

The NEW Online Language Test Generation

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More than any other form of online testing, language testing is confronted by two diametrically opposed demands. The requirement for validity on the one hand and the need for efficiency on the other.

Validity in online testing covers a number of different topics beginning with the content and scope of the test items, extending to repeatability and comparability of the results and finally including issues of security like preventing the use of unauthorized resources (cheating) and authentication of the test candidate; insuring that the candidate is actually the person he purports to be.

The assessment of online tests achieves its efficiency through objective or algorithmic evaluation and for many subjects this approach works well. Language listening and reading comprehension skills lend themselves well to objective evaluation but creative skills such as speaking or writing can only be adequately assessed subjectively, requiring human intervention and potentially impeding efficiency.

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 discuss only the test types most widely offered online: placement and 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. This presentation presents proposals for online placement tests and evaluations that are based on requirement-oriented validity standards.

Few teachers embark upon a course without the support of an authoritative book or similar material. Likewise, more and more teachers are turning to independent tests to aid them in their teaching.

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.



Taking the teacher's perspective, there are two basic relationships to tests. Either the teacher works for the test by preparing candidates for certificate exams or the test works for the teacher providing insights and tracking learning progress. In order to make effective use of tests, it is essential to select the right test or testing suite to fit the requirements. Especially in a corporate setting, teachers are often required to document the quality of language training by showing proof of progress. Caught up in the process of defining group levels, assigning students and selecting course materials, teachers can easily forget to record the beginning level of the students appropriately. Without this status quo, it is difficult if not impossible to provide exact information about the progress of each student at the end of a course block. Every test is designed for a specific application. Not every test used for general placement purposes delivers detailed information that can serve as a basis for progress monitoring. What is measured and how the test presents the results play an important role. To track progress adequately, the placement and proficiency tests must be compatible, the scoring scale must be granular enough to show average improvement and the tests must assess overall language ability and not mastery of specific tasks presented in a particular book.

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.