ASSESSING LANGUAGE FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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Abstract*: The last decade's major socio-economic and political changes affecting the more and more mobile workforce have led to an increased amount of interest in Language for Specific Purposes materials and (internationally recognised) tests. The free movement of workforce involving more and more countries, the continuously growing number of professions which start being recognised at an international level have triggered an equally increased need of testing and certifying language competence. What this paper tries to do is to prove that Language for Specific Purposes needs highly specialised tests, constructed according to test takers' specific (professional) needs.*

Keywords: *LSP, assessment, specific language tests.*

There has been lately an increased amount of interest in the vast and relatively new area of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), interest manifested especially at the level of materials development and courses organisation. There is an abundance of materials on language for business communication, language for law, language for computing, language for tourism, language for medical profession and so on. All these courses tend to become now more and more specialised, aiming at increasingly specialised target groups (such as, for instance, language for hotel personnel, language for nurses, language for business negociation, language for peacekeeping etc). These specialised courses need equally specialised tests, which makes the process of assessing language for specific purposes an important part of applied language research. Dwelling mainly on the studies of Dan Douglas, Tim McNamara and Tony Dudley-Evans & Maggie Jo St John, this paper tries to prove that "specific purpose language tests are indeed necessary, reliable and theoretically well-motivated" (Douglas, 2000: 2).

There are researchers within the area of applied linguistics who claim that general lanaguage tests are valid for all fields of expertise, the development of LSP tests being therefore unnecessary. The only difference between general language tests and language for specific purposes tests they acknowledge is one of lexic, which is not worth, in their opinion, the effort of creating new (specialised) tests. The first argument I will bring against their claim (in accordance with Dan Douglas' and Tony Dudley Evans & Maggie Jo St John's arguments) is that there is no such thing as pure general language test or pure LSP test. All tests have a (clearly defined) purpose and they are in fact organised on a continuum which runs from clearly definable General Language tests through to very specific LSP tests. Dan Douglas speaks about a "continuum of specificity from very general to very specific", being thus possible for a given test "to fall at any point on the continuum" (Douglas, 2000: 1). One cannot speak therefore of pure General Language tests; one has to consider - when using or creating a language test - where exactly it is situated on the continuum of specificity.

Recent research seems to point to the fact that (highly) specialised tests are indeed necessary for assessing the language knowlege of those test takers who are specialists (or try to specialise) in various areas of expertise (such as, for instance, in business, law, tourism, medicine, engineering etc). It has been proven that even if a test

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taker has good knowledge of General Language, this does not help him in coping with the professional environment he is (or becomes) part of. This not being able to communicate successfully in a certain professional environment or in a certain professional situation shows that the test taker needs more than General Language knowledge. He needs to know how to communicate in certain (clearly defined) situations which are strictly related to his field of expertise. He needs to get familiarised (during the language course as well as during the language test) with some of the authentic situations he is likely to encounter in his future (professional) activity. It is not therefore sufficient to use texts and tasks belonging to the general register of language. If we want to assess a test taker's ability to use language within a specific vocation, profession, or academic field, then specific texts and tasks will be needed.

Dan Douglas offers two main reasons for creating specific purpose language tests instead of using the already existing, general purpose tests: he argues first of all that language performances vary with context and test tasks, and secondly – that specific language is precise. Context and precision would be therefore the first two main concepts to be considered when trying to develop an LSP test. The context of the test should be as similar to the target language use situation as possible. The test tasks should be therefore authentic, that is they should represent the best they can the way language is used in non-pedagogic, non-test, natural communication. The LSP tests have to use field specific content in tasks which might be plausibly carried out in those fields. In order to do that the test developer has to carry out first of all a needs analysis of the target language use situation. He has to analyse the communication situations the test taker is likely to encounter in his professional activity. Needs analysis is an essential step in the development of both LSP materials and LSP tests. The test developer has to know exactly what is the context in which the test taker will have to use the language in order to create test tasks which are authentically representative of that context. And there are many features of the context that have to be taken into consideration: the physical and temporal setting (there certainly are variations between communication taking place in an office and communication taking place in a noisy factory), the roles of the test taker and the interlocutors (one has to determine which are the roles the test taker will most probably have to play), the purposes of the communication (one has to establish whether the test taker has to negociate something, to persuade somebody to do something, to inform the audience on a certain subject etc), the topic and content of the message, its tone and manner.

If, for instance, one has to test a lawyer's control of a foreign language, it is definitely not sufficient to use texts and tasks which are not specific to the legal profession. The test developer has to study first of all the (professional) situations the lawyer is likely to encounter during his activity. He/she will most probably have to present a case in a court of law, to conduct somebody's defence, to negociate a contract between two companies and so on. The same when one wants to test a manager's command of a foreign language. He/she will probably have to negociate a contract, to find new clients, to persuade prospective clients, to organise and run a team of employees etc. All these target language use situations require much more than just good knowledge of legal or economic lexic. They require, according to Dan Douglas, grammatical knowledge (knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax and phonology), textual knowledge (knowledge of how to structure and organise language into larger units = rhetorical organisation; and how to mark such organisation =

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cohesion), functional knowledge (knowledge of the ideational, manipulative, and imaginative functions of language) and sociolinguistic knowledge (sensitivity to dialects, registers, naturalness, and cultural references) (Douglas, 2000: 28). Not to mention a good command of the specific content, that is the specific field of expertise for each test taker (law and management in our examples). Subject knowledge always interferes with linguistic competence in the case of LSP tests and it appears that, under some conditions at least, background knowledge makes a difference to language test performance. "Tthe very essence of specific purpose tests is that they require the test takers to engage themselves authentically in test tasks that are demonstrably related to the target language use situation, and, therefore, relevant background knowledge will necessarily be called upon in the interpretation of the communicative situation and in the formulation of a response" (Douglas, 2000: 39). Research has shown that test takers whose language tests were strictly related to their expertise field obtained considerably better results (especially in the reading part) than those who had to deal with General Language tests or with tests related to other expertise fields. Good knowledge of their subject seems to help them do better in language tests, especially when they are at an intermediate level. For those having low language competence background knowldege does not seem to make a difference, neither for those having high level competence, who can compensate for a certain lack of background knowledge by making fuller use of their language resources. According to Dan Douglas subject knowledge is impossible to separate from linguistic competence, that is why LSP test developers must consider it when assessing a test taker's linguistic competence. In order to do that the test developer has two possibilities: subject specialist informant procedure and grounded ethnography.

Grounded ethnography has been defined as being an approach to describing and understanding a target language use situation using the perspective of the language users involved in that particular situation. Its main goal is to "produce an account of the principles which guide participants in cultural activities in behaving the way they do, interacting with each other, and interpreting each other's utterences and behaviors" (Douglas, 2000: 93). But grounded ethnography seems to be requiring too much time, too many human resources and financial resources to be regarded by test developers as an acceptable solution for analysing the target language use situation. Subject specialist informant procedure seems to be therefore the most appropriate solution for understanding input data in LSP disciplines with which the test developers have little or no expertise. There are several areas that specialist informants can help the LSP tester with: technical terminology, common language words used technically, contextual paraphrases, grammatical choice, rhetorical structure, punctuation structure, connectives. It is essential therefore that LSP test developers make use of the subject specialist informant in a principled way for analysing the target language use situation during the LSP test development process. Seeing the diversity of areas in which a LSP test developer may need the help of a subject specialist informant, one could conclude that the test developer can understand the target language use situation and the problems that need to be addressed in the test only through a detailed analysis of both the content and the language in the special purpose domain.

After having analysed the test taker's communicative needs and established the target language use situation(s), after having consulted a subject specialist informant and analysed the linguistic peculiarities related to the target language use situation, the

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test taker has to proceed to the next important step: the development proper of the LSP test. He has to create and organise the input, that is the specific purpose material in the target language use situation that language users process and respond to. When creating the testing material, the test developer has to focus on two main aspects: the prompt and the input data. The prompt refers to specific purpose contextual information necessary for the test taker to engage in a communicative task: establishing the setting (by mentioning the spacial and temporal setting of the target language use situation), the participants and their roles (by offering information on their profession/social position, age, gender, personality, behaviour), the purpose of communication (the reason for carrying out the task), its form and content, the tone (implicit or explicit referring to irony, humour, sarcasm) and norms of interaction (which may be derived from the choice of setting and participants or may be directly specified). Genre has also to be specified, since the material may be a monologue, an interview, a lecture, an advertisment, a panel discussion etc. The input data comprise the authentic aural and visual material which the test taker must process in performing the task, such as text and visuals (video, print, computer screen, photographs, charts, diagrams, drawings, gestures, live actions and so on), as well as physical objects (tools and equipment that the test taker is to describe or manipulate in some way to demonstrate communicative language ability). A very important characteristic of the input data for an LSP test is the degree of authenticity and specificity of the material. When taken out of its (situational and interactional) context and incorporated into a language test, the material may lose its authenticity. The test developer has to make sure to create the appropriate context for each part of the language test, by giving all the necessary information in the prompt. The prompt is used therefore to set up a specific purpose situation and it is nearly always produced by the test developers specifically for the test itself, whereas input data always represent genuine material imported from the target language use situation. Hence, in considering the authenticity of input data the test developer has to evaluate both the situational characteristics and the interactional characteristics of the material.

LSP tests are by definition – Dan Douglas argues - communicative tests, being aimed mainly at adult test takers. Both Dan Douglas and Tim McNamara ground their discussion of communicative competence on Hymes' theory, which greatly expanded the scope of what was covered by an understanding of language and the ability to use language in context, particularly in terms of the social demands of performance. For Hymes knowing a language is more than knowing its rules of grammar, or its lexic. He argues that there are culturally specific rules of use which relate the language used to features of the communicative context. For Hymes communicative competence involves judgements about what is systematically possible (in other words, what the grammar will allow), psycholinguistically feasible (what the mind will allow), and socioculturally appropriate (what society will alow), and about the probability of occurrence of a linguistic event and what is entailed in the actual accomplishment of it (Douglas, 2000: 26). "Competence is dependent upon both [tacit] knowledge and [ability for] use". (Hymes 1972: 282 – quoted by Douglas, 2000: 26)

Communicative language tests are characterised by two main features: they are performance tests, requiring assessment to be carried out when the learner or candidate is engaged in an extended act of communication; they pay attention to the social roles candidates are likely to assume in real world settings (Tim McNamara, 2000: 16-17). Performance, social roles, real world settings – three essential concepts for

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communicative language tests which characterise LSP tests as well. LSP testing is aimed first of all at assessing a test taker's communicative competence in a given target language use situation. Hence all features characterising communicative language tests will characterise LSP tests as well.

The analysis conducted so far allows us to present a comprehensive definition of a specific purpose test, as being "one in which test content and methods are derived from an analysis of a specific purpose target language use situation, so that test tasks and content are authentically representative of tasks in the target situation, allowing for an interaction between the test taker's language ability and specific purpose content knowledge, on the one hand, and the test tasks on the other. Such a test allows one to make inferences about a test taker's level of language ability with reference to a specific purpose domain." (Douglas, 2000: 88)

When looking back at the 'history' of specific purpose language tests one can see that they are relatively new comers in the field of language testing. In spite of some earlier attempts at assessing professional language, the true LSP testing seems to have begun in 1975 with the Temporary Registration Assessment Board (TRAB) examination, a test introduced by the British General Medical Council for the purpose of evaluating the professional and language abilities of physicians trained outside the UK applying for temporary registration to practice medicine in Britain. Both professional competence and ability to communicate in English were assessed during the examination. The language component comprised a taped listening test, a written essay and an oral interview in which both professional knowledge and language ability were assessed. This component was based on an analysis of the (spoken and written) language used by physiscians, nurses and patients in UK hospitals. Subject knowledge and linguistic competence seem thus to have been strongly related and collaboration with practitioners in the specialist area has been a pre-requisite for the design of an LSP test ever since the beginning of LSP testing.

The socio-economic and political changes of the last decade, with the more and more flexible and mobile workforce have led to an increasing amount of interest in LSP testing and internationally recognised LSP certificates. I will briefly present here, by way of concluding, the most well-known such tests: BEC (Business English Certificates), ILEC (International Legal Certificates), ICFE (International Certificate in Financial English), all of them organised by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. All these LSP tests are recently created tests, unlike the traditional (General English) Cambridge tests, which have been provided by University of Cambridge since 1913 (called then Certificates of Profiency in English) .

All these tests address professionals within various fields: business people, lawyers and other legal practitioners, accountants and finaciers. They all require good subject knowledge, which cannot be separated from language knowledge. All materials are strictly related to test takers' professional competence, as can be seen in the several examples presented below. The 2007 ILEC Reading Part, for instance, includes the following titles/sub-titles: *Third Party Rights* // *Liquidated Damages* // *Commercial Paper – A Negociable Document* // *Self-Help Remedies* // *Canadian Real-Estate Cases* // *Protecting Stories: Borrowed Elements or Stolen Ideas?* // *Appearance and Finish and Freedom from Minor Defects*. The 2007 ICFE Reading Part includes: *Travel Firm's Debt Costs Rise* // *Market Report* // *Financial Shared Services Centres* // *Notice of Annual General Meeting of Shareholders* // *Social Responsibility Accounting* //

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Analytical Financial Skills for Tomorrow's Accountants // *Disclosure in Company Reports*. All tests use authentic materials taken from the target langue use situation(s). To give only one example, the authors and publishers of *Cambridge BEC Higher 2, Past Papers*, 2004 mention, in the 'Thanks and Acknowledgements' section the following sources for the testing materials: specialised newspapers and magazines (*The Observer*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*), specialised books (*The Intelligent Organisation*, *Teach Yourself. Getting a Payrise*), web resources (*www. bkconnection.com*). The test developers acknowledge the help received from subject specialist informants: ILEC is a Cambridge ESOL examination, developed in co-operation with TransLegal – Europe's leading firm of lawyer-linguists; ICFE is developed by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations and ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants). All the tests analysed so far assess the four language skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking) and address test takers who have at least a pre-intermediate level of language competence; their assessment grid starts from level B1 (BEC) or B2 (ILEC, ICFE) They are all communicative tests, which try to assess the test taker's communicative competence within a given target language use situation. The prompts (especially for the speaking and writing parts) offer clear clues for creating an authentic context, giving information on setting, participants and their roles, purpose of the communication, sometimes the tone or cultural peculiarities.

What this (very short and very general) analysis of some of the widely known LSP tests tried to do was to show that they all respect the same structure, the same starting point and the same purpose, that is assessing language competence for professionals in various fields. LSP materials and LSP tests are characterised by three critical features: analysis of the target language use situation, authenticity of task and interaction between language and content knowledge. Those working in this vast area of Language for Specific Purposes (teachers, materials developers, test users, test developers) should all be aware that professionals need highly specialised language tests which can provide real information on their language competence.

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