

Writing the Freshman English Placement Test (FEPT)
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The AUET

The current method of placing students into Freshman English classes is the Asia University English Test (AUET) written by ELERI researcher Alan Sellers, who came to Asia University from Oregon State University, a former AUAP consortium school, during the 1992-93 academic year. The test consists of a total of 60 listening and reading comprehension questions (Sellers, 1993). The listening and reading sections of the test are scored together, not separately; moreover, the students are required to do a good deal of reading throughout the listening section. The problem that arises from this structure is that students with dissimilar skills are often placed in the same class.

The 1995 Freshman English Placement Exam

In 1995, VFM Larry J. Sinnott's project was to write a new Freshman English (FE) placement exam (Sinnott, 1996). He received assistance from VFM Michael Kearney on how the test should be evaluated (the set/subset theory used in the new Freshman English Placement Test) and on the style of the test (the use of pictures where possible in the listening section in order to reduce the amount of reading the students must do in that part of the test). However, during the course of the year technical problems and time constraints arose that made the project unusable.

Another problem encountered in Sinnott's test was that some questions were written to match pictures instead of creating

pictures to more accurately match questions. This made a large portion of the listening section redundant and invalid. Too much of the listening section was composed of simple vocabulary recognition thereby creating a situation in which students from a high-beginner level to an advanced level of English proficiency would become bored and lose their concentration. Such a situation made the remaining portions of the test, with more difficult questions, invalid as a measure of their English listening ability.

The New Freshman English Placement Test (FEPT)

The solution to these problems was to create the FEPT. The FEPT attempts to effectively evaluate the English ability of all students in FE and to place them into advanced, intermediate, and beginning level FE classes based on a set (listening scores) and subset (reading scores) system. We believe that by evaluating the listening and reading scores independently and placing students into FE classes using the set/subset system, we will be able to create classes where students have similar strengths and similar weaknesses. This method of evaluation will be explained later.

The overall premise of the FEPT was to write questions that progress from easy to difficult so as not to dishearten beginning level students before they get an opportunity to display their English ability while at the same time holding the attention of intermediate and advanced students.

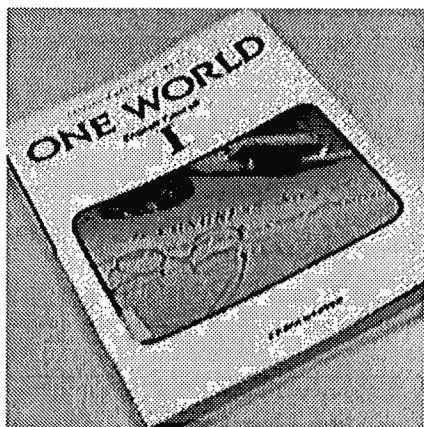
The Listening Section of the FEPT

The reason for evaluating students' listening comprehension first in the FEPT is because the medium of instruction in FE is oral/aural. The listening comprehension section of the FEPT

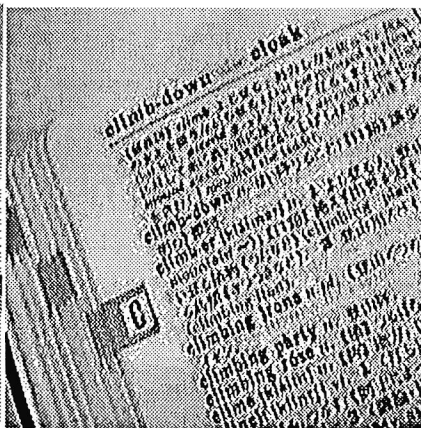
consists of the following five parts: Part 1 (Vocabulary); Part 2 (Short Monologues); Part 3 (Short Dialogues); Part 4 (Long Monologues); and Part 5 (Long Dialogues).

Part 1: Vocabulary

Part 1 of the FEPT consists of 26 vocabulary words. Students hear three vocabulary words per page (each word is spoken only once on the tape) and match the word to the correct photograph (five photographs per page). For example, students hear the words *notebook*, *textbook*, and *dictionary* and see five photographs of a) a textbook, b) a dictionary, c) an eraser, d) a notebook, and e) a pencil. Unlike Sinnott's test, which utilized graphics from a compact disc, the photographs used in Parts 1 through 3 of the FEPT were taken with a digital camera to accurately match each vocabulary word and listening comprehension question. For example:



(A)



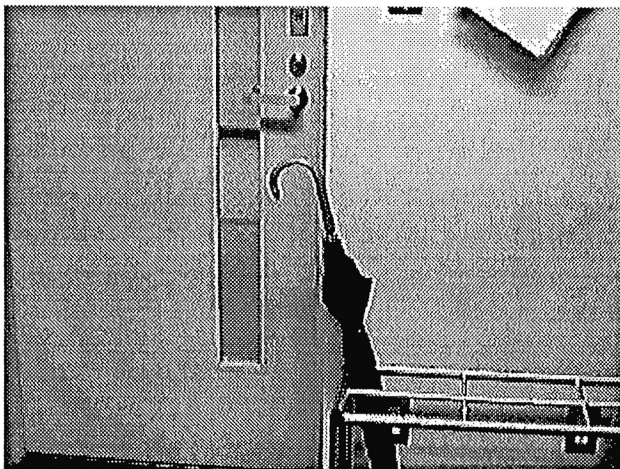
(B)

In other words, the first consideration was what to test, then the questions were written, and finally pictures were created specifically for each question. The vocabulary words in

the test include items related to materials used and things located in a classroom, places located on a university campus, places located in a city/neighborhood, things related to the outdoors and nature, methods of transportation, prices, numbers, and time.

Part 2: Short Monologues

In Part 2 of the FEPT, students look at a photograph and hear four sentences (A through D). Students must choose the sentence that best matches the photograph they see. There are a total of eight sets of photographs and corresponding possible answers. For example, students see a picture of an umbrella in a rack next to a door:

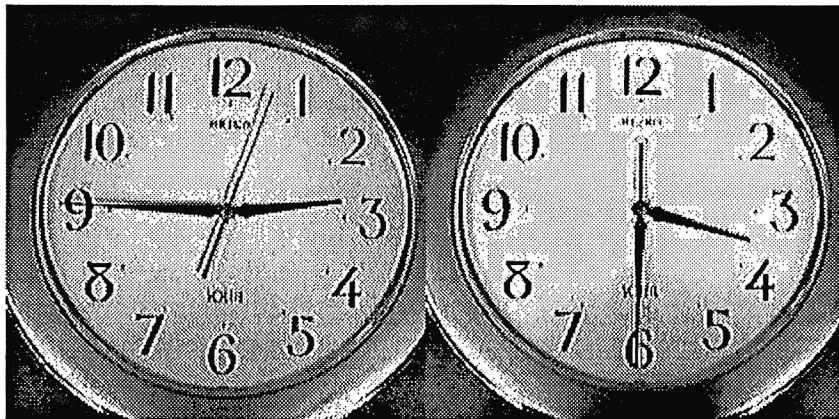


and hear the following four sentences spoken on the tape:

- (A) Both umbrellas are open.
- (B) The umbrella is on the door.
- (C) The umbrella is by the door.
- (D) Please lend me your umbrella.

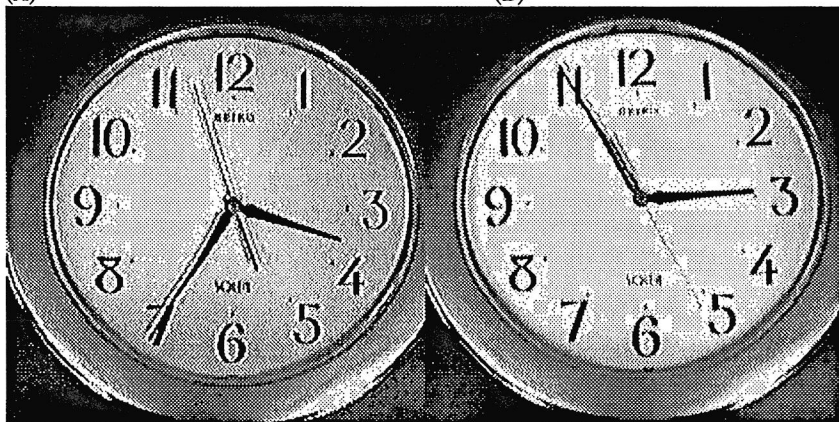
Part 3: Short Dialogues

Part 3 of the FEPT consists of six short dialogues spoken by two people, followed by a question about the dialogue. Students listen to the dialogue and question on the tape and choose the one picture (out of four) that best matches the dialogue they heard. For example, students see:



(A)

(B)



(C)

(D)

and students hear:

- A: Hey Bill, what time should I meet you this afternoon?
B: Why don't we meet at 3:30.
Q: When will they meet?

Part 4: Long Monologues

In Part 4 of the FEPT, students listen to five longer monologues on topics ranging from the weather, the history and location of Asia University, holidays in Japan, and James Joyce. After listening to a monologue on the tape, students answer three questions related to the monologue. Unlike Parts 1 through 3, there are no photographs in Parts 4 and 5. Instead, students listen to each monologue, which are not written on the test, read the three questions, and choose the correct answer (A, B, C, or D). For example, students hear the following monologue:

The National Weather Service has issued the following 5-day forecast for the Kanto Region: Monday and Tuesday will be clear with temperatures in the mid-twenties. Wednesday will be partly cloudy and cooler with winds out of the Northwest. Thursday will become increasingly cloudy with a chance of showers in the evening. Friday there will be rain, heavy at times, with the possibility of thunderstorms in Western Kanto.

Students read and answer three questions about the monologue.

For example:

1. Which days will be clear?
 - (A) Monday and Tuesday.
 - (B) Tuesday and Wednesday.
 - (C) Wednesday and Thursday.
 - (D) Thursday and Friday.

Part 5: Long Dialogues

Part 5 of the FEPT consists of five longer dialogues. Students must listen to the dialogue and answer three questions about the dialogue. Again, as in Part 4, the dialogues are not written in the test book, only the questions and answers (A, B, C, or D) are written. For example, students hear the dialogue:

A: Bill, how do you come to school everyday?

B: I usually ride my bicycle. It only takes me ten minutes from my apartment. But if it's raining, I

usually walk. But even then, it only takes me about twenty minutes to get here.

A: Is that all? You are so lucky! I live in Saitama and I have to take the train everyday. I have to get up at 5:30 every morning and rush to the train station. Sometimes I don't even have time to eat breakfast. The train is always crowded and it usually takes me about two and a half hours to get here. I wish I could move closer to school, but I can't afford to live in an apartment. I really envy you.

B: Oh Sumiko, no wonder you always seem so tired when you come to class. That's too long to be riding in a crowded train. Have you thought about living in the dormitory? It's close to school and much cheaper than renting an apartment.

Then students read and answer three questions. For example:

1. What are the two students talking about?
 - (A) Transportation to and from school.
 - (B) Bill's apartment.
 - (C) Sumiko's dormitory.
 - (D) Their classes at school.

The biggest difference in the listening section of the new FEPT compared to the listening section of the AUET is that much less reading is required. With the exception of Parts 4 and 5, students do not read anything, but rather match what they hear with a photograph. And even in Parts 4 and 5, where the questions and answers are written, students must still listen and comprehend what they hear without seeing the monologues and dialogues written on the page. In addition, as mentioned before, the listening section of the test is scored separately from the reading section, and these scores form the basis of the advanced, intermediate, and beginning level sets.

The Reading Section of the FEPT

The reading section of the FEPT tests both grammar and reading comprehension. As in the listening section, the questions increase in difficulty as the students progress

through the test. The aim of the grammar section is to test the students' knowledge of English grammar in the following areas: vocabulary, parts of speech, sentence structure, word order, pronoun identification, grammar identification, coordination, etc. The grammar section consists of Part 6 (fill in the blanks); Part 7 (error recognition); and Part 8 (samples/questions). The final section of the FEPT, Part 9, tests reading comprehension in the areas of identifying the main idea, choosing answers based on information presented, ordering events, predicting, inferencing, and drawing conclusions. The content of the readings includes a recipe, directions for taking an over-the-counter cold remedy, forms of recreation in Japan, the Internet, and an advertisement for a hotel.

Part 6: Fill in the Blanks

In Part 6 of the FEPT, students read a total of seven sentences containing a blank space followed by four choices (A, B, C, or D), one of which makes the sentence grammatically correct. For example:

- A train is _____ a bicycle.
(A) as large as
(B) more large than
(C) more larger than
(D) larger than

Part 7: Error Recognition

Part 7 of the FEPT tests error recognition by presenting seven sentences containing one grammatical error. Each sentence has four words or phrases underlined and marked A, B, C, and D. Students must identify the one underlined word or phrase in the sentence that is grammatically incorrect. For example:

- If I was Ken, I wouldn't have gone to Shinjuku in the rain.
(A) (B) (C) (D)

Part 8: Samples/Questions

In Part 8 of the FEPT, students read sample sentences and choose the correct phrase, A, B, C, or D, that correctly completes or restates the sample sentence. For example:

The campers remained calm despite the thunderstorm that came so suddenly.

The campers:

- (A) suddenly became quiet.
- (B) didn't get nervous.
- (C) remained in their tents during the storm.
- (D) were very afraid of thunder.

Part 9: Reading Comprehension

Part 9 of the FEPT completes the test by presenting five readings in the form of short to long paragraphs followed by two questions each. Students must read the passage and answer the questions by choosing the correct answer, A, B, C, or D. For example, students read:

For temporary relief from the common cold use *Clear-All*. *Clear-All* eases pain and discomfort for approximately 8 hours. Dosage for adults is 2 tablets every 8 hours not to exceed 6 tablets in any 24 hour period. For children over 12 years of age the dosage should be halved. Not to be given to children under 12 years of age without consulting a physician. If symptoms persist for over 3 days, discontinue use and consult a physician.

Next, they answer two questions about the reading. For example:

32. A ten year old child should be given:

- (A) 1 tablet every 8 hours.
- (B) no more than 3 tablets in a 24-hour period.
- (C) half the tablets that an adult would get.
- (D) no tablets unless a doctor says so.

Field Testing and Revising the FEPT

In April 1996, a tentative schedule was made for writing, field-testing, revising, and taping the FEPT. Questions were written for each part of the listening and reading comprehension sections of the test and submitted to the English Department faculty for review and feedback. By July 1, 1996, we completed

a first draft of the grammar and reading sections and asked nine VFMs to administer the trial test to a total of 30 FE classes in levels 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19, and 21. The students took the test anonymously, putting only a class code on their answer sheets. Visiting Faculty Members were asked to write any comments and suggestions for revision while their students took the test.

The answer sheets were electronically scored by Mr. Masaru Misawa in *Kokusaikoryu-bu* [the Office of International Affairs] who provided us with data for each question in the following manner: instead of providing a total score, each question was analyzed for each class by the number of students who chose answer A, B, C, or D. This enabled us to look at each question independently and determine if it was valid as well as rank it as being a beginning, intermediate, or advanced question.

While choosing and revising the grammar and reading comprehension questions for the final draft of the FEPT, the listening comprehension section was tested in October, 1996 in a total of 32 FE classes by ten VFMs in levels 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 20. Before this could be accomplished, a trial tape was recorded in the recording studio in the Asia University library with the help of eleven VFMs. Assistant ELERI Director Ken Matsuta read the Japanese instructions on the trial tape. The results of the listening comprehension trial tests were compiled and analyzed in the same way as the grammar and reading sections.

A final draft of the test was completed in December 1996 and contains a total of 100 questions: 70 listening comprehension questions and 30 grammar and reading comprehension

questions, thus providing the desired ratio of 70% listening and 30% grammar and reading comprehension.

A final tapescript was recorded in January 1997 utilizing all 22 VFMs as well as Ken Matsuta reading the Japanese instructions. Additional revisions and fine tuning were completed in January, thus completing the project by the February 1997 deadline.

Administering the Test

Both the listening section and the reading section of the FEPT are approximately 30 minutes providing an hour-long, 100-question placement test for the incoming freshman in April 1997. All freshman will be required to take the FEPT before they can be placed into FE classes. In order to remedy the problem of students who have in the past missed the placement test and were haphazardly placed in FE classes, there will be two make-up periods--first period (9:00-10:30) and second period (10:40-12:10)--on the first day of classes in April. Every freshman who missed the FEPT will be free during one of these periods. Students would be notified by Kyomuka (the Office of General Affairs) of the test time and location.

For example, based on the 1996 school calendar, if the first day of class were a Tuesday, every International Relations and Economics student who missed the FEPT would be available during first period to take the test because this period is reserved in their schedules for FE. Business and Law students would take the test during second period. VFMs who are not scheduled to teach during the above times would proctor the test. For the International Relations and Economics students, classrooms would not be a problem as rooms assigned to VFMs who

teach below level 15 could be utilized. For the Business and Law students, classrooms must be assigned by *Kyomuka*.

Since the FEPT is readministered to all FE students in December during regular FE class time, the FEPT can easily be conducted in two days. The 30-minute listening section can be administered in one 45-minute class period and the 30-minute reading section in one 45-minute class period.

The FEPT Evaluation Process

The former method of evaluating and placing students in FE classes will no longer be utilized for the new FEPT. In order for this test to achieve its highest level of accuracy in appropriately placing students, the FEPT must be scored in the following manner: the listening and reading sections must be scored separately by *Kokusaikoryu-bu*. Students will first be placed into *sets* (advanced, intermediate, and beginning) based on their listening scores, then into *subsets* based on their reading scores. These subsets represent the actual FE classes.

It should be noted that the number of students who are placed within each set will vary; however, this will not be a concern because it will not alter, nor will it determine, the total number of classes needed--this will continue to be decided by student enrollment. For example, if there were 525 students enrolled in Business, the breakdown could be the following:

50 students in Set A	Set A would have 2 <i>subsets</i> or classes
100 students in Set B	Set B would have 4 classes
225 students in Set C	Set C would have 9 classes
75 students in Set D	Set D would have 3 classes
75 students in Set E	Set E would have 3 classes

This would result in a total of 21 Freshman English classes; the same as our present 21 levels. However, this system changes the way FE classes are labeled at Asia University. Instead of

labeling Business and Law classes from level 1 to 21, Economics from 1-15, and International Relations from 1-10, classes should be divided and labeled according to the set/subset system.

For example, in the Listening sets, Set A will be considered advanced, with students who scored 90% to 100% on the listening comprehension section of the FEPT. Then students will be placed into the Reading subsets (the actual FE classes) as follows: Class 1A (highest reading scores in Set A); Class 2A; Class 3A; and Class 4A (lowest reading scores in Set A). Set B will be considered upper-intermediate (80% to 90% on the listening section); Set C will be considered intermediate (70% to 80% on listening section) divided into Classes 5C, 6C, 7C, and 8C respectively and so on.

Conclusion

The FEPT, like the ELERI curriculum, must remain dynamic in nature. That is, it must be reviewed every year for its effectiveness in placing students in the appropriate levels (advanced, intermediate, and beginning) in FE. The results of the first use of the FEPT in April 1997 must be analyzed carefully and the evaluation and placement process described above must be strictly adhered to. The true validity of this test will not be known until actual freshman take the test, are placed according to the set/subset system, and VFMs are able to determine if and why anyone has been misplaced. Furthermore, the content of the test questions should be analyzed and revised (or changed) as necessary to meet the need of effectively placing students into FE classes. This will require a VFM to act as the FEPT Coordinator who, with the FE Coordinator, will be responsible for seeing that the test is scored and students

are placed properly. We wish these individuals every success in continuing this project in the future.

References

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