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USE OF ACHIEVEMENT TESTS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSES AT THE DISTRIBUTED E-LEARNING CENTRE

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***Abstract.** This article describes the integration of achievement tests in the education of English at the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics at Plovdiv University. One-hour long tests are made available to students on a weekly basis via deLC to monitor their progress. These tests are based on the latest covered material and can be used for self-study at home as well as for formative assessment in class during the term.*

Key words: DeLC, IT, achievement tests, self-study tests, formative assessment, motivation, feedback

1. INTRODUCTION

The progress of IT in all spheres of life in the 21st century requires its wider use in the process of learning and teaching, especially in tertiary education. Integrating online activities done by students at home or in class while working with a textbook or other materials prepared and selected by the teacher motivates students to work harder and improve their knowledge and skills.

English is an international language the proficiency of which is a prerequisite for the successful realization and career development of all students and especially those at the Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics (FMI). Therefore, the process of language acquisition has to be intensified as much as possible in order to obtain measurable results in a limited time frame.

One of the ways to optimize the learning process is to use self-study tests [6]. Such tests were integrated in the education in English for students from two language groups at FMI during the first two trimesters of academic year 2013/2014.

As determined by a placement test at the beginning of the language course, the students from both groups had similar language abilities – their language level was A2 – B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [2].

During the English classes the students used the New Headway Pre-Intermediate course materials in General English which include a Student Book and a Workbook. The students from each group had classes at the university every week for 4 or 5

consecutive academic hours respectively. During those sessions they practiced new lexical and grammatical patterns, did listening and reading comprehension tasks and exercised their oral and written communication skills.

The Student Book comprises 12 units. Usually a whole unit is covered in class, and if there is spare time, workbook exercises are dealt with too, otherwise students are supposed to complete them out of class for homework. During the two trimesters students do twelve self-study tests at home, one on each of the textbook units, and two tests (Midterm and Final) in a computer classroom environment. The latter are used for formative assessment and cover the material from the first half of the textbook (Units 1–6) and all the study material in the book (Units 1–12) at the end of the term.

The test construction follows the steps as described in [3] and [1]. The application of these rules in practice has been reported in [7] and [6].

After a detailed list of the new grammar and vocabulary has been added to the test specification, a suitable form is selected for each test task. The options are multiple-choice questions (MCQs) with one correct answer, MCQs with more than one correct answers, strict matching (where the number of questions corresponds exactly to the number of answers), non-strict matching and open questions [5].

The tests are published online on the deLC website and are given a time limit of one hour. They are validated only for one week from the day on which the respective unit is studied until the day before the next in-class activities.

2. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING DELC FOR SELF-STUDY TESTS IN ENGLISH

From our experience with test construction via deLC, the use of the different task types has both its advantages and disadvantages.

Provided that multiple-choice tasks contain at least four answer options they are not easy to guess and at the same time not too difficult to devise. Experience allows teachers to anticipate some common mistakes that under-prepared students may make so they can include examples of these as distracters. DeLC offers a particularly helpful feature as regards MCQs. It shuffles both the questions and the answer options in a test so teachers needn't worry about the number of times a particular answer option (a, b, c, etc.) is the correct one in a task. When designing a test, teachers can always put down the correct option first and then add distracters to make sure no mistakes will be made when transferring the tasks to the site. However, too many multiple-choice questions can make the test rather monotonous and tiresome.

Matching questions can pose a few problems. Some of the issues concern formatting. When entering a text, sometimes a message appears on the page that reads "Data truncation. Text too long" no matter how long the text actually is. The problem can be solved by typing the text in a Text document first and then placing it on the website.



Table 1. An example of open and closed questions on a test.

Other problems we have experienced with matching tasks are connected with the total number of options and the scoring. As no more than six options can be added in a non-strict matching task we have had to split a task into two or more subtasks or change the format to MCQs. In one of the self-study tests all the students got the total number of possible points for two matching tasks although they had matched the words with the wrong options.



Table 2 a. An example of preset correct options on the website

In addition, from a student's point of view, scoring can be seen as unfair because in case a student has mismatched only one item out of ten, for example, then he/she gets a total score of 0 for this task instead of 9.

As regards short-answer open questions, observations show that although students sometimes get 0 points for such tasks, their answers are often correct. We have had to manually check all tests of individual students where such questions were present to verify that they have not been disadvantaged by their final scores. Usually problems arise from students typing whole sentences instead of just a missing word although instructions state clearly what they are supposed to do. Also, missing words are typed in with a capital letter instead of a lower case one and vice versa, or an interval is placed at the wrong place, etc.



Table 2 b. An example of students getting points for wrong answers.

The only problem students have reported so far in relation with long-answer open questions is that the text they type in cannot be formatted and for some kinds of tasks this is important such as in letter writing, editing and others.

Each of the tests that we used has the same total number of points and applies the same system of scoring: the maximum number of points is 80, 60 of which come from closed questions and 20 from an open question. To simplify the calculation of grades, 40 – 49 points (40 points being 50 % of the total number) amount to a grade of 3; 50 – 59 points give a grade of 4; 60 – 69 points render a grade of 5 and 70 to 80 points provide an excellent grade of 6.



Table 3. An illustration of the scoring system and the test results of a group of students on a self-study test

Below are some of the advantages of using the Distributed E-Learning Centre as a medium for self-study tests:

- It is very user-friendly. It allows for various types of tasks including the upload of pictures, and makes use of metadata which makes it possible to compile tests easily based on different criteria.
- DeLC offers the option to set a time limit and different validity periods for every test. Also, the preview option helps teachers to try the test out and correct any mistakes before they administer it to students.
- All questions are placed on one and the same page which facilitates scrolling through the various tasks to edit and correct items.
- Classroom tests provide teachers with essential information which can be used to make decisions about instruction and student grades.
- Tests require students to invest comparatively little time into them. They bear the same structure and method of scoring and are done on a regular weekly basis so students get used to the type of activity performed for class preparation.
- Self-study tests are done from the comfort of students' homes at a convenient time within the one-week period of test validity.
- The same self-study tests can be used for formative assessment in class with other groups of students who use the same study materials and a different form of language practice and project work at home.
- What makes tests particularly effective is that their content is relevant to the most recently covered study material and activities performed in class.
- Students obtain their test results immediately except for the open question score which is added after the teacher has read the texts.
- Last but not least we would like to mention the responsible and assiduous team members who do not spare their free time and efforts to provide any assistance teachers may need.

Some disadvantages of using deLC for self-study tests in English:

- Foreign students have problems registering to use the website because they do not have Personal Identity Numbers.
- It is not possible to measure some language abilities such as speaking and listening comprehension by using the available types of tasks [4].
- Students do not have the possibility to check out the grades they have obtained on previous tests.
- The feedback students get refers to their overall test performance but they cannot find out the exact mistakes they have made unless they contact the teacher and discuss these with him/ her.
- As students do the self-study tests at home, technical problems usually lead to impossibility to complete the tasks and getting a very low test score. Students report frequent site crashes and pop-up signs reading "Caching failed. Please contact the administrator", resulting in frustration and lack of motivation to contact the teacher and be granted an additional validity of the same test.

3. STUDENT FEEDBACK ON SELF-STUDY TESTS

At the end of the second trimester students who were subjected to self-study tests were asked to share an opinion of their experience.

A review of students' feedback shows that 77% maintain a positive attitude to the tests they have done, 17% have a negative attitude and 6% have expressed neutral attitude.

The most common complaints from the tests include technical problems (site crashes) and personal overload (students claim they feel too tired after classes to do any more work from home because they have jobs besides their full-time studies which exhaust them). It is interesting to note that the features some students find discouraging are appealing to others. For example, students write:

"In my opinion, the tests we've done so far were easy, except for the essays because I don't like them." as opposed to *"I like to do tests every week because they have a "write a text" part which we write with our own thinking."*

The neutral attitude to tests is expressed by comments such as *"It is my duty to do the tests so I do them."* or *"Tests are simply tests – there is nothing to like or dislike about them."*

Some of the points students make about the advantages of self-study tests are the following:

- Self-study tests are computer tests:

"We do the tests on computer which is much more interesting than others."

"The online tests are easier for us to do and for our teacher to check them."

"I like the tests in English because they are on computer and that's more easy and practical than on paper."

- Students have a week to do the self-study tests at their leisure without a fixed date and time for that purpose:

"The online tests every week keep us in condition and you can do them when you have more free time."

- The self-study tests are based on the study material.

"The tests are very helpful because they are on the same grammar as the unit that we have done in class."

"I think the tests are very good. I like them, they are interesting and they give us a chance to show what we know and what we have learned in our lessons."

- The tests are of the right level of difficulty.

"I think that the tests in English that I have done so far are very pleasant. They are not very hard but also not very easy. They are perfect for testing our knowledge and with their help we can remind ourselves of things that we have forgotten."

"The tests that we have done so far are very well made. They are not too hard and not too easy and we learn a lot from them."

- Good test quality and variety of tasks.

“In my opinion, they are not difficult and the questions are easily understandable. In conclusion, they are even fun to do.”

“My own opinion about the tests in English is great. They are really nicely done, with various questions – this is excellent!”

- Self-study tests can serve a teaching purpose.

“They help me learn new things and that is their job.”

Also, students made some recommendations such as to increase the test time limit and to change the number of tests they do – some suggesting the number should be reduced and others that it should be increased as long as learners are not graded for their performance on the tests:

“Something which should be changed is to low down the number of tests we do because every week is too often.” versus *“If I can I would like to have more computer tests and more writing.”*

“What I think about tests in English is that they are really important and help us. I think students have to do tests more often but without marks.”

4. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, the majority of students completed the self-study tests with enthusiasm. They consider them useful and stated willingness to continue using such tests in their education to practice the study material at home.

The future plans of the author are connected with using self-study tests with all students at FMI irrespectively of the subject – be it General English or English for Specific Purposes, and devising various types of questions to find the most effective form of testing the acquired knowledge and skills by the students in class.

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ИЗПОЛЗВАНЕ НА ТЕСТОВЕ ЗА ПОСТИЖЕНИЯ В ЧАСОВЕТЕ ПО АНГЛИЙСКИ ЕЗИК В РАЗПРЕДЕЛЕНИЯ ЦЕНТЪР ЗА ЕЛЕКТРОННО ОБУЧЕНИЕ

Ваня Иванова

***Резюме.** В тази статия се описва интегрирането на тестове за постижения в обучението по английски език във Факултета по математика и информатика в Пловдивския университет „Паисий Хилендарски”. Посредством DeLC на студентите всяка седмица се предоставят тестове с продължителност от един час, които проверяват овладяването на преподадените знания. Тестовите се базират на текущия изучен материал и могат да се използват както за самоподготовка вкъщи, така и за формиращо оценяване по време на упражненията през триместъра.*