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Ian C. Palmer

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No Penalty for Guessing:
TOEFL Preparation with Microcomputers

Ian C. Palmer
Language Resource Associates

1. TOEFL

The chief advantages of Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) are widely thought to be: branching to allow personalized (and learner-controlled) practice; variety in presentation; constant reinforcement; and ease of record-keeping. To these can be added the facility for the assembly of raw data for research at a later date.

These advantages have led to the application of CAI to preparation for standardized tests on a large scale. Second only to the SAT in numbers of examinees per year, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is becoming one of the largest "draws" to commercial test preparation centers in the U.S. and abroad, and foreign students already in the U.S. are demanding TOEFL preparation courses at their intensive English language programs. Preparation courses available for the TOEFL vary widely in format and effectiveness, and in addition many books of home-study material are published. Many of these courses are being adapted for use on microcomputers, and in addition some material is being written especially for microcomputer use. The major outlet for this material is for classroom use in intensive English language programs and commercial test preparation establishments.

The seven parts of TOEFL differ in format, and different skills are required (to different extents) for each. Section I (Listening Comprehension) is divided into three parts: sentence restatement, short conversations, and longer "episodes of communication" such as short talks or lectures, news broadcasts, or conversations. Part A requires the student to match the spoken statement with the closest paraphrase out of four sentences printed in the test book. Part B requires the student to choose the best answer out of four to a question spoken after the conversation. Part C is similar, but with anything from two to six questions per episode. Part A has 20 items, and Parts B and C 15. (See TOEFL Test and Score Manual, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, N.J. (1981) for a more detailed discussion.)

Section II, Structure and Written Expression, "measures mastery of important structural and grammatical points in standard

written English" (ibid. p.7). In Part A the examinee chooses the best out of four words or phrases to complete a sentence, according to his knowledge of standard written English (15 items), and in Part B he must identify which one out of four underlined words or phrases in a sentence would not be accepted in standard written English (25 items).

Section III, Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension, "measures the ability to understand the meanings and uses of words as well as the ability to understand a variety of reading materials." Part A (Vocabulary) asks the examinee to substitute one of four words or phrases for a word or phrase in a sentence so as to preserve the original meaning. Part B (Reading Comprehension) is based on a succession of short reading passages followed by from one to seven questions. The examinee must choose the best answer out of four, based either on the main or secondary ideas of the passage, inferences or analogies from the passage, or meanings of isolated words or phrases in the passage. Occasionally there are "sentence restatement" questions where the examinee must choose the sentence that most nearly conveys the meaning of the original. Part A and Part B both have 30 items.

It will be noted that there is a similarity of format throughout in terms of the mechanics of answering the questions (to simplify machine scoring), and that there are no questions which might require anything other than a multiple-choice format (to ensure objectivity). This makes TOEFL an ideal test to prepare people for by microcomputer.

2. Section II

Leaving aside questions of "testwiseness" which usually feature more or less prominently in test preparation programs, let us look at the methods which might be used to prepare people for each sub-test of TOEFL. Listening Comprehension presents many more difficulties than the rest of the test, on account of the interaction that would be required between the microcomputer, the student, and a tape recorder or some similar device in order for the student to hear each statement or question at the appropriate time. Perhaps the most expeditious solution in the short run is for the student to have a cassette player beside him which he simply switches on and off.

In each section the most effective form of organization would, I believe, consist of three modes: Tutorial (or explanation); Practice under non-timed conditions with access to explanation either of the rule as outlined in the Tutorial mode or of the reason for the student's choice being wrong (more of this later); and Test (timed conditions, no access to explanation, obligatory completion of a set number of items).

The Tutorial mode is composed of a succession of frames with the Purpose and Scope of the Unit:

=====

STRUCTURE UNIT 5

The purpose of this unit is to help you to be able to recognize a passive construction and to select the proper passive form of the verb phrase.

There are two types of problems, involving agentive and agentless passives:

1. Cue types in which the SUBJECT + BE must be selected, but the past participle is part of the cue sentence.
2. Cue types in which only the PASSIVE VERB PHRASE must be selected.

=====

EXAMPLE 1

_____ founded in Philadelphia.

- (A) The American Philosophical Society, which was
- (B) It was the American Philosophical Society
- (C) Which is the American Philosophical Society
- (D) The American Philosophical Society was

ANSWER: _____

=====

(D) IS THE CORRECT ANSWER.

- (A): passive verb phrase now part of a subordinate clause; incomplete sentence.
- (B): ungrammatical.
- (C): ungrammatical.

=====

The Practice mode and Test mode both randomly select items from an item pool of anything up to forty or fifty items, depending on

the estimated importance of the item type to the section. The student could be allowed to select the number of items to be attempted in the Practice mode, but preferably the number of items in the Test mode should be standardized.

=====

14. The periods when lemmings swarm _____ by naturalists.

- (A) recorded
- (B) have been recorded
- (C) being recorded
- (D) which have been recorded

ANSWER: _____

=====

(D) The periods ... which have been recorded by naturalists.

==INCOMPLETE SENTENCE==

==TRY AGAIN==

=====

(B) The periods ... have been recorded by naturalists.

== *^* CORRECT *^* ==

=====

3. Section III

The Vocabulary subtest requires a different approach. The Tutorial mode would consist of various lessons in background (affixes, phrasal verbs, compounding, etc.) followed by some choosing of synonyms. The Practice mode would be in test format, with selection of a wrong answer followed by the appearance of a sentence using the distractor in context.

The Reading subtest Tutorial mode would mention such question types as: title questions, topic questions, purpose-of-the-passage questions, etc. The Practice and Test modes would

have to be a little more complicated in order to allow the student to re-read the passage if he so chose. I would like to see this section include the capability to choose: (A) Answer the question; (B) Review the passage; (C) Continue to the next question (and return to that question later). The sentence restatement question type is easier to deal with.

4. General Comments

(1) The information contained in the Tutorials must be relevant to skills actually tested on TOEFL. Many "TOEFL Preparation" courses make the mistake of simply reviewing all ESL grammar etc. in the belief that "it can't do any harm." The content of the course should be based on item types regularly tested on TOEFL.

(2) Sound content material should be written before a start is made on formatting and programming.¹

(3) The ideal TOEFL preparation system would serve a diagnostic function also: after the student took a pre-test, his weak areas could be pointed out by error analysis.

(4) The student should have the greatest possible control over his learning situation, within constraints of making the test simulation as realistic as possible. The system would be menu-driven, preferably with a score-keeping system on separate disks.

(5) I would be most interested to hear of any authoring system which could be adapted or produced to enable work on this type of project to move ahead expeditiously. Your comments are helpful and welcomed.

1. Ms. Carol B. Eisenmann, University of Southern California, to whom I am indebted for this piece of advice and much other information contained in this paper, made this point in her presentation "Some Instructional Design Concerns in Software Development," to CALICO, Baltimore, MD, January, 1984.

15. Francis Preston Blair, Jr., _____ born in Kentucky, lived and practiced law in Missouri.

- (A) was
- (B) he was
- (C) although
- (D) who he was

=====

(B) Francis Preston Blair, Jr., he was born ...

==ARE YOU SURE?==

=====

==WRONG==

==THE CORRECT ANSWER WAS (C) ==

=====

22. The first zoological garden in the United States
 A B
had established in Philadelphia in 1874.
 C D

=====

==WRONG==

==TRY AGAIN==

=====

== *^* CORRECT *^* ==

==THE CORRECTED SENTENCE READS:

The first zoological garden in the United States was established
in Philadelphia in 1874.

=====

57. Acetylene is potentially dangerous, especially when kept under pressure.

- (A) Potentially explosive acetylene can be stored under pressure.
- (B) Compressed acetylene is especially dangerous when it is kept for long periods of time.
- (C) A person under stress is particularly susceptible to the harmful effects of acetylene.
- (D) Particularly when it is kept under pressure, acetylene can be dangerous.

ANSWER: _____

=====

==WRONG==

(A) Storing acetylene under pressure is a BAD idea (TURNABOUT)

==TRY AGAIN==

=====

==WRONG==

(B) Time is not mentioned (NEW INFORMATION)

==TRY AGAIN==

=====

==THE CORRECT ANSWER==

(D)

=====