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English Lingua Franca: Contexts, Strategies and International Relations

Papers from a conference held
at Ca' Foscari University of Venice
October 2011

edited by
Geraldine Ludbrook and David Newbold

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*English Lingua Franca: Contexts, Strategies and
International Relations. Papers from a conference
held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. October 2011*

Edited by Geraldine Ludbrook and David Newbold

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Acknowledgements

This volume collects the papers delivered at the *Giornata di studio su inglese lingua franca* held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice on October 21st 2011. The full title of the study day was 'English Lingua Franca: Contexts, Strategies and International Relations,' since the event grew out of a research grant in the use of English in international contexts, made available by the university's fledgling School of International Relations. The results of this research are published in this volume.

The study day brought together a number of invited speakers: in the morning session, professional figures from the world of diplomacy and international organizations were asked for their insights into how English is used internationally; in the afternoon session, academics working on English as a lingua franca (ELF) in Italy presented research papers. This meeting between 'practitioners' (in actual fact, high ranking professionals whose expert use of English in international contexts is a crucial part of their job) and university researchers, working on topics ranging from the use of English in company websites to the teaching and testing of ELF, constituted one of the novelties of the event, offering multiple viewpoints on an emerging phenomenon and, perhaps, an opportunity for cross fertilization.

The organizers would like to thank the visiting speakers from the world of International Relations who so generously gave their time to share their experiences of how English is used today as a lingua franca: Ambassador Christopher Prentice, Prof Luca Pes, Dr Engelbert Ruoss, and Dr Federico Prato. We were particularly fortunate to have as our keynote speaker, Prof Barbara Seidlhofer, one of the foremost scholars of English as Lingua Franca (ELF), whose contribution continued beyond her opening address, as she stayed on throughout the day to handle questions, to listen to all the other contributions, and to offer her own feedback on some of them.

The study day, and the publication of this volume, were made possible by generous contributions from the Department of Linguistics and Comparative Cultural Studies and the School of International Relations and the support of the Heads of Department (Prof Flavio Gregori and Prof Anna Cardinaletti) and the Director of the School (Prof Rolf Petri).

Geraldine Ludbrook
David Newbold

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Towards a valid test construct within an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) framework

Geraldine Ludbrook, Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Abstract

This article discusses a research project that has investigated the development of a language test within an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) framework. It focuses on one of the main challenges for test developers designing a language test of this kind: the validity of the test construct. The article reports on the procedures followed to define the construct of the test and specify the test tasks. A brief description of the test content shows how the construct has been operationalised in the test tasks. The article concludes with perspectives for future research in ELF test development.

1 Introduction

This article discusses a research project that has investigated the development of a language test within an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) framework. The test is designed for use by universities for the specific purpose of screening the English language abilities of non native English speaking students applying for admission to university courses in which part, or all, of the course is taught in English. The test sets out to assess the receptive skills of reading and listening, and to discriminate between test takers at CEFR levels B1 and B2. The test is designed to be computer delivered, with a multiple-choice item format.

The target language use situation is a university setting in which English is used as a lingua franca for instruction, administration, and interaction by teachers, administrators, and students. The test takers are European students, aged about 20, who have completed secondary education and are planning to enroll in university in their home country or in another European country.

The challenges involved in developing a test within an ELF framework have been examined in the testing literature (see, for example, Elder and Harding 2008, Jenkins 2006, Taylor 2006). Three main issues emerge from the debate. The first issue is the difficulty of defining a valid construct for a test given the fluid norms of ELF. The second issue concerns the principle of fairness and the bias that may emerge from the use of non native varieties of English, especially accents that may advantage or disadvantage certain language groups. The third issue concerns the accountability and prestige of a test developed in the ELF framework, and its acceptability by the stakeholders: students, teachers, and institutions.

The research project examined various issues involved in the development of tests within an ELF framework. In this article I focus on the procedures followed in the definition of the test construct and its operationalisation in the test tasks to ensure the highest possible validity of the test.

2 Issues in ELF test design

The use of English as a medium of education is in constant expansion due to the internationalization of student populations in European universities (see Newbold, this volume). The high stakes tests used to assess the language of students aspiring to study in English medium universities in the US, the UK, Australian and New Zealand are developed with reference to the standard English of the countries in Kachru's (1985) 'inner circle'. As Davidson (1994) states: 'Several large English tests hold sway world-wide; tests which are clear agents of the English variety of the nation in which they are produced. These tests maintain their agency through the statistical epistemology of norm-referenced measurement of language proficiency, a very difficult beast to assail' (pp. 119-120). The same tests are used to measure the English language proficiency of European students applying for admission to university courses taught through the medium of English.

In recent years scholars of ELF have invited examination boards to investigate alternatives to the model of Standard English to take into consideration the growing numbers of standard varieties of

English that are evolving. Jenkins (2006) points to the anomaly of the use of English language tests with international currency – such as TOEIC and IELTS – which do not accept internationally communicative forms of the language (p. 44). Sharifian and Clyne (2008) also refer to the need for international testing bodies to be informed by ‘the unprecedented growth of variation in the norms of international communication’ in order to match the contents of language tests with the actual functions of the language used by test takers (p. 28.12).

In her 2006 article, Jenkins called on examination boards to begin to consider basing the criteria used in such tests on successful communication between non native speakers rather than between a non native speaker and a native speaker of English (p. 49). To a degree this has been taken up by the international examinations boards. Taylor (2006), replying to Jenkins, notes that language assessment no longer uses the traditional deficit model based on a ‘native speaker’ criterion. She claims that in recent years a focus on knowledge and form has given way to a greater focus on function and communication (p. 52). Elder and Harding (2008) also argue that communicative effectiveness has replaced adherence to standard norms (p. 34.3). They observe that the developers of international tests used for academic purposes now clearly define the tests as a measure of academic language ability, and the test tasks are aligned more closely to the kinds of language use found in everyday academic life (p. 34.4). However, Standard English, as it is codified in grammars and dictionaries, remains the default model for language testing.

For language test developers, one of the main points of resistance to ELF test design remains that of the lack of clear and stable norms, which makes developing language tests problematic. In the next section I will discuss the importance of test construct validity and the ongoing debate on the issue of ELF norms.

3 Norms in English as a Lingua Franca

A central factor to the validity of a test lies in the validity of the construct, the language abilities we wish to measure in the test, or the fitness of the test for its purpose and context. For test developers, therefore, having as clear and unambiguous a definition as possible of what the construct should include, or what ‘complex of knowledge, skills, or other attributes’ (Messick 1994, p. 16) should be assessed, is necessary at the outset of any test development project. Indeed, as Spolsky (1989) states: ‘One cannot develop sound language tests without a method of defining what it means to know a language, for until you have decided what you are measuring, you cannot claim to have measured it’ (p. 140).

In the debate on the constraints imposed on language test developers by an ELF framework, one of the main points has been the difficulty of defining a model of language on which to base the construct of the test. Language testing scholars have upheld the need for a standard model of English in the development of international tests designed for use among L2 students intending to study in English-speaking countries such as the US, the UK, and Australia. Taylor (2006), for example, discusses issues of validity in this kind of English proficiency test. She argues that in language tests designed for university entrance, it is appropriate to use as a model the ‘dominant host language’ (p. 56), or standard forms of English. Several international tests now use a range of accents in the input for listening assessment. However, these tend to be North American, British, Australian or New Zealand varieties (see Harding 2012, p. 164).

Research on the use of L2 English varieties that differ from standard models of English is continuing to seek new norms as scholars have for some time explored the possibility that the wide range of the uses of English in the European context may be contributing to a distinct form of European English. Several corpora projects are collecting empirical evidence based on spoken and written texts of interaction between non native speakers for linguistic analysis. Three of these are the Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English VOICE project (Seidlhofer 2001), the SELF Studying in English as a Lingua Franca, and the ELFA Corpus of English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (Mauranen 2003, 2010).

The analysis of these corpora has produced some evidence of common features in non native speaker interaction. Seidlhofer (2001) has identified lexico-grammatical features that do not appear to hinder intelligibility between non native speakers of English. Jenkins (1998, 2000) has worked on ELF phonology, identifying a Lingua Franca Core of phonetic features that likewise do not appear to interfere with intelligibility in interaction between non native speakers of English. Mauranen (2010) has identified certain discourse and lexicogrammatical features that appear to characterize academic ELF (pp. 13-18). The results of this research have led Seidlhofer, Breiteneder and Pitzl (2009) to claim that there are the ‘first signs of something like a characteristic emergent European English’ (p. 9).

However, not all scholars agree that these findings, while identifying certain common features of ELF, are sufficient for the definition of a model of Euro-English. Mollin (2009), for example, used corpus analysis of the spoken and online English of competent European speakers. She found some lexical features that might point to a common European standard. However, other language features do not appear to indicate that there exists a systematically different variety of European English. Mollin concludes that most European speakers of English adhere to the native standard, and concludes that the term ‘Euro-English’ should be discarded: ‘Continental Europe is, as far as English is concerned, norm-dependent but not norm-developing’ (p. 199). Kirkpatrick (2007), too, notes: ‘In the case of English in Europe, there seems little doubt that it will continue to increase its position as the dominant *lingua franca*. Whether this will result in varieties of European Englishes, or in a single variety of Euro-English being used as a *lingua franca* can only be determined by further research’ (p. 169). The consensus among these scholars therefore appears to be that the use of English as a common means for communication among European speakers of English has an important function, but has not, or not yet, developed unique formal properties (Berns 2009, p. 198).

The issue is complicated even further when ELF scholars highlight the desirably flexible nature of ELF. Seidlhofer (2008), for example, claims that ELF norms are ‘unstable, negotiated online, continually shifting and changing, and that in the variable process of language use people do not just conform but adapt their linguistic and cultural behaviour as appropriate to their communicative purposes’ (p. 33.4). Prodromou (2008), citing Hopper (1998), argues that ‘ELF can be seen as ‘emergent’ because ‘its structure is always deferred, always in a process but never arriving’ (p. 34). Firth (2009) goes so far as to claim that, in ELF, ‘variation is at the heart of this system, not secondary to a more primary common system of uniform norm’ (p. 163).

The question therefore remains as to how test developers can define a valid construct with a language model that embraces such variation and instability. In the section that follows I will discuss two important approaches to language test development – construct based and task based test development – to investigate possible solutions to the question of construct validity in the development of a test within an ELF framework.

4 Construct based and task based approaches to language test design

The design of language tests tends to follow one of two main schools of thought. One approach is a construct based method. In this kind of test, performance is considered the means by which a language sample is elicited so as to allow evaluation of second language ability. Test tasks may resemble or simulate real-world tasks, or may be artificial. However, the real focus of the test is not the capacity to perform the task, but the underlying knowledge and ability that is revealed in the performance. Messick (1994) calls the performance in this kind of test the ‘vehicle of assessment’ (p. 14).

The definition of the construct serves three purposes. It is a basis for score use, it guides test development, and it enables test developers and validators to demonstrate the construct validity of the test (Bachman and Palmer 1996, p. 116). The construct of this kind of performance test is

generally based on an explicit theory of language and language use, and is ‘tied to the range of tasks and situations it generalises and transfers to’ (p. 15).

Within the communicative language framework, several models of language have been developed for use as the basis of language test development. Bachman’s (1990) model of communicative language ability greatly influenced language testing projects in the 1990s. For Bachman, the three main components of communicative language ability are language competence (knowledge), strategic competence (the ‘capacity for implementing the components of language in contextualized communicative language use’), and psychophysiological mechanisms which enable ‘the actual execution of language as a physical phenomenon’ (pp. 82-87). Bachman and Palmer’s (1996) model of communicative language ability adds to Bachman’s (1990) model an affective component, it reconceptualises strategic competence as a set of metacognitive strategies, and replaces knowledge structures with topical knowledge.

Conceptualising the testing of language for specific purposes, Douglas (2000) modifies Bachman and Palmer’s (1996) model, and describes communicative language ability through two interacting components: language knowledge and strategic competence (p. 33). In Douglas’s framework, language knowledge consists of four main features:

1. Grammatical knowledge: vocabulary, morphology, syntax and phonology
2. Textual knowledge: rhetorical organization and cohesion
3. Functional knowledge: ideational, manipulative, heuristic and imaginative functions
4. Sociolinguistic knowledge: sensitivity to dialects, registers, naturalness, cultural references (p. 35)

Douglas proposes this framework for the development of language tests for specific purposes. This would therefore seem an appropriate model of language use for the development of a test for the specific purpose of assessing the receptive English language skills of non native English speaking students applying for admission to university courses delivered in English. I return to this model in Section 8 below.

The construct-based approach to modelling and understanding second language performance is essentially a cognitive one. The second model of performance-based testing is one in which the focus is on the performance of the test task itself. Brown (2004) specifies that this approach does not simply use a real-world task to elicit particular components of language system which are then measured. Citing Long and Norris (2001), he claims that ‘the construct of interest in task-based assessment is performance of the task itself’ (p. 94). Messick (1994) calls the language in this kind of test the ‘medium’ of the performance (p. 14).

The test tasks in this approach to second language performance testing are carefully designed to simulate or replicate real-world tasks. As the tasks are ‘real-life’ activities, the test taker is required to produce meaningful language to complete them. The test taker’s performance is then related to a target performance based on real-world criteria. In its most practical form, this approach may draw on no theoretical model of language use in the definition of the test construct. Within this approach to test development, the term ‘proficiency’ is conceived as referring to general language ability, and performance is generally measured with reference to proficiency scales (McNamara, 1996, pp. 76-77).

Messick (1994) discusses the issue of validity in relation to the two approaches to performance testing discussed above: tests based on a construct of theoretical language ability, and tests based on the performance of test tasks. He argues that the adoption of construct-based tests is preferable as it may make it easier for test developers to focus on and identify the issues of construct under-representation and construct-irrelevant variance, which are the two main threats to test validity (p. 22). With regard to task-based tests, he suggests that they can serve legitimate instructional and assessment purposes by allowing the measurement of both product and process (p. 20). However, even if they are based on careful sampling of the domain being assessed, they risk not having sufficient breadth of coverage, and invite construct under-representation (p. 22). They thus risk

having low validity in terms of the interpretation of the performance and the inferences made of the test scores.

Bachman (2002) addresses the issue of construct validity in language tests based on the performance of tasks. Although he is critical of the limitations of atheoretical task-based testing, Bachman makes four suggestions to the designers of such tests that may increase the usefulness of the interpretation of test scores. First, Bachman proposes that test design should take into consideration both construct definition and task specification, arguing that ignoring either one of these features will reduce the usefulness of the test result. Second, he suggests that a set of task characteristics should be designed that match the testing context as closely as possible, which can then be used as a basis for test design. These task characteristics can be based on existing frameworks or on an analysis of the target language use domain. Third, Bachman suggests that test designers should define the specific areas of language ability to be assessed, either as separate components or a global definition. The definition can be rooted in a theoretical model, or based on a course syllabus, or emerge from a needs analysis of the target language use domain. Fourth, he suggests that a variety of procedures, both qualitative and quantitative, be used to describe the interactions among specific tasks and specific test takers. The planned integration of both tasks and constructs in the way they are designed, developed and used may provide test developers with 'the full range of validation arguments that can be developed in support of a given inference or use' (p. 471).

Bachman's suggestion that a detailed description and a close analysis of the target language domain can contribute to the definition of the test construct, and to the specification of the test tasks, was a useful starting point for the ELF test development project. The project therefore set out to draw up a detailed picture of the use of English made by university students studying in English either in their home or in a foreign university. In the next section I report on the procedures followed to collect information on the English language needs of such students, and how these data were analysed to inform the test construct and the test tasks.

5 Identifying the target language use (TLU) domain

Mobility within and across different countries and institutions gives rise to widely differing objectives and contexts which contribute to considerable complexity in the use of English as a lingua franca in academic communities in Europe. Three factors that contribute to the different needs are the objectives (teaching, learning, research), the length of stay (longer research projects, short student exchanges), and the location (permanent or temporary research centres). Mauranen (2010) discusses the complexity of such needs in academic ELF contexts.

For the purposes of the ELF test research project, the TLU domain was established as a multi-lingual university setting in which English is used by non native learners for academic study and for everyday use. The analysis of the language needs of such learners was based on the collection of data from several different sources.

5.1 Data sources

The primary data for the analysis were gathered from three different sources. The first was the Venice International University (VIU). The VIU is a consortium of eleven universities based in Europe, Asia, and the US. Each member university sends faculty and students to the Venice campus where the working language for academic teaching, administration, and peer interaction is English.

The methods used for the collection of primary data from VIU included:

- Semi-structured interviews with teachers and students regarding their uses of English and their perceptions of their language needs

- Observation of classes conducted by native and non native university lecturers
- Recording and analysis of peer interaction among students

The second source of primary data was two Italian universities, one in southern Italy (Lecce) and the other in northern Italy (Venice). An investigation was carried out of the English language needs in the two contexts as perceived by Italian faculty and students. The data collected in the Italian university context included

- Student questionnaires regarding their perceived English language needs
- Interviews with teachers regarding the skills and level of English competence needed by their students

More details concerning the procedures followed and the findings of the needs analysis are described in some detail in Newbold and in Basso (both in this volume).

The third source of data was the examination of the websites of European universities, with particular attention to the sections providing advice to incoming and outgoing students involved in Erasmus exchange programmes. A survey of the information published on these websites provided valuable insights into the real-world contexts of undergraduate life in which foreign students are required to engage.

5.2 Analysing the TLU domain

The analysis of the TLU domain identified three distinct but interrelated language contexts: academic language, administrative language, and everyday language. I report here briefly on the findings.

5.2.1 Academic language

Although the variability of norms in ELF is considerable, the norms regarding academic English are relatively stable as the domain implies the language of educated users in which the features of accuracy and appropriateness stand out as being desirable.

Newbold (this volume) reports on the findings of the needs analysis in some detail. In brief, the data collected on the language needs of Italian students studying in home universities, as perceived both by the students themselves and by faculty, were fairly consistent with the needs perceived by Italian students studying abroad.

The main English academic language needs concerning receptive skills in both contexts were identified as:

- Reading textbooks and scholarly articles
- Using the Internet for research
- Watching film and video
- Understanding native and non native speaking teachers
- Understanding native and non native speaking students

These results were to a degree predictable. Mauranen (2010), for example, has identified very similar needs in ELF academic contexts. However, the triangulation of the data sources assured a reliable picture of the students' perceived English language needs.

5.2.2 Administrative language

The purpose of the test was to assess the English language skills of students intending to study in English language medium academic courses. The test therefore needed to include the language required to deal with the planning stage before departure. A review of the advice given on university websites to students planning to study in other European universities identified a series of areas in which students are required to retrieve practical information regarding administrative procedures.

The main English needs concerning university administration procedures were identified as:

- Understanding university application and enrolment procedures
- Understanding tuition fees and methods of payment
- Understanding applications for funding and student loans
- Understanding study programmes, courses and examinations
- Dealing with academic problems, such as failing exams, plagiarism
- Dealing with coursework requirements, such as submission of work, deadlines

The consultation of several different European university websites and handbooks for students planning to study abroad provided evidence of the real-world target language uses with which these students are required to engage.

5.2.3 Everyday language

Advice given on university websites to students planning to study in other European universities also permitted the identification of a series of areas in which students can retrieve practical information regarding everyday student life abroad.

The main English needs concerning everyday university life were identified as:

- Selecting accommodation: on campus residence, student housing, host family
- Using university facilities: libraries, canteen, gym, computer laboratories, wireless networks

As with administrative language, the consultation of university websites gave clear indications of common contexts of everyday student life with which students are required to engage.

In conclusion, the analysis of the target language use provided a detailed picture of the language needs of European university students planning to study in courses taught through English in foreign university contexts. The TLU domain included three main areas of language needs: academic study, administrative procedures, and everyday student life.

5.2.4 Input texts for reading and listening

The analysis of the target language use served to define the specific areas of language ability to be assessed in order to provide detailed information also regarding the characteristics of the input reading and listening texts.

The reading input texts were identified as:

- University websites
- Titles of university courses, books, lectures
- Short descriptions of university courses
- Internet search engine results
- Short general academic texts

Both audio and visual listening texts were considered. The input texts were identified as:

- Presentation of general academic topics
- Explanations of academic and organizational procedures
- Discussions of topics related to everyday university life

In this section I have reported on the methods used to collect data regarding the TLU domain. The information collected and the analysis of it provided a clear picture of the range of language contexts in which European university students need to engage. It also provided information that allowed the identification of appropriate reading and listening input texts. In the next section I will report on how the test tasks were designed on the basis of the data collected in the needs analysis.

6 Test task design

Messick (1994) points to an important threat to test validity that may arise when the construct of a test is operationalised in the test tasks: construct-irrelevant variance, which occurs when a test measures variables that are unrelated to the construct. This may result in construct irrelevant easiness, when the test task may provide clues that allow some test takers to respond correctly in ways that are irrelevant to the test construct, and result in higher scores. It may also result in construct irrelevant difficulty, when the test is more difficult for some test takers, for irrelevant reasons, and results in lower scores (pp. 34-35).

Our analysis of the target language use domain led to the identification of input texts and related language functions, which were then operationalised in the test tasks. The test tasks were identified as:

- Reading a university website to retrieve information
- Reading titles of university courses, books, lectures to identify their content
- Reading short descriptions university courses to identify their content
- Reading an internet search engine result to retrieve information
- Reading short general academic texts to retrieve, analyse and process information

- Listening to teachers presenting general academic topics to retrieve information
- Listening to teachers and administrators explaining academic and organizational procedures to retrieve information
- Listening to peers discussing topics related to everyday university life to retrieve information

The test was designed to assess the English language competence of European students planning to enroll at university, not of students already enrolled in university courses. Particular care was therefore taken when designing the tasks, and choosing the input texts, to include only general academic content and to avoid introducing specific subject-related knowledge. In addition, background knowledge concerning only common university procedures and predictable aspects of student life was included. In this way it was hoped to avoid the threat of construct-irrelevance variance specified by Messick, which would have weakened the validity of the test.

I now turn to the question of authenticity in language test development, and discuss how the authenticity achieved can contribute to the validity of a test.

7 Authenticity and test validity

The importance of authenticity in language testing has been firmly established in recent years. In the 1980s, authenticity mainly centred on texts used in tests. ‘Authentic’ texts were those that had been extracted from real-life sources; ‘inauthentic’ texts were written or adapted for pedagogical purposes. With the rise of communicative language testing in the 1990s, the use of authentic

material to stimulate language in simulations of real-life contexts took on greater importance. The focus of the debate in this period addressed the authenticity of test tasks and their correspondence to tasks encountered in real life. See Lewkowitz (2000) for a detailed discussion of the issues related to authenticity in language testing.

Bachman (1991) distinguishes between two kinds of authenticity. The first kind is situational authenticity or 'the perceived relevance of the test method characteristics to the features of a specific target language use situation' (p. 690). Bachman's second kind is interactional authenticity. This is interaction between the test taker and the test task, or the way the test taker's language ability is engaged in the test tasks. Bachman also recognises that neither kind of authenticity is absolute, and that test tasks can vary in terms of their relative situational or interactional authenticity (p. 692).

Bachman and Palmer (1996) look at the effect authenticity potentially has on test takers' performance, and define authenticity as 'the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to the features of a TLU task' (p. 23). They link this concept of authenticity to the validity of the construct, claiming that 'authenticity provides a means for investigating the extent to which score interpretations generalize beyond performance on the test to language use in the TLU domain' (p. 24).

In the ELF test research project, the close analysis of the TLU domain allowed a high degree of authenticity to be achieved in several of its features. First, high situational authenticity has been achieved as test takers are required to carry out tasks of reading and listening/viewing that correspond closely to real-world tasks. They retrieve and process information from authentic sources and authentic texts that have been identified through the analysis of the TLU situation as being representative of the real needs of European university students studying through the medium of English.

Second, high interactional authenticity has been achieved in the test tasks that simulate university internet websites and internet search engines. Rees (this volume) discusses the design of the graphics and navigation of these tasks. In brief, the test taker is required to read to screen, engaging in authentic texts that are also presented with graphic authenticity. Moreover, navigational authenticity is also achieved as in these items the test taker clicks directly on text on the monitor as if 'really' working online.

The tasks used in the test are necessarily simulations and can at best only look like real life tasks (Spolsky 1985, p. 36). However, they have been designed with care to simulate tasks encountered in real life. This aspect of the testing project contributes to building up the validity claim of the ELF test construct.

8 Definition of the construct

I have described above the various procedures followed to define the construct of an English language test designed for the specific purpose of screening the receptive language abilities of non native English speaking students applying for admission to university courses delivered in English.

The construct is based on Douglas's (2000) model of components of specific purpose language ability (see Section 4 above). It has also been informed by a detailed analysis of the TLU domain: a university setting in which English is used as a lingua franca for instruction, administration, and interaction by teachers, administrators, and students.

The construct includes two main competences: language knowledge and background knowledge. Language knowledge comprises grammatical knowledge, textual knowledge, functional knowledge, and sociological knowledge. Background knowledge comprises knowledge of university procedures and of general academic topics.

The construct has been defined as follows:

Language knowledge

Grammatical knowledge

Knowledge of general grammar and syntax; knowledge of general academic vocabulary; knowledge of vocabulary related to university administration; knowledge of vocabulary related to everyday student life.

Textual knowledge

Knowledge of cohesion in general academic written texts; knowledge of cohesion in informal peer interaction.

Knowledge of rhetorical organization in general academic written texts (e.g. narrative, description, argumentation, comparison-contrast); knowledge of conversational organization.

Functional knowledge

Knowledge of ideational functions (e.g. information exchange, descriptions, classifications, explanations).

Knowledge of regulatory functions (e.g. rules and regulations), interpersonal relations (e.g. greetings, opinions).

Sociolinguistic knowledge

Knowledge of ELF varieties of English.

Knowledge of informal and formal register in written and spoken texts.

Knowledge of references to university procedures and student life.

Background knowledge

Knowledge of university-related academic and administrative procedures.

Knowledge of general academic topics.

The validity of a test is defined by Messick (1994) as ‘an integrated evaluative judgement of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences and actions based on test scores’ (p. 13). The validity of a test therefore lies in the degree to which inferences about the test taker’s language performance can be justified.

Construct validity is one of the most important factors adding to the overall validity of a test as it sets out the language features the test aims to measure. In this research project Douglas’s approach to specific purpose language testing was followed to define the construct, drawing on both a language model and a detailed analysis of the target language use domain. A carefully designed series of procedures were followed to ensure a clear description of the language features to be assessed in the test.

9 Test content

In this section I report briefly on the content of the test for European students. I specify the aim of each section of the test, and the rationale underlying the choice of texts and tasks.

9.1 Making connections

The first section is aimed at identifying test takers with lower than B1 level proficiency. In this section test takers are required to demonstrate reading at around B1 level of the CEFR.

The texts are all original texts taken from university websites and range from 1-2 words (academic subjects and courses, Internet links) to truncated phrases typical of Internet search results, to short paragraphs.

The four tasks designed are:

- (a) Consulting a university website to retrieve practical information regarding applying for university. This section of the test simulates a university webpage and the different levels of reading texts that users encounter, from menu headings, to short sentences, to short texts.
- (b) Consulting a university website to retrieve practical information regarding and dealing with daily student life abroad. This section of the test uses original texts from university websites dealing with everyday student life at the university: accommodation, social life, sport, library use etc.
- (c) Reading titles of books, lectures and courses to choose which is the most useful for the purpose supplied.
- (d) Reading the results of an Internet search to decide which link is the most useful for the purpose supplied.

9.2 Retrieving information

The aim of this section is to consolidate test-takers at B1 level and begin to distinguish test takers at B2 level. In this section test takers are required to demonstrate reading at around B1 level of the CEFR.

The reading texts are all original texts taken from general encyclopaedic websites. They may be narrative, expository, persuasive, analytical, or descriptive texts on general academic topics. The listening texts are semi-scripted monologues and dialogues, with NS and NNS speakers.

The three tasks designed are:

- (a) Listening to instructions from academic or office staff regarding academic assignments or university procedures (monologue).
- (b) Listening to fellow students discussing university-related topics, such as housing, sports facilities (dialogue).
- (c) Reading for simple research assignments related to general academic study. Three different text types are used: narrative, expository and persuasive.

9.3 Analysing and organising information

The aim of this section is to consolidate test takers at B2 level and begin to distinguish test takers at C1 level. In this section test takers are required to demonstrate reading and listening/viewing skills at B2 level of the CEFR or higher.

The video text is an authentic or semi scripted presentation of an academic course or topic. The reading texts are all original texts taken from general encyclopaedic websites. They may be expository or argumentative texts on general academic topics.

The three tasks designed are:

- (a) Viewing simple presentations to retrieve information, ideas and opinions on general academic topics.

- (b) Reading for research assignments to retrieve information, ideas and opinions from expository or argumentative texts on general academic topics.
- (c) Pre-writing: Understanding of cohesion and coherence within a gapped general academic text.

This schematic description of the test content has shown how the test tasks have been carefully developed on the basis of the construct defined in Section 8 above and from the analysis of the target language use domain.

10 Conclusion

This article has reported on the procedures followed to define the construct in the development of a test to screen the English language abilities of non native English speaking students applying for admission to university courses delivered in English. The research project has explored certain issues related to language test design within an ELF framework.

The test is not *per se* a test of ELF language; it does, however, include features of ELF interaction and has as such added useful evidence to the body of research on ELF testing. In particular, the detailed analysis of the target language use carried out for the definition of the test construct has begun to work towards a valid construct for a test of the English ability of European university students studying and living in an academic environment in which English is used as a *lingua franca*.

In addition, the project has investigated the design of new kinds of test tasks that achieve high degrees of authenticity in a test developed within a specific target use domain. Situational authenticity is achieved by the close match between the test tasks and the real world tasks carried out by the test takers. Interactional authenticity is achieved by the design of test tasks based on the graphics and navigation of university internet websites and internet search engines. The high authenticity realized adds to the validity claim of the construct.

Construct validity is not the only type of validity to be considered in language test development. Content validity, face validity, and predictive validity are just some of the other features involved in test development that require careful attention. Moreover, establishing the validity of a test construct is an ongoing process involving many types of evidence, analyses and interpretation in order to be able to make valid predictions about the test scores. Further research will be required to complete the test with assessment of the productive skills of writing and speaking, and the attendant issues of assessment criteria. Future research will also be necessary to further investigate the other issues involved in ELF test design: issues of fairness and the bias when using non native varieties of English, and the accountability and prestige of a test developed within the ELF framework. However, this initial phase of the test development project has set down a principled basis to this future research.

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