SHALL WE TEST MEDIATION SKILLS?

The candidates' perspective

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1. Introduction

No responsible language examination provider with carefully written specifications, with a clearly defined purpose, a transparent testing context and a well-established candidate base should ask such a question. An operational test that clearly reflects the interaction of these four elements either tests mediation skills, or alternatively, does not test this fifth skill. It tests mediation skills for a number of reasons: because of the required positive washback that the instructional setting requires; because there is a clear link between the mediation element of the syllabus and the mediation construct and its operationalization in the test specifications; and because the assessment criteria capture the underlying construct which the test intends to measure. On the other hand, there are a number of reasons an operational test will not test mediation skills. Firstly, because the needs analysis that informed the test specifications did not indicate target language use situations in which mediation skills are required. Secondly, teaching mediation skills is not part of the foreign language syllabus and/or thirdly, a lack of commonly accepted conceptualization of the skill makes the measurement and the assessment procedure highly problematic.

The currents research surveyed test-takers in Hungary with the aim of obtaining information about their experience with mono- and bilingual examinations. Bilingual examination for the purposes of the current paper is defined as a language test which includes the assessment of mediation skills either in the oral, written, or in both parts of the examination. A language examination which, in addition to the target language, applies mother tongue as a medium, i.e. the instructions are in the candidates' native language, is not considered a bilingual examination in this paper. With an average of 170, 000 annual test-takers in Hungary taking examinations in 36 different languages and with 23 accredited examination centres at the time of writing of this article, it appears that foreign language examinations are in demand in the country. The two dominant factors that attract candidates to taking foreign language examinations are related to studies in higher education. Accredited foreign language examinations add extra scores to the grades of the school-leaving examination and thus increase students' likelihood of admission to higher education. Secondly, in Hungary a foreign language examination is to be taken as partial fulfilment of completing a degree course in higher education. The number and type of language examination depends on the type of course; certain courses set two language examinations as a graduation requirement, one of which should be an LSP exam, others require only one. It is at the student's discretion whether they select a mono- or bilingual exam; the only stipulation is that the language examination should be accredited. Out of the 23 accredited examination providers 13 offer bilingual exams and 9 monolingual exams, of which seven are foreign examination centres in addition to the two Hungarian examination boards. One exam board offers the choice of both mono- and bilingual examinations.

It is not unintentional that the current paper selected the word 'mediation' rather than 'translation' as a key noun in the title. In doing so our aim was to indicate that our research focus is not translations skills associated with translation studies. Neither do we question the legitimacy of testing translation or interpretation skills. The question concerning whether mediation skills are part of general language proficiency will remain unanswered as it is beyond the scope of this study, regardless of the keen interest and opinions of the author on this topic. Nevertheless, the project hopes to highlight candidates' motivation in selecting a mono- or a bilingual examination and explore the attractions of the two different types of exam. The research questions that guided the project were the following:

Which are the factors that make bilingual examinations, including a mediation component, attractive to examinees?

Which exam is the more preferred type amongst the candidates participating in the research?

2. Methods

The Foreign Language Examination and Training Centre of the Budapest Business School provides examinations at three levels: B1, B2, C1 and in eight languages: English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Japanese and Chinese. Since its accreditation in May 2000, nearly 60,000 candidates have taken one of the language examinations offered by the board. The Examination Centre provides specific purpose language examinations in three fields: business, finance and tourism. The examination is bilingual: it also measures mediation skills. As part of its regular research and development activity, the Budapest Business School collects candidate feedback on issues related to test administration. In addition to the standardized paper-based questionnaire which collects data after the written and oral test at the examination, online questionnaires have been introduced and are used on the website of the examination centre after each examination session, each with a constantly changing focus. The amount and depth of data obtained from these sources in the past couple of years seem to suggest that candidates are more relaxed and willing to voice their opinion on the online platform when detached from the live exam context and relieved from test anxiety. The current study used an online questionnaire powered by 'SurveyMonkey' to inquire about candidates' views on monolingual and bilingual examinations, their preferences and the motivations behind selecting one or another.

2.1. Participants

873 (74%) of the respondents completed the online questionnaire out of the total 1177 who started filling in the online survey. The question on background data which sought to explore respondents' test-taking is of particular interest to the focus of the study. 17 different examination boards were listed where participants had taken language examinations.

The participants of the survey do not constitute a representative sample of test takers in Hungary, yet the fairly large sample size and the wide experience obtained through test-taking with different examination boards allows us to draw tentative conclusions based on the results.

BME	
általános	45
szakmai	
Cambridge	4
DEXAM	1
ECL	18
EURO	1
szakmai	2
általános	7
Goethe	14
KITEX	20
Kodolányi	
Társalkodó	
Gazdálkodó	4
LCCI	3
OECONOM	21
Origo	84
Pannon	13
Pitman	11
TELC	66
Trinity	2
Zöld Út	15
ÖSD	16

FIGURE 1 Participants' previous experience with different examination providers

2.2. Materials

The online questionnaire was accessible on the online platform of the examination board for registered users only. The data collection was conducted during a period of six examination sessions. Although only a rather small section of the questionnaire focused on the issue of monolingual and bilingual examinations, the open questions yielded extremely rich data on reasons, justifications and motivations that fuelled examinees' choices. Examinees were asked about their preferred examination type and also to give reasons for their choice.

2.3. Analysis

The analysis of the open-ended questions was performed with the assistance of the computer software MaxQDA. A coding system was worked out at the initial stage of the analysis which was extended as the analysis proceeded. An extensive list of categories was established where candidates' responses could be categorised into three dimensions: features motivating candidates to select a monolingual (3.2) or bilingual exam(3.3), and features which are a motivation for some and a distraction for others (3.1).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Features that may attract some and distract others

An interesting overlap was apparent between the same categories which for some candidates represented a distinct disadvantage, and for others a definite advantage of the preferred type of examination. The first such common category entailed issues of prestige and wider acceptance. Reference to this feature of an exam indicates that for some candidates monolingual exams seem to be of higher general acceptance, whereas others attach higher value to bilingual exams. The second common category similarly reflected a diversity of opinions concerning the measurement qualities of the two different types of language tests. Some candidates consider a bilingual examination a more reliable and valid measurement tool to assess candidates' language proficiency, whereas for others a monolingual exam gives a more accurate estimate of the trait measured. The third such category included candidates' emotional dispositions towards the preferred type of examination. Examinees expressed their affective attitudes towards the mono-or the bilingual exam and also claimed to perform at a higher level in one or the other type of examination. Regardless of whether the respondents preferred monolingual or bilingual language examinations, among the justifications in both group the "because it is easier" was commonly cited.

3.2. Reported attractions of monolingual examinations

Time appears to be an important factor for examinees. As a monolingual exam consists of fewer tasks, both the preparation time for the exam and the examination itself is shorter than a bilingual exam. Although issues related to test administration are external factors in test delivery – even if they might be a significant source of construct irrelevant variance in the measurement process – other surveys carried out by the examination centre suggest that practical reasons are decisive factors in candidates' choice of examination types and thus cannot be ignored. A number of candidates also considered monolingual examinations more useful, effective and represent a life-like situation and target language use in a more authentic way. Among the reasons related to administrative issues examinees also mentioned monolingual exams as the only acceptable type regarding the partial requirement to obtain a degree, which is a claim not consistent with the existing regulations and might be due to a lack of accurate information on the part of the respondent. There are no stipulations concerning the mono- or bilingual nature of the language examination required for any degree obtained in higher education.

Further reasons provided as an attraction of the monolingual exam included factors related to the cognitive load of the exam and the emotional attitude of the examinee associated with a supposed better performance on the favoured type of exam. The most frequently voiced opinion concerned the use of one single language throughout the exam which not only made the exam itself easier but the preparation process is also more effective if one language has to be used.

C120 It is much easier to define something in English than to translate it into Hungarian; in fact, there are certain issues which do not lend themselves to simple translation at all. Because of this, I prefer the monolingual exam.
C133 It is much more convenient to have to assume a German-speaking identity all through the exam.
C153 Switching between the two languages makes the examination difficult; it's much easier to think, read, write and speak in one language only.
C208 Quite often I understand the text I am reading in a foreign language but I cannot translate it smoothly into a coherent and elaborate Hungarian text.
C108 Mediation is one of the most complex skills and translation and mediation tasks are the most difficult components of the language examinations.
C164 The problem with this type of exam is that if you don't know the key words and terms in Hungarian you fail the whole mediation subtest.

The comments above reflect attitudes why the candidates would not choose the bilingual exam rather than what they like about it. An additional task which extends the preparation time and the length of the exam and which tests a skill they do not feel proficient in, for various reasons might turn away candidates from the bilingual exam and encourage them to select the shorter and less complex monolingual exam.

One examinee claimed that monolingual examinations can also give an accurate measure of the learner's language proficiency. Others raised an interesting issue concerning the construct validity of the examination: whether it is fair to include the assessment of the native language in a foreign language examination. The question of what skill is tested by the mediation task was also raised.

C2 In a monolingual exam it doesn't matter how I speak my native language, the only thing that counts is my foreign language proficiency.
C72 I feel that a foreign language examination should be 100% about a foreign language and not about the mother tongue.
C120 I think the use of the native language is justified in a language examination only if the examination tests proficiency in that language and not in a foreign language.
C67 Comprehension skills can be evaluated with the complete exclusion of the mother tongue.

FIGURE 2 Word frquency: monolingual examinations

3.3. Reported attractions of bilingual examinations

More than half of the respondents who answered the open question to justify why they would select a bilingual exam thought that mediation skills were important but they did not give a justification as to why they thought the skill was important. A number of candidates felt that their good mediation skills could compensate for other language skills they were less proficient in. They also claimed they liked the task and they enjoyed preparing for the bilingual tasks and found them really useful. These students also felt that the mediation task provided them with a good opportunity to give a more comprehensive account of their language knowledge.

C216 Foreign language proficiency also involves moving between two languages.
C133 A bilingual exam gives a more complex picture of language proficiency.
C197 Once I pass a language examination, it should prove that I am indeed at the required level.
C232 I find the mediation component of the examination extremely useful. It is through this task that the candidate's comprehension, logical thinking and summary skills can be evaluated.

Many thought that it was more life-like and natural to use both languages and that resorting to the native language in the examination can reduce test anxiety and give candidates a moment of respite.

C80 Bilingual tasks relieve stress and after all it is possible to check comprehension with the use of the native language.
C163 I was so pleased to talk in Hungarian in my English exam.
C170 Given the fact that we live in Hungary and speak English here, this answer needs no further justification.

A lot of respondents claimed that as a bilingual examination is a more comprehensive measure of language proficiency, it gives a more accurate picture of the examinee's language knowledge and thus is of higher prestige and more universal recognition and acceptance. They also noted that for those who would like to work in Hungary, mediation skills are indispensable – especially for those seeking jobs in multinationals.

C301 Monolingual examinations are considered to lack quality.
C200 Many companies value a bilingual examination much more.
C227 A bilingual task adds to the value of the language exam.

FIGURE 3 Word frequency: Bilingual examinations

4. Conclusion

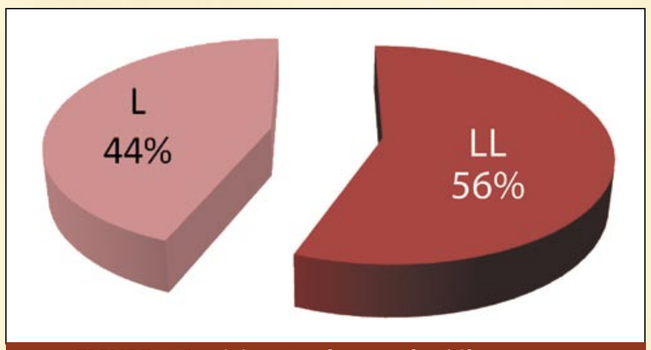

FIGURE 4 Candidates' preferences for different types of examinations

This study presents the most important findings of a larger survey the aim of which was to explore the reasons why candidates are attracted to monolingual or bilingual language examinations. A fairly large yet not representative sample of the examinees of the Foreign Language Examination and Training Centre of the Budapest Business School was questioned about the factors that motivated their choice of a certain type of examination. The respondents consider practical issues including length of preparation and that in relation to the exam itself, emotional factors such as affective reception of the task as well as assumed proficiency level and success with or without a mediation task as major decisive factors. Usefulness and applicability in addition to questions of acceptance and recognition are also important factors. The proportion of those opting for monolingual and bilingual examinations is decidedly balanced. Candidates have a wide selection of language examination to choose from which gives them the opportunity the select the exam which allows them to more abundantly fulfil their potential in a foreign language examination.

There are a number of issues, however, language examination centres and test developers have to consider when deciding whether to offer a monolingual or bilingual examination. The purpose of the exam, stemming from real-life language use coupled with positive test impact, is of paramount importance in developing bilingual test components. A careful consideration of reliable assessment and construct validity issues which have been the target of severe criticism should ensure that a bilingual examination component adds to the reliability of the measurement process. Finally, it is not sufficient that the measurement process is reliable, the construct purportedly measured by a test should be clearly defined and appropriately operationalized as well.