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Functional Objectives in Language Learning Project: An Interim Report

Ho Wah Kam

The purpose of the Functional Objectives in Language Learning Project (FOLL) is two-fold:

- to identify what may be called “functional objectives” in language learning (in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil) at three grade levels, viz. Primary 6 Normal (P6N), Secondary 4 Normal (S4N) and Secondary 4 Express (S4E), and
- to determine empirically how realistic or attainable these objectives are for pupils at each of the three grade levels.

For the empirical part of the study, the functional objectives identified from existing language syllabuses were turned into language tasks or test items. Information was sought on what pupils could do to indicate ability on a skill of particular interest to us. The language tasks in Phase One, for instance, were largely related to the communicative demands in a school. In other words, recognition has been given to the conventions that characterise the type of language demands associated with tasks in a school classroom. As in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Project¹ carried out in the United States (US), it will be possible to estimate the percentage of pupils (at any of

the three grade levels) who are able to perform a particular task acceptably.

Four Phases of FOLL

Because of the large number of objectives that can be teased out from each language syllabus, and also for practical reasons, it was decided that there should be four phases of testing (instead of an all-embracing one-off attempt), with each phase designed to test a reasonable number of objectives taken from all four language skill areas, i.e. reading, listening, writing and speaking. See Fig. 1.

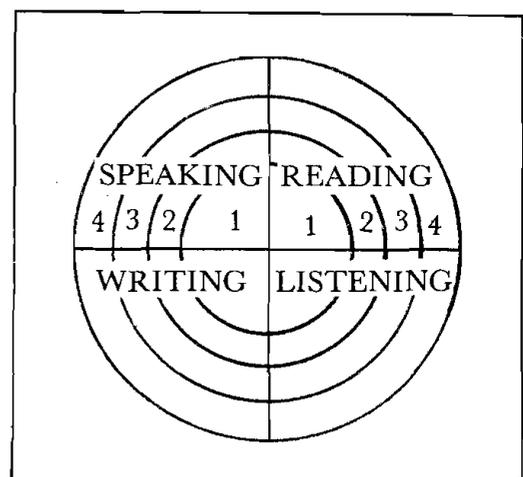


Figure 1: Four Phases of FOLL.

¹ The NAEP study was first conceived by Prof Ralph W. Tyler, now Director Emeritus, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences, Stanford, California when as a founder director of the same centre, he was asked in 1963 by the then US Commissioner of Education, Mr Francis Keppel, “to prepare a memorandum outlining procedures by which necessary information might be periodically collected to furnish a basis for public discussion and broader understanding of our [US] educational progress and problems” (Ralph W. Tyler). Since 1969, NAEP has collected data in 10 subject areas from samples of pupils, 9-year-olds, 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds, across the US and reported its findings to the nation.

To understand the purpose behind this project, it should be made clear that the project team is not really concerned with total scores as such, as in an examination, but with whether or

not pupils can achieve certain objectives of learning. What are these objectives? Please see Table 1 for the objectives identified for the first phase of FOLL.

TABLE 1. OBJECTIVES IDENTIFIED FOR THE FIRST PHASE OF THE PROJECT

Skill Area	Objectives/Skills
Reading Comprehension (Understanding news reports appearing in newspapers and comprehending narrative texts)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ability to identify the main ideas in narrative texts. 2. Ability to deduce the meanings of words in context. 3. Ability to identify key words, concepts and supporting details in narrative texts. 4. Ability to identify inferences in narrative texts.
Listening Comprehension (Listening and carrying out instructions)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ability to show knowledge of spatial positions. 2. Ability to provide relevant information. 3. Ability to carry out instructions.
(Listening and taking down a telephone message)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ability to identify the person for whom the message is intended. 2. Ability to identify the speaker. 3. Ability to identify the workplace of the speaker. 4. Ability to take down the message accurately.
Speaking	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ability to answer questions clearly in an interview. 2. Ability to answer with accuracy (pronunciation, stress). 3. Ability to answer with grammatical accuracy. 4. Ability to answer with fluency. 5. Ability to answer with appropriacy. 6. Ability to use a range of vocabulary and expression. 7. Ability to use elaboration in answers.
Writing (Form-filling and narrative writing)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ability to fill a form requiring personal information. 2. Ability to write a narrative composition. 3. Ability to write accurately and correctly. 4. Ability to write adequately, giving a fair number of points to make the composition reasonably substantial. 5. Ability to treat the stimulus material given in a fresh and original manner. 6. Ability to write a clear introduction. 7. Ability to write a neat conclusion. 8. Ability to write well-connected paragraphs.

The English Language Test and Results

In developing the English Language test based on the objectives (see Table 1), for instance, the team had to decide on the type of stimulus material to use (in the four sub-tests) during this early phase. The team selected four news reports (narrative texts) from a local newspaper for Phase One and tested the comprehension of these four passages. On each passage, a number of objective-type, multiple-choice questions were asked. What were the findings from the reading comprehension sub-test? Although the results are best regarded as preliminary and tentative (a necessary note of caution at this phase of the project), several trends in the reading comprehension data are evident. For example, an analysis of the data indicated that in respect of the four comprehension objectives tested, there was a strong tendency for the S4N results to be superior to the P6N results and the S4E results to be superior to those of S4N. Differences between group means were found to be quite substantial for all objectives except for "Ability to deduce the meanings of words in context", the results of which, though not substantial between groups, followed the trend mentioned above. In brief, then, the three objectives, "Ability to identify the main ideas in narrative texts", "Ability to identify key words, concepts and supporting details in narrative texts", and "Ability to identify inferences in narrative texts" should be achievable for most of the S4E and S4N pupils in this sample and for a slight majority (about 55-60%) of the P6N pupils. However, the objective "Ability to deduce the meanings of words in context" was a difficult one for most P6N and S4N pupils and for about half of the present sample of S4E pupils. The eight items for this objective dealt with different dimensions of vocabulary knowledge. On the whole, then, this would mean that the broad objectives of comprehending news reports (narrative texts) published in a local newspaper are achievable for most pupils at the S4E level, for the majority of S4N pupils and for the better or above average P6N pupils.

The data of the listening, speaking and composition sub-tests were also analysed. Briefly, in listening the ability to take down a telephone message appears to be a realistic objective, as

long as the message is not too complex, contains reasonable repetition and is spoken at a relatively slow pace. In one test, the team used a native-speaker of English to give the message on the phone. Pupils generally found that message difficult but it could well be the result of the complexity of the message and not because of a different accent of the speaker. In the oral test, there was an interview and then a conversation based on a picture. All pupils generally gave appropriate answers to questions, although some P6N pupils had difficulty understanding the questions asked. As expected, more P6N pupils received lower ratings for fluency (44%), range of vocabulary and expression (62%), and use of elaboration (44%) than S4N or S4E pupils. An interesting feature of these results is that the better S4N pupils performed as well as and sometimes even better than some S4E pupils, judging from the global scores and from the scores for separate factors, like fluency and accuracy. The team also found that 66% of the P6N pupils and 61% of the S4N pupils had experienced difficulty in writing a narrative composition according to given criteria. The team looked for factors like originality and grammatical accuracy. There was a distinct lack of originality or freshness of approach and grammatical accuracy in the compositions written by a substantial number of P6N and S4N pupils.

The Test in Chinese

From the results of the Chinese Language test, it would appear that the pupils from the three grade levels were quite weak in listening comprehension, while on the other hand the same pupils found the reading comprehension items rather easy, although on the whole the S4E pupils did much better, as expected, than the P6N or S4N pupils. Among the tasks (items) in reading comprehension, pupils of all three grade levels found this objective most manageable: "Ability to identify the main ideas in narrative tests". All pupils did equally well on the oral test but much code-switching (between English and Chinese) was evident. In addition, P6N pupils were generally less able than the other two groups in fully achieving this objective: "Ability to use a range of vocabulary and expression". Even the S4E and S4N pupils had

difficulty expressing in Mandarin such terms as "saw" (a tool), "overhead bridge" and "road partition". In the writing test, there was much bunching of scores at the midpoint (3) on a 5-point scale, which meant that most of the pupils could write acceptably well but their main weakness was in a lack of variety in their vocabulary, which made their writing appear less precise and accurate than it should be. Some grammatical errors were noted in their writing, but these were not serious enough to affect communication. In terms of the amount of writing produced in each composition, most of the pupils managed to write a minimum of 150 Chinese characters under classroom conditions.

Concluding Remarks

As part of the data analysis strategy, in addition to using simple percentages as indicators of the

extent to which an objective has been achieved, we also used the Rasch analysis to check on the relative difficulty of the tasks (and thus the objectives) for each group of pupils. It is claimed that the Rasch model, a latent trait model, by placing item difficulty and person ability on a common metric, produces a degree of measurement precision not attained in conventional measurement methodology.

As pointed out earlier, the findings drawn from the data collected in this phase of the project can only be regarded as tentative and should therefore be interpreted with caution. The sample size ($n=430$ for English, $n=401$ for Chinese) was adequate for Phase One of the project, but it should not be regarded as a representative sample.

Data collection for Phase Two (in both English and Chinese) was completed in November last year. Work has started on the Malay and Tamil versions of the project.

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