

**“Where are we going? -
An Update on Workplace Language Benchmarking in China and the
Region”**

by Mark Knight

Abstract

In recent years there have been several projects in China and the region that have helped organizations, both government and commercial, decide on language benchmarks for their staff and management. Prior to these projects, surprisingly little work had been done in this area and so, through trial-and-error, a basic approach has been developed.

Very often Human Resource staff are unaware of the complexities of researching language level requirements for their employees. In particular, there is a real need to explain implications of setting benchmarks from political, financial and language learning perspectives.

As organizations continue to think regionally, so must language testing and benchmarking. Links have been forged in a few countries but more needs to be done if we are to fully meet the needs of expanding businesses.

There are also a number of areas that need further research. This paper aims to describe some of the work that has been done so far, describe the processes that have been developed and to identify areas that need to be looked at more closely.

Background

I recently asked a group of language testing experts and a few other academics to look at a few sample writing tests. They were all well-known international tests of English. Before I gave them the sample tasks, I deleted the names of the tests so that they could only see the tasks themselves. I then asked them to identify which tests they were samples of.

Without exception, none of them were able to name a single test correctly. The sample writing tests downloadable from test websites are often very similar. They have two parts and the second part is longer than the first part. It is not that surprising, given the similarity of test formats that none of the academics could see any significant differences between them. Writing tests have mostly developed along the same lines.

Imagine then how it must be for Human Resource Managers when trying to decide which test to use for their staff?

How companies choose tests is research, perhaps, that should also be done at some point. Knight (2001) touched on corporate behaviour during benchmarking projects but not at the planning stages.

There has been an increasing number of organisations seeking to set language benchmarks for recruitment purposes. Many have surfaced in Hong Kong and China and some have been regional. As pointed out by Knight (2005) though, they have not all been successful projects.

This paper will refer to language levels using the ALTE competency levels.

Working out the Aim(s)

The first challenge is to attempt to ascertain the purpose of a workplace language benchmarking project. This may seem obvious. You may think that the purpose is to set benchmark levels for recruitment, training and promotion. There are occasions where the aim of a project, as far as the organisation is concerned, is along these lines only. However, there have been occasions where half of the current staff have been laid off on the basis of their test result. This suggests that the main purpose, for some organisations, in conducting tests of current staff is to identify which staff to lay off.

As testing consultants, we therefore need to ask ourselves whether we are entirely happy being part of a process of elimination in this way. If we decide that the customer is likely to lay people off anyway, and that our process is at least measurable, then we may be happy to proceed with this type of consultancy.

However, if a customer is planning on laying off current staff it is unlikely that they will tell you before the project begins, if at all. This lack of transparency was alluded to by Knight (2002) in his justification for benchmarking in the first place.

What is common though is that staff and sometimes management *think* that they will lose their jobs. Consequently, language benchmarking projects for companies are often more about change management than they are about language.

In fact, it has proven invaluable to approach the planning of these projects from a change management perspective.

For example, when interviewing staff to find out what they do in English, it is also an opportunity for the staff to ask the researcher questions directly about how the research can be trusted. Asking Human Resource Managers which staff or managers have put up resistance to previous projects and perhaps interviewing them first has also been a useful approach.

Through trial-and-error a process has been developed. It is often not possible to take up too much staff working time and so the research is normally limited to questionnaires, interviews, tests and eventually a presentation to the Directors of the organisation to explain the findings.

The aim, as far as the consultant is concerned, is to help an organisation make its own decision rather than to influence a decision.

Process – Stage One

As far as possible we should ascertain the aim of the project, bearing in mind though the real aim(s) may never be known by you.

Negotiate an initial plan with the Human Resources Director / Manager. This should be fairly detailed covering all the remaining stages.

The customer should be aware of the decisions that they will need to make:

- (i) to decide on how many job categories to have. Either one category where the minimum benchmark level could be used for current staff and the high-achiever benchmark level could be referred to for future employment and promotion or multiple job categories;
- (ii) however many categories are decided on, the decision then would be whether to have two (or more) benchmarks for each category or just one minimum benchmark for each; and
- (iii) after reviewing all the information collected, it would then make sense to decide on actual benchmark levels.

Process – Stage Two

This stage involves training line managers to choose suitable staff for pilot tests and interviews.

In larger organisations it is common for at least some line managers to resist language benchmarking projects, particularly ones that also set benchmarks for the managers themselves. In these situations it is important to involve line managers in the process of selecting staff for pilot tests and interviews.

This is not an easy task though as some managers are quick to point out that they are not language experts. How can they identify staff a particular language level when such a level has not yet been identified? They also point out that they only speak to their staff in their first language and seldom in English anyway. Similar issues were identified by Knight (2006) when training the same line managers to assess the writing of their staff.

A training session for line managers is crucial in these circumstances. The following criteria can be given to line managers to help them choose staff at the *right* language level:

- only choose staff who have not encountered real world problems after using English (*problems such as complaints or delays*)
- only choose staff that are competent in their work in their first language (*it being unlikely that someone could be competent at a job in a foreign language and not be at all competent in that role in their own language*);
- only choose staff that have been working in that role for at least six months (*it being unlikely that they could have demonstrated competency in a much shorter period*);

This criteria has proven invaluable in helping line managers choose staff for pilot testing. It has also served to reassure line managers that we are only asking them to do something which appears achievable.

Process – Stage Three

Here the questionnaires are distributed, interviews and finally tests take place. Experimentation has been conducted to see which might be the best order to conduct these in. The interviews can be used to check that the questionnaires were understood and so logically come after the questionnaires are returned. The interviews come before the tests so that questions can be asked about the tests before they take place. In the past, these have been reversed causing a few too many upset staff and subsequent complaints.

During the interviews, the consultant can be finding out what tasks the staff believe they should perform in English in their work. Surprisingly often, this differs from the tasks the managers think they do. There has been a great deal of useful research such as Drew and Heritage (1992), who explained that institutional talk was goal-oriented. This research in particular reminds us of the need to focus on goals rather than on grammar.

Interviewees can also be asked to interpret their job descriptions. Such interpretation often varies among staff and management as the descriptions themselves are often written in an indefinite manner.

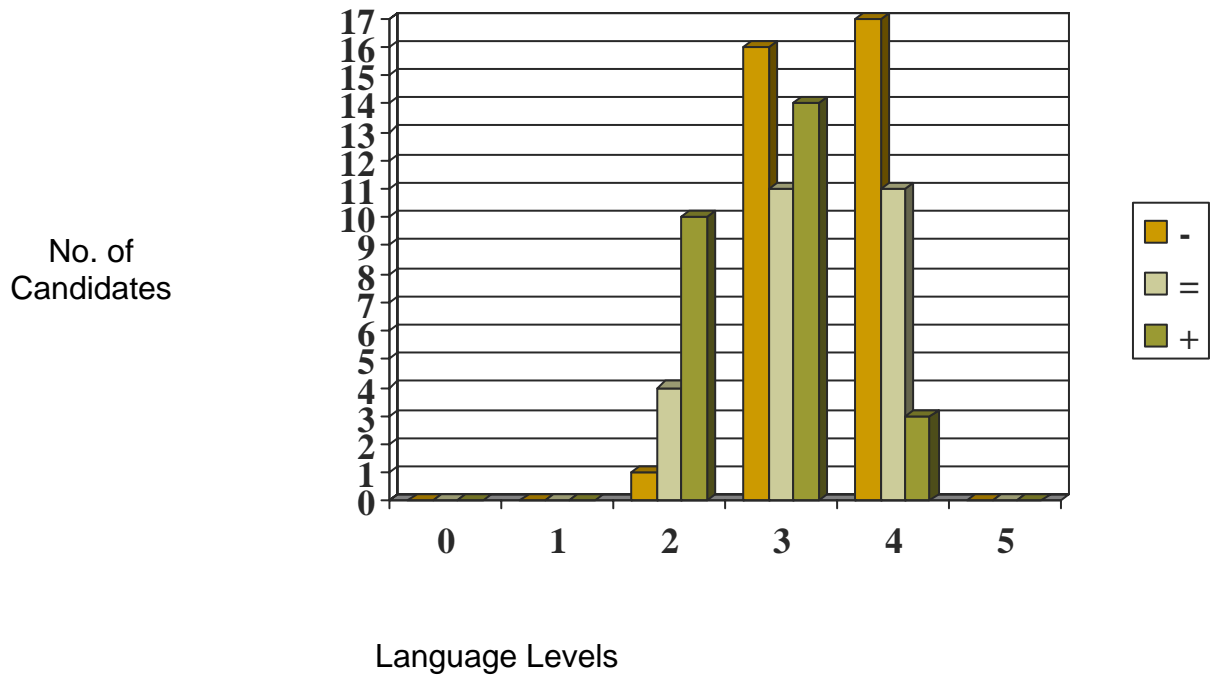
Process – Stage Four

An analysis of the information, questionnaire and test results then takes place. The data is presented in table format for Directors to review. At this stage, a draft final written report can be prepared but should not be emailed to Human Resources personnel yet.

Often the content of the report changes because of discussion in the final presentation with the Directors and so it is best not to let a customer see the draft version.

Sample Pilot Test Results

Figure 1:

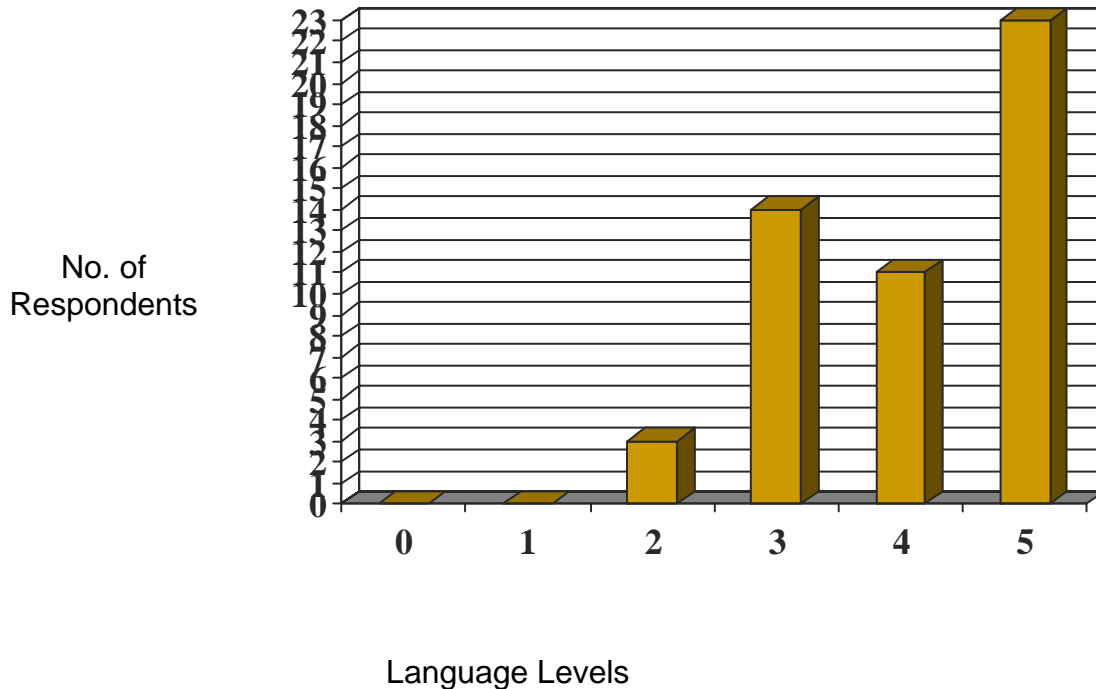


As described by Bachman (2004), results of this kind can be grouped as mode, median or mean. For example, in Figure 1 the mode grouping would be 4-, on the ALTE scale.

Such descriptions can be useful for Directors of a company indeed some kind of analysis will be expected, but I would not recommend getting too academic in a final presentation.

Can-Do Questionnaire Results

Figure 2:



In figure 2, the particular set of questionnaire results suggest that 34 of the 51 respondents to the questionnaires were expecting a higher ALTE level of 4 or even 5. As it happened, the average language level suggested by actual testing was 3-. This disparity of opinion with actual levels is worth noting in a final presentation. In this case, only 14 of the 51 who responded were also expecting a level 3.

Process – Stage Five

The consultant delivers a face-to-face presentation to the Directors and other decision makers in the client organisation.

This presentation can include the playing of speaking tests to demonstrate different language levels. Ideally, these should be candidates from that organisation. Sample writing scripts can also be shown for this purpose.

Directors often look at the consultant during the discussion that presentation generates, for *confirmation* that they have chosen the *right* benchmarks. I believe it is important not to give such confirmation. Instead, the Directors must understand their decisions and implications of them. Language learning implications, such as how long it might take for a member of staff to go from Pre-

Intermediate to Advanced level in English. Financial implications will have a direct impact on any benchmarks, for example the higher the benchmark the more people may be below and so require training and so a larger training budget may be needed. A political perspective also needs to be discussed, what message is being sent to staff by particular benchmarks, whether they are perceived as being too high or too low for example.

Giving recommendations at this stage, I believe, should be confined to general areas such as the type of training that may help staff at different language levels. If a consultant were to recommend particular courses or a particular course provider, then his/her research would become questionable.

Normally, organisations are more willing to invest in staff who are within one ALTE level of their target benchmark as there is a greater likelihood of achieving success.

General recommendations might be:

Possible Situation	Recommended Training (if any)	Recommended Follow-Up Testing
Candidate at or above minimum benchmark level	<p>If a candidate is at the required language level it does not mean that they can do their job in English.</p> <p>However, it does mean that they have the language resources to be able to learn to do their job. Consequently, sending them on an English course may not be necessary.</p> <p>If a candidate at or above the required language level is not performing in English at work, the causes of any problems may not be related to English.</p>	NO follow-up testing is necessary, unless it is felt later that the candidate's level has changed.

<p>Candidate below minimum benchmark level (but within one or two sub levels)</p>	<p>If a candidate is just below a minimum benchmark level, ie. a candidate is 2+ when a 3- is required, then, perhaps, a short skills based course (writing and/or speaking). Although, some people improve quicker than others, 30 hours per sub level may be sufficient.</p>	<p>A follow-up Writing and/or Speaking Test may be appropriate.</p>
<p>Candidate ONE WHOLE ATLE level below minimum benchmark or more</p>	<p>In this situation, a candidate will need to study general English - probably for at least a year.</p> <p>The candidate will need to be given the opportunity to bring their entire language resources up which are unlikely to be achieved on a short 30 hour course.</p>	<p>A follow-up Writing and/or Speaking Test is recommended but not for at least the first year to allow the candidate time to improve.</p>

Future Research

It seems that what makes a consultancy successful or not is the relative independence of the consultant and that the project is approached from a change management perspective.

Further research by change management specialists would appear to be an appropriate way forward in developing these processes. Research into how companies choose tests would prove interesting as would an in-depth look into corporate behaviour during projects.

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