

Introduction to the Extensive Reading Foundation Online Self-Placement Test

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This presentation introduced the pilot version of the Extensive Reading Foundation's Online Self-Placement Test (ERFOSPT). The test is designed to check the fluent reading ability of second language readers and match that to a graded reader series, or levels which might best suit them. The presentation explained some of the background to the test, how it was made and how it can be used. In the pilot version introduced here, the test is optimized for Japanese students of English but this will be extended to other language speakers in the near future.

Rationale

As more and more Extensive Reading programs are being established at all levels of ESL/EFL education, there is a strong need for a sound placement procedure to quickly and accurately evaluate the individual student's level. At the moment varied methods are used. One is the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER) Placement/Progress Test. While this has been available since 1990 and was a pioneering effort, today we recognize that it has a few drawbacks. The primary one is that it is a modified cloze test and as such may not indicate a learner's fluent reading level, but is open to guessing and involves writing. Another drawback is that it takes thirty minutes to an hour to administer and additional time to mark and get the results back to the learner. The EPER test is commercial and not easy to source, and as such is designed to be used by institutions rather than individuals.

Another method employed by numerous instructors is to make a copy of a page from a representative graded reader at various graded reader levels and then sequence them in difficulty. The students then read each sample page going up or down the levels until they find something that they feel comfortable with. The students should check their reading speed, comprehension and the number of unknown words encountered to find a suitable level to begin reading.

The ERFOSPT works in the same way as above except it is online. In order to provide an accurate online placement test at no cost to learners, a combined effort has begun with the support of the ERF and most of the major graded reader publishers. Since most ER programs use graded readers, this new online placement aims to match reading fluency as assessed by the test with published graded reader series from all publishers. The test uses the 16-level ERF Graded Reading Scale as its leveling system.

Background

All reading material for the test is from already published graded readers and provided by cooperating publishers. At this time the test is in the pre-Beta stage with students from a number of schools in Japan participating in trial runs. The instructions are currently in English only but multiple language interfaces are planned for the future. Once complete the ERF server will host the test.

This test is for placement only and should not be used for evaluation purposes. For research purposes certain data will be collected from all test takers. Background information collected will include the individual's name or institution ID number, institution name, number of years studying English, number of years doing ER, first language, an option for receiving results by e-mail and performance data on tests taken. Collected non-identifying data will be used

internally to help refine the test, compare ability levels within and between age groups and L1s. No privately identifiable data will leave the ERF or be made public at any time.

The ERFOSPT is adaptive in that the algorithm responds to previous performance. Reading time and response times are logged and form part of the algorithm. There is no backtracking, so students are unable to go back and check the text material when answering comprehension questions and it tests what students have understood rather than testing whether they can retrieve specific information. There is a pool of texts and new ones can be added for additional contexts. There are also impressionistic questions to acquire data on student's thoughts about the test and its level of difficulty.

The ERFOSPT Beta Version

Students input personal information, or login with an ID and password. The login screen currently looks something like Figure 1 but will be changed in development.

On the next page (Figure 2), the students then 'rough select' their level as a starting point for the test.

Once the student chooses a text at the appropriate level, he/she is taken to a reading text (Figure 3) at that level to more deeply assess their ability. The time taken to read is logged and used as part of the assessment. The student then clicks to go onto the next page once the reading is finished, and the timing stops.

After finishing the reading passage, the student is directed to the first of two question pages. This is to gauge the learner's impressions of the material just read. A learner's emotional reaction to a text is an important part of determining the overall assessment in addition to time taken and the number of comprehension questions answered correctly.

After that page, the student is directed to the page of comprehension questions about the reading passage.

All the comprehension test items are true/false format questions and none are trick questions. One reason for this format is to allow the student to answer simply and efficiently, to reduce the overall time it takes to administer the test. The student is not allowed to go back and check. There is no difficult vocabulary or grammar and no double negatives are used. All

ERF ONLINE SELF-PLACEMENT TEST

Please input your information.

Student number (Please enter YOUR NAME if you are NOT a STUDENT):

Your teacher (Please select if you are a STUDENT):

Location (Please enter if you are NOT a STUDENT):

Class code (option):

Experience studying English (option):

Experience extensive reading (option):

Email address for results (option):

Input your name and password.

uid: richard password:

Figure 1. ERFOSPT login page (Pre-Beta)

ERF ONLINE SELF-PLACEMENT TEST

Please click the text at your level.

Sally goes out of her house and walks to the store. The sun is shining brightly and it is very hot.

Every day, when she went to the store, she said 'Hello' to Mr. Brown, the owner. He was very kind, but he never gave her anything for free.

Sally found some strawberries and brought them to the counter. Mr. Brown said "What do you want with all those strawberries? That's too much for just you to eat!" "Yes, I know," she replied "and they are a bit more than I can afford."

Sally told Mr. Brown that she was quite excited because she was having guests. Her aunt and uncle, who lived in the north, were passing through and had written to say that they would call on her today. She felt quite anxious, as she hadn't seen them for over ten years.

In fact it wasn't quite accurate to say that she hadn't seen them for over ten years, since even then, it was only at a distance—at the funeral of her great-grandmother. She hadn't had occasion to speak with them directly, and even now she wondered if there were some sort of special business that was bringing them to her today. In fact, unlike her, they were quite well off and through her uncle had connections to some of the leading politicians and businessmen in the country.

Figure 2. ERFOSPT choosing a starting level (Pre-Beta)

If you know Starkfield, Massachusetts, you know the post office there. If you know the post office, you have probably seen Ethan Frome driving up to it in his buggy; and you have probably wondered who he was.

It was there that, several years ago, I saw him for the first time. He was a noticeable figure. His tall, strong body was badly twisted, and much shorter on the right side than on the left. He moved slowly and painfully, pulling himself along. Just the few steps from his buggy to the post office were clearly difficult for him. His face had a sad, grim look. It was the face and body of an old man, and I was surprised to hear that he was only Fifty-two.

I learnt this from Harmon Gow, a man who knew all the families around Starkfield.

'He's been like that since his bad accident, nearly twenty-four years ago,' said Harmon.

'But Fromes don't die young. Ethan'll live to a hundred, probably.'

'He looks like a dead man already,' I said.

'I guess he's been in Starkfield too many winters,' said Harmon.

'Most smart people get out of here.'

'Why didn't he get out?' I asked.

'He had to stay and take care of his family. First his father got hurt, then his mother fell sick, then his wife.'

'And then the accident?'

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Figure 3. ERFOSPT text sample (Pre-Beta)

ERF ONLINE SELF-PLACEMENT TEST

Choose your answer.

The text was ____ .
 very easy easy hard very hard

There were ____ words I did not know.
 no one or two a few very many

I could read it ____ .
 quickly at normal speed a little slowly very slowly

I understood ____ of the text.
 all most a bit very little

[next](#)

Figure 4. ERFOSPT Individual Impressions of text (Pre-Beta)

ERF ONLINE SELF-PLACEMENT TEST

Choose your answer.

Ethan Frome can often be seen at the Starkfield post office.
 True False

Ethan Frome always looks happy.
 True False

Ethan had an accident that damaged his body.
 True False

It is easy for Ethan to walk from his buggy to the Post Office.
 True False

Ethan is twenty four years old.
 True False

Figure 5. ERFOSPT Comprehension Questions (Pre-Beta)

questions are based on explicitly stated information found in the passage and follow the order in which the information is presented in the story. There are no questions about implied or trivial information. Questions concern the main characters, places and events in the story.

After completing the questions, the ERFOSPT calculates the student’s ability and then presents a second reading passage based on these results. This may be at the same level, higher or lower depending upon the test results. Once the student completes a second set (text, impressions and comprehension questions) the third and a fourth passages are presented to more carefully home in on the student’s reading level. At the end of the test, the student is presented with a recommended ERF reading level and some recommended series-specific levels to read. Overall the test should take about 20-30 minutes.

The ERFOSPT team is currently developing the test and would like to hear from anyone who wishes to help beta test the system with his or her students. These people should contact the ERF at the following email address: ERFOSPT@erfoundation.org.