Assessing the Suitability of the Project 2020 Test for EFL Teachers in Vietnam

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Abstract

With the aim to upgrade English teaching and learning in the country, the Vietnamese ministry of Education and Training has conducted a nationwide project known as Project 2020. As part of this project, EFL teachers across the country were required to take a test, commonly referred to as the Project 2020 Test. The assessment was meant to investigate the English proficiency of current EFL teaching staff before government-funded training was provided to "unqualified" teachers who failed to achieve their expected levels in reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The paper draws upon this context by offering a discussion on the suitability and organization of the Project 2020 Test in relation to the literature on language for specific purposes (LSP) tests. While the Project 2020 Test highlights the importance of EFL teachers' English proficiency development, which used to be taken for granted, the test items appear to overlook the expected criteria of an LSP test and the actual teaching situations of EFL teachers in the Vietnamese context.

Introduction

In several countries in Asia, recently there has been increased interest in assessing teachers' target language proficiency in an attempt to improve teaching quality and, in turn, foster students' language improvement. Some countries (e.g., Hong Kong, Vietnam) have conducted nationwide projects to evaluate the English language competency of their existing teaching staff. However, those projects, which were carried out with inadequate literature and resources (Hamp-Lyons & Lumley, 2001), received a considerable amount of criticism despite some praiseworthy achievements (Le, 2015; Mai, 2014).

In Vietnam, the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (Project 2020) is being conducted with the aim of improving current English teaching and learning in the country. For the first time, English language standards for EFL teachers of all teaching levels were developed on the basis of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). As a result, EFL teachers across the country were required to take the Project 2020 Test. When the test results were revealed, the majority of teachers failed to achieve the expected English proficiency level, which attracted a lot of criticism from the public. Various reasons have been proposed and discussed for this lack of achievement. Questions and doubts about the professional competence of the current teaching staff were raised. However, not much has been discussed

about the quality of the Project 2020 Test itself, particularly in light of literature on language for specific purposes (LSP) tests. This paper will address the characteristics of and current issues in LSP testing, as well as those designed for evaluating EFL teachers' target language proficiency. Afterward, the Project 2020 Test for Vietnamese EFL teachers will be investigated in light of the literature related to LSP tests and the current teaching situation across the country.

Assessing Language for Specific Purposes

Douglas (2000) defined an LSP test as being developed with a full consideration of the specific features of target language use situations. Since they are supposed to be a predictor of test takers' language performance at work (Elder, 1993), test items are expected to echo the language used in worksite situations. Unlike general language proficiency tests, LSP tests require a balance between linguistic knowledge and specialised knowledge (Elder, 1993; Douglas, 2000; Tratnik, 2008; Brunfaut, 2014). Douglas (2000) claimed that specificity, authenticity and non-language factors are features of an appropriate LSP test. He defined specificity as the distinguishable features of language used in testees' fields. Authenticity reflects how well the test items correspond to real communication at the workplace. Douglas' work has become the underlying framework for the majority of current LSP tests contributing the development of the theoretical foundations of LSP (O'Sullivan, 2012).

In another attempt to describe the features of an LSP test, Tratnik (2008) asserts that a proper ESP test is determined by authenticity, provision of reliable measures of language ability, positive washback on test takers and practicality concerning available facilities and human resources. These features overlap considerably with those applied to general language proficiency tests proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996), whose seminal work also highlighted the importance of authenticity, practicality, and positive impact.

Designing a sound LSP test is a challenging task for any test developer. Those tests are expected to collect inferences about test takers in terms of general language competency and language use in the target workplace (Sullivan, 1996; Douglas, 2000; Douglas 2001; Elder et al., 2012). The key concern remains how much linguists and specialists should be involved in the process of developing the assessment. Generally, LSP tests require more resources when compared to a general language proficiency test (Sullivan, 1996; Hamp-Lyons & Lumley, 2001; Douglas, 2001). Additionally, the literature related to assessing language competence for specific purposes is still far from adequate for test developers (Elder, 1993), which is probably a key source of difficulty concerning test usefulness and effectiveness.

It is important to keep in mind that each professional field requires different language components. For example, English in engineering is obviously distinct from English used by tour guides. There have been some attempts and investments, at least by some institutions, made to develop LSP tests for particular occupations such as the English Test for Aviation (ETA) (O'Sullivan, 2012), Occupational English Test for Health Professionals (Elder et al., 2012), Taped Evaluation of Assistants' Classroom Handling (TEACH), and an evaluation of oral language proficiency for teaching assistants (Douglas, 2000). Besides considerable praise in terms of specificity, these tests also received criticisms, mostly due to the extent to which the test tasks fail to reflect field-specific language (Douglas, 2000; Douglas, & Selinker, 1992; Elder et al., 2012).

Another common choice when conducting an ESP test is to adapt or combine recognised general English tests such as IELTS or TOEFL (O'Sullivan, 2012), regardless of the possible drawbacks of constrainedly adapting the functions of general language tests to those for occupational purposes (Douglas, 2000).

The replacement of LSP tests with non-field-specific and standardized tests (e.g., IELTS) has received critique from both researchers and test takers. These tests are not intentionally developed for field-specific purposes, and, therefore, fail to assess the language essential for test takers' in-service performance. Although they manage to evaluate, more or less, the information related to general language proficiency, the specific language determining successful performance of test takers in work situations is overlooked. Discussing the convenient use of IELTS tests as an alternative to LSP tests, Douglas (2000) claimed that LSP tests are supposed to contain distinct characteristics of workplace communication (e.g., technical terminology, task procedure). Also, Hamp-Lyons and Lumley (2001) raise the question of whether individuals and institutions using the IELTS scores for making job-offering decisions might suffer from the lack of specificity of this test. Hamp-Lyons and Lumley's worry is compelling because the language that IELTS tests aims to evaluate does not always coincide with that used in many fields. This might lead to an unexpected consequence that despite being able to achieve high IELTS scores, employees cannot perform as expected in their professional tasks.

Assessing Language Teachers' Target Language Proficiency

Existing studies have indicated that high proficiency in the target language is essential for L2 language teachers (Tang, 2007; Fraga-Canadas, 2010; Richards et al., 2013; Lv, 2014). They are considered as the models of target language use for many students, especially for those who study English as a foreign language. Learners' exposure to language is centered in in-class activities, with teachers as the instructors, performance models and feedback providers (Hien, 2006). Correspondingly, ensuring teachers' language proficiency is crucial to the broader mission of improving students' language competence.

With respect to teachers' target language proficiency, it consists of a combination of general language use and professional language for teaching (Elder, 1993). General language competency can be understood as the mastery of linguistic competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence (Smadi & Al-Ghazo, 2013). In regards to the working environment of teachers, effective communication with students is an essential contribution to effective teaching (Tang, 2007). Concerning the aspects of teachers' quality, the literature has long highlighted the positive correlation between a command of the target language and teaching performance, including lesson design, lesson presentation, feedback provision and class management (Shin, 2008; Smadi & Al-Ghazo, 2013; Tang, 2007). Language tests designed for teachers should, therefore, represent the competency necessary for their teaching practices. It is also important that the test tasks offer teachers an opportunity to demonstrate their language competence in teaching in addition to general language skills.

Assessment of the language competence of language teachers has been conducted with the underlying aim of upgrading their teaching performance and, in turn, enhancing their students' language development. Teachers' inadequate language proficiency has predictably negative

effects on their performance in classrooms. Those teachers tend to be less confident in their teaching and have difficulty choosing suitable teaching strategies (Smadi & Al-Ghazo, 2013; Tang, 2007). Tang (2007) witnessed that EFL teachers with limited English proficiency provided inappropriate feedback to their students. Teachers' target language proficiency also affects their professional development and prestige within the staff. According to Nakata's (2010) observations, there was a positive correlation between teachers' language proficiency and their ability and confidence in assessing their colleagues' teaching performance.

Evaluating teachers' performance has become a prerequisite for the quality of foreign language teaching and learning. A multitude of efforts and investments have contributed to substantial projects meant to assess teachers' language competency. It is undeniable that test tasks are supposed to reflect teachers' professional activities. In that case, performance tests are an ideal choice (Abraham & Plakans, 1988). Performance tests are usually in-house assessments conducted within an educational institution in which teachers are required to 'perform' a part of their teaching process in a real classroom situation. However, an obvious drawback of this kind of assessment is that it can only involve a small number of teachers and the results might be questioned due to the subjectivity of examiners' assessments.

In an attempt to investigate teachers' target language proficiency on a broad scale, teachers' language proficiency has been assessed by nationwide projects involving all teachers across a country (e.g., Hong Kong (Coniam & Falvey, 2013), Ireland (O'Sullivan, 2012) and Vietnam (NFL 2020 Forum, 2014)). As a telling example, Hong Kong is now (2017) in the middle of a national project involving secondary and primary teachers. They are required to take reading, writing, listening and speaking proficiency tests, as well as perform a teaching demonstration. It appears to have been a well-prepared project, since piloting processes and repeated training for assessors were conducted in advance (Coniam & Falvey, 2013). However, the initial outcomes still show no significant improvement in teachers' standards (Drave, 2006, as cited in Coniam & Falvey, 2013).

It should be noted that LSP tests for teachers have obtained both praise and criticism with respect to their specificity, authenticity and impact on teachers. It is worth acknowledging that ESP test developers have had limited engagement with the literature on developing a proper test (Douglas, 2000). Also, the nature of an LSP test itself contains a variety of factors to be considered (O'Sullivan, 2012). As for tests designed for assessing teachers' proficiency, aspects specific to teaching should be taken into account. In the following sections, I will closely examine the case of Vietnam, where EFL teachers' English proficiency has only recently drawn serious attention (Mai, 2014).

The Adapted CEFR in the Vietnamese Context

Developed by Council of Europe in 2001, the most updated format of the CEFR is originally designed for the contexts of European countries only. It is designed to help Europeans overcome possible difficulties arising in a "multilingual and multicultural Europe" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 3) and intended to be used as a reference for professionals working in the field of language teaching and learning across the continent (Council of Europe, 2001). However, its influence has spread beyond the borders of Europe. Language competency is divided into six

levels, ranging from A1 as the lowest to C2 as the highest (see Appendix A). A detailed description of expected skills is offered for each level covering the four skills (i.e., reading, listening reading and writing) with a focus on communicative competency. With a strong reference to theories of language competency, it is intentionally developed to be 'context free' (Weir, 2005, p. 21; Casas-Tost & Rovira-Esteva, 2014) so that it can be flexibly applied to different contexts. This flexibility, however, has become a source of problems when this framework is adopted and adapted by other countries. All of the descriptions contain statements of expected language skills for each level (e.g., at the A2 level learners are expected to be able to orally express their likes and dislikes). The different possible interpretations of 'able to' statements may result in mismatches in the same level between two contexts (Weir, 2005).

Another issue is the ignorance of local factors such as assessing systems and traditional values when the CEFR is implemented in different contexts or transferred into other languages. Casas-Tost and Rovira-Esteva (2014) explained the case of using the CEFR for the Chinese language in Spain, where Chinese is taught as a foreign language. They noted that the competences described in all levels were too demanding for Spanish speaking students considering the significant differences between Chinese and Spanish. Similarly, the CEFR concepts were verbatim translated into the foreign language evaluation system at Japanese universities (Uni & Nishiyama, 2013). A detailed analysis covering every chapter of the two versions (the original CEFR and its Japanese version) showed that the direct translation failed to consider the context of Japanese education. Furthermore, Uni and Nishiyama (2013) emphasized that other countries should develop their own evaluation frameworks, which are valid in their settings. In all above contexts, the CEFR and its adapted versions have been applied in evaluating learners' target language proficiency. In Vietnam, however, the CEFR has become a scale for standardizing EFL teachers' English language proficiency.

The Project 2020 Test's Suitability

As far as the situation in Vietnam is concerned, a national foreign language project, Project 2020, has been proposed with a view to improving the quality of foreign language education across the country. Since this ambitious project was launched in 2008, teachers' language proficiency has been evaluated using the Vietnamese version of the CEFR. The framework divided English proficiency into six levels from A1, the lowest, to C2, the highest (see Appendix A). A certificate of B2 or C1, according to specific teaching levels, has become the target of all state teachers and lecturers of English (NFL 2020 Forum, 2014). For example, teachers at secondary schools are required to achieve the B2 level, while high school teachers' standard level is C1. More than 80,000 teachers of English across Vietnam were required to take the Project 2020 Test (Parks, 2011). This examination aims at investigating the current proficiency levels of teachers of English before necessary training courses funded by the government were conducted (NFL 2020 Forum, 2014). Despite not being threatened with dismissal from their current positions, teachers were undeniably facing unseen stress when their English proficiency was put on the scale.

The tests are further divided into six sub-sections, including grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, writing and speaking. After administering the first Project 2020 Test across 42 out of 64 provinces total in the country, the majority of teachers were scored as unqualified. The results

showed that 75 percent of elementary teachers and 90 percent of high school teachers were unable to achieve B2 and C1 levels respectively (Tue Nguyen, 2014). Numerous debates and criticisms arose due to these shocking numbers. The English competence of current EFL teachers, which used to be taken for granted, was called into question.

Concerning the quality of a language test, validity, reliability, authenticity, practicality and positive washback are widely considered as must-have criteria (Bachman and Palmer, 1996). As for an LSP test, the specificity factor should be considered so that the test results are projectable to the test takers' language performance at work. Therefore, rather than blaming the existing staff for these disappointing results of the Project 2020 Test, insightful analysis should be carried out, in the first instance, on the basis of the questions of whether the Project 2020 Test manages to reflect the available literature related to LSP as well as whether the Project 2020 Test takes into account the actual language that teachers need for their teaching practices.

Regarding the factors that an LSP test is expected to contain, specificity (i.e., the extent to which the test items reflect the language that candidates actually use in their service) was seriously overlooked, particularly with respect to the test task. The test simply focused on general knowledge of the English language. Of course teachers should show their mastery of general English, which is the subject matter of their teaching. However, the absence of features specific to the domain of language teaching in the entire test is highly problematic. For example, there are three sections in the Speaking test, including social interaction, solution discussion and topic development (see Appendix B). The following example is an example task in the section of solution discussion.

> *"A group of people is planning a trip from Danang to Hanoi. Three means of transport are suggested: by train, by plane, and by coach. Which means of transport do you think is the best choice?"*

With this prompt, teachers who take the test can only demonstrate general English abilities and not the specific language abilities needed for teaching. This can be explained by investigating the original target population of the CEFR who are intended to be learners of general English, rather than teachers whose English competence is a tool for teaching practices. According to Richards (2010), target language proficiency of EFL teachers is defined as the language necessary to teach effectively. It, therefore, covers the English teachers use to interact with their students when delivering lessons and to perform other teaching-related activities (e.g., marking students' papers and giving feedback on students' performances).

Given that specificity features are disregarded, the language included in the test lacks authenticity as well. The test content, which was a combination of IELTS and TOEFL tests, do not reflect teacher-student interactions (see Appendix B). The most obvious illustrations can be found in the Writing section, in which the first task was similar to the IELTS writing section of the general module, and in task 2 of the Project 2020 Test, which mirrored the IELTS writing task 2 of the academic module.

> *"Tourism has become one of the fastest growing industries in the world. Millions of people today are travelling farther and farther throughout the year. Some people argue that the development of tourism has had negative effects on local communities; others think that its influences are positive.*

Write an essay to an educated reader to discuss the effects of tourism on local communities. Include reasons and any relevant examples to support your answer."
You should write at least 250 words. Your response will be evaluated in terms of Task Fulfillment, Organization, Vocabulary and Grammar.
(An example of Writing task 2 of the Project 2020 Test)

The topic can be argued to be unsuitable for English language teachers in the Vietnamese context. Even though it is undeniable that language teachers' should master general English, tests that use ELTS tasks as a sole means to decide whether an English teacher is qualified or not without any reference to teaching practices seem problematic. In other words, the tasks overlook the specificity factor of an LSP test. The topic of tourism fails to cover the abilities needed for language teaching. In my view, in order to test teachers' ability to write a discussion essay related to their field, the test should include topics related to education or tasks involving language teaching situations.

For the sake of test takers, Tomlinson (2005) emphasized that test tasks and test preparation should resemble the language that test takers are familiar with and will actually use for their future communication. Additionally, Douglas (2001) suggested that real communication samples should be collected and reported for the test items. Also, this analysis should be based on reliable theoretical frameworks. Concerning the Vietnamese context, the knowledge teachers might obtain from their preparation process is different from the language of which they are in need for their teaching. For instance, some primary teachers complained that IELTS-based tasks are not useful for their occupational needs at primary schools, given the concern that their students are aged six to eleven (Mai, 2014).

Instead of developing a coherent assessment procedure for all Vietnamese teachers, different leading universities in Vietnam are responsible for conducting a test for assessing teachers in certain neighboring provinces (Toan, 2013). Although fluency levels (A1-C2) orient to the CEFR, the subjectivity of possible interpretations might affect the reliability of the tests. The inconsistencies among the different institutions responsible for organizing the test might result in discrepancies in actual proficiency of two candidates achieving the same qualification. Also, for each teaching level, the same tests are applied to all teachers regardless of their different teaching circumstances, which might lead to another issue. According to Le (2015), there is a big gap in terms of teaching conditions among regions in Vietnam due to the differences in social and economic status. As a consequence, teachers in remote areas might be at a disadvantage when they take the same test compared to those in more developed cities (Parks, 2011). Le (2015) also pointed out that when taking the Project 2020 Test, a number of teacher participants were not provided with adequate preparation for the new test design and were rated by examiners with insufficient training in testing and assessment. According to Nguyen (2017), the language content in the Project 2020 Test is different from what is taught in teachers' training courses and teaching practices, which makes the poor performance of teacher test takers explicable.

The drawbacks of the Project 2020 Test results are rooted in the lack of insightful consideration of the current literature on the characteristics of an ESP test and the current teaching situation in the local context. Consequently, the test fails to highlight the language that

EFL teachers actually need for their teaching practices. Also, the organization of the examination, which might affect the results of teacher test takers, should be taken into account.

Conclusion

It is praiseworthy that the Project 2020 Test has offered teachers an opportunity to self-evaluate their language proficiency as well as encourage lifelong learning, which is of paramount importance to teachers' success (Horwits, 1996). Furthermore, for many Vietnamese teachers, the training they receive from the project helps them get exposure to new teaching methods. This is valuable and urgent for those who are from remote areas and were originally trained more than a decade ago when new teaching methods such as communicative language teaching or task-based language teaching were not in fashion. Additionally, the test results reveal the aspects of English language in which teachers are less proficient, which can become valuable input to develop more efficient in-service training courses.

However, although it is essential for any language teacher to demonstrate their mastery of the general target language, the Project 2020 Test seems to put too much emphasis on general English. Since it is used to classify the current staff into those who are qualified enough to teach and those who need to participate in professional training courses, the test items should also be tied to the specific tasks that teachers carry out in a teaching context. The mandatory training courses for those who fail to exhibit the target proficiency level aim to provide teachers with knowledge of English language teaching and learning, cultures of English speaking countries, and issues related to professional values and attitudes (Thuong Nguyen, 2017). Thus, using a test focusing on general English as a reference to decide whether teachers need to attend training courses whose content is far different from general English might be problematic. This is even more evident in the Vietnamese context, where teachers are considered as the master of knowledge and where teachers' English proficiency has been taken for granted.

The above mentioned drawbacks of the Project 2020 Test could potentially have been avoided with an insightful investigation into the English language needs of target test-takers before the test was officially designed, which was overlooked by test developers in Vietnam. The language proficiency tests applied for Vietnamese EFL teachers leave much to be improved in terms of the engagement of general and field-specific language in the test tasks. The amount of general English and specific English for teaching performance should be reconsidered and more appropriately allocated in the test tasks so that the test would offer teachers an opportunity to demonstrate their mastery in general English and English necessary for teaching practices This paper is not meant to reject the original spirit of the teacher assessment project in Vietnam. Rather, it calls for a critical adjustment of any frameworks borrowed from foreign contexts, especially when the CEFR is more likely used for evaluating English proficiency of general learners rather than EFL teachers. Also, careful research of current literature related to LSP tests with a regard to local situations would be integral to long-term improvements of teaching staff in the country.

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APPENDIX A
CEFR Reference Levels

Level		Global descriptor
Proficient user	C2	Proficiency: 'Mastery'; not native-speaker competence
	C1	Advanced: 'Effective Operational Proficiency'
Independent user	B2	1st Certificate: Post-intermediate
	B1	Pre-1st Certificate: 'Threshold'
Basic user	A2	Pre-intermediate: 'Waystage'
	A1	Post beginner: Breakthrough

(Council of Europe, 2001)

APPENDIX B
Description of a Project 2020 Test for Vietnamese EFL teachers

Components (point allocation/100)	Duration (minutes)	Number of items	Task description
Listening (20)	40	35 items	Task 1: short announcements or instructions Task 2: conversations on everyday topics Task 3: a talk or lectures
Reading (30)	60	40 items	4 reading passages (500 words/each)
Writing (30)	60	2 tasks	Task 1: replying an email/letter Task 2: an academic style essay on a common topic
Speaking (20)	12	3 sections	Social interaction Solution discussion Topic development

(Source: http://vstep.edu.vn/de-thi-mau-chung-chi-b1-b2-c1-tieng-anh-theo-dinh-dang-vstep)

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