

Test of Interactive English (TIE) Provider Approval: Interim Standards and Guidelines.

BACKGROUND:

The decision to develop and establish a set of English language proficiency exams was taken in 1997 by the Board of the Advisory Council for English Language Schools. This was taken after feedback from the recognised ELT sector nationwide as to what type of project they would like to see developed by the Council to meet needs and uphold and further improve quality in the recognised ELT sector in Ireland.

As a result the Test of Interactive English (TIE) was developed by a team of interested ELT professionals under the auspices of ACELS, with input from a series of external experts brought in to inform and evaluate the process at critical points. When a Project Manager was appointed in 2000, responsibility for the management of the project devolved to the Project Manager. It was at this point that the test was divided into two formats: second level learners (juniors) and adults, to recognise these two discrete markets and the differing profile and cognitive abilities of learners in these two segments.

The test was one of the first to be developed based on CEFRL principles, with a strong emphasis on the principle of assessment as an integral and core component of the learning process, to be used both to identify learner achievement and to inform and support the learning process. The central focus is on valuing the learner as the central agent involved in this process re making decisions for himself, guiding his own learning at his own pace in a manner which suits his learning preference and style, motivating and supporting the learning process by allowing each learner to select and work on content of interest and need to them individually. There is a strong focus on self-assessment to enable the learner to develop skills of self-evaluation and to raise awareness of what learning and acquiring language competence actually means, and how a learner may successfully develop the learning strategies and habits which will enable him to fulfil his potential as a language learner.

Technically the TIE assessment scheme is a framework which can be used both for formative and summative assessment purposes. It is criteria referenced (rather than norm referenced) with direct and explicit links to the global scale of language competence in the CEFRL. It values each learner and the learning achieved by him and supports the learner in setting himself learning objectives and evaluating his progress on this continuum. It is non-judgemental in the sense that there that is no fail grade as such, and it recognises the complexity and challenges involved in becoming a fully competent language user across the broad spectrum of the knowledge, skills, strategies and affective factors which are critical components in this process. The overall and underlying principle of the assessment approach is that it values learning and assessment of this learning as a central and necessary element of the learning process in which the learning is assessed using content chosen by the learner and in the process of which the learner is the decision maker. In this way the mechanism is inherently motivating and relevant to the learner, the issue of test interference in the learning process is defunct and 'test preparation' is clearly the learning process and programme, not vice versa as may be considered in more traditional, lockstep testing type approaches.

WHAT IS TIE:

TIE is designed as a learner-centred exam. It is flexible, designed to recognise and accommodate the needs and interests of each learner whatever their age, social, cultural or educational background. The test is task-based with the content chosen by each individual learner and can therefore be used to assess learners with the following needs and motivations:

- learners of English for general purposes;
- learners of English for business or professional purposes;
- learners of English for academic purposes;
- learners of English as a second language.

Key points about TIE

- the test is suitable for English language learners of all levels;
- the test reflects a task-based methodology;
- the test content is learner-generated;
- the tasks reflect situations from daily life;
- the test promotes the principle of formative as well as summative assessment;
- preparing for the test is an inherently motivating learning experience;
- self-evaluation and reflection on learning is integrated into the test procedures;
- the test is designed to promote and help support the development of learner independence;
- quality is assured through various explicit test procedures;
- assessment is carried out using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale;
- the TIE certificate is suitable for inclusion in a language learner's portfolio;
- TIE is recognised by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI).

The test is designed to assess learners' communicative competence and interactive skills in both predictable and spontaneous situations. It directly assesses the students' level of language ability in speaking and writing, with the receptive skills (reading and listening) being tested indirectly through preparation for the test and through the skills required to interact effectively during the test.

TIE is in two parts – the Oral Test (30 minutes per 2 candidates) and the Written Test (60 minutes). All the elements of both parts are compulsory and are designed to build upon learners' background knowledge, provide relevant language development opportunities to suit the needs of each student, and reflect tasks with which they will be familiar from the English language classroom and their daily lives.

The Oral Test (OTIE):

The oral test takes the form of an interview between 2 candidates (3 candidates in exceptional circumstances) and one examiner, with two examiners taking part for every fourth interview. All candidates are roughly paired according to level and age. One examiner conducts the interview and assesses the candidates' performances, (when there are two examiners, the second examiner is responsible for the assessment). It is a requirement of the oral test that candidates bring their logbook into the test with them (see below). All tests are recorded for sampling and checking purposes.

The Written Test (WTIE):

The written test consists of two tasks of a minimum of 100 words in length each, which the candidates produce over 60 minutes. The candidates may bring their book, their logbook and a monolingual and / or bilingual dictionary into the test for reference.

What preparation is the candidate required to do?

In preparing for the test, the learners are required to carry out three standard, pre-specified tasks. These form the framework within which the learners select their own topics and materials, and decide how to develop each task. In addition, there are two spontaneous tasks in the test, which require the learners to respond in speaking and writing to unpredictable situations. Assessment is made according to how well each candidate performs in carrying these out, according to the assessment criteria.

TIE candidates are required to do the following preparation for the test:

- *the candidate needs to carry out an investigation*
This is a piece of research or mini-project. The topic should be of interest and/ or relevance to the individual learner. The findings of the investigation are recorded in the candidate's logbook.

- *the candidate needs to read a book in English.*
This can be a work of fact or fiction – a graded reader, a novel or a book of factual information such as a guidebook, manual or reference book. What is important is that the book has been chosen by the candidate to reflect their interests and needs. Each candidate is required to have read all, or a substantial part, of his selected book. Candidates are not allowed to select a magazine, periodical or ELT course book.

- *the candidate needs to follow a news story*
The news story should be one that the candidate can follow over several (3 or 4) days. The candidate can make notes about the event and can collect photographs and articles. All information about the news story is recorded in the candidate's logbook. In the case of an ongoing news story, the candidates should record the part of it occurring over the above consecutive time period.

Each candidate is required to keep a logbook which they must bring with them to the test. This is a notebook in which candidates record the information about the 3 tasks (described above) they are required to prepare. Candidates are required to produce their logbook in the oral test and may refer to it in the written test. The logbook represents a record of each candidate's learning during the process of preparation for the test. Although the logbook is not awarded a grade, the TIE certificate contains the following statement: *This award is supported by a logbook produced by the candidate in fulfilment of test requirements.*

As an underlying principle of the test, and in accordance with the Council of Europe's focus on developing learners' awareness of self-evaluation and independence strategies, candidates have the opportunity to select topics and materials which reflect their own individual interests, needs and specialisations. The candidates decide upon and control the test content to give them the best possible opportunity of performing well, with topics that are stimulating for them, in situations that they themselves have created.

The oral and written sections of the exam are organised so that the book and the news story are referred to alternately in the oral test and the written test. For example, if a candidate has been required to do a task on his/her book in the oral test, s/he will then be asked to do a task on his news story in the written part, and vice versa. This means that candidates are always expected to carry out one task referring to each of these prepared tasks in either the oral or the written test. The candidates do not know beforehand which one will come up in which part of the test.

How is the candidate assessed?

The TIE Scale of Assessment has been drawn up using the following Council of Europe's bands. The TIE Scale is made up of 6 basic levels:

- **Proficient User:** C1, C1+ and C2

- **Independent User:** B1, B1+, B2 and B2+
- **Basic User:** A1, A2 and A2+

The back of the TIE certificate provides the scale along with a description of what each level means. A copy of the scale in the main European languages as well as Chinese, Russian and Korean is available to candidates.

All TIE examiners are experienced and well-qualified teachers of English who receive initial training and ongoing support through workshops, seminars etc in examining for TIE.

After taking TIE, each candidate is awarded a certificate recording their grades. This tells candidates their level for each part of the test – oral and written – and awards them a separate grade for each section.

Certificates are sent to the approved provider from the NQAI.

CURRENT POSITION

At the end of August 2011 the previous TIE tender expired. After considering the options available, the NQAI has now decided that a new mode of operation is to be launched with interested parties having the opportunity to submit applications to offer the TIE assessment scheme as for a period of 5 years (renewable by mutual consent). All certificates will be issued on application by the TIE Certification section at the NQAI.

The suite of tests of Interactive English (TIE) are copyrighted to, and remain the intellectual property of, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI, and its successor body). Any approved provider is not permitted to use the name TIE in its company title. An approved provider may use the legend 'An Approved TIE Provider' Initial approval will be granted for a period of five years subject to a satisfactory review of performance after the first twelve months of operation. Periodic external review of Approved providers will be organised by the NQAI.

The approved provider will have the right to develop the exam following procedures as laid down in the approval agreement, market and promote TIE to markets in accordance with their planning.

Certification Fees:

The NQAI will charge a Certification fee of €20 per candidate. Payment is made by Bank Transfer only. Certification will not be issued until certification fees are paid in full.

The NQAI reserves the right to alter fees charged for certification. The cost of the examination to the candidate is set by the approved provider.

Interim Standards and Guidelines

Applicants must submit documentary evidence demonstrating how they proposed to meet all of the standards in Section A.

Section B provides guidelines on the required documentation that should accompany any application.

A TIE Approved Provider Standards

The Approved Provider applicant is required to demonstrate capacity to meet the following General Standards:

1 Documented examination administrative systems containing the following core components:

- a. a system of application for candidates
- b. procedures for arranging and delivering exam sessions
- c. a system of grading and marking candidate performance
- d. a system to ensure exam security
- e. a robust and secure system of archiving and storage of results and papers
- f. a system for managing appeals and complaints

2 A documented business plan containing the following core components:

- a. a marketing plan which describes how the test will be promoted and developed over the next 5 years, with projected candidate numbers for each year. A multi-media plan which sets out how various media (e.g. website, social media, applications etc) are to be utilised to further promote the test.
- b. an operational plan which sets out in detail the objectives of the first year of operation and also identifies the challenges, opportunities and risks. Annual operational plans will be prepared for each subsequent year of the Approved Provider agreement.
- c. a financial plan which has been designed to meet the needs of the business plan (annual over 5 years)

3 Documented Internal Quality Assurance System

1. A quality assurance system which describes how the test is to be managed and developed ensuring that the test design principles are maintained and the quality is assured in all aspects of design, delivery, grading and certification.
2. Specific procedures in relation to the following operations
 - a. Operation of an examinations board with a documented remit and functions
 - b. Procedures to assure quality of test arrangement, test delivery and post test procedures
 - c. Procedures for the training and ongoing maintenance of examiners (oral and written)
 - d. Procedures for checking grading re analysis of examiners' performance, double marking etc
 - e. Evaluation of tests re measures of reliability (e.g., inter and intra rater reliability) and validity (e.g., construct, content, face, scoring)
 - f. Statistical analyses re reliability of test tasks, e.g., through correlation, IRT, SD analyses
 - g. Systems for the collection, analysis and reporting on stakeholder feedback on examination operations

4. Documented Staffing and Organisation Structures

Documented systems, policies and procedures for managing the following:

- a. Internal governance and management structure
- b. Procedures for the recruitment, induction and performance management in relation to all staff that are required to administer the examinations effectively.
- c. An internal system of effective communication between all staff involved in the management, grading and administration.
- d. A system of communication with all external stakeholders (candidates, teachers, examiners, centres etc)

B Guidelines on documentation to be submitted with application.

The following documentation indicates the type of documentation to be submitted in support of an application.

1 General

- a. Candidate Handbook (appropriate for proposed candidate cohort)
- b. TIE Centre Handbook
- c. General Guidelines for TIE
- d. Candidate Application form
- e. Quality Assurance Handbook

2 Oral TIE

- a. Protocol for sessions
- b. Grading sheet
- c. OTIE pack contents:
 1. Scheduling procedures for exam sessions
 2. Grading sheet
 3. Examiner feedback sheet
 4. Recording equipment
 5. Payment claim form
 6. Incident Report form

3 Written TIE

- a. Grading sheet
- b. System of grading and finalising of grade

4 Administration

A TIE Administration Handbook to include the following.

1. Organigram of company with positions.
2. Flow chart of system from application to certification
3. Communication systems with
 - exam centre
 - candidates
 - examiners
 - graders
4. Exam Session Administration: Procedures and Systems
5. Duties of office administration, session leader, invigilator, examiners
6. TIE grading sheets – OTIE; WTIE
7. Procedures for recruitment ,appointment, training, standardisation & development of examiners
8. Maintenance of examiners' and graders' documentation
9. Security procedures, (re exam papers, data protection of results)
10. Archiving procedures

11. Procedures re setting up of OTIE sessions
12. Procedures re the grading of WTIE papers
13. Certification procedures

Approved Providers will be provided with the following documentation.

1. Examiners Handbook.
2. Oral TIE task 4 development specifications.
3. Written TIE task Development specifications.