



## **ILTA Workshop Report**

### **Test Specifications**

**January 11 - 15, 2016**

**Universidad de Oriente, Santiago de Cuba**

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#### **Introduction**

Recent evolutions in Cuba have raised the demand for the assessment and the certification of English language proficiency in particular. These calls have revealed an urgent need for local capacity building in a country where language testing still has to be recognized as a professional field in its own right (Van Maele, Rodríguez González, Díaz Moreno, van Splunder & Baten, 2015). To address this need, an extended workshop was organized for 30 language lecturers with the support of an ILTA Workshop Award and of the Institutional cooperation with Universidad de Oriente, IUC-UO project, VLIR-UOS (Flemish Interuniversity Council - University Development Cooperation), funded by the Belgian government (DGD). This five-day workshop was conducted at CATFLAg, the language center of Universidad de Oriente in Santiago de Cuba, one of the country's most important universities (<http://www.4icu.org/cu/>), from January 11 to 15, 2016. The main objectives of the workshop were to enhance overall language assessment literacy and to establish a local community of practice. The focus of the activities was on guided peer-development of test specifications (Davidson & Lynch, 2002; Davidson, 2012), which was considered as a concrete path towards addressing various core issues in language testing and assessment.

#### **Facilitators and Participants**

The workshop was facilitated by Stéphanie Gaillard (Groupe ESC Troyes, France) and Jan Van Maele (KU Leuven, Belgium). The participation of Stéphanie Gaillard was made possible thanks to the ILTA Workshop Award; the expenses of Jan Van Maele were covered by the IUC-UO project (Institutional cooperation with Universidad de Oriente). Fred Davidson (Prof.em. University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) had accepted to be the principal facilitator but he had to cancel due to several travel restrictions for US citizens that were still in place at the time of the workshop. Stéphanie Gaillard, a former PhD student of his who co-facilitated a workshop on test specifications at LTRC 2015, stepped in while Fred Davidson provided continuing support during the preparatory stage and through a prerecorded address to the workshop participants.

A total number of 30 persons participated in the workshop. All participants were university language lecturers in Santiago de Cuba, with representatives from the English Department, the Department of Modern Languages, the University of Medical Sciences, and the Teacher Training College. These last two units used to be separate institutes and were recently merged with Universidad de Oriente. Originally, it had been anticipated that lecturers from other universities (such as UCI in Havana and UCLV in Santa Clara) would also join the workshop, allowing for a wider dissemination across the country. However, due to practical obstacles, these delegates eventually had to cancel their participation.



### **Structure, contents, and outputs**

Following Bachman and Dambock's 2014 recommendation that future ILTA workshops should be longer than two days so that participants can better absorb, understand and apply new information, the workshop was held during five consecutive days from Monday 11 to Friday 15 January, 2016. Each day consisted of two sessions: one in the morning (9:30 am – 12:30 pm) and one in the afternoon (1:30 – 3:30 pm). The following topics and activities were covered during the sessions, making for a combination of theoretical input, hands-on exploration, group discussion, and eventually, the creation of a set of full test specs for the local context.

#### **Monday January 11, 2016: Introduction to test specs**

- Illustrating 'test specs' with the *Elicited Imitation Task* [EIT] (Gaillard, 2014);
- Exercise on understanding 'test specs' with the EIT.

#### **Tuesday January 12, 2016: Reverse engineering of test specs**

- Exercise on 'reverse engineering' on the basis of the test spec for the EIT;
- Exercise on 'straight reverse engineering' on the basis of test tasks from various existing tests (TOEFL, TOEIC, Cambridge, EPT-Illinois);
- Exercise on 'critical reverse engineering' on the basis of the test specs created by peer groups.

#### **Wednesday January 13, 2016: Developing a validation argument**

- Validity: exploration of the possible impact of 'bad tests' in Cuba;

- Validation: illustrating the construction of an argument-based approach (Chapelle et al, 2008) with the EIT;
- Exercise on identifying validation arguments for the tests considered previously in the reverse engineering task.

Thursday January 14, 2016: **Tests, specs, and the CEFR in a Cuban context**

- Exploration of the value of CEFR-descriptors (EAQUALS, 2008) for teaching practice, including specs;
- Reading and discussion of a paper on test specs (Davidson, 2012);
- Co-creating test specs for local use (group work, per institute or department).

Friday January 15, 2016: **Co-creating test specs for local use in Cuba**

- Co-creating test specs for local use – *continued*;
- Conclusions.

By the end of the workshop, participants had created a draft test specs bank with full drafts for the following five tests:

- The CATFLAg Listening Placement Test. Target group: Universidad de Oriente staff, mostly lecturers who are candidates for pursuing a joint PhD in science and technology in Cuba and Flanders, Belgium.
- Final oral test for the course ‘English for Medical Purposes’. Target group: Cuban fourth-year medical students at the University of Medical Sciences.
- In-class writing test on basic communicative functions. Target group: bachelor students (non-language majors) at Universidad de Oriente.
- Midterm test: public speaking for the course ‘English for Legal Purposes’. Target group: second-year law students at Universidad de Oriente.
- Midterm test: essay writing. Target group: third-year students at the Teacher Training college.

## Evaluation

Every day the participants filled out a short questionnaire, including qualitative and quantitative items. On day 5 the participants were asked to present their global evaluation. Overall feedback was very positive, as illustrated by this representative voice.

*What was the most relevant thing you learned this week?* The creation of the spec was really relevant. It is rather new to us but turned to be very useful.

*What was the most difficult aspect?* Applying this knowledge to our context seemed a bit difficult at first but with good teamwork we will make it through.

*What is your overall evaluation?* Overall, the workshop has been wonderful, very hands-on and with a view on language testing that is both useful and necessary to us all.

This degree of enthusiasm and appreciation was also reflected in the quantitative questions, in which participants were asked to rate the presentations and exercises of that day on a four-point scale [1 = very poor; 2 = poor; 3 = good; 4 = very good]. All 14 items that were rated in the course of the week

received a mean score of 3.9 or 4.0. Participants were also asked what they felt was missing from the workshop. The few responses referred to shortcomings that were due to the material context (e.g. breakdowns of equipment) rather than to contents-related matters.

## Conclusions

This workshop provided support for the suitability of using test specs as a pivotal theme in language assessment literacy training. Contributing factors were the fact that test specs engaged participants – including those with no background in language assessment – in concrete tasks; that these tasks naturally led to a discussion of the core issues of a validation argument; and that the produced output appeared of immediate use in the participants' language assessment practice. At a more general level, the workshop succeeded in highlighting language testing and assessment as a prime concern for language teaching professionals in Cuba. The fact that the workshop coincided with a visit from the Belgian Ambassador to Cuba to the Universidad de Oriente even gave the workshop some diplomatic clout.



*From left to right: Stéphanie Gaillard (facilitator), Patrick Van Gheel (Belgian ambassador to Cuba), Jan Van Maele (facilitator), Jorge Herrera Ochoa (head of English Department, Universidad de Oriente)*

Given the fact that other regions of the country were not represented, it appeared not feasible to establish a permanent organisation in the form of a Cuban Network of Language Testers at this point. However, as the workshop progressed, a community of practice was formed that has survived beyond the weeklong intervention. At this moment, the facilitators are still involved in the test specs development process, now from a distance, and they intend to disseminate the insights gained from the experience to the testing community at large. Moreover, as the Cuban and the Belgian side will keep working together within the context of the long-term capacity building project of the Flemish Interuniversity Council, the outcomes will be sustained and a follow-up language testing workshop has been planned for June 2016, targeting participants from a wider range of universities. Thanks to the fact that all workshop materials, including video recordings of the lectures, have been stored on the local server of the university and remain available for downloading, newcomers will be able to

catch up and join hands in the development of an active community of language assessment practice in Cuba.

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