

INTERACTIVE E-TEXTS

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The Interactive e-Text is particularly ideal for self-instruction as it is self-correcting. It originated as scrambled stories for the learning of English. With the facility of *MS Frontpage* computing, academic texts can be easily formatted as Interactive e-Texts for tertiary students to have more intellectually stimulating practice in text analysis, thesis identification and claims validation.

INTRODUCTION

My fascination with self-instructional texts started way back in 1980 when I ran a module “Programmed Instruction” for trainee teachers of English in a college in Kuala Lumpur. Then they were taught to do linear as well as branching programmes. The latter, introduced by Crowder (1963), led to the creation of the scrambled text for the learning of English. At the end of the module, the teacher trainees produced colourful scrambled stories complete with pictures and beautiful covers. I was impressed because they looked ready for publication. I finally only got my own scrambled storybook, *The Poor Starfish* (Ngoh & James, 1989) published after almost a decade later! Computer technology then could only do word processing and drawing, not interactive e-text programming.

My dream of an e-text was finally fulfilled as we stepped into the age of the personal computer.

In 1999, publisher L. A. Pacific in Melbourne successfully created two interactive e-texts, *The Story of Joseph* (Ngoh, 1999) and *Mozart the Music Wonder Boy* (Ngoh, 2000). And now, with the prolific Microsoft software, *MS FrontPage*, we can even publish self-instructional interactive e-texts on the Internet. This was how the programming of *The Story of Esther* (Ngoh, 2002) was made possible in a matter of weeks.

CREATING INTERACTIVE E-TEXTS

For those who are interested in experimenting with interactive e-texts, here is how you can go about it.

First, we need to select an academic text that lends itself readily to critical reasoning questions so that prospective students can be cognitively challenged.

Next, divide the whole text into short paragraph bits so that a multiple choice question that specifically tests critical reasoning can be set for each of them.

Assign a page for each of the three or more choices of response to the question, that is, the correct answer and at least two “distractors” as wrong answers.

For each of the two wrong answers, direct the reader back to the original paragraph to make another attempt at answering the question. Here *MS Frontpage* with its hyperlinks and corresponding bookmarks helps to facilitate quick movements between pages at a mere click of the mouse.

We need to ensure that the related pages are not adjacent so that the student will not be tempted to “cheat” by peeping into the answers before making his selection. Hence, a creative scrambling by random selection of the page numbers should be done.

Finally we can include pictures and even innovative sound effects such as applause when the correct answer is clicked. In this way, interactive e-texts become innovative as well.

AN EXAMPLE OF AN INTERACTIVE E-TEXT

Thus far, we have only discussed the mechanics of formatting an interactive e-text using *MS Frontpage*. We need much more thought to be put into perfecting the art of questioning for intellectual stimulation so that the thinking skills of learners can be enhanced. Our goal should be the creation of an interactive e-text for the testing of critical reasoning and other higher order academic

skills. An example based on an article (Mohanani, June 14, 1997) in *The Straits Times*, is given.

Page 1

It is not surprising that in a world that has seen a direct connection between thinking and economic advantages, Edward de Bono has become a big name. He is famous because he offers a practical, foolproof, general purpose thinking programme that promises to produce creative thinking individuals. It is a general purpose tool kit approach because the tools appear to be the same for all domains: thinking in business, science, mathematics, medicine, literature, engineering and administration. But does it really deliver what it claims?

A good way to approach this question is to compare de Bono's ideas with those of Howard Gardner, a highly respected authority on intelligence and thinking. One of Gardner's leading ideas is that of multiple intelligences. To him, there are many types of intelligence: linguistic, logical, spatial, musical and so on. Hence, an intelligent mathematician need not necessarily be an intelligent administrator.

Question: From his comparison of the theories of de Bono and Gardner, what conclusion do you think the writer will most likely lead readers to?

a) They are complementary, showing both sides of the same coin.

Go to Page 10

b) They are logically contradictory.

Go to Page 17

c) de Bono's theory is more convincing than Gardner's.

Go

to Page 21

Page 10

I'm afraid you have to read the paragraphs more carefully. In claiming that they are complementary, you are implying that they have rather similar theories. Is that true? Do return to Page 1 and try again.

Page 17

Well done! Good reasoning! Now you may read on.

(The text continues)

Sorry, wrong deduction. The writer seems to be more convinced of Gardner's theory, not de Bono's, because he calls the former a "highly respected authority". Would you like to return to page 1 for another try?

Thus we can see how versatile this self-instructional text can prove to be, for both teaching as well as testing of critical reasoning. In designing the questions skillfully, we can test the critical reading ability of the student and by giving adequate feedback for incorrect answers we can help him understand where his reasoning went wrong.

Before I conclude, it must be said that these interactive e-texts, in the form of downloadable files, have so far been more than well-received. Some teachers of English have even purchased multiple copies in computer diskettes to use as class texts in school. It is thus highly recommended that NUS staff of any discipline, particularly those with computer expertise, collaborate so that together we can innovatively improve on the format and style of questioning of interactive e-texts so that our students can effectively enhance their cognitive skills. Furthermore, with such collaboration, the self-access English Language Facility (SELF) of the Centre for English Language Communication will certainly not be lacking in resources that are both self-instructional and self-correcting particularly for remedial English students.

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