

Writing language tests is very much a part of the life of the English language teacher. Although one can assume that most English language teachers undergo some form of formal training in the teaching of the language, one cannot say with certainty that all language teachers are trained to write language tests. The task of writing test items may seem a reasonable demand but mere churning out of items without much consideration as to the balance or the adequacy of the resulting test may result in an inadequate or inaccurate measurement of skills.

While this article does not intend to teach how to write good test items, it hopes to provide a brief guide that will help to ensure that the test items already written have all the features and qualities of a good test namely, validity, reliability and practicability. Effective testing requires careful planning. A systematic approach is suggested here. For this system to work there must be a **co-ordinator** – the person who is in charge or responsible for the whole paper. This is usually the most experienced person in the team. Then we have the **setter** (or **setters**) of the exam paper. Next we have at least two **vettors**. These are usually the persons who know the students the test is for and who probably teach the course as well. Finally there should be at least one **proof-reader**. This person need not be one of the setters or vettors.

### The Co-ordinator

The co-ordinator is a crucial person in this system. He plays an important role before the test is written and also at the end, after the whole paper is ready. Before the test is prepared, the co-ordinator talks to the setters and vettors and decides on the type of test that is wanted. Most language tests are usually either aptitude tests or general proficiency tests or achievement tests.

The co-ordinator also elaborates on the features of the test – the level difficulty of the sections, the number of items per section, the type of skills to be included, the weightage for each skill or section and, finally, the time allotment for the whole paper. The co-ordinator is also the person the setters consult if in the course of writing the items they are not sure of something or other.

After the test has been written out and set, the role of the co-ordinator is as follows:

1. To ensure that the sections are graded according to pre-established criteria.
2. To ensure that the variety of skills tested is as agreed earlier.
3. To ensure that the vettors and setters have met and their comments taken into consideration.
4. To ensure that the paper is complete in every way.
5. To ensure that deadlines are met.

### The Vetter

The vetter has the duty to vet the whole paper. He does it by following the guidelines given below:

1. He must attempt the whole paper from a student's point of view. He must also write the answers down. This will ensure that there will be only one possible answer and also if there are alternative answers, these can be included in the key. If the intended key is not chosen as the answer by the vetter, it will indicate to the setter that something is wrong with either the stem or the options.
2. He must state the time taken to do each section of the paper. This will indicate to the setter if the allotted time is fair and correct.
3. He should comment on the clarity of the instructions. Many a good testing point is lost in value because the rubrics were not clear enough. Moreover, students may be misled to do wrong things if the rubrics are vague. It would then be unfair to penalise such students during marking.
4. He should comment on the suitability of the format used to test a particular skill. This is especially true for assessment tests. Some formats are ideal for the teaching or classroom situation but prove inappropriate in a testing situation. For example, true/false items.
5. He should also comment on the suitability of the distractors especially in MCQ items.
6. The vetter should also comment on the appropriateness or accuracy of the key or answer. It

will then enable the setter to reword the key if necessary.

7. He should comment on the level of difficulty of each section. The setter can then rearrange the sections according to the level of difficulty. Students will have a better psychological set if they move from easy to difficult sections.
8. In the case of English for special purposes, the vetter should also comment on the subject matter of each section. For example, if the paper is for science students, one must ensure that there is an appropriate mixture of biology or physics. There should be enough variety in subject matter.
9. He should comment on the weightage or mark allocation. Is the weightage fair for the skill and difficulty level of the section?
10. Lastly, if a separate answer sheet is used, the vetter should check the answer sheet against the question paper to ensure that it has all the items and sections correctly indicated.

It must be added here that it would really help the paper and the setter, if the vetter also gives concrete suggestions on how to improve the stem, the options, the rubrics or any part of the paper that requires modification or improvement.

#### **The Setter**

1. The setter should indicate in each section the skill that is tested in that section. This can be done by attaching a small slip of paper to each section. This slip of paper can be easily removed and destroyed after the vetting session. With this information, the vetter can comment if the skill is actually tested as indicated. It will also be easier to point out if the format used is suitable for testing that particular skill.

2. The setter should also be responsible for handing in his completed section/paper to the vetter on time. As most of us have a busy schedule as language teachers, deadlines must be met diligently to ensure the smooth running of the system.
3. If separate answer sheets are used, the setter should prepare the answer sheet and answer key together with the question paper and hand them all to the vetter. The reason for this is already indicated under the duties of the vetter.
4. After the paper and comments have come back from the vettors, the setter should look at the comments and make changes as necessary. Constructive criticism should be taken in a professional light, with the aim of producing the test to the best of one's ability. Once the items have been revised, it is the duty of the setter to show the vetter the paper again for any more suggestions or changes to improve the paper.
5. Finally, if one cannot type, the setter must be responsible for providing a neat, legible paper. This will greatly ease the burden of the vetter, typist and the proof-reader.

#### **The Proof Reader**

The duty of the proof-reader, as the name suggests, is to proof-read the paper after the typist has typed the whole paper. If the proof-reader is in doubt about anything, he should consult either the setter or the co-ordinator.

With this system of co-ordinators, setters, vettors and proof-readers, I have found that the quality of the final paper is greatly enhanced. The above are only suggestions and should be modified to suit the needs of individual teachers.