

# 16th Annual Conference of the Japan Language Testing Association

27 October 2012

## Gems of English: A tale of triangulated testing

**John BLAKE**

Institute of General Education  
Japan Advanced Institute of Science and Technology

This study discusses the creation and execution of an end-of-course test for the first cohort of one hundred showroom sales staff in the world's largest jewelry store in Thailand. The showroom sales staff had just completed a seventy-hour English for Specific Purposes course held over twenty weeks. The test candidates were mainly ethnic minorities from various hill tribes in the Golden triangle. The majority spoke various Chinese dialects but there was no *lingua franca* as there were also monolingual Thai and Korean speakers. A significant number were illiterate as they had received no formal education.

The remit of the test was to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the candidates' ability to sell jewelry to English-speaking customers in the showroom in order to allocate the staff into sales teams. Those in the higher-ranked teams would be assigned the first coachload of English-speaking customers, and the lower-ranked teams would only be called on should a second coachload arrive at the same time. This meant the earning potential was substantially higher for the higher-ranked teams.

The end-of-course test consisted of elements that were proficiency tests and other sections that were pure achievement tests. This difference was ameliorated, however, by the fact that the vast majority of the candidates were absolute beginners at the start of the course although there were a few false beginners.

In consultation with the store management, a battery of tests was used with each one testing different aspects of the sales process. A knowledge-focused written test making use of visual prompts was used to assess the candidates' ability to recognize key lexical items and functional phrases. A one-minute spoken presentation of a self-selected jewelry item was used to assess persuasive presentation technique and pronunciation. Secret (but quickly discovered) customers were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the sales staff in the showroom. The sales process was observed *in situ* by the teacher, the floor manager and the staff supervisor. The teacher listened for language usage, the floor manager assessed personality and manner while the staff supervisor assessed sales technique.

The problems and solutions in creating and carrying out these tests in terms of validity and reliability will be examined from the standpoints of various stakeholders in the process.