

RAPID PROFILE AS AN ALTERNATIVE ESL PLACEMENT TEST

ALI ALSAHRANI

Abstract

The use of computer software in language testing has been widely acknowledged. Rapid Profile (hereafter RP) is software used to screen EFL learners' speech samples to assess their language acquisition level. The aim of this paper is to compare the results of RP and a conventional placement test of a UK University language centre in assigning EFL learners to their proficiency levels. Speech samples were collected from a number of students who have already been subject to the language centre placement test. Based on the language acquisition developmental stages (Pienemann 1998), findings revealed that about one third of the sample were placed in different levels than their current levels assigned by the language centre placement test. Recommendations about the use of Rapid Profile in language centres are also made.

Keywords: *placement test, rapid profile, second language acquisition, profile analyses, testing*

Introduction

Studying in higher education institutions requires a mastery of and a level of proficiency in the academic and teaching language used (mostly English) before non-native speakers are allowed to begin their degree programmes as a UK universities English Language policy. There are various types of tests that students can take to be accepted for entry to a full degree programme before joining the university such as the

International English Language Testing System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and Cambridge ESOL Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF). Students scoring should be as minimum of IELTS 6.5, TOEFL 575, or CEF C1+ (Pathways into university 2008-09, p.15). Students who fail to fulfill the institution's language proficiency criteria usually gain conditional admission which requires them to study in the university's language programme for a period of time depending on proficiency level (mostly four terms of forty-two weeks). In the English language programme, students who have not provided evidence of English language ability take a language centre entry test to be allocated with other students at levels appropriate to their degree of knowledge or ability in order to create homogeneous groups of students as suggested by Heaton (1988), Bachman and Palmer (1996) and Alderson (2005).

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to compare the participating informants' current developmental stages according to the results of a linguistic profiling test (Rapid Profile) with their actual proficiency levels, as assigned by their language centre placement test results.

Literature Review

This section includes three parts. Firstly, the language centre conventional test is concisely discussed; secondly, a detailed definition of Rapid Profile is presented. Thirdly, the theoretical background of RP test, the Processability Theory, is briefly introduced.

Language Centre Test

Students at the language centre are working toward developing their English skills through an intensive weekly timetable of practice of the reading and writing skills as one component and listening and speaking as another component. The programme has also a general English component where students practice what they learnt to extend their language knowledge and develop their English fluency and accuracy. In order to achieve this goal, students' progress is assessed during the term through written essays, reports, field notebooks, practical exercises, group and individual research projects, bibliographical searches, oral and video presentations, and problem solving exercises. This classroom formative assessment is both formal and informal. Students are given advice and feedback throughout their programme from their teachers, enabling them to build on their successes. This part weighs about 30% of their final marks. The remaining 70% of the final mark is through a summative language centre test that gauges their English language proficiency level. The test consists of four parts: the first part is a writing test where students are asked to write about one compulsory topic. A reading comprehension test gauges their abilities to take notes, skim scan academic texts , guess meaning of unknown vocabularies, predict, identify writer's purpose and attitude, and to evaluate the writer's argument. Part three is the listening test where students listen to segments of a lecture, an academic discussion and a general conversation and are asked to answer some questions that test their abilities to take notes, use linguistics cues given by the speakers, and fill the gaps by vocabulary used in the listening segments. Finally, part four is the speaking test where students talk about a variety of different everyday situations and social exchanges. The test aims to check the students' accuracy and

fluency. Students' averages determine to which level they should move. Usually students move to the next level.

Rapid Profile

Kessler (2008, p.165) defined Rapid Profile, developed by Manfred Pienemann of the National Languages Institute of Australia / Language Acquisition Research Centre, as "a computer-based procedure for screening speech samples collected from language learners to assess their level of language development as compared to standard patterns in the acquisition of the target language". Rapid Profile performs statistical analysis of a transcribed speech sample of a second language learner from an interview conducted in a casual atmosphere. It is based on the work of Fletcher, Garman, and Crystal (1976) of Standard Profile Analysis, a tool that has been developed to diagnose language impairment according to the suggestions of Clahsen (1985), Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley (1988) suggest that "emergence rather than mastery should be taken as evidence for change in the speaker's interlanguage" (Kessler 2008, pp.166-167).

Pienemann (1992) confronted the two main obstacles to applying the Standard Rapid Profile. It is time consuming and the analyst may spend 20-40 hours in assessing a 60 minute speech sample. Furthermore, teachers would be obliged to be professionally experienced in areas out of their speciality. Pienemann created an improved version of Rapid profile, for which it is easy for teachers to understand the underlying theoretical background (Processability Theory) and to use. Rapid Profile is straight-forward practice that requires a short period of training sessions (4 hours for 4 days) for teachers to be Rapid Profile analysts. The analyst needs only 15 minutes to diagnose the ESL learner's English problem(s) and assign him or her to a

developmental stage according to Pienemann's (1998, p. 8) universal processing hierarchy and application to ESL.

Stage	Processing procedure	Phenomena	Examples
6	Sub-procedure Main and sub clause	Cancel Aux-2nd	I wonder what he wants.
5	S-procedure Inter-phrasal inform	Neg/Aux-2nd -? Aux-2nd -? 3sg-s	Why didn't you tell me? Why can't she come? Why did she eat that? What will you do? Peter likes bananas.
4	Phrasal procedure Phrasal information	Copula S (x) Wh-copula S (x) V-Particle	Is she at home? Where is she? Turn it off!
3	Phrasal procedure Phrasal information	Do-SV(O)-? Aux SV(O)-? Wh-SV(O)-? Adverb-1st Poss (Pronoun) Object (Pronoun)	Do he live here? Can I go home? Where she went? What you want? Today he stay here. I show you my garden. This is your pencil. Mary called him.
2	Category procedure (lex. Categ.)	S neg V(O) SVO SVO- Question -ed -ing Plural -s (Noun) Poss -s (Noun)	Me no live here. / I don't live here. Me live here. You live here? John played. Jane going. I like cats. Pat's cat is fat.
1	Word/lemma	Words Formulae	Hello, Five Dock, Central How are you? Where is X? What's your name?

Table1. Universal processing hierarchy and application to ESL

Rapid Profile software

The software is a diagnostic tool applied to assess the second language learners' English language acquisition developmental level in natural and formal instruction environments. It also pinpoints what the learner is not able to produce at their current stage. The tool consists of eight morpho-syntactic features with the possibility to assess some aspects of the lexicon and of variation features. These defined features include: Negation, Word Order, Question, General, Verb, Noun, and Pronoun. The setting of the assessment task using the programme requires the preparation of communicative tasks in the form of picture sequencing. Informants are asked to describe them, ask questions, or spot differences between the two pictures in a communicative task. A facilitator encourages the learner to talk, and an analyst codes the spoken response, and he may check audio and/or video recording to transcribe the informant's spoken production if he/she is not sure of what was said.

The software interface is straight forward where the analyst identifies structures of the screened features by clicking on the relevant buttons. Both recognized and missing structures are coded by clicking either '+' for features present or '-' for those which are missing. To register the acquisition of any syntactic structure, the software requires three different forms of evidence. For morphological structures, the software calculates both morphological and lexical variations.

The current third version of Rapid Profile (Rapid Profile III) is different from the first and second versions in two features. First, the new version has no room for formulae (formulaic chunks) produced by stage 1 learners and the second one is that the syntactic feature of negation (S Neg V) is lowered to be a feature of the second

stage not as a third stage feature. The remaining features are the same. The software has a new button that allows the analyst to code informant avoidance of applying the morphological structures with verbs, nouns, and pronouns.

Properties of Rapid Profile

Rapid profile is an indirect test that gauges the syntactic, morphological and lexicon features which underlie the skills examined. It provides L2 instructors with the learner's interlanguage developmental level (competence) and predicts the learner's ability to perform in the next stage (criterion-referenced). It is a statistical computerized test that minimizes the effect of rater subjectivity and raises inter-rater reliability and can be satisfactorily validated by the empirical findings of second language acquisition theory (Processability Theory) to create a high construct validity test. It is also authentic in that a representative sample of spontaneous speech produced in a natural communicative situation is assessed. Most importantly, it is easy to understand and use and has a direct effect on the teaching process, including teaching methods, textbooks, teachers and learners (backwash effect).

Processability Theory

The theoretical literature applying Rapid Profile to assess the acquisition of a second language relies on Manfred Pienemann's Processability Theory (first presented in 1998) which views Language processing as a human processor influenced by Levelt's (1989) model of language production. This model considers language processing as an autonomous processing of unconsciously linear model procedure with a temporary memory access of the grammatical processing. It also considers that

language processing is incremental. Processability Theory tackles the two main problems in an attempt to explain the procedure of second language acquisition.

According to Processability Theory, Language acquisition occurs in a stage by stage sequence. Each stage requires the mastery of its structures before moving to the next stage, where prior stages constitute the basis for subsequent ones. Therefore, no stage can be left out. Each stage is marked by a specific key structure in a hierarchy of processability. Consequently, language instructors can predict their learners' development courses, as stated by Pienemann

"The logic underlying Processability Theory (=PT) (Pienemann 1998; 2005) is the following: at any stage of development the learner can produce and comprehend only those L2 linguistic forms which the current state of the language processor can handle. It is therefore crucial to understand the architecture of the language processor and the way in which it handles a second language. This enables one to predict the course of development of L2 linguistic forms in language production and comprehension across languages". (2008, p. 9)

Pienemann (1998) noticed that ESL question formation follows a specific developmental sequence of stages as follow:

Stage	Structure
Stage 4	Aux-second
Stage 3	Copula inversion
Stage 2	WH+SVO
Stage 1	SVO question

He found that ESL learners try to produce a fourth stage structure (Aux-second) at the third stage. This results in different interlanguage variants which place the auxiliary in the second place, but failed to constitute the correct structure; as, for example:

Where he been?

Where has been?

Where he has been?

He has been where?

(Pienemann 2008, p.11)

This example shows that language acquisition is a uni-directional learning process where higher stage structures cannot be learned before mastering the lower ones (the development problem). In this case, Learners have identified 'he' as a third person singular (linguistic knowledge) and used the correct form of the auxiliary verb 'has' (logical problem). Despite their incorrect responses, learners have matched grammatical information between the parts of the statement (feature unification of Lexical Functional Grammar). The example demonstrates that the learner's interlanguage development is not arbitrary but can be predicted.

Methodology

Informants

Eight ESL/EFL students at four different levels (upper beginner level, intermediate level, upper intermediate level, and advanced level) of an English Language Intensive Programme at a university took part in this study. Two informants were randomly chosen from each level, and include equal number of males and females within the age range 19-23 years. They are from various cultural backgrounds and speak different mother tongues (Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, Hausa, and Russian). They have studied English as a second or a foreign language for periods between six

to nine years but had never studied English in an English speaking community before coming to the United Kingdom.

Language Centre – Rapid Profile levels correspondences

In order to correlate the six developmental stages of Rapid Profile for English as second language students with the different levels of the language centre, the different morph-syntactic features of each developmental level were examined for each course level. The result indicates that there is no one language centre level which corresponds to one Rapid Profile developmental stage but that two adjacent Rapid profile stages correspond to one language centre level.

levels of language centre centre	language centre	IELTS	TOEFL	CEF	Rapid profile stages
Advanced	70+%	7+	575+	C1+	Stages five and six
Upper intermediate	61-69	6.1-6.9	550	C1	Stages four and five
Intermediate	56-60	5.6-6	500	B2+	Stages three and four
Pre- Intermediate	46-55	4.6-5.5	475	B2	Stages two and three
Essential English	40-45	4.5	450	B1+	Stages one and two

Table2. Language Centre – Rapid Profile levels correspondences

Communicative Tasks

It is vital for the analyst to collect high density data speech samples to be able to generate a valid diagnosis of each informant's current stage in the developmental

schedule in just fifteen minutes. To fulfil this condition, the analyst has to select the proper communicative task that encourages the informant to produce as many structures marking his/her current developmental stage in a formal and natural context as possible which is enough to generate a valid diagnosis of his/her stage in the developmental schedule. This is due to the acquisition developmental consistency/stability (steadiness hypothesis) despite the limited duration to produce the screened structures (Pienemann 1998). The analyst should remember that diagnostic gaps do not violate the processability hierarchy but may be due to the analyst's choice of a particular communicative task.

Six different communicative tasks were proposed by Pienemann (1998) which are involved in eliciting the production of different structures in natural contexts. These tasks include *habitual actions*, *story completion*, *picture sequencing*, *picture differentiation*, *meeting a partner*, and *the informal interview*. These communicative tasks vary in the targeted structure(s) they encourage the informant to produce. The informal interview communicative task is used in this experiment to prompt the production of as many syntactic and morphological structures as possible in a friendly atmosphere where the informants and the analyst exchange information about themselves.

Results and discussion

The analyst collected the informants' speech samples and coded the different developmental interlanguage structures using the Rapid Profile software to allocate their current developmental stages. The current proficiency level of each informant

according to the English Language Intensive programme was then compared with their current interlanguage developmental stage.

Informant One

The developmental features found in the speech sample of informant one as seen in figure 1, show that he produced a high data density sample of almost all the screened structures. The results also indicated that he practiced the WH|DO| Aux SV (O)? correctly in three different incidents, but failed to produce any of the fifth stage Aux structures (Aux 2 nd-? and Neg Aux -2 nd) and consequently to produce Cancel Aux 2 nd properly. He also produced the 3rd SG-s correctly on one occasion, but failed in the remaining four productions; avoiding the structure twice and violating the rule twice. This is because he is only in the fourth developmental stage which does not allow him to produce these structures. The informant did not master the correct use of the Copula S (x) structure in question formation, and this is related to his use of structure SVO? although he did well (scoring 80%) in applying the structure Wh Copula S (X). An explanation for this is that the informant is applying Wh questions correctly in the third and the four stages. Rapid Profile allocated the informant to the fourth developmental stage, which contradicts his advanced proficiency level according to the English Language programme.

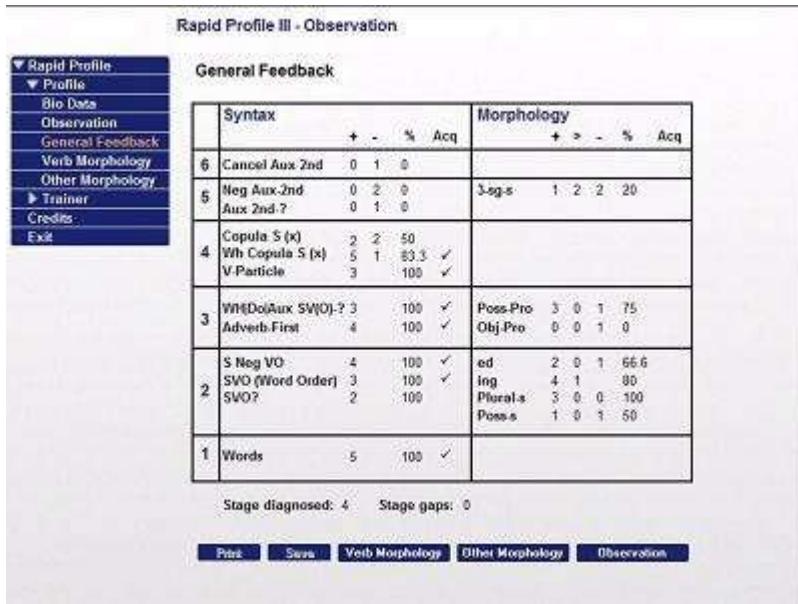


Figure1. The general feedback for Informant One

Informant Two

The Rapid Profile feedback for informant two (fig.2) indicated that she is at the second stage of her English acquisition developmental process. She managed to produce correct word order statements whereas the correct application of the S Neg VO, adverb-First structure and the morphological obj-Pro structure are mostly formulae chunks she has memorised, rather than indicating that she has reached the third stage. This informant avoids using irregular verb past tense markers by using the regular forms (played, walked). She violates the ing and plural-s structures. She is on the Essential English course, which is congruent with the second developmental stage as diagnosed by Rapid Profile.



Figure2. The general feedback for the second informant

Informant Three

The results of the screen for the third informant (fig. 3) reflects that he mastered the correct word order of his productions and the morphological (s) markings of plural and possessive. However, he violated the past event marking rule and avoided using the ing. He used the SVO? structure to create questions and this was reflected in his violation of two structures in question formation (Copula S (X) and Wh Copula S (X)). He has acquired the application of WH|Do| Aux SV (O)? and using adverbs first, but has not yet mastered morphological features at the third stage level. Therefore, he was considered to be at the third stage of interlanguage developmental. This Rapid Profile diagnosis conflicts with his current proficiency level in the English programme as an upper-intermediate level student.

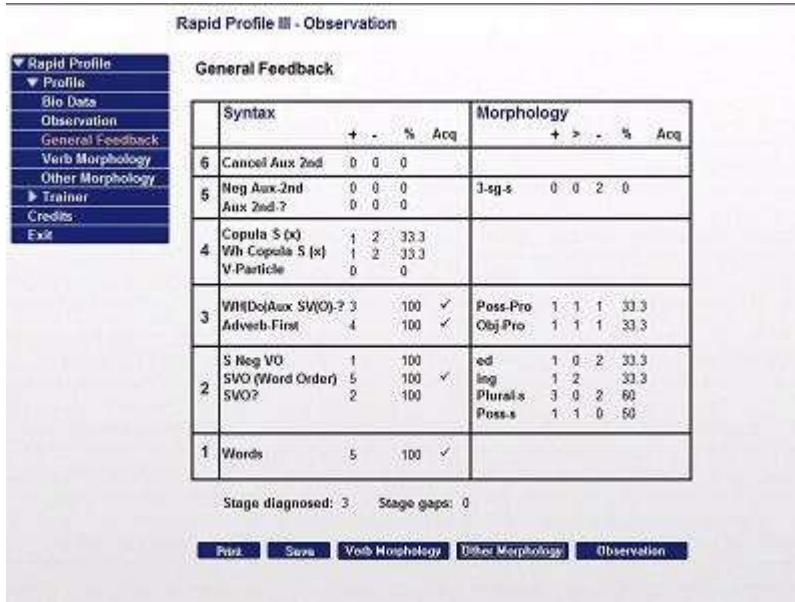


Figure3. Third informant general feedback

Informant Four

Despite his correct production of WH|Do| Aux SV (O)? Structures in two incidents and the use of adverbs first once, the informant is still at the second stage. He has acquired the feature of correct word ordering as coded (fig. 4); and performed well in using past tense marking. He is still striving to acquire the S Neg VO structure. He violated the plural-s but managed to produce a correct Copula S (X) structure question which mostly a formulae chunks he memorized at the beginning of learning EFL. The informant is currently at the Essential English course of his English programme which correlates with his current interlanguage developmental stage as measured here.

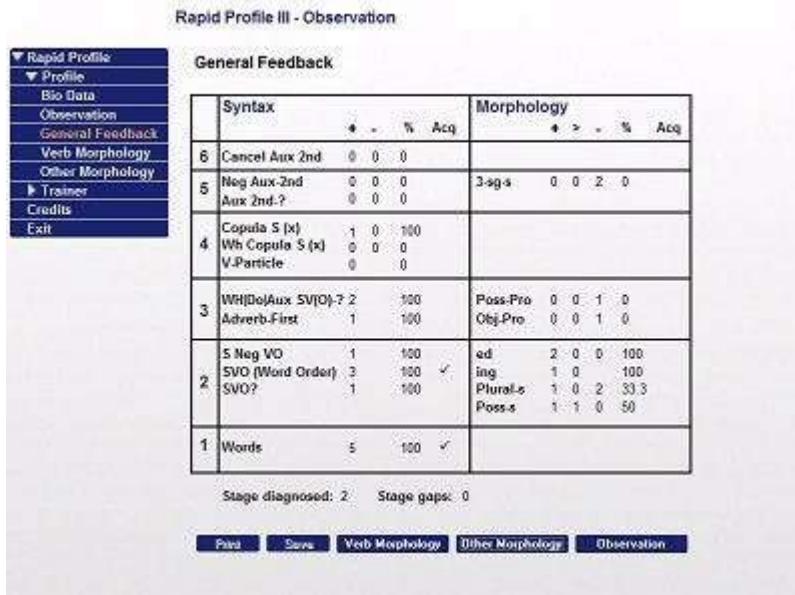


Figure4. The general feedback for the fourth informant

Informant Five

The informant has fully acquired the WH|Do| Aux SV (O)? feature and used adverbs first in two incidents, which is an indicator of good mastery of the syntactic features of his current developmental stage (fig. 5). However, he inconsistently uses, avoids and violates the morphological features of Possessive and Objective pronouns. He is also inconsistent in applying and violating the structures of Copula S (X) and Wh Copula S (X) to produce questions at stage four. This is due to the fact that he is not developmentally ready to produce these structures because he is still at stage three. The informant is at the pre-intermediate level in the English Language Programme which correlates with his diagnosed developmental stage.

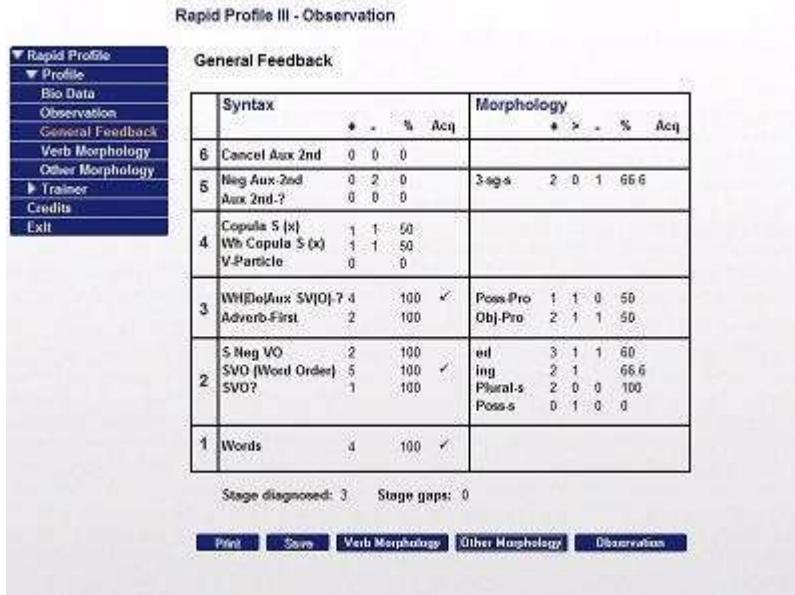


Figure5. The general feedback for the fifth informant

Informant six

Figure 6 shows an English Language learner at the advanced developmental stage. She demonstrated a coded mastery of question production by applying the Aux 2 nd ? feature and the morphological feature of the third singular -s. On the other hand, she applied neither the negation feature Neg Aux-2 nd nor the negation structure in the second stage. She is at the fifth stage of the developmental schedule and the advanced level in her English program is appropriate for her case.

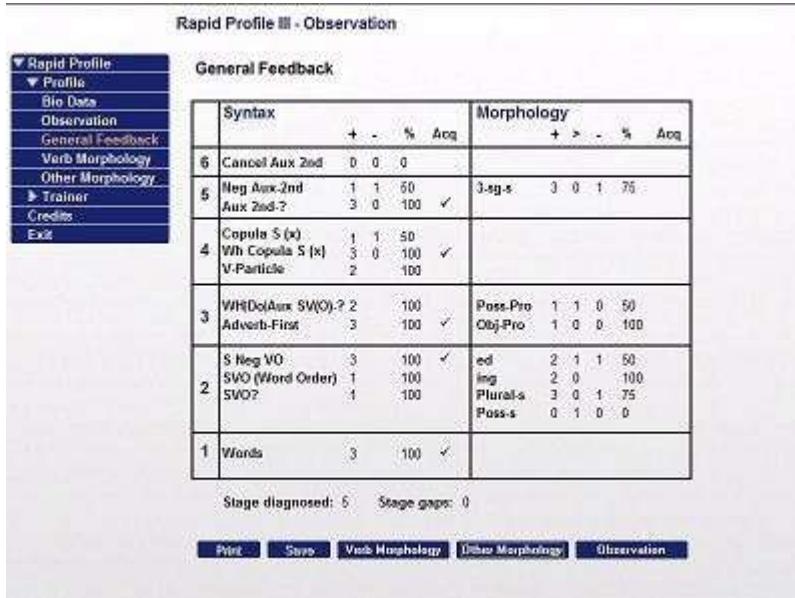


Figure6. The general feedback for informant

Informant Seven

The informant follows the correct syntactic rules in producing questions, which marked her at stage four as shown in his general feedback screen (fig.7). She correctly applied the Wh Copula structure but only inconsistently applied the Copula S (x) structure. He properly produced the correct V-particle structure despite the strict application of the emergence criterion by Rapid Profile programme. She violated the fifth stage syntactic and morphological key features, which is expected because of his current developmental stage. The informant's current intermediate level in the English Intensive programme corresponds to his current position in the fourth developmental stage.

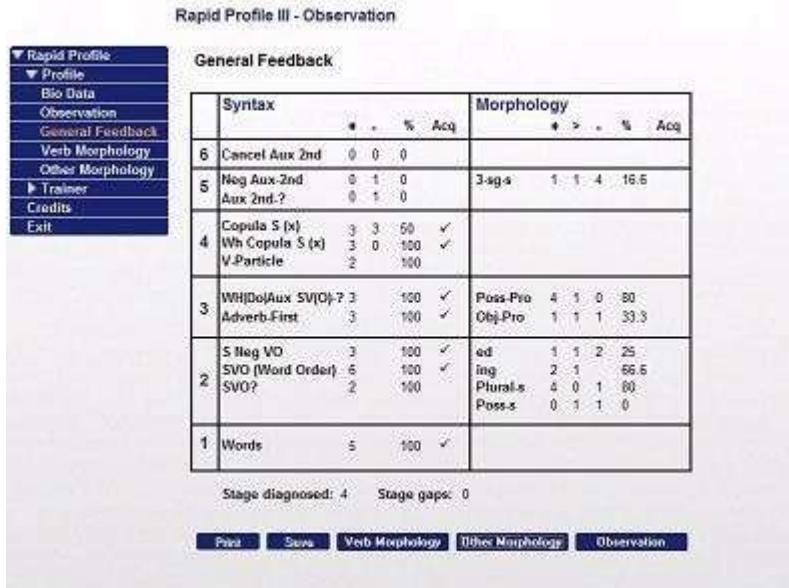


Figure7. The seventh informant general feedback screen

Informant Eight

The developmental features found in the speech sample of Informant Eight as seen in his feedback screen (fig.8) illustrates that she is at the second stage of the English language interlanguage developmental process. She managed to produce correct word order statements and a correct application of the S Neg VO as well as the morphological key structure of plural -s. She violated the progressive marking and inconsistently applied the morphological past event marking (d or ed) to all verbs where her production is correct with regular past tense verbs, and violated the structure in the cases of irregular past events verbs. She violated the question formatting structures of stage four and did not produce any WH|Do| Aux SV (O)? structures is due to her application of SVO? Feature to create questions, as expected in her current stage. She is at the third level (pre-intermediate level) in the English Language program which contradicts her diagnosed second developmental stage.



Figure8. The general feedback for Informant Eight

Implications

The results of this preliminary study indicate that the Rapid Profile test allocated 63% of ESL learners sample to their current levels whereas 37% were placed at levels below their current proficiency levels assigned by language centre test. These results indicate that Rapid Profile's strict application of the emergence criterion gives different results that could be included in decision-making to allocate ESL students to different levels. At this stage, The application of Rapid Profile in the area of English as a second placement scales requires a further investigation in term of validity and reliability in examining large population sample to help in decision-making.

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About the author

Ali Alshahrani (Ali.Alshahrani@ncl.ac.uk) is a second -year I PhD student in the School of Education Communication and Language Sciences.