was often done with the help of colourful stickers of different forms. A typical structure of work was the following: individual work - group discussion - feedback/presenting in front of the whole group.

As a result of the trainers' successful effort to ensure the right group dynamics, participants got on very well with each other from the very start, and no one seemed too intimidated by the presence of trainer trainees.

6 Training skills of the trainers, handling difficult situations

Besides having the necessary professional knowledge of the subject taught, the trainers all had some experience in conducting training sessions. They were able to make sure the sessions ran smoothly, keep to the planned timing and they had several ways of creating appropriate group dynamics. Also, they were able to represent the professional view and stand up for it whenever it was necessary.

One reason for the success of the course was that participants learnt almost everything 'by doing', by taking part in activities, that is, they spent very little time listening to lectures. The trainers were able to vary both the grouping techniques and the activities to make the course as efficient as possible.

The greatest difficulty in this particular course lay in the fact that the participants formed a very mixed group. However, by constant monitoring, re-grouping and allocating different roles to participants, the trainers managed to cater for individual needs and bridge the great differences between participants' background knowledge and experiences.

7 Social activities

The social activities included some films chosen by the candidates and some games. *Activity* was lead by one of the trainers, and then one of the trainer trainees volunteered to teach the group how to play *Cranium*, which turned out to be great fun.

On the first night, there was an introductory social event, and on the last night there was a farewell party organised by the participants, each event accompanied by a buffet dinner. At the farewell party participants performed what they had prepared on their own. Both evenings were successful and great fun. One afternoon there was a coach trip to Visegrád and Esztergom. Also, participants had a chance to have a rest and/or explore the surrounding forests in the 2-hour long afternoon break. As a result of this wonderful timing, participants did not feel the course exhausting.

8 My future plans in connection with the course

All in all, I feel that the course was highly successful as well as enjoyable both for me and for other participants. I feel that I have managed to achieve the aims I had set before the course, that is, I feel prepared to conduct similar courses, or preferably parts of them, in the future, with the support of experienced trainers at first, and later on, on my own.

Rationale, content and the process of „Exam Preparation and Task Design British Council Summer School” (METT, Writing Intermediate and Speaking Intermediate modules)

(26-th June-2-nd July 2005)

Rationale

Type of course

The course is an 60-hour residential in-service course set up for participants who are interested in modern English language examinations. All the tutors are well-experienced, highly qualified ELT specialists whose active, helpful and conscientious contributions made the course very useful and valuable for all the participants.

Resources

Venue of training: „Hotel Manréza and Conference Centre” is an ideal place to run courses like this one. It can be reached easily from any part of Hungary and its peaceful and pleasant location provides a unique venue both for learning and leisure purposes (tours, walking, jogging, hiking etc.)

The plenary room (where the sessions were held) has a large space and its physical arrangement is suitable for working in small groups and pairs. The mini library (books on testing, and other supplementary materials) can be used by the participants during the course. TV, video, OHP, laptop, and other technical appliances are also provided.

Target population

12 participants from the public sector were involved in the course. All of them were enthusiastic practising teachers from different towns (Szeged, Debrecen, Nyíregyháza, Marcali etc.) working in secondary schools or at universities. They attended this course so that they could learn the best testing techniques to prepare students for language exams and to be trained as raters for writing examinations, assessors and interlocutors for speaking examinations. The working atmosphere was open, attentive and warm. The participants were not sent to attend this course by their school management, they were willing to attend it for their own benefits.

Admission requirements

There was no entrance exam or fee to join the course. It was open to anyone (having a college or university degree) who wanted to broaden his/her knowledge on testing skills. The course was financed by the British Council. The participants' contribution to the costs was 20,000 HUF.

Need for the course

All the teachers who participated in this programme had the opportunity to share their views on testing. The meetings also served as a forum where the course participants could receive first-hand feedback on issues of mutual concern. They were provided with useful up-to-date information on research results, development of effective testing techniques and test design.

All this can contribute to improving the quality of instruction in schools, keeping teachers interested and motivated by providing them a sense of direction and purpose on testing.

Another reason for launching the course is the realisation that the methodology training on testing that teachers received at universities years before, was not sufficient to satisfy the new requirements of modern English examinations. So a sound methodology base knowledge on testing has also been built in the course so as to update the participants' methodology on testing. (The first session of the face-to-face mode: „General introduction to the principles of testing the main skills” provided an excellent frame to cater for these needs). As a sum we can say that the necessity of the course is unquestionable.

Aims and objectives

The primary aim of the course is to give the participants help in how to prepare the students for modern English language examinations and to enable the participants to provide the bridge between the received knowledge on testing (if any) gained at universities and the experimental knowledge acquired during the course period realised in simulated real-life testing situations under the guidance of experienced course tutors. In order to perform these roles (rater, interlocutor, assessor) with success, participants had to acquire and use a number of skills which this course aimed to introduce.

- To familiarise participants with the main principles and procedures of administering the model Examination
- To practise using analytic rating scales
- Acquire the appropriate assessor-interlocutor and rater roles
- To present guidelines for designing exam tasks

The content of the course

The course is divided up into three phases.

- Distance pre-course phase
- 7-day life training

- Post-course phase

They are logically sequenced each phase has its clear aim. Both in the distance-phase and on the face-to-face training the participants received a „methodology-refreshing” on testing but the course aimed to cover more professionally and practically oriented issues of testing. The tutors on the course wanted to emphasize the need of standardisation of the assessment procedure.

The participants were introduced how to apply the analytic rating scales for assessing written and oral performances. They were also provided with the opportunity to acquire – or at least to practise – the necessary skills to play the roles of interlocutor and assessor of oral examination.

The value of learning from each other particularly from those with more experience, received a stressed role on the course. There were several opportunities to discuss questions which trainees felt relevant and the tutors did their best to give effective feedback. The participants were provided with effective guidance, concrete help, practical suggestions and reasonable explanations.

Annotated bibliography of the Introductory Training Pack suggests books on testing so anyone wanting to search for literature on testing can turn to these publications.

The course content is built around the cyclical process of experimental training approach the EROTI-model.

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|----|---|----------|
| 1, | Concrete E xperience | E |
| 2, | Abstract Conceptualisation (R ationale) | R |
| 3, | Reflective O bservation | O |
| 4, | Active Experimentation (T rial) | T |
| 5, | I ntegration | I |

The course incorporated all of these elements in an adequate and very practical way. The starting point was the participants' **experience**: what they do in the classroom, what they know about the basic principles of testing etc. By doing the distance pre-course tasks (marking video sample performances and writing scripts) they used their existing classroom experiences on testing backed up with the help of analytic rating scales. Then on the first day of the live training the participants were given opportunity to identify and discuss key issues and anticipated problems concerning teaching implications for testing writing and speaking. This nicely led the participants to the **Abstract Conceptualisation** stage (Rationale behind the testing procedure). The aim of this phase is to make the trainees form a clear conception

of the principles underlying testing. Then those principles can create further experiences and practice for the participants. Moving from **experience** (trainees are asked to carry out a sequence of tasks) to **rationale** (the tutors help the trainees to see the underlying principles) played a prominent role during the course.

Incorporating **observation tasks** into the training (**Reflective Observation** phase) is unquestionable: as teachers or trainees we can all learn about our teaching by watching learners, watching other teachers or being watched ourselves. This training course provided a lot of opportunities to observe. (each other, videotaped examinations: learners, interlocutors etc.) The **experimental component** of the training was combined with **observation** by assigning different roles to different participants (student, interlocutor, observer). This observation task (role-plays) allowed the participants to review, and raise discussion about the importance of being well-prepared as an interlocutor, to follow the standardized interlocutor behaviour, how to stop an „over-talkative” student and how to handle difficult exam situations. The purpose of this observation is developmental (it can help to refine our interlocutor’s role) not evaluative.

The last two phases of the EROTI-model (**Trial** and **Integration**) represent the two aspects of the process of application. The Trial element relates to the application that is done within the context of the training room: the trainees were asked to try out the piloted tasks (reading and use of English), to analyse them, to decide the order of difficulty. They were also involved in a simulated real examination task when they played (tried out) the role of interlocutor and student. (See: above)

The integration element relates to the application that takes place in the „real” classroom with „real” students. As an assignment the trainees are asked to try some piloted Reading, Use of English and Speaking tasks with their learners at their schools.

The Methods of the course

Teaching modes and activities

The teaching modes employed including the discussion techniques as well, allowed the course members to comment all the time to share opinions and ideas. Active participation was promoted by various teaching modes and activities. The course included completion of written assignments, set readings, discussions, seminars, analysis of tasks, video-taped exams, marking scripts, conducting speaking tests, assessing speaking performances etc. The use of procedures and tasks such as role-plays, workshops, simulations, self-study and conducting mock-exams with the participants' own students (as a post-course assignment) heightened the interest on the course and made its content more relevant.

The progression of the course

The progression of the course is logical and coherent. The structure of each session is similar, having a fix format which was secure for the participants. (controlled tasks → guided tasks → free) (working in small groups → one person from each group presents)

This progression is carefully thought out. The course is trainee-centered. It is not based on traditional transmission model of training. As the structure (content) of the course suggested, different types of teaching modes and activities reinforced the trainee-centered and task-based centered approaches.

Organistaional issues, procedures

Ther venue, the accomodation, the delicious meals, the hiking tour , the evening programmes (watching films, activity, games etc.) and the Szentendre trip all of them provided us with nice memories and pleasant experiences. Thanks to the course tutors (Györgyi, Ildikó, Gyuri and Gyula alias New See) for their professionalism and for their hard work.

Thanks to the British Council for their support.

Magyar Miklósné
participant
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