QUICK PLACEMENT TEST ON CD

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Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2002, www.oup.com/elt

Product type: Interactive English language placement test on CD-ROM

Language: English by default (instructions in the following languages can be set from the supervisor's mode: Spanish, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese and spoken Japanese)

Level: pre-intermediate to advanced

Operating system: Windows 95 and above

Hardware requirements: Pentium PC with a minimum of 16 MB RAM, sound card, CD-ROM drive (at least 8 x transfer rate), 10 MB free hard disk space (650 MB for full installation).

Availability: commercial.

Overview

Quick Placement Test on CD-ROM (referred to as **QPT** later on in this review) is a multimedia test package offering quick and reliable assessment of English language proficiency of the testee. It matches successfully the most recent developments in testing theory with many blessings of computer technology such us using multimedia; its unique format allows it to evaluate grammar, reading and listening while its banks of carefully graded exercises are accessed selectively to finely-tune the test to the current proficiency level of the testee (this additionally contributes to the feeling of accomplishment that was sometimes lacking in similar tests before). Test results can be made available to the supervisor only and are presented in a number of 'understandable formats' (i.e. in accordance with Council of Europe or ALTE specifications).

Description

The electronic version of QPT (the traditional paper and pen version also available) makes use of the unique **Computer-Adaptive Testing** (CAT) technique that enables the program to

adjust automatically to the actual language proficiency level of the taker on the basis of data gained from previous responses. The CD contains banks of items (activities) ordered by difficulty: if the taker fails a question - s/he is given an easier one, if s/he succeeds - a more difficult one is posed (needless to say the initial activity is of medium difficulty). There are about 25 questions asked. Such procedure saves a lot of time (it takes 15-20 minutes to do the test and results are available instantly) and the complicated statistical formulae are there to assure reliability. QLT was initially validated by more than 5,000 students in 20 countries and supervisors are encouraged to take part in the on-going validation procedure by sharing test results of their testees with the test makers to make it even more reliable (one of the floppies included with the program can be used for such a purpose).

The results of the test are available in either an Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) level or points (out of 100). The ALTE level can be translated easily (the **Chart of Equivalent Levels**) into:

a) Council of Europe specifications

b) Cambridge Examination levels.

The program offers a special password-protected mode for supervisors in which they can customize:

- the language of instruction (nine options)
- the amount of personal information they want to obtain from the taker (which is stored on the hard drive and can be accessed from the supervisor mode)
- whether to reveal test results to the testee (test results are by default available only to supervisors).

QPT evaluates listening, reading and the use of English (including grammar and vocabulary), mostly through multiple choice or cloze formats (suggestions for assessing writing and speaking can be found in the manual). The program can be installed on standalone computers or on networks, which means that more than one testee can have access to it at the same time (in the latter case each taker is given different items to work with).

Evaluation

The electronic version has some obvious advantages over the paper-and-pen one:

- it checks listening comprehension which is a major problem for many, even quite advanced, students
- it instantly adapts to the testee, offering gradually more challenging activities (constant challenge and high motivation guaranteed!)

- it is more interactive and looks more attractive, which contributes to significantly less weariness on the part of the testee.

The few problems that were noticed while evaluating the program were:

- it did not let choose the drive or directory in which to install it
- Polish characters did not show properly (in the supervisor mode one enters institutional data and each testee provides some basic personal info at the beginning of the test)
- Polish was not one of the nine languages (or language varieties) available to users in the help mode (the help mode can be run either before the test starts or accessed during the test by means of a special button).

It is hoped that these will be dealt with in the new versions of the program.

A much more serious issue the author of this review had to deal with was his inability to recover the remaining user counts after his system had crashed and he had to re-format the hard drive. User counts are supplied on a floppy (called the **Authorisation Disk**) and there are 50, 250 and 1000-use floppies currently available. All the counts are transferred to the hard disk during the installation process (it is possible to retrieve some/all of them later on). Since the author's hard disk had crashed before he managed to transfer the remaining counts to the floppy, he lost them (the CD-ROM is useless without them). The good thing was, though, that after the author had got in touch with the on-line help, he was immediately offered a free replacement (they should be praised here for a very prompt reply!). Maybe it would be safer if the uses were gradually 'debited' from the floppy rather than transferred to the hard drive all at once, or gradually obtained over the Internet.

Another drawback may be the price (see: prices in PLN), which may discourage individual teachers (floppies with more user counts are much better value, though).

Recommendation

I do recommend the programme to schools, educational institutions and individual teachers for the following reasons:

- it is easy to install and run and user-friendly; the interface is simple but appealing; the user manual is detailed and on-line help is available (see the e-mail address below); it can be installed on a few computers and/or on a network and simultaneously accessed by more than one user

- its assessment is quick and accurate (the result is readily available once the test has been taken), allowing to place many takers in their appropriate groups relatively quickly

- the test is fun to take as it checks a few skills in a variety of ways and it can adjust to virtually any level (with the exception of elementary students, perhaps, who are not encouraged to take it anyway)

- testees can find out instantly (thanks to the Chart of Equivalent Levels) what their current level of advancement is and which of the Cambridge Exams they are 'ready for'; teachers can assign students to appropriate groups quickly and accurately and have a way of dealing with late-comers joining groups as the course progresses.

Additional notes

For additional information and resources on the QPT go to its official webpage (if your browser directs you to the main OUP page and prompts you to choose your country, simply ignore the message and click on **ELT International Site** link at the bottom). You can also find a free sample of the paper and pen version (PDF) and an interactive presentation of the CD-ROM version (Flash Player) there. The program has its own support and information service (qpt@ucles.org.uk) that is, as my example proves, very quick and helpful.

Note

This article is a significantly extended and modified version of the review prepared for the IATEFL Poland webpage.