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TESTING TIMES

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A NEW SCAM IN THE LANGUAGE QUALIFICATIONS MARKET TRICKS AND RUSES TO ENHANCE TEST RESULTS

In the aftermath of the on-going investigations into the widespread tax evasion and tax avoidance schemes that global and international organisations have been implementing over the last few years, the Anti Language Test Evasion group (ALTE) have discovered similar nefarious schemes that aim to boost language schools test success rates within and beyond the member states of the Council of Europe. It appears that a number of legal but unethical (test avoidance) schemes and in some cases patently illegal (test evasion) schemes have been devised to guarantee a 100% pass rate in all languages of the European Union at all levels up to and including C2. And with many of these schemes, no previous knowledge of the language is required; in fact, there is no need to book superfluous preparation courses and the success rate is claimed to exceed 100%!

To find out more we sent our "TESTING TIMES" roving reporters, Max Marks and Minnie Phlopps to check out a number of so-called avoidance and evasion test havens. Here is their report.

Our first stop was in the Alps, where we discovered TESOL (Test Evasion in Switzerland or Liechtenstein). According to their unofficial spokesperson, this association has introduced a number of innovative test procedures designed to ensure their members' desired results.

Firstly they have established so-called "bad banks", i.e. non-validated item banks located in the cellars of their Zurich and Vaduz offices. As these banks are only accessible with the correct code and password, they are never called to account or subject to official auditing. These "bad" item banks work as follows:

- + All "True/False" questions have been converted to a new "True/True" format.
- + All Multiple-Choice items have had their distractors removed.
- + Traditional "gap-filling" tasks have been transformed into more candidate-friendly "gap-creation" tasks where – in the first part of the test – the candidates themselves choose which word or words to omit. In Part 2 of the test they then re-fill the gaps with the correct word(s) in the usual way.
- + "Multiple-matching" tasks have been reduced to a one-to-one format.

Thanks to these facilitating procedures, the failure probability rate has been virtually reduced to zero regardless of the language and the level. The advantage for all concerned: Optimum Quality Management Data.

All TESOL Speaking Tests start off with a warm-up phase that consists of a so-called "note-taking" activity, or to give it its full name, a "banknote-taking" activity. This initial contact with the examiner is crucial for optimum grades, and has a great influence on the final score, which largely depends on the actual denomination i.e. the number of zeros on the notes taken. (Intending candidates should be aware that at present EUROS are less than popular). In view of the high-stakes and large amounts of money involved, such tests have been classified as "summative tests". To ensure success, this note-taking activity also requires the use of brown envelopes as evidence of intercultural sensitivity.

This warm-up phase, also referred to as a "golden handshake", may be followed by a "golden goodbye" for borderline candidates. For obvious reasons, TESOL insists that

every test registration form contain the phrase: **“WARNING: This Test is Dangerous for Your Wealth”**. Incidentally, such forms are usually perforated to ensure a quick rip-off.

The other parts of the oral test are monologic in character, i.e. the examiners talk to each other or to themselves to ensure coherence and fluency and avoid over-taxing the candidate. The writing task is typically a chain letter. Useful links can be found on the web.

All successful candidates receive a certificate (known as a **“EUROBOND”**) for the language and level attempted. Should candidates unexpectedly fail due to inadequate fiscal resources, they receive a self-evaluation certificate known as a **Language Port-fail-io** to fill in themselves. This is why teachers recommend the so-called **Total Fiscal Approach**.

When we queried the quality of such assessments and suggested that these examinations might become known as **“con-tests”**, the **“bad bank”** directorate replied: **“We can assure everybody that our test system is a serious (Swiss) Franc approach to language proficiency assessment. People can take full advantage of item-bank ‘loan’ words or apply to the ECB Structure Fund for a-credit-ation. Naturally, these attractive features have led to a steep rise in the rate of interest and as a result, further attractive offers cannot be discounted. Consideration is already being given to a “flatrate” test scheme for ‘wannabe’ plurilinguists covering all languages and levels, as well as the possible introduction of off-period “happy hour” or even last minute tariffs sold by bucket test agents.**

He also added that in their opinion the TESOL system was fully aligned to the principles of the CEFR as it offered a **BREAKTHROUGH** and a **THRESHOLD** for the **disADVANTAGED** and was a genuine fast-track system as the usual **WA(Y)STAGE** has been dispensed with.

Our second port of call in the interest of investigative journalism was the **Association of Cheap Airline Travel** whose members are thinking of setting up a **Consultancy Headquarters for Evading and Avoiding Test failures**, to be known as **CHEAT**. The following tests seem to be in the pipeline:

+ A large British **“no frills”** airline will be setting up **easyTests**.

+ An Eastern European low-budget airline **“Swizz”** will be offering tests **24/7**. But it must be admitted that all such tests are subject to delays and cancellations at short notice.

+ A well-known Irish airline is also considering the idea of test evasion centres, but this scheme is quite controversial, as not only will the test centres be miles away from the location advertised, but the seemingly moderate price for the test will be augmented by hidden costs such as surcharges for the oxygen inhaled in the test room, the wear and tear of the test centre furniture, the increase in air-conditioning due to perspiration on the part of nervous candidates, the fanfare played when the test is completed on time, etc. In addition, there will apparently be very little legroom between candidate and examiner. Negotiations are rumoured to be taking place between this airline and **Wembley Stadium** to hold special **Super-Jumbo** sessions, where thanks to the innovative idea of standing-room only up to **250,000** candidates will be able to avoid and evade at the same time. Many accredited language professionals believe this all-exclusive sproach will have a detrimental effect on the reputation of language testing. But as a spokesman for the airline commented, this would be good marketing in view of the company name **“Ruin-Air”**.

Rumour has it that the **British National Health Service** has also been approached to set up a treatment centre for the grammatically and lexically challenged, the differently linguistically accurate and the syntactically impoverished. Known as **“A and E”** stations, these centres will help in emergency cases involving extreme avoidance and evasion.

Finally we contacted a number of supermarket chains who also see great potential in the test avoidance market. The largest of these chains – **Test Evasion to Support Career Opportunités**, whose slogan is **“Every little helps”** – offers **Loyalty Programmes** where you can **“check-out”** your results. According to a spokesperson, this scheme is very popular with their own employees, particularly in the **Butchery Department**, where there is great interest on the part of all the **steak-holders**, in the **Seafood Department** where they aim to become **extra pro-fish-ent** and in the **Cheese Department** where the staff hope to prepare **Caerphilly** and become **Brie-lingual**.