TITLE

Identifying key criteria of written and spoken English at C1

This is a summary of a report by Susan Sheehan, Pete Sanderson and Ann Harris as part of the ARAGs Research Online Series. For a copy of the full report, see
www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/publications/

WHAT WE LOOKED AT:

This project attempted to establish the criterial features of written and spoken English at C1 level. C1 is a challenging level to investigate as there is a lack of agreement around what makes a C1 level language user. One of the reasons for this lack of agreement is the under-specification of the C levels. As part of the English Profile Project new descriptors were written of the C levels. Green (2012) provides an account of the difficulties encountered when writing these descriptors and trying to establish criteriality at C levels. At the same time C1 is a level which is requested by various authorities. The inspiration for this project was the need to create a test of English which would be accepted by a teacher certification agency as evidence that potential applicants for a teacher training course were C1 level language users. The agency stated that C1 is the required level for a person for whom English is not their own language to be accepted on a course to train to teach English as a foreign language. This prompted questions about what language features characterise a C1 level language user and how these could be established.

HOW WE DID IT:

This project used two data sets. The first data set was collected from 36 MA TESOL students who all had an IELTS score of 6.5 or above or equivalent. They completed a written test of English which contained 3 different sections. The first was a multiple-choice grammar test. The second was a test of lexis. A head word was supplied to which the participants had to supply other members of the family. The final part of the test was an essay. The participants also completed an oral interview.

The second data set consisted of Aptis test data. Both written and spoken Aptis tests were analysed. The Aptis tests scores indicated that the participants were C1 level language users or above. The British Council – EAQUALS Core Inventory for General English (Core Inventory) was used as the framework for data analysis. The codes were based on the Core Inventory and then applied to the data using ATLAS.ti software. Once the data had been coded, it was possible to identify which aspects could be considered criterial.

WHAT WE FOUND:

The following points were found to be criterial for written English. Each language point is shown with an example taken from the data

- expressing attitudes and feelings precisely – it surely could have been worded better
- expressing opinions – Intrusion into individual may be the top concern of most citizens.
- expressing reaction e.g. indifference – I'm not that bothered about the trip being called off
- critiquing and reviewing – The writing is organised by using some cohesive devices though it still contains mistakes
- developing an argument systematically – This sure is a beneficial thing to a city since it allows monitoring of public safety. Furthermore, when it comes to legal evidence, those tapes could provide evidence in a criminal case.
- markers to structure and signpost formal speech and writing – The appeal is two-fold.
- phrasal verbs – to put a lot of effort into
- passive forms all – The route map should be improved.
- collocations – One gets the gist of the main points.
- technical and legal language – Ability to use different tenses, e.g. Present Tense, Future Simple, Past Simple
- The following points were found to be criterial for spoken English.
- markers to structure and signpost informal speech – The reason I want to become a teacher is because I love children. In addition, it is because I want to teach them a more sophisticated language
- narrative tenses for experience – The teacher would make us complete many exercises.
- collocations – They had good intentions and they helped us to overcome problems.
- expressing feelings and attitudes precisely – What really annoys me is when a colleague refuses to help me out.
- technical and legal language – Peer observation is a great way to improve myself and for me to help to develop my colleagues.
- There are three language points which were found to be criterial for both written and spoken language. These were:
- expressing feelings and attitudes precisely
- collocations
- technical and legal language

The inclusion of Aptis test data led to the development of a new code which was not taken from the Core Inventory. The code was named 'beyond C1' and was used on 58 occasions. It was applied to language which was more sophisticated or complex than that used in other parts of the data. This code was most often applied to Aptis examiner test data. One person wrote: "While I understand that the trip was cancelled due to lack of interest, I do not feel it is fair to penalise those members who did sign up by refusing to refund the cost of their entrance ticket." This is an example of the more sophisticated use of language labelled as beyond C1. Other language points coded this way were more colloquial. For example, another participant writing about their disappointment at a decision wrote simply: "That sucks."