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Chapter VI

Online Assessment of Foreign Language Proficiency:

Meeting Development, Design, and Delivery Challenges

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Abstract

In this chapter, the challenges involved in creating online Arabic and Russian proficiency tests by using a commercial test product are discussed. Guidelines used for item and test development are presented, along with specific challenges test developers faced in designing computerized, semiadaptable tests. Also discussed are the issues involved in delivering the tests securely over the Internet to examinees, who took them on computers in college and university language labs across the United States and abroad. The chapter concludes with a list of five important lessons that could help others who are contemplating a similar test development project.

Introduction

Standardized tests of foreign language proficiency for languages that are less commonly taught in the United States—that is, languages other than Spanish, French, German, or English (Walker & McGinnis, 1995)—are needed more than ever to meet the

growing demand for accurate information concerning students' foreign language proficiency in these languages. One common challenge for professionals teaching less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) is the lack of available tests that measure students' progress and proficiency or help with the placement of new students into the appropriate levels of instruction. (See Hughes, 1989, or Bachman & Palmer, 1996, for more information about different kinds of foreign and second language tests.) Because college and university departments and programs that need such language tests are typically small and have low numbers of potential test-takers, few resources are allocated for the development of nationally available standardized tests. In addition, currently available paper and pencil tests for the LCTLs in the United States are often difficult to locate, are inconvenient, and are expensive to administer and score due to the small volume of use. One solution is to create Web-based proficiency tests for these languages. Such tests are more easily available, allow for use by a large variety of programs and institutions, and provide the option of automatic and immediate scoring of test items.

However, Web-based testing of these languages poses a few problems: (a) LCTLs in the United States include languages with logographic (e.g., Chinese) or non-Roman (e.g., Arabic and Russian) alphabets that can be difficult to enter into Web formats; (b) reliable resources for creating authentic test items are scarce; (c) individuals who know the languages well enough to create items may not be at the same location and may not be trained as test developers; and (d) the development of a Web-delivery system for such tests can be time-consuming and costly (Chalhoub-Deville & Deville, 1999; Dunkel, 1999b), especially when compared to the small audience for the tests.

In this chapter, the challenges involved in creating two online LCTL proficiency tests, one for Arabic and one for Russian, at the Center for Applied Linguistics are discussed. Each test has two sections, listening and reading, that can be taken separately or back-to-back in either order. The basic template for these two semiadaptable[1] tests is provided, and insights are offered into how other foreign language online test developers, especially LCTL test developers, could start a similar project.

Background

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is a not-for-profit institution in Washington, DC, committed to improving communication through a better understanding of language and culture. CAL's Language Testing Division has maintained the paper and pencil Arabic Proficiency Test (APT), developed by Dr. Raji M. Rammuny and Dr. Mahmoud E. Sieny at the University of Michigan, since it became operational in 1993. The APT is administered to about 200 students per year.

Project Goals

In 1999, in response to widespread use of networked computer labs at institutions of higher education and advances in computer-assisted and computer-adaptive testing for