

TESTING IN OTHER CULTURES AND LANGUAGES

Not everyone speaks English; however, many tests and exams are written originally in English and remain that way usually for the life of the test. So what does that mean for individuals for whom English is a second language, or worse, who do not speak the language at all?

Exam and test questions need to be understood and answered. In the majority of cases they are written in multiple-choice format. There sometimes is a lot of text involved, which means a lot of reading is needed to understand the question. For someone with limited or no English ability, trying to understand and answer test questions must be very difficult or almost impossible. The language of a test, and the level of knowledge of this language for many people therefore is an additional burden above and beyond the knowledge and experience needed to answer the questions.

Only a few countries in the world have English as their primary language. The vast majority of the world speaks English only as a second language, or not at all. Despite this there are fast growing areas where individuals take educational exams and occupational tests in English. These are mainly to be found in Europe and Asia.

I happen to be able to speak a second language--Italian (although it was 30 years since I was fluent). And on a recent visit to that beautiful country I would have been completely stuck. I would not have been able to move around, eat or have conversations (except with my son) if the Italians had not rescued me by being more capable in English than I was in Italian. If I tried to take an Italian language exam, the experience would be a disaster. I would fail the test because of my inability in the language, even though you can classify me as a second language speaker. This scenario of taking a test in a second language for me is imaginary, but for many other people taking tests and exams it must happen day in and day out.

Now I only spoke about people who have at least some skill in the second language involved, but what about those who have to take a test or exam in English but have no English ability at all? There is no good reason to take the test at all. It would be a waste of time and money. But not supporting these individuals and not giving them the opportunity to complete a test or exam in their own language, encourages them to sidestep the rules, perhaps by having someone else take the test for them.

The problem with testing in other cultures and languages is not just with the language. There are countries and cultures with no cultural experience with specific test formats, for example computerized tests made of mostly multiple-choice questions. Test takers struggle conceptually with knowing what is required, e.g. how to operate the computer or how to answer a multiple-choice question.

How can these tests be made fairer then? Or better yet, how can the testing experience minimize or completely remove the problems associated with language and cultural differences? Here are a few ideas that seem to work.

Translate the exams. When feasible, translate the test into the primary languages of the people to be tested.

Provide practice tests. Practice tests that mimic the difficulty and format of the exam and let people experience the (computerized) testing format and the nature of the information in the test. This is useful whether or not the test is translated.

Make sure the tests are culturally fair. Good writers and editors can make sure the test, even in English, does not use jargon, idioms (language specific sayings or expressions), country-specific references, lengthy and complex sentences, or a high-level vocabulary when a simpler one will do.

Give more time. It is possible to allow more time for an English test for those individuals where English is a second language.

Add the English root question. For translated questions, it is a good idea to provide the original English version of the item. Sometimes technical terms get translated when they

shouldn't. Having the English item available helps clarify the meaning of some technical terms.

Rely less on multiple-choice questions. Using more interactive item types, such as simulations, drag-and-drop and others, provides a more intuitive interface and reduces the mistakes usually associated with multiple-choice questions.

Confirm the fairness with research. Use the test results to confirm that persons with equal ability are performing equally on the test, regardless of difference in nationality, culture or language. This research should be made available to test users.

These and others solutions will allow measuring competences of individuals more accurately.