

## Experience with interim testing at ESIT – Some General Considerations

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The following article will focus on interim testing at ESIT and new requirements in the French context. However, it is hoped that the presentation will be of more general interest and will help course organisers and trainers identify appropriate modalities for the design of interim tests.

Traditionally, ESIT, as many other courses, has organised interim tests half-way through the course; i.e. in the case of ESIT at the end of year one. These tests have never been compulsory for all students. Those who are considered sound on the basis of continuous assessment are not required to sit a test. Thus, some students may proceed to second year without any tests at all, although this tends to be a relatively small minority (about 15%). Others may have only one test. However, about half of all students are required to sit three or four tests (one for each language direction in their combination), as a means of evaluating their interpreting technique and/or language proficiency.

The tests are a consecutive interpretation of a five-minute speech, delivered freely, not read. The language directions are C into A, B into A and A into B (or C1, C2 and C3 into A). The tests are eliminatory in the event of two or more very low marks (indicating multiple weaknesses). Students with just one very weak mark or who are borderline in several tests are allowed to repeat the first year or are advised to spend a year abroad for language enhancement purposes, depending on the nature of the problem. Thus, the tests do serve a pedagogical purpose, whilst also being selective.

The justification of using tests plus continuous assessment for mid-course selection rests on the following postulates:

- students need good consecutive skills to do well in simultaneous;
- simultaneous cannot be approached without sound language skills (understanding, and expression for active languages);
- not all students can necessarily become good professional interpreters in the space of a two (at most three) year course.

It should be pointed out that there is no quota system and that all students who meet the pre-defined criteria of proficiency pass.

### - **Eliminatory interim testing at end of M1 – Appraisal**

Although it would be naïve and idealistic to claim that everyone is happy with the eliminatory tests described above (students are often disappointed and upset), they are on the whole well-accepted. The reasons for this are variously given as:

- . Test results are *validated by subsequent outcomes*, in that virtually all selected students go on to become bona fide conference interpreters, even those who do not pass the diploma exam.
- . Trainers and outside assessors do not have too much difficulty in assessing students' ability and potential at the tests.
- . The tests *focus on a specific set of skills in a distinct interpreting mode* – language proficiency, interpreting ability and capacity to understand conference-level material, as applied to consecutive interpreting.
- . Students have completed a full academic year of consecutive training. They will continue practising and perfecting consecutive in second year, but are expected at this stage to have acquired the basic skills. The evaluation/testing comes at the end of a *distinct phase* in the curriculum. It marks the end of the first year and concludes the first stage of training which emphasises basic skill acquisition and consecutive interpretation.

. A number of trainer workshops have been organised in the past to define as clearly as possible *expectations* at this stage. Expectations are that the students should be able to do a five minute consecutive interpretation of a conference-type speech (delivered freely) in the various directions required with their language combination. The consecutive should be usable in a professional situation, ie should convey the speaker's reasoning with clarity and precision. Expression should not be distracting or inappropriate in any way. Some hesitations and omissions are considered acceptable at this stage. For all these reasons, the tests are perceived as being *relevant, timely and fair*.

Three years ago, following concerns that students were not practising sight translation enough, an additional sight translation test was added to the set of interim exams.

It is interesting to observe the differences between the consecutive interpreting interim testing and the sight translation test. Nearly all trainers are uncomfortable with evaluating sight translation at the end of first year. At this point students have had three months of practice, much of it doing very free renditions of the written text and much "tacked on" to existing consecutive classes rather than in dedicated sessions, although there is a highly structured master class in sight translation methodology. Students are not of professional or "near-professional" standard nor are they expected to be. About half of the students are required to sit the sight translation test.

Evaluation criteria have been defined (fluent rendition at normal speaking speed, coherence, lack of contamination), but the benchmark does not correspond to a specific professional objective or at least has not been expressed in those terms. Consequently, there is some unease with marking. Also, the test does not take place at a distinct teaching stage. Students continue practice with sight translation in the same way at the beginning of second year.

The characteristics that distinguish a satisfactory interim test from one that is felt to be more awkward test are confirmed in the light of experience with the introduction of new tests introduced after the first semester and the third semester of the course. These changes were introduced following new administrative requirements in the wake of University reforms in France.

The reform required courses to distribute evaluation and to award ECTS over the duration of the course. Thus, mid-point assessment modalities had to be introduced. These are inevitably somewhat artificial, in that the end of a semester does not necessarily coincide with the acquisition of a skill or sub-set of skills.

**At the end of S1** a formal assessment of students' progress was introduced, with trainers filling out an evaluation form for each student and awarding a provisional mark. All the evaluations for each student are then discussed at a teachers' meeting. After ensuring consistency, the marks are corrected or validated, as appropriate. The evaluations are then discussed with the students. The evaluation is in no way eliminatory. A pass mark confers ECTS, but a fail can be offset by a better mark at the end of the year.

Students find it helpful to have a coordinated, formal assessment at the end of the first semester. They do not feel under undue stress, as they know the evaluation is only provisional and that they have "a second chance".

Trainers find it useful to have a general discussion of each student's progress and a stock-taking exercise half way through the year. The trainer-to-trainer and trainer-to-student discussions are beneficial.

However, many trainers are unsure of the expectations at this stage, at least for the interpreting classes. In order to have a clear “cut-off” point, evaluation criteria rest to a large extent on success with exercises without notes. However, the students have already started note-taking at the time of the assessment, so some element of this had to be incorporated. Whilst it may be relatively easy to gauge whether a student can do a gist exercise in such a way as to render a coherent message, it is fair more tricky to state whether or not the beginnings of note-taking are going well. Trainers are also asked to say whether the target language is clear and well-expressed and to assess SL understanding. This is less controversial.

Most of the students do not pass all the interpreting training units at this stage, as is only to be expected for a skill-acquisition course. However, those who do well overall also tend to get good results at the end of the year, so the S1 evaluation is often predictive.

Formal assessment with a view to awarding ECTS was also introduced at **the end of S3**. It was felt that it would be inappropriate to have the same kind of course-work evaluation as in first year, as the students are heading towards professionalism. Various pre-diploma exams have been introduced. It was initially decided to have some consecutive exams in January. However, this runs counter to the generally accepted principles of CI testing (AIIC, EMCI). It was therefore decided to have one consecutive into B (used to see whether students were proficient enough to do simultaneous into B) and a sight translation. The choice of sight translation was made for pedagogical reasons. This exercise is acknowledged as an effective tool for improving speed and fluency of expression. It is also an excellent lead-in to simultaneous interpreting and good preparation for simultaneous with text. The teaching staff seems relatively comfortable with the choice of these two tests. This interim test is in no way eliminatory. A fail can be offset in June during a re-sit, which takes place at the same time as the final exams.

However, the tests require a lot of organisation, as full assessment panels have to be convened for all the various language combinations. They are thus rather expensive, as assessors are paid. Furthermore, outside assessors rarely participate (although they are invited), as they understandably prefer to attend the diploma exams in June. These tests have increased the workload for trainers and administrative staff to a far greater extent than the evaluation at the end of semester one.

### **Results with S3 interim testing**

In principle, all students at this stage can do a near-professional consecutive and sight translation (this is a requirement for moving up into second year). Yet, the results themselves have proven highly disappointing. Most students fail one or both (all) these tests. Their performance is not disastrous, but is generally below professional standard and indeed below their usual level of work. Of the 20 or so students, only 4 or 5 pass both tests. In June, as one would expect, nearly all pass.

Why is this? According to the students:

- timing, just after Christmas break. Students find it hard to pace themselves.
- Stress management seems to be a problem.
- As there are just two tests, a lot rests on two short interpretations. there is considerable pressure in a short exam.

The tests are not generally considered very useful as a trial run or mock exams either by the students, but simply as a distraction half way through the year. It is hard to say whether the tests are helpful objectively as a “dry run”. It would be worth keeping statistics and comparing five years of results of students who sit tests in January with a contingent of students who did not have such interim testing.

The feelings of trainers are :

- The testing interrupts the flow of second year to a minor extent.
- The status of tests is unclear. For instance, there is a full panel but no outside assessors.
- The interim evaluation makes the whole assessment in second year feel more fragmented.

### ***Conclusion***

Interim testing works when it focuses on a distinct set of skills; when it takes place at an appropriate stage in the course; when expectations are clear. Results should be validated by subsequent outcomes. If this is not the case, the testing should be reviewed.

In the light of the above considerations, it is worth recommending that University authorities allow skills-based courses, especially those designed for specific professional purposes, to apply evaluation procedures with some flexibility.

Finally, in the light of experience over the past two years with the EMCI assessment project, the author would like to emphasise the value of regular analysis and review of evaluation models. This provides an opportunity to step back from course routine and to gain valuable insight into the merits or drawbacks of various assessment procedures.