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0521013321 - A Modular Approach to Testing English Language Skills: The Development of the Certificates in English Language Skills (CELS) Examinations

Roger Hawkey

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- Steve Baxter, former Senior Examiner of Oxford EFL exams, and current Chair of Writing for the Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Certificates in English Language Skills (CELS) exams
- H A Swan, Principal, Swan School of English, former Chief Examiner for the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, and Trustee of the ARELS Oral Examinations
- Hazel Orchard, formerly of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) Examinations Board
- Dave Allan, Director of the Norwich Institute for Language Education, member of the original Communicative Use of English as a Foreign Language (CUEFL) Examination Working Group, and former Chief Examiner for CUEFL.

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Series Editor's note

Over the years, many different organisations in Britain have been involved in the testing and certification of English as a Foreign Language. For a variety of reasons some of these organisations no longer operate. Unfortunately, there is rarely any significant record of what they did or how they did it. This volume was written in order to capture the history of the Oxford-ARELS English examinations and those of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), and to describe how they have impacted on the development of a new Cambridge ESOL examination – Certificates in English Language Skills (CELS). The Oxford-ARELS English examinations and those of the RSA made an important contribution to the testing of English as a Foreign Language in the UK and around the world for a number of years in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Since the 1980s the number of examination boards operating in the context of school examinations in the UK has decreased. This has been for a number of reasons related to government policy, the economics of running examination boards and so on. The University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) has remained as the only university directly involved in school examinations in the UK. Through the 1980s and into the 1990s, UCLES formed strategic alliances with a number of other boards culminating in 1998 with the formation of Oxford, Cambridge, RSA (OCR). The drive to form OCR was a consequence of government legislation in the UK. As these various mergers took place, EFL examinations were sometimes involved but EFL was never the prime driver for any of the mergers. The consequence, however, was that by the late 1990s Cambridge ESOL (or UCLES EFL as it was then known) was in possession of a fairly large number of examinations that did not sit easily together but required significant resources to support. A decision was made to produce a new suite, CELS, which aimed to rationalise the number of examinations offered while attempting to bring together the best features, as far as it could, of the examinations that were to be phased out.

In this volume Roger Hawkey begins by describing the English Language teaching and testing context out of which the Oxford-ARELS and RSA examinations grew. He outlines succinctly a number of trends and evolves a very useful framework for the evaluation of communicative tests that he later applies to his analysis of the various examinations described in more detail in chapters two and three.

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Chapters two and three trace in some detail the history of the Oxford-ARELS and RSA examinations respectively. Although the records are sometimes sparse, Hawkey was able to gain access to a certain amount of useful documentation. However, what makes this volume so special are the numerous interviews that Hawkey was able to conduct with many of the key people involved in the initial development and subsequent production of these examinations. He draws a fascinating, accurate and sympathetic picture of how the boards operated and how the examinations were conceived and subsequently produced. Hawkey's analysis of the examinations is always fair and certainly helps us fully appreciate the great dedication and commitment of the individuals involved in their development. Each chapter also has extensive appendices that allow readers to get a very clear idea of what these examinations looked like and what was in them. Many readers will, I believe, find this of significant interest.

Chapter four brings us into the present in that it describes in detail the rationale and development of CELS. There is a significant focus on the validation of the new examination focusing in some detail on the validity, reliability, impact and practicality issues that surround examination development. The question paper production process is described and there is some emphasis on the management of change. The Cambridge ESOL approach to examination development gets significant attention and provides the reader with a very detailed understanding of the processes and issues involved.

Chapter five presents the new CELS examination in detail and compares its content to the Certificates in Communicative Skill in English (CCSE), one of the examinations that CELS replaced. There is a comprehensive review of CELS sample materials and specifications.

Roger Hawkey has produced a well written and fascinating history of a number of examinations that no longer exist, as well as a detailed review of CELS, the new examination that replaces them. He brings out clearly the high degree of professionalism that has characterised the British approach to English language testing over the years and illustrates well the quality of the new CELS and the great emphasis that Cambridge ESOL places on all aspects of the examination revision, development, production and validation process.

This volume is the second historical survey in this series, the first being SILT 15, which documented the revision of the Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE). Volumes on the development of business English, academic English and English for young learners are now being prepared.

Michael Milanovic
Cyril Weir
Cambridge
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