

# COMPUTERISED SUMMATIVE TESTING: ONE STEP FORWARD OR TWO STEPS BACK?

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**Richard Chapman**  
**University of Ferrara**



# Aims of the talk

*Today we will take a brief look at:*

- *the advantages offered by computer-assisted language testing*
- *doubts we may have about ‘examination by computer’*
- *the opportunities and dangers of CALT, and*
- *the theoretical and practical issues involved*

# CALT comes of age

- *Recently,*
  - **on-line summative tests have become widely available**
  - **not *just* placement/diagnostic or progress testing**
  - **certification is (quite rightly) entering the internet age**
  - **synergy with the way many students learn English**

# The advantages of CALT

*Numerous benefits are claimed for computerised testing:*

- *logistics and administration*
- *greater uniformity in the test-taking experience*
- *tracking of all candidate behaviour  
(time taken, corrections etc.)*
- *allows for individualised tests (e.g. CAT), saving time*

# The advantages of CALT # 2

- *test experience can be more pleasant*
- *greater security (copying can be virtually eliminated)*
- *more 'sittings' of the test per calendar year; quick results*

# A few caveats about CALT

*CALT seems highly attractive, but some significant issues have emerged:*

- *identity detection is problematic*
- *adaptive testing is not uncontroversial:*
  - > *item banks MUST be very large and regularly renewed;*
  - > *candidates can 'get wise' quickly;*
  - > *the algorithm needs to be very effective*

# More CALT caveats

- *anxiety*
- *technical issues:*
  - > *constraint of medium (e.g. screen size)*
  - > *standardised equipment or ‘digital divide’?*

# A “*Great Leap Forward*”?

*The last ten years have seen a significant development in computerised language testing.*

- **2006/7: Cambridge ESOL (now CELA) offered *Main Suite* examinations in a computer-based form**
- **2012: Oxford’s OTE introduced. This is not merely computer-based, but a fully *on-line* examination**
- **Similar steps taken by other providers (e.g. TOEFL and TOIC)**



# The real “*Great Leap Forward*”?

- **Summative testing uses most powerful technological developments to improve testing;**
- **in the same medium as candidates’ language use (smartphones, computers and skype are real *loci* for English today);**
- **so, is this a *great leap forward*?**

# One step forward, two steps back?

*Using CALT risks making progress with technology while regressing in testing language.*

*Why?*

*Firstly:*

- \* *CALT offers contributions to reliability rather than validity*
- \* *little or no attention paid to actual language content*
- \* *in other words, these tests are NOT *new*!*
- \* *CAT involves risks in terms of validity*

# One step forward, two steps back?

*Secondly:*

- \* *no attempt to exploit the capabilities of new technology*
- \* *'same old language' in an unnatural context*
- \* *the medium should contribute to test design and the*  
*construct*

# Brief bibliography

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