Presentation Reflection

A reflection on whether to adopt the Cambridge KET and PET tests

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At the 2009 JALT CUE Conference, I was fortunate enough to attend an engaging presentation by Paul Wicking of Meijo University titled Teaching and Testing True Communicative Competence Through the KET and PET. Based on Wicking's experience as a full-time lecturer in the liberal arts department at Meijo, his findings revealed that students have become more proficient and seem to be more motivated as a result of a departmental wide adoption of the Key English Test (KET) and Preliminary English Test (PET) textbooks published by Cambridge Press. For the record, Cambridge ESOL exams are aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) published by the Council of Europe. The Key English Test (KET) and Preliminary English Test (PET) are accepted worldwide as reliable indicators of English proficiency. Thus, unlike the Japanese-born TOEIC and EIKEN tests, the KET and PET are for the most part geared towards global living, working, and studying. This internationally recognized framework describes language ability in a scale of levels that ranges from A1 for beginners to C2 for those who have mastered a language (KET Handbook, 2005). As Wicking informed us, the KET is positioned at level A2 and PET is at level B1 and the test is taken in over sixty countries with 75% of the candidates aged 18 or under.

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According to KET Handbook (2005), the test represents the publisher's lowest level of standardized exams and has the following three components. First, there is the reading and writing section that lasts for 70 minutes. In this section, examinees need to be able to understand simple written information such as signs, brochures, newspapers and magazines. Examinees also have to fill gaps in simple sentences and write a short piece of around 25 words. The second section is listening that lasts for 30 minutes. Here examinees must show an ability to understand announcements and other spoken material when spoken at a reasonably slow pace. Finally, there is the speaking section for up to 10 minutes. In this communicative strand, examinees need to demonstrate they can take part in a conversation by answering and asking simple questions. For this purpose, the speaking tests consists of paired conversations usually held with two candidates (Capel & Sharp, 2005).

The pedagogical framework at Meijo is for the native English speakers to teach the productive skills of speaking and writing while the Japanese teachers focus on the receptive areas of listening and reading. One advantage toward using this curriuculum is that since the same textbook is used throughout the school year, all of the teachers can readily see the current module and plan accordingly for lessons. This tightly structured, uniform approach helped keep students on-task and weekly vocabulary quizzes served to both remind and motivate students to review course material.

As an experienced university educator in Japan, these favorable results led me to reflect upon my own department's EFL objectives and delve deeper into the efficacy of the KET/PET texts and its accompanying vocabulary quizzes that supplement the program. Also, I was quite keen to determine whether it was solely the advent of the KET/PET materials that produced these purported gains and/or the implementation of a standardized syllabus that required all teachers to use the same textbook materials that may have led to these reported

increases. Therefore, since returning from the CUE Conference I immediately secured inspection copies of the materials in question and began a rather extensive foray into the CEFR framework. Perhaps, most importantly I wanted to gain a better understanding whether material produced for the European market—most likely geared toward ESL learners in Greece or Italy—would be suitable for my 1st year female university business management majors.

It seems that many—if not most—Japanese universities permit EFL teachers to choose their own textbooks and because so many teachers simply do not have time to compare lesson plans with one another, students may quite often receive similar vocabulary, grammar, and communicative tasks in class. Regrettably, a paucity of data or criticism can be gleaned from this systemic problem. However, it remains a topic that warrants further academic inquiry. With this as a backdrop, the risk of maintaining the current EFL framework is rather clear. Japanese university students may improve their fluency in EFL classes however, without the setting of concrete objectives or standard test levels, learners can have a tendency to plateau as false beginners throughout their entire university career. Granted, other factors such as large class sizes, once a week EFL courses, and excessive part-time work on the part of students may exacerbate this condition. To offset this prevailing academic setting, Wicking's university took bold measures a few years ago to implement a university wide adoption of the KET/PET program to standardize the curriculum and help provide students with skills to improve their TOEIC scores. This movement to standardize the English language curriculum likely stemmed from the Ministry of Education's new measures that set specific TOEIC targets for Japanese teachers of English coupled with whole scale societal endorsement for the business English test (Tanabe, 2004).

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Wicking explained that one of the most useful elements of the KET/PET program is its emphasis on practical English skills. The test employs an ambitious list of language functions, notions, and communicative tasks that appear for each of the CEFR levels. For example, at the basic A1 level students are expected to achieve three areas of this can-do list. The first step is that students can understand basic instructions or take part in a simple factual conversation on a predictable topic. Next, students should be able to display that they can understand basic notices, instructions or information. Lastly, students are able to complete basic forms, and write notes including times, dates, and places. From a topic standpoint, many of the KET communicative subjects mirror those found in many EFL textbooks such as daily life, clothing, shopping, entertainment and media, hobbies and leisure.

Frankly, I remained a bit skeptical of Wicking's claims that the KET/PET tests better motivated students so I decided to conduct further inquiry using structurd interviews with other teachers employed within the Meijo program. Their observation was that students recognize the advantages of studying the practical English used in the KET program. Real world tasks like reading signs, understanding brochures, and deciphering advertised specials at stores are tools that students can use when they travel to English speaking countries. Since Meijo encourages

its students to participate in short language programs over school vacations, listening for key information that simulates bus terminal and airport announcements has the potential to empower learners since the text contains realistic encounters they could likely encounter overseas. Moreover, from close inspection of the Cambridge material it seems that the communicative information gap activities in KET/PET are more challenging than the standard jigsaw types used by many of the Japan-based EFL textbooks. Another advantageous point is that both the KET and PET include word scrambles and crossword puzzles throughout many chapters to help challenge students cognitively and to recycle the target language. While teachers remained unclear about the effectiveness of these activities, they did report that students seemed to enjoy them since they catered to students with different learning styles.

However, the Meijo program is not devoid of criticism by teachers. Two teachers mentioned in face-to-face discussions that the persistent emphasis to teach to the test can limit the amount of class time to focus on specific areas that might stimulate and benefit student learning. Although these teachers did acknowledge that the curriculum does provide them with freedom to select the specific chapter exercises to use within the KET/PET material, it does not allow very much time to explore material beyond the textbook. Perhaps the main caveat of this program is that the onus falls upon the student to keep up with the material and weekly quizzes are used to fulfill this objective.

As I found myself becoming increasingly enamored by the efficacy of the KET framework, I stepped back and began to reflect upon my own teaching style and approach. Similar to the Cambridge can-do tasks, my lesson plans always include SWBAT's (students will be able to do) as one of the primary objectives. The thinking behind this concept is that students will be able to leave the classroom with a particular practical skill—or able to complete a communicative task—by having tried, failed, and revised an activity in English class. So, it seems that my methodology is on par with the KET in that regard. However,

compared to the KET, my approach did not feature nearly as many signs and brochures. In future lesson plans, I will strive to incorporate similar authentic materials to my students.

As I continued to ponder whether to include the KET in its entirety or elements of the can-do communicative testing into my classes, I looked back at student evaluations and thought about areas that have brought me success in the EFL classroom. Some of these include a student-generated needs-based syllabus, typically conducted in small groups during the first class of the semester, based on Graves' model (1996). For my classes, I attempt to incorporate experiential learning into classroom tasks that I hope will lead to a much deeper personalized EFL approach. Also, I try to encourage critical thinking and reflection with student portfolios representing 30% of the course grade. In addition, personalizing learning with situations, dialogs, and topics that student groups generate in class continues to be a major part of my teaching.

It seems that adhering to the KET European framework would leave me very little time to incorporate elements of the aforementioned methodology into a 90-minute class. As for the weekly quizzes, I recollected about the time I attempted to include vocabulary quizzes into the curriculum that culminated in average quiz scores of 55%. Students that reviewed the classroom material did quite well on the quiz, but the majority of students expressed that they did not set aside proper time to study because of part-time work and social obligations. This experiment caused students to utter that English is difficult for weeks on end and the negative washback effect was clearly noticeable. As a result, I found myself scrambling to remedy the situation with fluency activities to restore confidence in my learners.

As I remained on the proverbial fence concerning the KET, I focused on my role as a foreign language teacher for first year students. While I cannot speak for all false beginner first year university EFL classes, I have come to the realization that my learners benefit from a heavy

dosage of affective strategies (Oxford, 1990) to help disengage them from the skewed view of EFL as primarily consisting of grammar translation activities and memorizing word lists.

When I began as a full-time university teacher, I often wrote teaching logs after class and one of the most common themes was, "I need to remove the negative stigma students have regarding English and to promote self-esteem and to find a way for students to enjoy English." Later, I found this inclination was supported by research on self-determination in education and intrinsic motivation (Reeve, 2002; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). These authors discovered that students actually do perform better when teachers assume less control and allow students to direct more of their learning. Detractors may ask whether this would hold true outside the North American classroom, yet support can be found with Benson's (2001) research in Hong Kong showing that autonomy and learning are indeed concepts that are shared by students of various cultural contexts. As a result, I remain in accord with Cohen's (1990) premise that teachers must seek out ways to allow learners to become more self-directed. As I reexamined the KET book, I wondered whether this model would allow EFL teachers enough flexibility to include the necessary steps for implementing self-directed learning and student-generated material?

In conclusion, I remain hesitant to adopt the KET and PET framework. My main concern is that it would serve as a reminder to students that English at the university level is yet another round of tests that they need to pass. The KET test runs the risk of causing increased anxiety and would not promote an affective learning environment. However, if my students were much more academically oriented or keen to study abroad in the U.K., then the KET/PET would serve as a viable option. On the other hand, the KET/PET framework does seem formidable for EFL learners in European countries. In fact, I admire many facets of the KET and plan to utilize some of the can-do activities since the Cambridge examples contain numerous opportunities for

promoting task-based learning. I applaud the educators at Meijo for standardizing their English program and welcome qualitative research including student exit interviews regarding the KET/PET program that will provide further insight into intrinsic motivation and delve deeper into the effects of teaching to the test.

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