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THE MAIN PRINCIPLES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TESTS

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Introduction. Testing creates great opportunities for the organization of effective and quality control in language learning that can ensure successful achievement of the learning objectives. All diagnostic tools as well as language tests are designed to measure students' achievements and learning outcomes. Assessing the general English proficiency of test takers is a challenging and demanding issue as “it includes various interacting components and subcomponents such as reading, speaking, listening, and writing” [5, p. 82].

Moreover, the process of designing a good test requires a clear understanding of the main principles of constructing language tests such as validity, reliability, authenticity, and practicality of the test format.

Aim. Well-designed tests are aimed at specifying areas of difficulties experienced by the group or individual students so that additional training and corrective exercises can be done. It's really urgent to discuss some important issues of test designing. Such principles as reliability, validity, authenticity, and practicality of language test tasks are substantiated in the paper.

Materials and methods. The issues of validity and reliability, holistic and analytic scoring methods have been contemplated by Ch. Alderson, L. Bachman, H. Brown, D. Clapham, A. Hughes, T. Lumley, C. Harsch, A. Pollitt, T. McNamara, L. Hamp-Lyons, etc.

The Ukrainian scientist S. Nikolayeva has worked out theoretical foundations of test controlling. According to S. Nikolayeva, the main forms of control used for assessment are current, final or summative, and diagnostic testing. Based on the test objectives, which include measuring the level of language competence: language skills and students' proficiency, defining their progress in language acquisition, providing feedback on students' achievements in language learning, promoting language learning, and evaluation of teaching and learning effectiveness, all tests are traditionally divided into four main types: tests that determine the level of language proficiency; tests for the division of students into groups according to their language proficiency; diagnostic tests and students' achievement tests [8, p. 372].

The British Council has been actively involved in language test development: a lot of important and innovative work was done in this area. It has developed specific expertise to ensure quality and compliance of the whole assessment process.

The tests aimed to determine the level of language competence have been developed by specialized testing institutes and unions. Among them there are well known and recognized in the world IELTS, TOEFL, BEC, FCE and others.

Results and discussion. The International English Language Test System (IELTS) is one of the most reputable English tests that is used to assess the language proficiency of those who intend to study or work in an English speaking context. It is one of the most large-scale proficiency tests which affects the lives of many students as the results of the test are used for making critical decisions about the test takers.

The IELTS test has been developed to assess and provide information concerning the English level of the applicants, based on which the students will be labeled based on their English proficiency level according to specific band scores of the IELTS testing organization.

International language tests are designed on the basis of the main principles: validity, reliability, authenticity, and practicality.

Generally, the reliability of a test is described as the extent to which the results or that can be recognized consistent or stable. A reliable test should be a consistent measure of performance. Reliability is the stability of results obtained by the same students in two separate commissions, or if they pass the same test at different times.

The IELTS exam contains four components upon which an overall band score is awarded. Thus, an estimate of composite reliability offers a useful measure of overall test reliability.

As for validity it is also an important issue. The general notion of validity is defined as "the degree to which a test measures what it requires, or intends, to be measuring" [3, p. 231]. Validity reflects the purpose of the test, its content, and the evaluation criteria.

The test is valid only when its content is made up of representative samples of skills, abilities, structures that were studied. To determine validity, each item is tested. A. Hughes claims that "for the validity a test must confirm consistently accurate measurements, therefore, it must be reliable" [6].

The principle of practicality refers to "the economy of time, effort and money in testing. In other words, a test should be easy to design, easy to administer, easy to mark, and easy to interpret the results" [2]. Some significant attributes of practicality may be staying within budgetary limits; clear directions for administration; appropriate utilizing available human resources; considering the time and effort involved for both design and scoring.

Objectivity of a test is an important factor as it affects both the validity and reliability of the test. There are two aspects of objectivity which must be considered while constructing a test. The first is concerned with the scoring of the test. The second is regarding the interpretation of the individual items of the test.

When the examiners are asked to award a score for a test performance, it is usual practice that they use a set of descriptions of what to expect at different levels of ability. This set of descriptions is known as a rating scale. Some rating scales are simple in design and simple to use, others are more complex. A test is perfectly objective when the examiners using the same test upon the same students give identical scores [4].

A test must be authentic, i.e. the language used must be as natural as possible, have items that are contextualized rather than isolated, include meaningful and relevant topics, provide some thematic organization to items (e.g., a story episode), offer tasks that copy real life use of language [7].

What should we do before developing the test tasks? Firstly, we have to develop test specifications that include the purpose of the test, the level of the educational institution, the level of language proficiency of students being tested. Secondly, we should take into consideration the facts about test takers: their age, stage of study, educational level, etc. The number of test sections and the time it takes to complete each part are also of great importance. We should think of the types of texts to be used and their scope; language skills to be tested and how they are tested (individually or in an integrated way); language elements to be checked (list of grammatical structures and functional samples, the most common vocabulary); the tasks required for verification. Testing methods to be used must be discussed. They can be the following: multiple choice, filling in the blanks, ratios, transformation, short answers, description of the pictures, etc. The sections to be used for providing instructions; availability of test samples; the criteria that will be used for assessment are valuable too [2].

Conclusion. To sum up, test construction requires a systematic organized approach if positive results are to be expected. Firstly, the objective must be well defined. There are numerous points which are common to all types of tests and items which must be observed in constructing a test. Secondly, we should avoid obvious and meaningless items; observe the rules of rhetoric, grammar and punctuation; avoid items that have no answer upon which all experts will agree; avoid items which contain irrelevant clues or furnish the answers to other items.

Therefore, a good test task can be characterized as relevant, meaningful and authentic one. The tasks must be surely constructed on the basis of students' level of difficulty and must be based on the information in the task or text and not with test takers' background knowledge. Tasks should not cause offence to any test taker. A good test measures what it is supposed to measure, it is easy to be conducted and to score without wasting too much time or effort. Besides, it covers all the items that have been taught or studied. Moreover, a good test should be balanced: it should verify linguistic as well as communicative competence and it has to reflect the real command of the language.

Test developers need to check carefully a number of things before a test is administered live: the clarity of the instructions, the time allowed, the adequacy of the scoring, and whether the questions in different tasks are straightforward.

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