Standardized External Testing in Foreign Languages: Ukraine's Experience

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This paper reveals the current situation in the domain of language education caused by reforms in the school-leaving exams and implementation of the Standardized External Testing. It discusses the washback effect on the teaching and learning practices. It also highlights the need for introduction of a new academic programme at higher educational institutions within the framework of which language testing specialists may be trained. The programme will contribute to the theoretical background and practical training of specialists in the professional teacher education. Qualified specialists in language assessment will ensure better understanding of testing by the society at large.

Keywords: foreign languages, language education, language testing, standardized external testing, curriculum

Introduction

The acute role of language testing in the realm of education is highlighted by the title of Ch. Alderson's plenary address to the Third Annual Conference on Current Trends in English Language Testing in Dubai "Testing is Too Important to Be Left to Testers" (Alderson, 1999).

Language education acquires a special place in the process of integration between different countries and calls forth reforms. The Ministry for Education in Ukraine initiated some important projects both in the secondary and higher education aimed at modernization of the current educational system, which will provide professional career opportunities for secondary school leavers, and facilitate the mobility of qualified specialists in different spheres between the countries.

Cooperation Between Universities and Business

As the globalizing society moves from an industrial age to the knowledge and information age, there are new aspects to be addressed by the educational system. In this connection, it would be reasonable to appeal to the European experience. The new European strategy for growth *Europe 2020* (Europe 2020, A European strategy for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth) proposes seven flagship initiatives, whose implementation demands a special role of higher education in the processes of reform and innovation. Some of the proposed initiatives

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imply the following: (1) enhancing the performance of education systems and facilitating the entry of young people to the labour market; (2) creating the conditions for modernizing labour markets, raising employment levels; and (3) empowering people by developing their skills throughout the lifecycle with a view to increase labour participation and better match labour supply and demand, including through labour mobility.

The success of a modern enterprise at a today's dynamic and competitive market is increasingly dependent on the knowledge and skills acquired by the student at university. This kind of interaction between university and business with the support of government is represented by the so-called "triple helix". Here the main stakeholders include governments, higher educational establishments, and businesses working in a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship. Successful university—business cooperation provides an array of benefits for all parties involved, and wider, to society.

However, enterprises report a mismatch between the competences of university graduates and the qualifications the employers seek. Employees who possess employability skills are in demand and are considered a valuable human asset to the company. The notion of employability embraces non-technical skills and knowledge necessary for effective participation in the workforce, and can include skills such as communication, self-management, problem solving and teamwork, capability to take sound, critical decisions, and wish to learn. It should be stressed that the knowledge of a foreign language/languages is one of the key competences of a candidate. All the above said makes us reconsider the role of the academia in the modern globalizing world.

Common European Framework of Reference in the Ukrainian Context

The Ukrainian government has recently taken a lot of initiatives to ensure the quality of education. One of such measures is the introduction of school-leaving proficiency tests. Standardized External Testing Project in foreign languages started running in 2009 in Ukraine. The government introduced changes to ensure valid measurement and certification of the levels of school-leavers proficiency in foreign languages and to provide higher education institutions with a reliable evaluation instrument for selection and admission. The test also intended to guarantee equal access to higher education to school-leavers. Given the importance of the functions assigned to the test, it is no wonder that it has aroused great interest of specialists and public at large. As Davies (1997) put it, since tests often had a prescriptive or normative role, their social consequences were potentially far-reaching. It became clear that it is necessary to revise the evaluation system to conform it to the international standards.

Realization of the above mentioned Standardized External Testing Project was preceded by the government initiative to prepare language testing professionals in the local educational domain. With this purpose in view, the Ukrainian educational authorities together with the British Council addressed the international experts and launched a project to train the local specialists in the light of current testing research and needs (2006). The Project worked towards professional content, transparent, and practical procedures of the school-leaving English test, with a view to relating its results to the Concept of Language Education in Ukraine and the Common European Framework of Reference (*CEF (Common European Framework of Reference)*, 2001). It is clear that the test construction cannot take place without the required professional background. As well as in other European countries (Eckes, et al., 2005), in the process of test construction the Ukrainian specialists are guided by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF).

The publication of the CEF is critical for setting of standards in the meaning "levels of proficiency" in the

domain of evaluation. The availability of a transparent and independent framework has become especially crucial after the Bologna Declaration of 1999 because of the growing need for international recognition of certificates in Europe, in order to guarantee educational and employment mobility. Moreover, the CEF is claimed to be a compendium of what is known about language learning, language use, and language proficiency. This claim accounts for the multi-purpose character of the CEF: It can be used as an essential guide to syllabus construction, development of test specifications and rating criteria, materials design, textbook production, as well as in teacher education (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001). As Alderson (2002) said, "Clearly the influence of the Framework has been widespread and deep, impacting on curricula, syllabuses, teaching materials, tests and assessment systems and the development of scales of language proficiency geared to the six main levels of the CEFR" (p. 15). Calibrating the new test against the Framework is essential for the test to achieve international recognition.

One of the strong points of the CEF is the six-level scale, which enables description of levels of learner's proficiency and fosters relations between different systems of qualifications across Europe. In spite of the CEF being a normative document in the sphere of language learning, teaching, and assessment, it should not be considered as a methodological must (North, 2004). The critical analysis of the document points to some drawbacks, among them theoretical discrepancies, terminological gaps, lack of consistency and others (Fulcher, 2004; Weir, 2005). Thus, the function of the CEF should be regarded as facilitating the test design process but not bounding it within its limits.

In relation to testing, the CEF can be used: (1) for the specification of the test content; (2) for stating the criteria to determine the attainment of a learning objective; and (3) for describing the levels of proficiency in existing tests to enable comparison of different systems of qualification (*CEF*, 2001).

However, it should be borne in mind that the CEF was not designed specifically for testing purposes, so it is not surprising that some test constructors have encountered difficulty in using CEF for test development (Weir, 2005). Future research needs to be done to meet the testers' needs.

Following the publication of CEF, the Manual appeared under the title *Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (2003), which is aimed at assisting test developers to situate their tests within the CEF context and validate language tests that claim such linkage. The Manual helps the test providers to develop, apply, and report transparent and practical assessment procedures. Relating a test to the CEF includes four interrelated stages: familiarization, specification, standardization, and validation. Though the Manual is not intended as a blueprint for the development of a new test, it is intended to encourage reflection about good practice which includes reflection on the needs, recourses, expertise, and priorities; responsibility for thoughtful and appropriate application of procedures; collaboration with colleagues; reliable recording of results and accurate and transparent reporting of conclusions (*Relating Language…*, 2003, p. 13). It is in the interest of language test providers to establish valid and reliable links between the results of their systems and the levels of the CEF in order to make these links transparent to users of their language tests (Alderson, 2002). In this perspective, application of the procedures offered by the Manual may lead to wide acceptance of the test.

Standardized External Testing Project: Historical Overview and Main Outcomes

The all Ukrainian Project engaged 30 language educators who volunteered to undergo training. The Project

team mastered theoretical basics and acquired some practical experience in test construction and administration. Most importantly, the Project revealed a range of problematic issues that need resolving in the sphere of foreign languages education. Though the objectives of the Project were not fully realized, we believe its major outcome is that Ukraine has joined the international language community on the way to fair and professional testing, as well as raising the awareness of the society and encouraging further research into testing nationwide. The participants of the Project represent different regions of Ukraine. It is noteworthy that all the team members are practicing teachers working in different educational establishments of the language teaching system. The Project is expected to help establish a constructive climate about assessment among teachers, and stimulate changes in teaching approaches and class-testing practices. Now the participants of the Project are engaged in the dissemination of the knowledge acquired (Bessonova, 2007; Byessonova & Zavgorodnya, 2006, 2007; Hnapovs'ka & Kvasova, 2007; Tarasova, 2007; Teodorovych, 2006; Todorova, 2011; Yashenkova, 2006) and can apply their experience in the Standardized External Testing process as test designers, administrators, invigilators, raters, and experts.

A great contribution to the process of development and implementation of the standardized external test in Ukraine has been made by the Alliance for the development of the USETI (Ukrainian Standardized External Testing Initiative). The first constituent meeting of this international initiative was held on May 31, 2010 in the offices of American Councils for International Education (ACTR/ACCELS) in Kyiv. The Alliance includes a lot of institutions which support the initiative, such as ACTR/ACCELS (American Councils for International Education), USAID (United States Agency for International Development), USAID (United States Agency for International Development), AIR (American Institutes for Research), and others. The Alliance also cooperates with the Ministry of Education and Sciences of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Center for Educational Quality Assessment, some leading universities of Ukraine and organizations. Among the areas of the Alliance USETI's activity are the followings: (1) supporting the UCEQA (Ukrainian Center for Educational Quality Assessment) in test development and administration; (2) assisting in developing a normative legislative basis in testing; and (3) strengthening Ukrainian citizens' support of reforming the admission system to establishments of higher education.

Piloting test tasks, developed by the Project members, and took place in different regions of Ukraine, has pointed to the topicality of the test implementation. Both pupils and teachers have expressed their positive attitude and considered it a significant event in the process of school language education reformation.

Testing and Assessment: International Experience

Testing and assessment have received a lot of attention in the global language teaching communities (Eckes et al., 2005; Cheng & Qi, 2006). In many countries (such as Hungary, Greece, Poland, France, Germany, the Baltic States, China, and others), language assessment reforms have been realized, which are aimed at development of a transparent and coherent national system of evaluation of foreign language performance. Reforms in the language assessment procedures are essential in the process of modernization and integration that is going on worldwide. One of the examples of international cooperation in the testing sphere is appearance of specialized testing institutions. Professionals in testing join to set up international testing organizations which provide expertise in the field of language testing. One of them is The ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe), which provides standard examination and computer based language tests in 27 languages. Besides, ILTA (International Language Testing Association) should be mentioned, which is an international group of

language testing and assessment scholars and practitioners whose objective is to promote language testing. DIALANG (Diagnostic Language Assessment System) is a diagnostic language assessment system available on the Internet free of charge, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Its key features are self-assessment and feedback components: It reports on the users' level and gives feedback on the weak and strong points in their proficiency, and also provides advice for further learning, thus increasing learners' self-awareness and facilitating independent learning (Morrow, 2004). The activity of such organizations stimulates professional development in the sphere and increases public understanding of testing. This short review demonstrates that Ukraine can rely on rich international theoretical background and practical experience.

High-Stakes Tests and Washback Effect

An important factor that should be taken into account during test construction and administration is that the test is a high-stakes test. According to Madaus (1988), high-stakes tests are those whose results are used to make important decisions that immediately and directly affect the test-takers and other stakeholders. As a high-stakes exam the English test exerts a washback effect on all its stake-holders. It is known that the washback effect can be either positive or negative. Alderson and Wall (1993, p. 117) mentioned such negative effect of a test as anxiety in the learner brought about by having to take a test, and concerned in teachers being aware of the consequences that will follow on poor performance by the learners. To negative consequences of wide test use also belongs to overuse of testing techniques by some teachers who are eager to train their students for the test rather than teach. However, such positive achievement should be noted as raising students' motivation to improve their command of a foreign language as a tool to understanding other language communities. Thus testing may be regarded not only as a measurement instrument but also as an improvement tool. Furthermore, the beneficial impact of the test consists in collaboration of teachers and students who view the test positively and work willingly to achieve the objective of getting ready for the test.

So, primarily the test influences the *candidates*, raising their motivation and achievement. *Parents* are also an interested party, since they take an active part in the decisions concerning the future education of their children. The test results are important for *receiving institutions* (e.g., higher educational establishments). Besides, the test may have a crucial role in the candidates' working career, because it serves as a signal to the *potential employers* about the candidate's language proficiency. On the other hand, a high-stakes test exerts a considerable impact on teaching methodology. The position of *a school teacher and school authorities* is conditioned by their responsibility for the teaching results, which the test reflects. It is expected that the new test will cause positive changes in the foreign languages methodology in the Ukrainian secondary school. Other stakeholders are *the general public*, *textbook authors*, *publishing houses*, and *mass media*, so *the whole society* is involved in the process of the new language test development.

A lot of concerns about the actual impact of high-stakes testing have been noted in the relevant literature. Researchers express negative criticism with respect to the consequences that high-stakes tests have at different levels (Tsagari, 2004). For example, at the curricular level, high-stakes test is said to narrow the curricular by forcing teachers to practice only skills, which are included into the test construct. At the educational level, high-stakes assessment restricts teaching methods to preparation practices, learning materials to practice tests. Moreover, at the psychological level, the pressure induces negative feelings in both students and their teachers. In the Ukrainian context, the new test may cause distrust and lack of support both among the public at large and

educationalists, which is naturally explained by the desire to keep the traditional and customary assessment system. In this case, the washback effect can be negative. One of the reasons for this is insufficient information about the test objectives and its character. Alderson and Banerjee came out with some possible solutions, based on the recommendations made by D. Wall, among them: (1) involving teachers at all stages of test development; (2) ensuring the participation of other key stakeholders including policy-makers and key institutions; (3) ensuring clarity and acceptability of test specifications, and clear exemplification of tests, tasks, and scoring criteria; (4) full piloting of tests before implementation; (5) regular monitoring and evaluation not only of test performance but also of classrooms; and (6) an understanding that change takes time (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001).

As Alderson and Banerjee (2001) claimed, tests are potentially "levers for change" in language education. It seems clear that the analysis of test results contributes to a better understanding of what knowing a foreign language is. In the Ukrainian context, an impact that the English language test has, relates to both teaching and learning. Teachers are forced to adapt their methodology making it more communicative and learner-oriented. From this, it follows that the content of teaching and the teaching materials undergo changes as well. Since a great emphasis is laid on the evaluation procedures, teachers have to revise their assessment practices and develop students' self-assessment skills, and encourage students' self-regulated learning.

Additionally, tests have a strong impact on other areas; they affect language policy of the country in general. Shohamy (2007) made the point that today tests were viewed not only as measurement tools but also as instruments connected and embedded in political, social, and educational contexts.

Requirements for a Good Test and Stages of Test Development

It is important to remember that when tests are developed and used appropriately, they are reliable and objective measurement tools. Though a centralized test has become a reality in Ukraine, it is crucial to keep its prestige by conforming to the rules of good testing practices. Accordingly, to create a reliable and transparent measurement tool, a test should satisfy the standards, or psychometric qualities, including validity, reliability, practicality, and usefulness.

The procedure of test development and organization is complex and includes a number of steps. At the initial stage, a needs analysis should be conducted to determine the content of the test. It would be reasonable here to address the stakeholders to find out about the needs of those involved into the testing process. The primary concern is the purpose of the test. Test developers seeking to produce positive washback should also define the target audience in terms of age, academic background, language proficiency level, and motives to take the test. Following the initial stage, the theoretical construct is determined as well as the underlying language theory it will be based on, including competences and skills to measure.

Keeping in mind the purpose of the test, test specifications should be developed, which consider the key points of the test, such as the structure of the test, test tasks formats, administration, and scoring system. The next step is writing items and pretesting them on a suitable population. Test piloting provides useful information about different components of the testing process, which can be analyzed and revised before a large-scale test implementation. An important point to make is that testing is an ongoing cyclic process, which presupposes revision of different test stages and their changes.

Shaping the Future of Testing in Ukraine

At this point, the country's experience allows making first conclusions and outlining the future perspectives in the field of language education. It is clear now that a lot of work has been done and a scope of theoretical, practical, and organizational issues has been solved: (1) creating a national testing centre; (2) involving professionals into test-making process; (3) making a bank of test tasks; (4) constructing a single national test; (5) training test designers and administrators; (6) preparing training materials for students; (7) surveying the teachers and students' feedback; (8) disseminating information about the test; (9) conducting extensive research into testing and assessment; and (10) cultivating interest among the society.

Ukraine has evidently made progress on its way to a new professional, valid, and transparent assessment system, and it is urgent that we keep the positive experience obtained and develop a national testing system with solid theoretical and practical foundations.

Teaching practices receive a new impetus due to the implementation of the external testing system. So, it is expected that the language education quality in the secondary school is going to be improved in line with the European standards. Innovations in the field of professional education are necessary, which will promote training competitive and highly-qualified teachers with an advanced language competence and communicative skills. At the same time, introduction of the standardized nation-wide testing has exposed lack of local specialists with testing expertise. As a solution, a special academic programme in Language Testing can be initiated at higher educational establishments where future language teachers are trained. Within the framework of this programme a range of specialists can be instructed, among them are test designers, item writers, administrators, raters, etc.

The aim of the programme is to introduce basic notions of language testing and acquire basic practical skills in test construction and analysis. It may cover the following topics: (1) Basic Notions, which focuses on covers the definitions and characteristics of the key terms and concepts in testing such as test, test characteristics (validity, reliability, authenticity, transparency, etc.), test types, construct, etc.; (2) Test Design, which looks closely at the stages of test construction and administration process; (3) Testing Techniques, which discusses different methods used in testing; (4) Testing Grammar and Vocabulary, which highlights the essential points of measuring grammar and vocabulary skills; (5) Testing Skills, which considers the theoretical constructs and studies the ways and methods to measure the communicative skills: (a) testing reading comprehension; (b) testing listening comprehension; (c) testing writing; and (d) testing speaking; and (6) Assessment and Evaluation, which explores the ways, in which the test results are evaluated and interpreted.

In conclusion, we can say that Ukraine has made progress in reforming the language educational system but we recognize that more work should be done. Testing will increasingly become the anchor point in the assessment and evaluation practices. Changes in the syllabus of professional institutes and universities, as well as cooperation with the international experts will help to develop Ukrainian national testing theory and practices.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the process of reforming language education in Ukraine. It discusses the model of university—business cooperation in a global society and highlights a crucial role of foreign languages as one of the key competences of a job candidate. Furthermore, the paper provides a historical overview of the Standardized External Testing Project implementation. Ukraine's commitment to the reform is aimed at

developing a valid high-quality test in accordance with the international language standards, such as proposed by the CEF. The positive outcomes of the language reform can be summarized as revising the standards in foreign language teaching, improving teaching practices, enhancing the students' motivation, raising the public involvement into assessment. The paper proposes to introduce an academic programme to train qualified specialists in assessment and testing.

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