Testing Pre-service Teachers' Spoken English Proficiency

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Abstract: This paper discusses the recent introduction of the Spoken English Proficiency Test for Teachers (SEPTT) in Malta. By means of this test, the regulator of the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry in the country is seeking to ensure high levels of spoken English proficiency amongst pre-service teachers. SEPTT tests candidates' ability to use spoken English for a variety of functions, including conversing, explaining, presenting information, giving instructions and responding in a context specific to teaching. The paper shows how the test is based on the idea that people require different proficiencies that are always situated in particular contexts and bounded by a particular social practice (Freeman, Katz, Garcia Gomez, & Burns, 2015). Hence, an ESP-derived approach to language proficiency is required whereby teacher education focuses on the specific linguistic needs of teachers when enacting their role. This paper describes the research that went into SEPTT's design and implementation.

1 Introduction

The term 'proficiency' is hard to define, especially given its various uses in assessment. However, there appears to be a shared understanding of the qualities a proficient user should possess. These are competence and skill in the target language. As a result of the fast changing realities of the ELT industry and an increased number of English language speakers globally, a growing concern about teachers' spoken proficiency has become more pronounced than ever before. Varieties of English are bound to generate diverse perceptions when evaluating oral communication or ensuring an adequate classroom model for learners. Thus, a teacher's spoken production in the target language has become central to the ELT industry in Malta. Operational as from 2017, SEPTT is designed to ensure high levels of spoken English proficiency amongst ELT practitioners, specifically, pre-service teachers working in a variety of international contexts. A determining factor in the design of SEPTT was the decision to move away from 'native-speakerism' (Holliday, 2006). In fact, SEPTT does not adopt a normative standard based on the notion of native speaker.

Apart from incorporating the standard assessment criteria typical of the speaking component in a general English proficiency test, SEPTT introduces a new dimension; more precisely, it tests the language teachers are expected to use in a classroom context. Based on Freeman et al.'s (2015) English-for-Teaching, the test materials are modelled on teachers' use of English in classroom discourse. This is represented by a fifth criterion in the test's rating scale, which is teacher discourse. SEPTT tests candidates' ability to use spoken English for a variety of functions, including conversing, explaining, presenting information, and giving instructions and feedback in a context specific to ELT.

2 English for teaching

SEPTT is based on the notion that people require different proficiencies that are always situated in particular contexts and bounded by a particular social practice (Freeman, 2015). Just as general English proficiency cannot address all the linguistic needs of students in the world beyond the classroom, it cannot fully specify the demands on teachers' use of language inside

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the classroom when teaching the language. Equally important is the attention that should be given to language use in teacher talk and classroom discourse. Pre-service teachers are thus made aware that by enhancing language use they could increase students' learning potential (Walsh, 2002).

Walsh's (2002) study focuses on the "relationship between language use and pedagogic purpose" (p. 4); he stresses that control of the use of language is as important as the choice of methodologies. He contends that "the teacher by controlled use of language and by matching pedagogic and linguistic goals, facilitates and promotes reformulation, clarification, leading to greater involvement and precision of language on the part of the learners" (Walsh, 2002, p. 4). Van Canh and Renandya (2017) echo the importance attributed to language use by emphasising the need for the ELT practitioner to not only be highly proficient in general English but also "adept at using the language to create conducive learning environments" (p. 79).

Having factored in all the reasons for encouraging a more intense focus on teacher discourse, an ESP-derived approach to language proficiency is required whereby teacher education focuses on the specific linguistic needs of teachers when enacting their role. According to Freeman et al. (2015), such a "focused approach converts the problem of language improvement from one of general proficiency to one of specialized contextual language use, which is likely to be more efficient in bringing about practical impacts on teacher classroom efficacy and student learning outcomes" (p. 131). This acts as the foundation for the construct of English-for-Teaching, i.e. the essential language skills needed to prepare and enact a lesson in English (Young, Freeman, Hauck, Garcia Gomez, & Papageorgiou, 2014). One of the main implications of English-for-Teaching is that teacher language assessment needs to change so that the focus is on classroom-specific language proficiency rather than general language proficiency. This is imperative given that "Creating assessments that actually look like the work teachers do in the classroom can help build stronger validity arguments" (Freeman et al., 2015, p. 138).

A similar approach to assessment was developed by Douglas (2001) who asserts that Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) tests "derive their content from an analysis of specific language use situations of importance to the test-takers" (p. 172). SEPTT was designed after analysing the target language use (TLU) (Douglas, 2001); teacher discourse is the criterion that takes into account language use in a specific purpose context. The target situation is specific to pre-service teachers whose classroom experience is limited to the teaching practice sessions held during their pre-service training course.

Some of the tasks in SEPTT replicate the classroom tasks and routines that teachers typically engage in. Freeman et al. (2015) inventoried these tasks and routines and grouped them into three functional areas: managing the classroom; understanding and communicating lesson content; and assessing students and giving them feedback. The proficiency construct in SEPTT is framed by the context in which teachers typically use English when teaching the language. Hence, SEPTT is only appropriate for candidates who have completed a pre-service ELT methodology course. Despite the fact that candidates' knowledge of methodology is the

basis on which their spoken English proficiency is tested, the knowledge itself is not assessed in SEPTT.

3 Context

English has official status in Malta. It is given significant importance in various domains and it is studied throughout compulsory education. The target test takers are either first or second language speakers of English. Malta is one of a handful of countries to have legislation in place to regulate teaching in the ELT industry, which is responsible for over 75,000 international students per year. As the regulatory body, the ELT Council strives to maintain high standards in ELT qualifications and is responsible for issuing teaching permits. It operates quality assurance systems in all aspects of the ELT industry; this includes periodic monitoring visits to ensure compliance with established quality standards.

SEPTT is a legal requirement for teachers applying for a teaching permit in Malta. In addition to SEPTT, prospective teachers applying for a permit should be in possession of an Advanced level certificate in English or a language awareness qualification, together with a pre-service teacher training qualification. Although the Advanced level certificate in English and language proficiency test incorporate a speaking component, they were never designed to assess teacher discourse. SEPTT is the final examination pre-service teachers sit prior to obtaining a teaching permit; therefore, candidates would have already obtained qualifications in general English proficiency and teacher training. Such a combination of qualifications is fundamental to the selection and development of the test material as it is grounded in candidates' knowledge of pedagogy.

4 SEPTT design

Stakeholder representatives were part of the task design team and these ensured that the test is both comprehensible to teachers, and acceptable to stakeholders (see Andrews, 2004). The introduction of SEPTT underwent a process of public consultation as part of a revised legal notice. Following this, the test was designed and a detailed manual produced. Upon completion of all the documentation, a more focused consultation exercise was conducted with school owners, who bear most of the impact, and schools' Directors of Studies, who experience the test's washback effect through teacher training and teacher recruitment. Finally, intensive training sessions were organised for the examiners.

4.1 The three-part structure

The test content is authentically representative of tasks conducted by teachers in the target situation. SEPTT is divided into three tasks and takes no longer than 15 minutes. The first part serves the purpose of establishing the role of the candidate as a prospective teacher. This is followed by a gradual increase in the challenge of the second and third task, the long turn and conversation respectively. Both parts aim to immerse the candidate in a teaching-related situation and their language use is tested. It is important to establish that SEPTT does not test

knowledge of pedagogy but instead it exploits that knowledge to elicit teacher discourse based on the activities determined by the test materials.

4.1.1 Part 1 – Interview: the teacher

Part 1 consists of an introductory interview in which the examiner asks questions about the candidate's interests, plans, and training in relation to ELT. Questions may also focus on the candidate's views about teachers, teaching and learning.

The task takes the form of a two-way exchange initiated by the examiner where the candidate is expected to respond to a set of questions. The questions posed by the examiner may focus on past, present or future situations.

The task is aimed at assessing candidates' ability to provide information about familiar topics related to ELT, as well as details about their interests with respect to this profession.

4.1.2 Part 2 – Long turn: the lesson

This part is a three-minute presentation expressed as a long turn by the candidate based on a prompt focusing on some aspect of an English language lesson, such as managing the classroom, communicating content, or setting up an activity. Before entering the test room, the candidate is provided with 10 minutes in which to examine the prompt. Prior to the presentation, the candidate is provided with three minutes for preparation.

This task focuses on extended, structured speaking using a prompt that clearly outlines what the candidate is meant to do in a particular scenario. Besides a detailed rubric, the prompt might also include printed or visual components that would aid the candidate in the delivery of the presentation.

This task assesses the candidate's fluency and accuracy in presenting, defining, developing and exploring information related to the prompt. The presentation needs to include a description and explanation of what the candidate would do and why.

When delivering the presentation, the candidate might need to: introduce the presentation by indicating how each part of the prompt will be discussed; define and focus on each part of the prompt; exemplify each part of the prompt; conclude the presentation by summarizing, referring to future situations, identifying main areas of concern, suggesting the course of action required, or indicating personal experiences and views.

4.1.3 Part 3 – Conversation: instructions and response

In the third and final part, a conversation between the examiner and candidate takes place, which is based on a given scenario related to the prompt in Part 2. The candidate is provided with a rubric and one minute in which to examine it. Then the candidate is asked a number of questions.

This task focuses on the candidate's ability to respond to a particular lesson scenario or provide instructions to learners. The candidate might be asked to describe how s/he would

address a specific situation or what kind of instructions they would provide to learners. The candidate is expected to use concrete examples when answering. By means of a set of questions, the candidate may be required to speculate, evaluate, compare and contrast, explore possibilities, extend situations and experiences, and suggest alternative perspectives.

4.2 Measurement of performance

A candidate's performance on SEPTT is assessed by means of an analytic rating scale made up of five criteria and 20 descriptors corresponding to four bands, Band 4 being the highest level of proficiency and Band 1 being the lowest. The five criteria are: teacher discourse; coherence and cohesion; pronunciation; grammar; and vocabulary. At the end of the test, the examiner determines the band that best describes a candidate's performance with respect to each criterion across all three tasks. The lowest band attained for a specific criterion determines the global band attained in the test. A global Band 4 and 3 allows the candidate to obtain a teaching permit.

The examiner in SEPTT also acts as an interlocutor and is responsible for timing every single part of the test, initiating interaction with the candidate, and assessing the candidate's performance. Interaction with the candidate, including the instructions provided to the candidate and all the questions posed to the candidate, is scripted for the purpose of ensuring reliability. Every SEPTT examiner is periodically provided with rigorous training on how to follow test procedures in a consistent manner, and on how to interpret the rating scale for the purpose of reliably assessing candidates' performance. Every single test is recorded and these recordings are used to regularly monitor examiners' rating performance.

5 Conclusion

As was to be expected, the implementation of SEPTT generated some level of anxiety among teachers and trainers; this was less evident with Directors of Studies. One group resisted the test, another one ignored it until it was launched, and a third group embraced it as a welcome change (for similar responses in other studies, see Andrews, 1994).

The first data set was collected and went through a preliminary analysis. The test tasks, instructions, materials and scoring method seem to be producing the desired results. SEPTT allows for the possibility 'to make inferences about a test taker's capacity to use language in the specific purpose domain' (Douglas, 2000, p. 19). Different sessions were compared to one another and moderation was conducted following each session.

Research is a key factor in evaluating both the intended and unintended consequences of SEPTT; thus, further collaboration and consultation with stakeholders is currently underway. The research that is being conducted on SEPTT consists of an investigation into the impact and washback of SEPTT on the ELT industry at large, on school management, on teacher trainers, on pre-service teachers, and on teaching and learning. Some of the research projects that are presently being carried out involve:

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- interviews with teacher trainers from different pre-service training courses;
- interviews with Directors of Studies regarding new recruits' spoken proficiency following SEPTT's implementation;
- observation of teacher trainers during pre-service training courses while focusing on developing trainees' spoken proficiency;
- investigating whether an impact on teachers' methodology is taking place;
- investigating whether teachers have changed their instructional practices since SEPTT's implementation, and if so, whether this has effected a change in student learning.

The long-term plan is to analyse the speech data collected from each examination session with a view to comparing the teacher discourse used in SEPTT with authentic classroom discourse.

Since becoming operational in 2017, it is already evident that SEPTT is having an effect on pre-service teachers, trainers and school management. This is because the test is a legal requirement in Malta and has a bearing on teacher training and recruitment. SEPTT is a high-stakes test that determines whether a pre-service teacher obtains a teaching permit or not. Teacher trainers who are responsible for pre-service courses are now bound to dedicate classroom time to prepare trainee teachers for SEPTT. By shifting the spotlight onto oral communication in the classroom and building a strong association with language use in teacher talk as an essential part of classroom discourse, it is possible that SEPTT is elevating teachers' spoken English proficiency to the same level of importance as the ELT methodologies taught in teacher training courses.

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