Developing resources for LSP tests: A reflection

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Overview

- Part I: Exploring LSP
- Part II: A case study: Developing LSP tests in Romania
- Part III: LSP resources: Towards the production of LSP tests
Part I

EXPLORING LSP
Warm-up: Show of hands

- Who has ever taken a general language proficiency test?
- Who has ever taken a Language for Specific Purposes test?
- Who does not know what kind of language test he/she has taken?
- Who has ever taken a test of English?
Different tests of English

GENERAL

PTE

T.E.A.

BULATS

B2 First/FCE

IELTS

TOEFL

SPECIFIC
Different tests of English

- **PTE General English test** or **B2 First** - formerly known as Cambridge English: First (FCE)
- **BULATS**: Assesses English language skills for business, industry and commerce.
- **IELTS**: Targets study, work and migration
- **TOEFL**: University admission, academic language use
- **T.E.A.**: Test of English for Aviation
Specificity

- It’s all about specifying:
  - Test purpose
  - Test taker population
  - Target Language Use (TLU) domain
A continuum of language tests

General Language Tests

Broad LSP Tests

Narrow LSP Tests

- Occupational English Test (OET) (Australia): www.occupationalenglishtest.org

The English language test for healthcare professionals

- Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses (CELBAN): www.celbancentre.ca

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## A continuum of language tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Language Tests</th>
<th>Broad LSP Tests</th>
<th>Narrow LSP Tests</th>
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Some defining features / questions:

- Language vs content knowledge
- Specificity
- Authenticity (language, tasks, contexts)
- Needs analysis (Target Language Use Domain)
- Involvement of subject and context specialists
Part II

A CASE STUDY: DEVELOPING LSP TESTS IN ROMANIA
Overview of Part II

- Context of LSP in Romania
  - Focus on academic context: two angles
    - Foreign students in Romania
    - LSP courses for Romanian students
- Survey: LSP teachers’ perspective
- End of courses exams – how specific (LSP-ish) are they?
Status of LSP in Romania

Socio-economic situation

Academic environment

LSP in Romania
Emigration/ Immigration

7.3%
9/h
1/6h
1m
Foreign students in Romania

20,000 foreign students

- medical
- technical and economic
- socio-humanistic and artistic
Romanian students - example

Babeș-Bolyai University

- 30,000+ students
- English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian
- 24 fields
Assumptions

- Anyone who teaches general language must be able to teach LSP in that language.

- You just need to know the terminology. The domain (physics, geography, etc.) is the same in all the languages.

Is what we are doing really LSP?
LSP teachers’ perspective

- Survey to gauge teachers’ perspective
- Training vs teaching/testing demands
- Teaching practices
  - Purposes
  - Needs analysis and challenges
  - Assessment criteria
  - The role of experts
Survey: respondents

33 respondents; 7 universities;

Experience in teaching/testing LSP: 6 months – 30 years

Mother tongue: 32 – Romanian; 1 - Hungarian
Language of teaching

- English
- French
- Romanian
- German
LSP domains of teaching

- Medicine
- Technical and economic
- Social sciences and arts
psychology

social sciences and arts

tourism

fine arts

geography
How much they needed to study

Series1  Series2
Could you easily change domains?

- Yes: 5
- No: 25
Could you easily change domains?

- medicine
- economy
- social sciences
Is there a difference between teaching/assessing LSP in L1 or in L2?
What do you consider as the purpose of your teaching/testing?

[Bar chart showing the distribution of responses for 'studies', 'work', and 'both'.]
Needs analysis

Do you do needs analysis?

- yes
- no
Needs analysis

- Conversation with the students: 18
- Conversation with graduates who also took the examination: 2
- Discussions with the teachers from the domain faculties: 3
- Literature in the domain: 1
- Discussions with more experienced colleagues: 1
- Observation in classes from the domain faculty: 1
What else do you teach/assess besides specialized vocabulary?

- Oral interactional patterns
  - doctor-patient dialogue
  - nutritional evaluation
  - negotiating
  - reciting
  - the plea
  - chart presentation
What else do you teach/assess besides specialized vocabulary?

- Specific written documents
  - anamnesis questionnaire
  - medical letter
  - patient medical file
  - prescriptions
  - commercial contracts
  - business correspondence
  - sociologic questionnaires
  - the survey
  - memorandums
  - tourist welcome protocols
  - case studies
  - theatre review
  - theatre script
What else do you teach/assess besides specialized vocabulary?

- **Contextual information**
  - medical protocol
  - hierarchy in the medical system
  - regulations in different institutions
  - the history of the discipline
  - differentiating between related jobs (e.g. tour operator-travel agent)
  - work flow in public and private companies
What else do you teach/assess besides specialized vocabulary?

- Legislation in the domain
  - occupational health
  - forensic medicine
  - the system of health insurance (in Romania)
  - family medicine
  - EU common legislation in the domain
  - animal protection legislation
  - tax return
What else do you teach/assess besides specialized vocabulary?

- Use of some instruments/substances/equipment specific to jobs in the domain
  - musical instruments (parts and how to use them)
  - use of medical instruments and applicability of medicine
  - use of different IT applications
What else do you teach/assess besides specialized vocabulary?

- Procedures spécifique to the domain
  - designing questionnaires
  - data collection
  - conducting a medical consultation
  - checking reflexes
  - first aid
  - use of video recordings for explaining surgical procedures
What else do you teach/assess besides specialized vocabulary?

- Knowledge related to the cultural context
  - patient tipology
  - patients from the countryside/from town (in Romania) (in relation with foreign students);
  - popular beliefs on diseases; facts about corruption in the medical system
  - use of medicinal plants
  - culturally specific management styles
What else do you teach/assess besides specialized vocabulary?

- Syntactic / morphological / rhetorical structures
  - abbreviation
  - ellipses
  - predominance of grammar structures in certain texts and oral discourse: passive voice, relative clauses, possessives, gerund, modal verbs
  - iambic pentameter, fragmenting syntax
What else do you teach/assess besides specialized vocabulary?

- Others
  - targeted, simplified language
  - accepting lack of perfect accuracy
Assessment criteria

Do you use specialised scales/grids?

- Yes
- No
Do you think that specialised grids are necessary for LSP exams?
Consultation with experts in the domain

Have you ever consulted with experts in the domain for courses and examinations?
Consultation with experts in the domain

Consultations for courses

- Practitioners in the field
- Current/future teachers in the domain faculty
Conclusion of the survey

- Little resources /training available
- Teachers put in a lot of effort
  - Target population, Needs analysis, Teaching materials, Examination

End of LSP course tests have a high degree of specificity

Advocacy: More resources and training would be beneficial for teachers in Romania
Part III

LSP RESOURCES: GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING LSP TESTS
Developing LSP: A Manual

To help the language testing community with the development of LSP tests, the ALTE LSP SIG developed a practical, step-by-step guideline – as a supplement to:
Commonalities

- What do general language tests and LSP tests have in common?
  - Test development cycle
  - Quality management process
  - Continuous improvement
Problems to be addressed in designing LSP tests

1. The interplay between language and content.
2. The variable extent to which mirroring the authentic language, tasks and contexts of the TLU domain is necessary (needs analysis).
3. The extent to which the involvement of specialists/informants in the domain is necessary. (Guidelines, after Douglas)
An ongoing discussion

LANGUAGE AND CONTENT
Language/content

Anything but …

Nothing but …
Language & Content: Inseparable

- “It is neither possible nor desirable to separate language knowledge from subject matter knowledge; in fact, subject matter knowledge has come to occupy a central position in today’s construct of LSP testing.” (Emery, 2014: 213)
  - Content rather than language is the distinguishing feature of an LSP task. (Davies, 2001)
- If content knowledge plays no part in the candidate’s performance, it is questionable whether the test is really an LSP test. (Douglas; O’Sullivan in Brunfaut, 2014)
Boundary discussions

- “Conceptually, there is a struggle with integrated concepts” (Brunfaut, 2014: 218)
  - General vs specific language use
  - Independent vs integrated tasks
  - Language vs content
- Contrastive approaches (“versus”) or boundary discussions might not be the most productive discussions (Brunfaut, 2014; O’Sullivan, 2012; Elder, 2001)
  - More in-depth focus on the (integrated) construct
Guidelines

- No theoretical discussion
- Practical point of view: Emphasis on
  - Needs analysis
  - Ongoing conversation and involvement of all types of experts (and other stakeholders)
Key in distinguishing a general language test from a LSP test
Addressing issues of specificity and authenticity

NEEDS ANALYSIS
### Table 16.1  Steps in the NA process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Define the purpose</td>
<td>1 Define the purpose of analysis</td>
<td>1 Decide what information to gather and why</td>
<td>A Get ready to do the NA research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Delimit the target population</td>
<td>2 Delimit student population</td>
<td>2 Decide the best way to gather it: when, how and from whom</td>
<td>1 Define the purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Delimit the parameters of investigation</td>
<td>3 Decide upon approach(es)</td>
<td>3 Gather the information</td>
<td>2 Delimit the target population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Select the information gathering instrument</td>
<td>4 Acknowledge constraints/limitations</td>
<td>4 Interpret the information</td>
<td>3 Decide upon approach(es) and syllabus(es)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Collect the data</td>
<td>5 Select methods of collecting data</td>
<td>5 Act on the information</td>
<td>4 Recognize constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Analyze the results</td>
<td>6 Collect data</td>
<td>6 Evaluate the effect and effectiveness of the action</td>
<td>5 Select data collection procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Interpret the results</td>
<td>7 Analyze data</td>
<td>7 Decide on further or new information to gather</td>
<td>B Do the NA research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Critique the project</td>
<td>8 Interpret results</td>
<td>8 Evaluate the effect and effectiveness of the action</td>
<td>6 Collect data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Implement decisions (i.e., decide upon syllabus, content, materials, methods, etc.)</td>
<td>9 Determine objectives</td>
<td>9 Determine objectives</td>
<td>7 Analyze data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Evaluate procedures and results</td>
<td>10 Evaluate decisions (i.e., decide upon syllabus, content, materials, methods, etc.)</td>
<td>10 Evaluate and report on the NA project</td>
<td>8 Interpret results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[Implement decisions (assessments, materials, teaching strategies, etc.)]</td>
<td>C Use the NA results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[Decide on further information to gather (for ongoing curriculum evaluation)]</td>
<td>9 Determine objectives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Needs analysis

- “Analysis of the Target Language Use (TLU) situation determines test content and method, but also (indigenous) assessment criteria.” (Douglas, 2001: 171)

- “a much more comprehensive, fine-grained and context-specific needs analysis” (Brunfaut, 2014: 217)
Guidelines: general questions

- Establishing a clear need for the test involving the main stakeholder(s) and determining the language needs within a specific domain.
- Data collection: literature/document review, collecting reference materials and resources, observations, interviews/consulting expert informants, …
- Identifying the core target tasks, as well as lexis, functions and grammar for the test.
- Finding and involving suitable subject and context experts to work in partnership with throughout the whole test developing process.
Guidelines: specific questions

- Which **types of tasks** best reflect the needs of the workplace? How **authentic** do these need to be?
- How do the **language demands** interact with the professional subject knowledge and skills?
- What **general language skills** are needed in the TLU domain (i.e., a CEFR level)? Is there a threshold level?
- What **specific language skills** are needed? Which domains, topics, themes and social contexts are relevant?
- What role does **jargon, technical language and professional language** play?
- Does cultural knowledge need to be tested?
Needs analysis: Examples

- The **perfect** police officer will be **completely fluent** and able to communicate in all kinds of language varieties and registers. (ALTE 2018: 8)
  - ‘Perfect’ person vs. minimally competent person

- In a test commissioned to **assess hotel industry language use**, the needs analysis showed that the majority of the test takers would function as **front-of-house staff**, and that they would need to **interact with customers**. (ALTE 2018: 8)
  - The test will need to focus more on the oral skills needed in staff–customer interactions.
Needs analysis: Examples

- It is necessary for a nurse to **speak clearly** as he/she must be understood by elderly patients whose hearing is not good. (ALTE 2018: 19)
  - Impact on rating scale design & rater training

- Determined in a needs analysis
- Refined in conversations between language assessment experts (pronunciation) and subject experts (acceptability)
Authenticity
Authenticity

- a relative rather than an absolute quality

- paramount for LSP testing
  - a critical condition for valid decision-making
  - positive washback on teaching and learning
Authenticity

- a relative rather than an absolute quality

- paramount for LSP testing
- a critical condition for valid decision-making
- positive washback on teaching and learning

All authenticity issues must be dealt with in consultation with subject and context experts. (ALTE, 2018: 9)
Bridging the gap

THE ROLE OF EXPERTS
The role of experts

- Who needs to be involved at what stage of the test development process?

(ALTE 2011, p. 18, 20)
The role of experts

- Assessment experts:
  - Language assessment experts
  - Test developers

- Subject experts: practitioners
  - Air traffic controllers, doctors, nurses, …

- Context experts:
  - Teachers of an LSP course
  - Professional go-betweens
The role of experts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experts</th>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment experts</td>
<td>Monitoring and supervising of the item writing process (recruitment, training, reviewing, etc.), item writing, item/task reviewing</td>
<td>Have previous experience in designing tests for general language ability or language proficiency, acquire up-to-date knowledge in the LSP field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject experts</td>
<td>Training of assessment experts in content domain requirements, providing texts/sources for the test items, supporting item writers in understanding certain materials (texts, areas of vocabulary, etc.) in TLU situations, item writing, writing of samples of anticipated response for items, item/task reviewing</td>
<td>Have current experience in the domain, can detach themselves from their specific workplace and take a broader perspective on the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context experts: LSP teachers</td>
<td>Training of subject experts in content domain (linguistic) requirements, item writing, item/task reviewing</td>
<td>Have expertise in both language and the subject content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An example

- If a test for nurses is designed to cover two workplaces, i.e., hospitals as well as nursing homes for the elderly, it is not always easy to accommodate both areas equally well. While the practitioners of geriatric or hospital care may feel their respective fields to be quite well defined and easily distinguishable from one another, assessment experts might well miss the finer differences. Hence, they might not be able to categorise items correctly and consequently might get the mix of tasks wrong. (ALTE, 2018, p. 12)
To conclude

- Recent publications point to the need of a coherent theory of LSP assessment (see Brunfaut, 2014).
  - O’Sullivan’s 2012 model based on Weir’s socio-cognitive model (2005) is a promising contribution.
- The ALTE guidelines might not provide big answers, but formulate the key questions that will help you design a reliable and valid LSP test for a particular test-taking population in a specific domain.
Thank you!

The important thing is not to stop questioning;
curiosity has its own reason for existing

-Albert Einstein