ILTA Workshop Report

Assessment Literacy for Higher Education – setting up a Cuban Network of Language Testers

10 – 14 July 2017

University of Informatics Sciences (UCI), Havana, Cuba

Background

In Cuban universities, English has been taught as curricular subject for many years, going through a range of traditional approaches and methods. The Ministry of Higher Education is currently promoting a paradigmatic change in the teaching and learning of the English language, including the adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This change implies extended teacher training on the implementation and adaptation of the CEFR and on the most recent trends of language teaching and assessment to the Cuban context. There is only very limited availability of practical and valid assessment and testing tools and expert test developers in the Ministry and in Cuban universities. This is why it is imperative to develop assessment literacy amongst a core group in order to form a community of practice, which can widen participation and disseminate expertise for the whole Cuban system.

An initial step to form such a community of practice was made last year, when in January 2016 an international group of testing experts and Cuban teachers worked together at a 5-day workshop at the Universidad de Oriente, in Santiago de Cuba. The January 2016 workshop formed an invaluable first step in forming a local community of practice, access to which, however, was restricted to representatives of universities of the Santiago de Cuba province due to logistics issues and practical obstacles. Hence the 2017 workshop built on this initial community and expanded it by stakeholders and participants from other Cuban regions in order to establish a network of a professional assessment community across Cuba’s universities.

Facilitators and Participants

The workshop was facilitated by Prof Claudia Harsch, director of the Foreign Languages Centre of the universities in Bremen and Professor for Language Learning and Teaching Research at the University of Bremen and by Ivonne de la Caridad Collada Peña, director of the Foreign Languages Centre at the University of Informatics Sciences (UCI). The workshop took place from 10-14 July 2017 at the UCI, which is a central and influential university; this facilitated establishing a hub for a Cuban network of foreign language assessment professionals.

Accommodation and meals for all participants were covered by UCI, travel costs for participants were covered by their respective universities, travel costs for Claudia Harsch were supported by ILTA, and material printing was covered by the British Council Cuba.

A total of 33 persons participated in the workshop. The following participants attended:

- 11 teachers from UCI, with experience in English language training (EFL and ESP), but limited experience in testing and assessment and almost no experience in current-trended test development;
- 2 informatics engineers from UCI with experience in software development and limited experience in the application of ICT to language learning and with some experience in English language training (EFL and ESP)
- 12 teachers from other Cuban universities, with experience in English language training (EFL and ESP), but limited experience in testing and assessment and almost no experience in current-trended test development. They were appointed by their language centers as responsible for the application of the new policy in their centers.

- Planned: 5 teachers from the University of Oriente who participated in the previous workshop, to build on their expertise; unfortunately, travel issues did not allow these participants to reach Havana. They received all the materials and information, so that they can continue working and are included in further activities of the network.

- Stakeholders from all Cuban regions who are responsible for developing the national assessment strategy. These are:
  - The advisor of the Ministry of Higher Education for English Training at Cuban universities. Santiago Jorge Rivera Pérez, PhD, has been leading the new policy for the teaching-learning of English. He has a PhD in Pedagogical Science and has been teaching English for 25 years. He is in charge of managing national tests and the general guidelines for all of the institutions.
  - 6 heads of language centers or departments, who have to do with the application of the new policy in Cuban universities. They are responsible for the implementation of assessment and testing in each institution of higher education in the country.
  - Eduardo Garbey Savigne, PhD: coordinator of the English Language Section of the Association of Cuban Pedagogues. Associate Professor Havana Medical Sciences University

Structure, contents, and outcomes

The workshop was delivered over 5 days with morning and afternoon sessions, as recommended for ILTA workshops. It consisted of a combination of input sessions, group work, hands-on test specification development and discussions, resulting in a set of test specifications and culminating in the setting up of a Cuban network of assessment professionals in Higher Education.

The workshop was accompanied by two strategic meetings over lunch and after the workshop, one with Dr Santiago Jorge Rivera Pérez, the advisor of the Ministry of Higher Education for English Training at Cuban universities, Ivonne de la Caridad Collada, Prof Claudia Harsch, and Yailet Landrove, Projects Delivery Manager at the British Council Havana where strategic aspects of a longer-term cooperation between the University of Bremen and the Cuban partners was discussed; the second meeting took place with Prof Eduardo Garbey Savigne, coordinator of the English Language Section of the Association of Cuban Pedagogues, Ivonne de la Caridad Collada, and Prof Claudia Harsch to discuss aspects of the nature of the new assessment network.
Meeting with representatives of the Ministry, UCI, University of Bremen and British Council

Overview workshop activities:

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Morning Activity</th>
<th>Afternoon Activity</th>
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| Monday, 10 July morning | 1. **Introduction** to language assessment  
2. **Placement** tests | Input to plenary on basic principles in testing and assessment, differences  
large-scale and classroom-based assessment, quality criteria, evaluative cycle  
(curriculum design, teaching aims, learning objectives, assessment),  
educational monitoring  
Input on placement tests and formats; reflection on suitable formats for own  
context |
| afternoon     | 3. **Proficiency** Certificates  
4. **Constructive Alignment** – analyzing current situation in Cuba | Input on proficiency certification and the UniCert® system in the German HE  
context, group work on how this may be adapted for Cuba  
Group work to analyze the current teaching, learning and assessment  
situation in Cuba and to relate principles to local context; analysis of the role  
ICT can play in assessment; establish common goals which participants want  
to cover by the end of the week |
| Tuesday 11 July morning | 5. Assessing **receptive skills** in the foreign language classroom | Input on theoretical models underlying teaching and assessment of receptive  
competences |
| afternoon      | 6. Focus on **Reading Tasks** | Group work on task development and on operationalizing relevant constructs into communicative assessment tasks |
| Wednesday 12 July morning | 7. Focus on **Test specs Reading**  
8. Assessing **productive skills** in the foreign language classroom | Group work on developing test specifications reading comprehension for the  
local context, taking the local curriculum into account  
Input on theoretical models underlying teaching and assessment of productive skills, defining the construct |
| Thursday 13 July morning | 9. Focus on **Speaking Task Design and Test Specs** | Input on task design and test specs speaking |
| afternoon      | 10. **Test Specs Speaking** | Group work on developing test specification Speaking for the local context,  
taking the local curriculum into account |
| Friday 14 July morning | 11. Assessing Speaking: feasible approaches in Cuba  
12. Focus on **Speaking Task development** | Input on assessment approaches, on what it means to be “at a level”;  
exploring feasible approaches to certify B1+ in the Cuban HE system, and  
feasible rating approaches  
Group work on operationalizing relevant constructs into communicative assessment tasks |
| afternoon      | 13. **Rounding up**  
14. **Setting up a Cuban network** | Next steps, timeline, collaborative online space  
The afternoon was used to establish roles and responsibilities the new Cuban  
etwork of assessment professionals |
By the end of the workshop, the following outcomes were achieved:

- A Cuban network of assessment professionals in HE was established, with Pedro Castro Alvarez, UCI, being nominated as head, and local groups in all Cuban regions being established.
- An outline of a training, assessment and certification programme for English language learning in Cuban higher education was drafted, together with stakeholders from the Ministry of Higher Education.
- Test specs were developed for reading and speaking at CEFR levels A1 to B1+.
- Mid-term planning:
  a) The network agreed on a timeline and the next steps (reading task development) until the next workshop, where listening and writing are to be targeted.
  b) It was agreed to expand the existing online platform at UCI so that all network member have online access to a shared collaborative space, where they discuss and give feedback to each other’s task drafts. The next workshop with Claudia Harsch was planned, with financial support from UCI, the Ministry of Higher Education and the British Council. It is taking place 11-14 October 2017.
- Long-term planning: A strategic partnership between the Ministry, UCI, the new Network, the British Council and the University of Bremen was initiated. Meanwhile, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was drafted for long-term cooperation and research. The final discussion for the MoU will take place at the strategic meeting with the Ministry, UCI and network representatives, and the British Council being scheduled for the 9th October 2017.
Right after the workshop, Claudia Harsch, Yailet Landrove (British Council), Pedro Castro Alvarez (UCI), and Norma Melitina Nodarse González, from the Central University of Las Villas (UCLV) traveled together to attend LTRC at Bogota, Colombia, where they also attended the workshop on setting up a Latin American Assessment Association.

Evaluation

On the fifth day of the workshop, participants filled out a questionnaire that included both quantitative and qualitative items. The overall outcome was very positive. Out of 31 people who filled out the form, 29 rated the event as Excellent, only one as Very good and one as Good.

Among the most highlighted aspects were relevance of information, quality of presentations, material availability, program quality, applicability and relevance of discussions.

Almost all participants coincided in considering Prof. Harsch’s knowledge, expertise and skills as the most positive aspects. The only negative comment was about not having enough time in five days. They all commented on the great applicability contents have in the context of their universities, with the new policy being put into practice, and how much they need to continue with this kind of training.

They all expressed commitment with the task of cascading the acquired skills to other teachers and administrators in their institutions.

Conclusions

This workshop first of all provided input and hands-on experience on designing a suitable assessment system for the Cuban higher education context that is reflecting relevant teaching and learning goals while being aligned to an internationally recognized framework, i.e., the CEFR. Teachers and stakeholders alike gained deeper insights into the purpose and guiding principles of assessment principles, constructs, test specifications and task design principles. This workshop will be complemented by further workshops to deepen assessment literacy amongst the Cuban network members.

Second, the workshop facilitated setting up a Cuban network of assessment professionals in higher education: Representatives from nearly all Cuban regions were participating, the last day of the workshop was focusing on setting up the necessary steps for a Cuban network of assessment professionals, and by including ICT engineers, the
workshop contributed to enhancing the existing online collaboration space to create a sustainable working environment and the possibility for development of interdisciplinary research.

Third, selecting UCI as meeting place has strategic implications, as UCI is to become an assessment and testing hub which will be used for the benefit of the whole Ministry of Higher Education as a center for test development and teachers/developers training for several Cuban institutions.

Last but not least, the workshop initiated endeavors for a longer-term strategic cooperation between the Cuban partners and the University of Bremen, to facilitate the sustainable development of assessment literacy and to undertake joint research on the innovative training, assessment and certification program.

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September 2017