

## **EALTA-funded workshop series:**

# **‘Communicative Language Assessment: Promoting Best Practice for English Language Classrooms’**

**12-17 November 2017**

Report by Benjamin Kremmel, Monique Yoder and Laura Vilkaitė-Lodzienė



## **Introduction and rationale for workshops (use info from the proposal)**

Within the past decade, there has been a redirection in the approach of foreign language testing within the Republic of Lithuania. Previously, the matura foreign language exams reflected a structuralist view of language testing theory, yet now the emphasis has shifted to performance assessment. Currently, the National Exam Center (NEC) in Vilnius works with upper secondary school teachers in training them on how to assess speaking and writing skills for the school-leaving exams to ensure consistency of test administration and ensure reliability when evaluating students' language performances. Unfortunately, this training has not trickled down to lower secondary school foreign language teachers, and some are reticent to write language tests within their own classrooms. Rather, they prefer to use assessments that come readymade from textbooks or other published course materials, with varying degrees of awareness of their suitability or validity, and little training on how to evaluate or improve on these sources.

In helping to promote and work towards the objectives of EALTA to improve language testing and assessment systems and practice in Europe and building assessment expertise at a local level, the overarching goal of the communicative language assessment best practices workshop series was to improve classroom-based language assessment of foreign languages literacy in lower secondary schools within Lithuania by providing basic training in classroom-based language testing and assessment to EFL teachers in lower secondary schools. By participating in the workshop sessions, lower secondary school teachers were able to a) distinguish formative and summative classroom-based assessments, b) evaluate existing assessments that encourage authentic and communicative usage of spoken and written language, and c) raise awareness on how to adapt textbook or other readymade assessments to elicit and evaluate spoken and written performances. A second objective of the workshop series was to increase visibility of EALTA in a country that has few individual EALTA members.

## **Locations and Partners**

After consultations with representatives from the NEC and the English language teachers in Lithuania (LAKMA) professional organization, we identified Vilnius, Panevėžys, Kaunas, and Klaipėda as the four Lithuanian cities to hold the workshops. The geographic distribution of the cities made the workshops accessible to teachers, with no teacher needing to travel more than 100km to attend the event. Hosting institutions where we were either employed or had personal connections were the venue locations for the workshops. This allowed us an opportunity to keep the venue rental costs to an absolute minimum and plan logistics in advance. There was a point person at each venue who helped us to arrange for the rooms, food, and equipment necessary for the sessions. Laura Vilkaitė-Lodzienė acted as the point person for Vilnius University, Vladislava Veličkienė for Panevėžio 5-oji gimnazija, Juratė Zybartienė for Jono Joblonskio gimnazija I Kaunas, and Monique Yoder for LCC International University in Klaipėda.

A month before the workshops, LAKMA promoted our workshop series by distributing printed flier advertisements at its annual ELT conference and sending digital fliers through its email listserv. Admissions counselors and English department faculty at LCC International University also distributed digital fliers to their network of English language teachers in the western part of the country. It was of great benefit for us to have gone through these channels since teachers trust the professional development sessions that LAKMA and LCC host throughout the year. A week before the series took place, we had to close our online registration for two of the sites and put teachers on waiting lists due to teachers' interest outnumbering the number of seats we had available.

## **The EALTA-funded workshops**

We held the workshops series throughout Lithuania from 13 – 17 November, 2017 to accommodate for the All Saint's Day holiday and school breaks. Each one-day workshop accommodated up to 30 teachers and comprised three sessions, intermixed with coffee and lunch breaks. Sessions established an overview of classroom-based assessments to fit the needs of the A2-B1 English as a foreign language classroom. At the end of the day, certificates of attendance were awarded to participants (see programme below).

**Workshop Programme** (except the Klaipėda workshop, which started at 9:00 and finished at 15:15)

- 9:30 - 10:00: Registration
- 10:00 - 11:30: Overview of formative and classroom-based assessment
- 11:30 - 12:00: Coffee
- 12:00 - 13:15: Key considerations in assessing the productive skills
- 13:15 - 14:00: Coffee
- 14:00 - 15:30: Tailoring materials to fit classroom assessment needs
- 15:30 - 15:45: Final thoughts / Certificates for participants

### **Session Content**

Benjamin Kremmel created the materials for and led the workshop sessions. The first half of the morning session focused on assessment types, distinguishing between formative and summative assessment, identifying self-assessment tools for the classroom, and invited teachers to share their experiences in creating and using these types of assessments in their own classrooms. The second half of the morning session focused on principles of test usefulness, defining key aspects that make a good test (e.g., reliability, validity, authenticity, impact/washback, and practicability).

After the first coffee break, the session looked at writing task design and evaluating different types of real-world prompts in relation to the features of communicative assessment and the principles of test usefulness discussed in the morning session. Special attention was paid to the rubric (instructions) of a writing task and provided teachers with recommendations of what they should consider when constructing writing tasks for their own classroom use. The session closed with a look at the differences between analytic and holistic rating and considerations of the type of feedback to give to students once they've completed a writing assessment.

The final session of the day began with a look at the factors that make up a performance assessment (e.g., the performance itself, the test-takers, the interplay between the test-taker and his or her interlocutor, raters, etc.) to raise teachers' awareness of how incredibly complex assessing writing and speaking assessments can be. Teachers then interacted with each other in pairs and triads to identify features of spoken language as an exercise in critically thinking about the construct of speaking. This led into a discussion on how task design can be shaped to measure the speaking construct(s) in focus for a performance assessment. Special attention was paid to test fairness and the importance of choosing tasks and content that help push test-takers to demonstrate what they can do with the language

have. Short video clips from the *Into Europe* series were used to demonstrate this concept. The session ended with a look at writing assessments from textbooks used in Lithuania English language classes. Using the theoretical principles from the day's sessions, teachers critically evaluated the tasks and offered suggestions on how the prompt could be altered to make it more communicative and tap into the construct in focus.

### **Vilnius session**

26 teachers from the capital and the outlying area attended the November 13 session at Vilnius University. We were pleased with the LAKMA president, Eglė Petronienė, in attendance, offering her support to the event and interactively participating with the other teachers. Although the workshop aimed to allow lower-secondary school teachers a chance to develop their assessment literacy, it was interesting to have a variety of teaching contexts represented, from primary- to secondary- to tertiary-level in both private and public schools. This allowed for insightful sharing in both the small-group and large-group discussions.



### **Panevėžys**

24 teachers from mostly lower secondary public schools attended the November 14 workshop at Panevėžio 5-oje gimnazija. Typically, Panevėžys is often looked over when it comes to delivery of language pedagogy professional development sessions. Historically, teachers from this area of the country have not participated in professional development events offered by LAKMA or other professional groups. In turn, these organizations often don't host events in Panevėžys. Rather, they hold the events in Kaunas or Vilnius. We were very pleased to see that we had such a great turn out for this event by teachers in the Panevėžys area and northeast part of the country. The teachers in this one were particularly interactive, eager to ask questions, and willing to share their classroom assessment experiences. Had EALTA not been able to so graciously fund this workshop series, this opportunity would have not existed.



### **Kaunas session**

20 teachers from various public schools in the city of Kaunas and an ERASMUS exchange graduate student studying education in Šiauliai attended the November 15 workshop at Jono Joblonskio gimnazija. There was a mix of novice and more established teachers who participated, and the discussions benefited greatly from the ideas that the novice teachers shared.



### **Klaipeda session**

Weather affected the attendance for the November 17 workshop in Klaipėda. Earlier in the week there had been heavy rain and flooding in the city and neighboring areas. Of the 35 teachers registered for the workshop, 16 teachers were able to attend. Although smaller in number, the teachers were as equally interactive as other locations. Most of the teachers in attendance came from lower-secondary schools in the area; however, there were a couple of private language school teachers who also participated. This is encouraging that teachers at these institutions showed a keen interest in making sure that their classroom assessments follow best practices principles.



### **Feedback**

During the coffee shops and after the sessions, there was a lot of positive verbal feedback. Participants specifically commented that they appreciated the quality of the content that the workshop leaders shared and the level of professionalism in which we were able to deliver the workshops. Participants expressed great appreciation for the workshop and extended productive assessment materials we shared with them via email the week after the workshop series. There were opportunities at the end of the session to talk about how to keep the conversation going about best practices in assessment. There is a language assessment Facebook group maintained by the NEC and some members from LAKMA. EALTA may be able to liaise with this group to help share more information about assessment literacy and best practices.

After the sessions, a GoogleForms questionnaire was distributed. Unfortunately, the completion rate was very low, so that it does not seem feasible to report any results in detail here.

### **Going forward**

It is our hope that with these workshops, we were able to introduce the EALTA organization to lower secondary school teachers within Lithuania and familiarize them with the aim and mission of the organization. It is our hope that we'll be able to see a spike in EALTA memberships for Lithuania. More importantly, though, we hope that these teachers shared their experience at our workshops with their colleagues and institutions; thus, continuing the conversation about what to consider when creating classroom assessments that are meaningful, relevant, and useful to language-learning students.

### **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank EALTA and the selection committee in allowing us the chance to hold this workshop series. Overall, we got the impression that these sessions were well-

received by the teachers who participated. Funding this series allowed us to reach teachers who are normally left out in the language testing best practices conversation.

We would like to extend our thanks to Vladislava Veličkienė and Gintare for their over-the-top hospitality at Panevėžio 5-oje gimnazija. They kept us well-fed, hydrated, and looked after. Juratė Zybartienė did a great job of organizing everything for us and welcoming us at Jono Joblonskio Gimnazija, even though she had other administrative duties that needed her attention on the day of the workshop. Diana Kvasniauskaitė in the Business Office at LCC International University made it possible for us to administer official receipts to all participants for the EUR nominal fee that covered the cost of refreshments and lunch at the different venues. Avital Agafonova, administrative assistant for Academics at LCC International University, was also of great help in liaising with maintenance crew on making sure the rooms were made up for our sessions. We sincerely thank LAKMA for helping us get the word out about the workshops series and would also like to personally thank our employers for letting us take time off work to travel to and around Lithuania to run the workshops.



*“Labai ačiū!!”* from the workshop series team.