

Assessing languages for specific purposes - why and how

Anna Sołtyska

Studium Języków Obcych Politechniki Warszawskiej

While it is obvious nowadays that language knowledge should be tested, not everyone is convinced that special tests to assess knowledge of languages for specific purposes (LSP) are needed. This article attempts to give answers to the following questions: what are the differences between LSP and GP tests, what a typical language testing situation consists of, how to create a good LSP test and finally why there are no LSP tests devoted to technical language. The article is based on research and professional experience of the author, the university teacher in Foreign Languages Teaching Centre at Warsaw University of Technology.

LSP tests vs. general purpose tests

Although it is claimed by some that LSP tests are just GP tests with technical vocabulary that has just been added or used as a replacement for „general vocabulary”, there are some other distinguishing factors that have to be mentioned. Language for Specific Purpose tests are derived from an analysis of a specific language use situation, and are typically language for academic, occupational / professional purposes tests. The exemplary tests include: Swedish for Nurses, Japanese for Tour Guides, English for Air Traffic Controllers, Business English Certificate. On the contrary, General purpose tests are characterised by a more broadly defined purpose, and are typically used to establish general language proficiency of a given test taker, as is the case with the following tests: First Certificate in English, TELC examinations, London Tests of English and many others.

What distinguishes LSP tests

There are two main features that distinguish tests of language for specific purposes:

- Authenticity of task (s): it aims at increasing the likelihood that the test taker will carry out the test task in the same way as the task would be carried out in the actual target situation;

- Interaction between language knowledge and specific purpose content knowledge: in LSP testing background knowledge is a necessary integral part of the concept of specific purpose language ability, whereas in general purpose language test the factor of background knowledge appears to be contributing only to measurement error and as such is to be minimised as much as possible.

A typical language testing situation

To answer the question whether LSP tests are really needed, let's imagine a typical language testing situation, a kind of a model which should – with certain reservations – apply to both „classroom testing” and „high stake examinations”, so called external ones. It consists of the following stages:

- Target situation analysis
- Test specifications
- Production of test tasks
- Trying test out
- Revision

Let's have a closer look at them:

- Target situation analysis needs to be carried out;
- Test specifications: should be elaborated on; this is a blueprint for test developers and item writers and for score users, a kind of a document that contains the following information on the test that we intend to develop:
 - Statement of the purpose
 - Description of the contexts and tasks that are to be included in the test:
 - Place where the target communicative events take place
 - Materials & equipment involved
 - Time & physical conditions
 - Participants
 - Types of communicative tasks

- Details on scoring a description of
 - how responses will be judged correct;
 - how they will be assigned to levels on rating scale;
 - how a total score will be calculated
- Interpretation of the scores
- Evaluation of the qualities of good testing practice which include the following qualities common to well-designed and well-executed tests:
 - Validity → whether the test measures what it is intended to measure;
 - Reliability → consistency and accuracy of the measurements – how far one can depend on them;
 - Situational and interactional authenticity →
 - relationship between the target situation & test takers;
 - engagement of the test takers' communicative language ability;
 - Impact → influence the test has on learners, teachers and educational systems;
 - Practicality → constraints imposed by such factors as money, time, personnel, educational policies, etc.; whether the benefits of conducting a test are balanced by time and money invested.

It should be taken into consideration that test specifications are dynamic, changing due to feedback from:

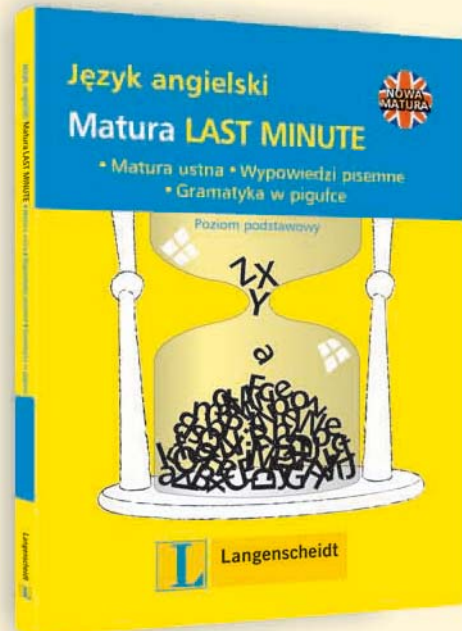
- members of the development team;
- teachers who may be consulted at various points;
- subject specialist informants;
- experience gained in trialling / piloting test tasks;
- Production of the test tasks, assembling the test on the basis of the above mentioned specifications;
- Trying the test out – e.g. giving it to a group of people from a given profession whose LSP proficiency is already known;
- Revision of the test before its „final” use – i.e. giving it to actual test-takers.

Why are LSP tests needed (why can't we use general purpose ones)

There are three reasons that justify the need for LSP tests:

- firstly, BECAUSE language performances vary with both context and test task; it is **not** just about **test topics being relevant** to the field of studying / area of professional or

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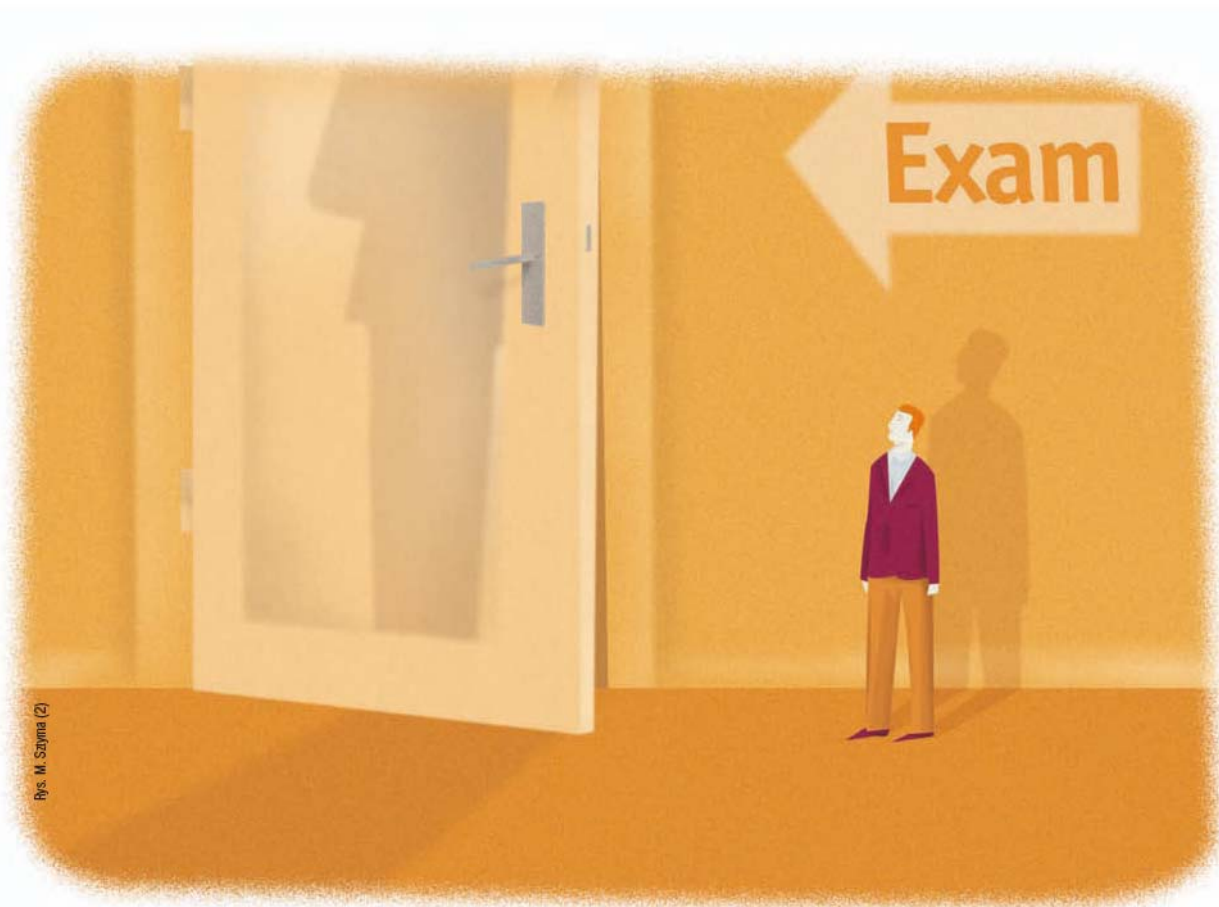
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private interest, it is also about **the test task being authentic** – as already said, otherwise it will not represent a specific purpose field in any measurable way;

- secondly, **BECAUSE** specific language is precise; what we often refer to as jargon or even gobbledegook, has **a specific communicative function within a given field**: these are lexical / semantic / syntactic / phonological characteristics of language peculiar to any field and they allow men-of-the-trade to speak and write **more precisely** about aspects of the field that outsiders sometimes find impenetrable;
- and finally, **BECAUSE** of the distinction between **aims** (the eventual target behaviours of the learners) and **objectives** (pedagogical constructs that will enable the learners to achieve the behavioural targets) in general purpose tests and no such distinction in LSP tests (such a distinction is not visible, so that descriptions of target behaviours – usually derived from a needs analysis – become the course / test content).

How to create a good LSP test

How should we create a good LSP test that would reflect the above mentioned description of a testing situation, and fulfil all the criteria of good testing practice? The main problem is that a tester is seldom an expert in the field in which s/he is attempting to measure language ability. In other words,

“We don’t even know what we don’t know”.

Luckily, there is a solution to this problem: to seek an expert – to help to understand both the key features of the target language use situations, and the characteristics of the input data that will form the basis of the LSP test. There are three approaches on how such cooperation with an expert can take place:

- **Grounded ethnography** which means studying the behaviour from differing viewpoints of the participants, often by means of hidden or / and inconspicuous cameras; then videotapes are observed and commented on by participants themselves, researchers and experts in the field being investigated.

- **Context-based research** which involves studying second language acquisition and use in important real life contexts; it is based on the distinction between primary data (the language we wish to study) and secondary data (commentary on the primary data by the participants themselves or experts: linguists, ethnographers, specialists in target field/s).
- **Subject specialist informant procedures**, the method which can best help determine what in the data collected by LSP test developers is really worth focusing on is known as subject specialist informant procedures. What is more, it provides information on what a test developer (and later a test taker) needs to know to understand language in a given discipline – as there are numerous elements that are to be mastered; these comprise:
 - Technical terminology
 - Common language words used technically
 - Contextual paraphrases
 - Grammatical choice
 - Modal words
 - Rhetorical structure
 - Punctuation structure
 - Connectives

Drawbacks and potential problem areas

None of the above mentioned approaches is free of disadvantages, especially when practical considerations are in question. First of all, the informants should have a feel of the technical language of their discipline, and what is equally important they should be open to linguistically-oriented questions. Secondly, there is considerable controversy as to the value of untrained informants' commentary (see grounded ethnography and the stakeholders active in this approach). Moreover, the more participants are involved in a test development process, the more time consuming it becomes. And last but not least, as most highly qualified and professionally outstanding partners would expect some remuneration for their contribution, costs of the test are to increase significantly.

Why is there no *Test in Technical English*?

Finally, due to my professional engagement in teaching technical English, and first-hand experience of the lack of any reliable tests assessing knowledge of technical language, a few remarks on such a situation are presented. Why is there no „*Test in Technical English*” (a draft name of such an exam, used by the author)? Firstly, because it is hard to define what exactly „technical language” means – it needs to be specified which area of technical language is to be tested, which means that the subject area of our „specific purpose” test has to be tightened. What is more, there are some fuzzy subject areas, such as mathematics, which for lay people seem to be a must in each technical branch, and as such should be in their opinion included in any „technical language” test; however, there are also many less obvious fields in case of which decision has to be taken whether or not to include them in a given test.

Then, if a highly specialised test is to be prepared, there arises a need for good experts to cooperate with along the whole test production process; they have to be found, persuaded to work with given test development body, instructed along the process, and „kept” for future test improvements etc.

It can neither be forgotten that by tightening the subject area of a specific purpose test the group of potential test takers is limited; as a result, potential financial output is also likely to be lower.

Finally, there is little awareness of a very thin line between LSP and CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) – they aim of any „technical language” test is not assess the background knowledge, but the language proficiency.

In conclusion it has to be admitted that there is definitely a need for such „technical language” exams on the labour market, but on the other hand, if this niche is not filled in, real life situations may prove the best exam for engineers.

References

The following titles proved useful and particularly interesting during the preparation of this article - should you like to learn more about language testing in general and /or LSP testing, they are definitely to be recommended:

- Douglas, D.** 2000. *Assessing Languages for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: CUP
- McNamara, T.** 2000. *Language Testing* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Weir, C.** 1990. *Communicative Language Testing*. New York: Prentice Hall