Quality Standards of Online Language Tests – The Future of Testing

Martin Beck

beck@mondiale.de

MONDIALE-Testing GmbH (Switzerland)

Abstract

The objective of successful online language testing is to attain an acceptable degree of validity at the same time maintaining a level of efficiency commensurate with the expectations of online testing. There are many different types of tests for different objectives but the presentation will concentrate on a special type of online tests; the proficiency tests. Placement tests are those taken prior to participating in a language training course to assign the new student to the appropriate group. Proficiency tests either test the achievements of a participant in a training program or assess the language skills of an applicant for admission to an institution, employment or transfer. Higher standards must be applied to proficiency tests. An important aspect of validity in the context of proficiency tests is that the results must be easy to interpret and comparable to assessments from other sources. In short they must be mapped onto an accepted standardized scale such as the Common European Framework for Languages.

Another variable in the validity equation is the granularity or the preciseness of the assessment scale. Although the CEF is a helpful tool for interpreting test results, in many cases it does not discriminate sufficiently well to compare test candidates. When a large number of individuals with similar skill levels must be differentiated, a more exact scale is necessary than for a small number with a broader range of skills. For instance several thousand international students applying for a limited number of openings at a university need to be rated on a much finer scale than a hundred employees being placed into language training classes. An efficient testing strategy must take this into account.

To reach the appropriate balance between efficiency and validity is no easy task. Above all there is no single correct strategy for all situations.

When asked about language testing, most people will immediately think of high-stakes certificate examinations used for selection purposes (academic admissions, career recruitment, immigration). These tests, sometimes called strategic tests, are by far the most prominent examples of language test but tests designed around teaching and learning, tactical tests, are instrumental in bringing students up to the levels required for success in certificate exams. Syllabus-related tests are often used to align students with the appropriate teaching material or to test the achievement during the course. Equally important, are tests that monitor the overall language proficiency and show the big picture. Syllabus-independent tests are necessary to do this.

MONDIALE Testing has specialized in tactical language testing for more than 15 years. From a solid background in corporate language testing, the organization has expanded its customer base to include adult education institutes, free-lance teachers and tertiary education institutions. Recognizing the potential in new technologies, the company converted from paper-based to web-based test administration eight years ago, becoming a pioneer in the field of internet testing. Mondiale Testing offers teachers, schools and corporate clients independent verification of the quality of a language-training program and, because of the flexibility of the web, can provide 4 skill language-testing capacity when and where it is required.

One of the most difficult areas in test development is the field of language certificates for professional purposes. Factors such as the wide range of language demands at the workplace – specific job-related skills, specific structural and lexical elements, etc. – make it difficult to bridge the gap between meeting individual needs on the one hand (= flexibility) and providing a viable sustainable test on the other hand. This particularly applies to Technical English where the degree of specialisation can easily lead to a reduction in relevance if the necessary compromise between a common-core curriculum and job-specific content is not achieved and where content can have a very short life-span as a result of

the speed of technical progress and innovation. And at the same time, (potential) employers have a vested interest in a precise definition of linguistic and communicative competence. This workshop will present ideas on how these circles could possibly be squared with the help of on-line tests.

Increasing globalisation makes it necessary for technical personnel not only to have a certain level of communicative competence in their working environment, but also to demonstrate such communicative competence by means of certification. However, such a need raises a number of important issues that demand specific answers as a basis for providing the required certification. These issues include at least three important questions: Firstly, questions of curricular design, e.g. "How "common" can/should a "common-core" curriculum be in order to meet both the specific language needs of the specialist technical area the candidate operates in and at the same time demonstrate the candidate's communicative proficiency 'across the board'?; Secondly the issue of the skills such a curriculum/test should cover, for example should the test take into account all skills or simply provide optional skill-based modules according to relevance?; Thirdly the question of level: Should such a test be a "level-based", e.g. B1 or B2, or a dual level "profile-based" test, e.g. scaled from A2 – B1 or B1 to B2, or higher?. In this respect online tests can offer a high degree of flexibility. Based on examples taken from presently available testing systems, the presentation will give a number of ideas and approaches in connection with these questions as a springboard to a follow-up general discussion on the possible directions such online tests might/should take in the future.