

Presentation of an Australian- Chinese joint venture program in China

ANTHONY BOWERS

Ningbo University of Technology

A major Australian ELICOS College which uses portfolio - based assessment in its ELT programs also run a number of joint venture programs in Mainland China. From hereon in these will be referred to as the Portfolio-based assessment (PBA) Programs. Each PBA program is run in partnership with a local school or higher education institution. Students are enrolled in an Advanced Diploma of Business, but before students enter the Diploma they need to successfully complete the Australian College's English training PBA Program. Usually this involves students being assessed in their competencies for the equivalent of CSWE 1, 2 and 3. However, the particular program described in this paper has a slightly different format, in that students complete a Certificate 3 Introduction to IELTS and CULT course before they enter into the Advanced Diploma of Business.

Implementing an Australian education format in a foreign environment raises a plethora of issues. Problems arise through the different perspectives that education experts have in different countries, student learning styles vary greatly and the ideas of what constitutes quality education can also vary greatly. Before I go into the presentation of the program it is necessary for me to expand on and clarify these issues.

Students who enter the Australian PBA Program have graduated from senior school and need to successfully complete two years of English training before they enter the Business Diploma. Along with their English study, which follows the PBA Program's curriculum and syllabus, they are also required to study a number of compulsory subjects, including Mao Ze Dong Thought, Deng Xiao Ping Theory, The Three Represents, Marxist-Leninist Thought and Mathematics.

So, from the start of the program the students go through two streams of education; the PBA Program stream that has its background in systemic functional linguistics, holistic learning and ongoing assessment and the Chinese stream which has its grounding in Confucian principles of learning. Herein lies the great dilemma. How do you implement the program so that it maintains the quality of delivery and integrity of an Australian learning style, while at the same time respecting the fact that

the program is taking place in a foreign county with foreign students and different perspectives on education?

One main area of conflict is the differing approaches to assessment and testing. This Australian ELICOS College's policy states clearly that testing should involve ongoing observation, portfolio work, and report writing, as outlined in detail by Hagan et al (1993). In contrast, for the Chinese learner and more importantly, for the Chinese parent, a single one off test at the end of the year is seen as the only real way of testing ability. Moreover, without a clear test many parents assume that the course is a waste of time and will not sign their children to the program.

I earlier introduced the idea of a Confucian ethics in learning in China. Confucian styles of learning are of paramount importance in the Chinese education system. It was only during the Cultural Revolution that his theories were criticized, and the influence of Confucian ethics is again paramount in China. This is more so now that a large proportion of students in rural areas are turning to private tutors (Si Su) for their education. Si Su teach a course of Confucian Morals, Chinese classical works and Mathematics.

We can see this influence in the style of learning that takes place in the Chinese classroom, where students are studying Chinese subjects for which there is no concept of critical enquiry. For example, the aim of studying "Deng Xiao Ping Theory" is not for students to critically examine the course but to memorize the theory and implement it into their own social practice. In addition, testing for these subjects involves one major test at the end of the semester.

Context is another key issue for the preparation of a program curriculum. Hagan et al discuss context in relation to 'topic based approaches' and 'text-type approaches'. It is necessary to examine other areas of contexts of learning; for example, context not only of 'culture and society' but the context of articulation.

In other words, educators must take into account their learners' education pathway. They need to ask the question 'What is it that the students will be required to do in the next education step?' This is a critical question and not an easy one in the context of this PBA Program being implemented in a Chinese education institution. This is clearly in evidence in the ongoing negation of ideas between the partner institutions regarding how the programs are run, how students learn and how they should be assessed.

Issues of collaboration and articulation (Hagan et al) feature prominently in the planning of this course. For example, the programs across China are aimed at preparing students to enter into an Advanced Business Diploma from an Australian college. In

most of the joint ventures set up in China by this Australian College students articulate from the Certificate 3 in English into the Advanced Diploma. The articulation rationale is that students who have been assessed as successfully meeting the criteria for the level 3 Certificate will have the relevant competencies that match an IELTS 5.5, and the Australian College uses this rank as the minimum English level required for entry into their Diploma courses.

In this course however the partner school has selected the Certificate 3 Introduction to IELTS and CULT course as the articulation course into the advanced Diploma. The reason for this may be that advertising the course as an IELTS preparation gives the school greater marketing leverage.

However, by offering the Certificate 3 Introduction to IELTS and CULT course, articulation into the Diploma becomes a serious issue. College Directors of Studies in charge of the Certificate 3 in English course have a fair amount of flexibility in the syllabus and programming that they can offer. Therefore they are able to introduce language activities that will help students with the business contexts and lexis that they will need to successfully complete the Diploma course.

The IELTS course however is very structured in what is required of students in order to achieve the course competencies. If the course criteria are strictly followed, students in this course may have less suitable preparation for their articulation into the Business Diploma. For this reason there have been a number of additions to the program.

The Program

The revised Certificate 3 Introduction to IELTS and CULT course contains a total of ten modules; five core modules and five enrichments modules.

CORE MODULES	ENRICHMENT MODULES
• Writing for IELTS	• Focus on Pronunciation
• Reading for IELTS	• Focus on Writing
• Listening for IELTS	• Focus on Reading
• Speaking for IELTS	• Focus on Listening
• Introduction to English Skills	• Focus on Study

However, these enrichment modules still do not specifically focus on themes and lexis which students will need in the Business Diploma. The teachers must take additional steps to ensure that there are also elements of learning that will help prepare students for the Diploma course.

Each course has a nominal allocation of 45 hours, except for Introduction to English Skills which is given ten hours. It is important to note that these are nominal hours only and can be changed at the discretion of the program coordinator.

In addition, the enrichment modules do not carry any weighting in regard to successful entry into the Business Diploma. Therefore, if a student fails to meet the competencies in the enrichment modules she or he will still be able to enter the Business Diploma. However, students must meet the required competencies for all the core modules in order to enter the Diploma course. For this reason 5 weeks were allocated to teaching the non-core modules and the rest of the time (12 weeks) focused on teaching the core modules.

Testing and Assessment

Of critical importance is the reliability of assessment in the program. As Bachman states “If we are to interpret the score on a given test as an indicator of an individual’s ability, that score must be both reliable and valid” (1990:24). Hagan identifies two types of reliability; inter-rater and intra-rater reliability.

As stated earlier the Australian PBA Program has the dilemma of producing an assessment system that satisfies the local Chinese market’s idea of satisfactory assessment and testing procedures. Previously there had been only one test at the end of the semester where students sat a mock IELTS exam. Their passing or failing this exam was then used to judge if they had shown competency in the course and could move into the Business Diploma. However, this testing system did not comply with the Australian College’s policy of ongoing assessment. Therefore, testing was broken down into a mixture of testing and ongoing assessment, with three tests held throughout the semester and weighting distributed between the three tests:

WHEN	WEIGHTING
Week 5	20%
Week 10	40%
Week 18	40%

Furthermore, for the Enrichment modules and the Introduction to English skills module ongoing assessment, student portfolios and writing journals were made part of the assessment.

In terms of the assessment of the ‘Focus on Writing Module’, for the first exam, the DOS worked to ensure that the marking for students was fair and reliable; two teachers were asked to blind mark random samples of essays in order to ensure there

were no great discrepancies and if there were, to be able to mentor the teachers with their assessment activities. This policy of cross-checking was continued in the week 10 and 18 exams and teachers assessing the reading and listening exams were also asked to ensure that cross checking of random samples was taking place.

To further ensure that the assessment of the writing module had high validity the Focus on Writing module marks were combined with ongoing assessment of students work during the course.

The first assessment required learners to write about one topic from a list of five. These topics had been dealt with during the first 5 weeks of the course. They included Living in Ningbo, Studying at Ningbo University, Sports and Recreation, Food in China, and The Chinese Economy. Students were required to write a plan of their work and submit this along with their paper.

This assessment required students to show they had achieved learning outcomes related to the Focus on Writing Module. Below are the main learning outcomes along with selected assessment criteria:

LEARNING OUTCOME 1	ASSESSMENT CRITERIA	NOTES
On completion the learner should be able to use a variety of strategies to write effectively.	Use knowledge of reader-writer relationship to predict appropriate lexico-grammatical items.	For this assessment criteria the student had to show use of correct register, as the assessment stated they were to write a formal essay for an education institution.
	Use a range of strategies to plan and organize text eg. Mindmap, dotpoints, rough draft, flow charts.	For this assessment criteria teachers checked whether the student had planned the essay; dot points, mind maps, or some evidence of planning for the paper needed to be submitted with the final paper.
LEARNING OUTCOME 2 On completion the learner should be able to use a range of listening and reading texts to facilitate own writing.		The above outcome was assessed as part of ongoing assessment during class and was not part of the first assessment.

<p>LEARNING OUTCOME 3</p> <p>On completion the learner should be able to write a range of effective texts.</p>	<p>This learning outcome has the most assessment criteria for this module:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.1 Identify overall and specific purpose(s) of writing task. • 3.2 Use a range of lexico-grammatical items appropriate to the subject matter. • 3.3 Use a range of lexico-grammatical items appropriate to the reader-writer relationship. • 3.4 Select appropriately from more spoken to more written language according to aspects of communication e.g. personal writing as opposed to systems/ public writing. • 3.5 Organise and stage text appropriately to achieve writing purpose including use of paragraphing, headings, sub-headings. • 3.6 Link text appropriately using references and conjunctions. • 3.7 Use appropriate layout. • 3.8 Use appropriate referencing/ acknowledgement/ presentation procedures where required. • 3.9 Present written work in clean legible copy. 	
---	---	--

In the Focus on Speaking and the Speaking for IELTS modules cross-checking was difficult to implement without recording the dialogue between students and teachers. In the first exam only one teacher assessed the students. In hindsight this was a mistake as there was no cross-checking. For the next two exams both the class teacher and PBA Program teacher were present during the assessment to ensure inter-rater reliability and allow for a fairer assessment for the students. After each assessment both assessors were able to discuss student performance and compare results before awarding a final mark.

In the first assessment students were told to present a topic in class and then questions would be asked on this topic. By allowing students to choose their own topics the teacher avoided cultural bias in the questioning. This is quite relevant to the IELTS test which has been accused of cultural bias (Weir), both in the content of testing and in the format of the test. However, by allowing the student to choose a topic beforehand the fundamental nature of the assessment changed.

Students memorized tracts from textbooks and so the assessment became less about speaking and more about the ability to read and memorize a large amount of material. While the students produced clear English the assessment failed to show the students' ability to communicate effectively and in using various communication strategies during a conversation.

After the students completed their monologue the assessor asked a few questions related to the topic. While this was effective in checking whether the students had an understanding of the topic, it still did not assess whether the student was able to communicate effectively. The lack of validity in the assessment is apparent upon review of some of the main learning outcomes for the speaking module:

LEARNING OUTCOME 1.1	Identify interaction as a two-way process unsuited to pre-prepared or rote-learned knowledge
LEARNING OUTCOME 1.6	Adapt language to accommodate moves from more spoken to more written language in different stages or sections of interaction
LEARNING OUTCOME 1.9	Respond quickly and appropriately to changes in topic, in demeanor of examiner or to unpredicted lines of questioning or comment in more open ended interaction

Hughes states that 'A test is said to have content validity if its content constitutes a representative sample of the language skills, structures etc with which it is meant to be concerned.' (1989:22). He goes on to say that 'the greater a test content validity, the

more likely it is to be an accurate assessment of what is supposed to measure' (1988:22). Following from this, the assessment in question clearly lacks content validity. In addition, because the test is testing reading and memorization rather than speaking it also had a very low level of construct validity.

The issues of Inter-rater reliability and Intra-rater reliability (Hagan et al, Bachman, Alderson et al.) are also critical in the analysis of this assessment as there is very little in the way that we can evaluate either. In the first assessment there was only one assessor so there was no way to check the inter-rater reliability. A key recommendation is that the assessments need to be recorded and at least a sample of the assessments checked to allow for a higher level of inter-rater reliability.

The alternative to recording the assessment is to have two assessors present for every student. This can be effective in producing a true group conversational feel. However, in this context there are some disadvantages. Firstly, it is not reflective of the IELTS Speaking exam and secondly, it can be logistically difficult as there are over one hundred and twenty students on average in the course.

Hagan defines the level of intra-rater reliability as 'the measure of consistency when the same rater assesses the same performance on different occasions' (1993:28). In the speaking tests there was little variation in the marks across a large number of results. However, it may not be said that intra-rater reliability was high as while there was consistency in the marks they may not be accurately reflecting the students' proficiency as there was only a small difference between the highest and lowest marks.

Negative washback was also present in the assessment. Students, rather than learning in order to improve communicative ability, are learning to pass the test. Bailey cites Buck in defining washback as "[the] influence of the test on the classroom" (1988:17).

The test promotes negative washback as it fails to "test the abilities whose development you want to encourage" (1988:17)

In addition, the test failed to meet a number of criterion that researchers have identified as being appropriate in communicative language testing (see Bailey). It was not task based or criterion referenced and it did not reflect or encourage good classroom practice. Furthermore, as Hughes states "it is inappropriate to their [students'] true learning goals." (1989:26)

Another clear shortcoming is that there was no clear test rubric, and so the assessor gave a mark simply based on an opinion. This represents a clear problem, because the test-taker cannot question the mark and the assessor has clear guidelines to judge the performance.

I have already stated that the test may be seen as invalid as it appears to be testing the

ability for students to memorize rather than participate in a conversation or interview type scenario. However there are some areas where the assessment has merit.

Firstly, by allowing students to choose the topic the assessor has removed cultural bias. Weir stresses that 'cultural imperialism' is a key problem for international proficiency testing. Cultural biases and imperialism have been identified and discussed in detail by many researchers (see Pennycook (1994), Phillipson (1994)). The detrimental effect of cultural bias in tests should not be underestimated and I believe that the assessment can be praised in its attempts to give students some control over how they are to be assessed.

We could even extend this into Lynch's summation of alternative testing where the author states 'Students should be active participants in the process of developing assessment procedures, including the criteria and standards by which performances are judged' (2001:10). In this case the students heavily influence the criteria by being allowed the freedom to choose the content.

Summary

The difference in education theory underpinning the Australian College's approach and the Chinese school's approach is most apparent in the different attitudes towards assessment procedures. Whereas the assessment methods outlined by the Australian College require ongoing assessment, the Chinese partner school felt it more appropriate that the writing format should take place in a test environment. These types of negotiations on the nature of the program and assessments are an ongoing feature of education joint ventures in China. It is of critical importance that both sides keep an open mind and are willing to appreciate each others' views while remaining clear about theories which underpin their own education stance.

In addition, it may be beneficial for the Australian College to carry out a rigorous formal evaluation of the program to examine its effectiveness as a preparation course for the Advanced Diploma. Richards (1990) outlines the different areas that the formative evaluation should cover. In particular there needs to be an evaluation of the:

- Appropriateness of the program's objectives
- The usefulness of the syllabus
- The selection and use of test instruments

Having stated some concerns about the program, it is also necessary to say that I believe that the students do benefit enormously from their participation in the PBA program and that they receive a quality education of exacting and high standards. The fact that they will be going through an IELTS preparation will also enable them to prepare to sit an accredited IELTS test in the future. Depending on their results, the

IELTS proficiency test may help them gain entry into a foreign education institution, which is the aim of many students in the course.

The implementation of the PBA program in a foreign country presents many challenges to the teachers and Directors of Studies in the classrooms and schools and also those responsible for the establishment and continuation of the Australian College's PBA programs in partnership with local schools. For the Program to have an ongoing successful future, the Australian stakeholders need to have a clearer understanding of the education theories that underpin all of the modules of the program. Without this they will not be able to explain to or negotiate with the local partner institute in regards to issues of programming, syllabus design and testing. It also needs to be made clear that the Australian College is dealing with a different set of education criteria that are based on thousands of years of educational history and thus need to seriously consider ideas regarding the program that are given by the Chinese partner institute.

REFERENCES

- Alderson, J.c., Clapham, C. & Wall, D. 1995 'Monitoring examiner reliability' In *Language Test Construction and Evaluation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 128 - 147
- Bachman, I. 1990, 'Measurement' In *Fundamental Consideration in Language Testing*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 18 – 53
- Bailey, K. 1996, 'Working for washback: a review of the washback concept in language testing' In *Language Testing*, Vol. 13, No.3, pp. 257 – 279
- Buck, G. 1988: Testing listening comprehension in Japanese university entrance examinations. *JALT Journal* 10, 15-42
- Hagan, P. et al. 1993, "Introduction to the certificates in spoken and written English" In Certificate in spoken and written English, NSW Adult Migrant English Service & National Centre for English language teaching and Research, Surry Hills
- Hughes, A. 1989, 'Validity' In *Testing for Language Teachers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 2 – 28
- Lynch, B. K. 2001, 'Rethinking assessment from a critical perspective' In *Language Testing*, Vol. 18, No.4, pp. 351 - 372
- Pennycook, A. 1994, *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language*, London & New York, Longman

Phillipson, R. 1994, 'English language spread policy', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, vol 107, pp 7-24

Richards, J.C. 1990, 'Curriculum development in second language and teaching' In *The Language Teaching Matrix*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp1-34

Weir, C. 1993, Testing written production In *Understanding and Developing Language Tests*, Prentice Hall, New York, pp. 130 – 165

Anthony Bowers has taught EFL both in Australia and China. He most recently held the position of Director of Studies at the Ningbo University of Technology, China. he is currently competing a Masters in TESOL at the University of Technology, Sydney