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Foreign language test for people with disabilities: basic requirements and specifics of development

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Written by:

V. B. Kurilenko²¹⁴

ORCID: 0000-0003-3638-9954

Elibrary: 1106-3582

Yu. N. Biryukova²¹⁵

ORCID: 0000-0002-5977-4081

Elibrary: 2426-6209

K. V. Ahnina²¹⁶

ORCID: 0000-0003-3379-9077

Elibrary: 4683-2171

Yu. S. Pestushko²¹⁷

ORCID: 0000-0002-9397-8096

Elibrary: 7731-5060

E. Yu. Kulikova²¹⁸

ORCID: 0000-0001-8595-939X

Elibrary: 5603-6120

Abstract

The article describes the specifics of developing a foreign language test for people with disabilities. It is obvious that such tests have differences in organization and content compared to tests for ordinary students. They have structural, content, functional flexibility and variability depending on the type of violation. The article also notes the importance of taking into account discursive characteristics for determining test situations and selecting language, speech, and communication material while creating each specific test. It is revealed that testers and testologists should have the inclusive competence to develop test materials and conduct the exam. Such inclusive features should be taken into account while creating materials for testing in a foreign language for people with disabilities.

To prove that consideration of these features is necessary, an experiment was conducted in which 15 students with partial and complete vision loss who plan to take a test for the level of foreign language proficiency participated. The students were from different countries: Syria, Egypt, and China. The analysis of respondents' responses showed that the factors identified in the article are important and should be taken into account in the process of preparing test materials.

The results obtained can be used by creators of test materials for people with disabilities, scientists who are engaged in related research in this area.

Keywords: test for people with disabilities, requirements and factors to tests, inclusive student.

²¹⁴ Professor, Dr. habil. Medical Institute, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Moscow, Russia.

²¹⁵ Associate Prof., PhD, Medical Institute, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Moscow, Russia.

²¹⁶ Associate Prof., PhD, Medical Institute, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Moscow, Russia.

²¹⁷ Associate Prof., Dr.habil, Pacific National University, Khabarovsk, Russia.

²¹⁸ Associate Prof., PhD, Law Institute, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Moscow, Russia.

Introduction

Problem setting

According to the World report on disability (produced jointly by WHO and the World Bank), more than a billion people in the world today experience disability. This corresponds almost to 15% of the total population in the world. Disabled people generally experience more problems than people without disabilities. They have poorer health, lower education achievements, fewer economic opportunities and higher rates of poverty. In many countries disabled people have problems with physical environments and transportation. Assistive devices and technologies are not available or not always adapted. Moreover, cases of discrimination against persons with disabilities are not uncommon.

In modern day society, the rights of disabled people are protected by the “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” in many countries. This document explains that people with disabilities are part of our society and have the same rights as people without disabilities. Persons with disabilities **should be integrated into any possible** area. It is obvious that disability cannot be a reason for denying access to development programs or the realisation of human rights.

Each member of society has the right to education, which should also be implemented by people with disabilities who wish and can acquire the skills necessary for a particular profession. Education is one of the factors that can help people with disabilities overcome their own limitations. Foreign language training is traditionally carried out in educational institutions where a large number of disabled people study. At the end of the foreign language training course, many students are invited to take a test and receive a certificate confirming their foreign language proficiency levels so that they can use them in their professional careers.

Of course, tests designed for students without special needs will not be relevant for people with health problems. Therefore, these tests should have their own specifics and content for a certain category of citizens.

Let us consider these features in more detail.

Specifics and content of a foreign language test for students with special needs.

The testing system for people with disabilities should:

- meet the requirements of *discursive expediency* and *discursive priority*, which, first of all, is manifested in the development of a linguodidactic description of communicative competence of students with disabilities, the definition of test situations and the selection of linguistic, speech and communicative material included in test materials;
- have structural, conceptual and functional flexibility and variability;
- be *accessible* to all categories of testees, which makes it necessary to (a) rely on safe analysers of migrants with special needs in the process testing in Russian as a foreign language; and (b) use technologies and means of sensory compensation, taking into account the specific needs of persons with health problems; and;
- entice testers and testologists possessing *inclusive competence* into developing test materials and conducting examinations, developing and implementing a system of measures to form this competence in persons integrated into the process of preparing and conducting tests in Russian as a foreign language for students with special needs.

Let us consider the main areas of implementation of these requirements using the example of a testing system for students with defective vision. A linguodidactic description of communicative competence for the testees, their possible socio-communicative roles and intentions, genres, types, genre varieties of texts, requirements for skills in the main types of speech activity (Dolzhikova *et al.*, 2016, 2018). It appears that all of the listed components should be meaningfully refined and modified in the linguodidactic description of the communicative competence of students with defective vision. The nomenclature of situations and conversation topics for this category of testees should be determined with a focus on their priority discursive needs, taking into account the requirements of discursive expediency — testologists should first of all answer the questions: what is the real communicative practice of this group of testees and what situations, topics and socio-communicative roles are of the greatest importance for them?

For example, in our opinion, situations of *the socio-cultural sphere* may include communication:

- in specialised cultural and leisure institutions (for example, in a library for people with defective vision);
- in sports and recreation centres for people with defective vision;
- in centres for socio-cultural integration of people with health problems, etc.

Expanding the list of communication situations necessitates determining specific socio-communicative roles in which students with defective vision can act. From our point of view, these roles can include as follows:

- a visitor to specialised state institutions and public organisations;
- a patient of semi-stationary and stationary institutions of a social or medical and rehabilitation orientation;
- a member of public associations of people with special needs, etc.

We believe that the topics of communication relevant to this category of testees can include: “Rehabilitation problems”, “Accessible/barrier-free environment”, etc.

The second of the requirements outlined above — the requirement of adaptability — implies the need to create an adaptive testing environment, “friendly” for people with health problems. First of all, this relates to the structure of the linguodidactic test, which should be flexible, i.e. vary depending on the specific needs and requirements of the considered contingent of migrants.

A typical test in a foreign language, as a rule, has a modular structure and is formed by the subtests: “Reading”, “Listening”, “Writing”, and “Speaking”. In some languages, for example, in Russian, the fifth subtest is included, i.e. “Vocabulary. Grammar”.

The modularity of the test structure allows it to be “tailored” to the needs of people with one or another form of health disorder and to develop options for each group of migrants with special needs [ADA 2010, Bulletin 2019, Sergeeva et.al. 2018, Malusho et.al 2017]. We think it possible to exclude from each version of the linguodidactic test subtests addressed to a particular group of testees, the implementation of which requires predominant reliance on the sensor system that was deprived (for example, “Reading” and “Writing” for people with defective vision and “Listening” for those with hearing disorders). We conceive this to be justified from a communicative point of view: these types of speech activity are either completely excluded or are not leading in real communication of the considered contingent. At the same time, using 3–4 subtests, it is possible to check rather effectively the general readiness of testees with disabilities to communicate with native speakers.

As noted above, test materials for students with defective vision should meet the accessibility requirement: the most effective, methodically correct test materials can lose their measuring power, validity and reliability if they are accompanied by fuzzy and difficult instructions or presented in a format that is not accessible to the testees. As a rule, instructions for subtests in foreign language tests are presented in the form of microtexts. In our opinion, for this category of testees, it is more methodologically justified to present the information contained in these instructions (the number of tasks, the task time, the possibility of using the dictionary, etc.) in tabular form. Among other issues, a table can include an indication of the maximum score that can be obtained after the successful completion of the subtest as well as iconic symbols, for example, to indicate that it is forbidden to use the dictionary. Here is a possible variant of a similar form presenting instructive information (Fig. 1), which can be used in the “Listening” subtest.

10 assignments

Time: 25 minutes



Subtest 3. LISTENING

max 70 points

Fig. 1. Sample instructions for the “Listening” subtest in Russian for students with special needs.

An integrated form of representation of working matrices will also greatly facilitate the test execution procedure. In the practice of testing in RFL, it is customary to present test materials and working matrices in the form of separate documents. For students with special needs, it will be more convenient if the working matrix

will be included in the test materials. The test tasks in such a document should be printed in large font and it is necessary to increase the boxes for the answers of the testees (Fig. 2).

The consultation office is closed because today is ...

A		Sunday
B		Holiday
C		Saturday

Fig. 2. A sample presentation of a test task with an integrated working matrix for students with special needs.

An equally important aspect is the formation and development of *inclusive competence* of testers and testologists integrated into the system of linguodidactic testing of this category of people. The inclusive competence of testologists is understood as the ability and willingness to develop test materials in Russian as a foreign language, taking into account the special needs of people with disabilities as well as the principles of pedagogical tolerance. The latter assumes the specifics of selecting textual material and defining test situations. It is important to exclude communication situations in which the testees, due to their health disorders, cannot find themselves and intentions that they cannot realise for these reasons. Test materials should not contain information that can lead to an emotional imbalance of the person who passes the exam or complicate the testing procedure. The inclusive competency of testers is understood as the ability and willingness to conduct an examination in RFL in a format convenient and accessible for migrants with special needs.

In different countries of the world, experts create tests for categories of people with hearing and eyesight disorders. For example, in Russia, specialists from the Russian Test Consortium have developed tests for the following categories of people with disabilities: for people with partial loss of vision and for people with total loss of vision (blind or with residual vision). The choice of the form and conditions of the exam is determined on the basis of a study of the documents provided by the candidate. The

testing materials were created taking into account the specifics of the test development.

Methodology

In order to find out how important and necessary the factors presented in the article were that testers should consider when creating a test for students with disabilities, we used the questionnaire survey method that studies a sample of individuals from a population with a view towards making statistical inference (Groves et al 2009). When people are asked what ideas or views they have, what they know or think, the researcher can capture the information that they describe in order to draw the necessary conclusions.

Participants

The survey involved 15 inclusive students with partial or complete loss of vision who were going to pass a foreign language proficiency test. The students were from different countries, i.e. Syria, Egypt and China. The age range of the participants was 22–24 years.

Data collection and analysis

After the students completed the test, a conversation was held with them, which included the following items.

The data were collected and analysed simultaneously. The teacher had a special form

to fill in to be able to conduct qualitative and quantitative research afterwards. Then, the ratio of positive and negative answers was derived from the total number of participants' responses; a qualitative analysis was carried out and the corresponding conclusions were drawn.

Questionnaire

1. Were the test situations relevant for you?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
2. Was the font for the test items readable?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
3. Did you have enough time allotted to complete the test?

- A. No, I did not.
 - B. Yes, I did.
 - C. I had a lot of free time.
4. Was it convenient for you to use the working matrix?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.
 5. Did you feel comfortable during the test?
 - A. Yes.
 - B. No.

Results

The results of the survey showed the following. The majority of the respondents gave a positive answer to the first question and explained that the situations presented were relevant to them and quite realistic.

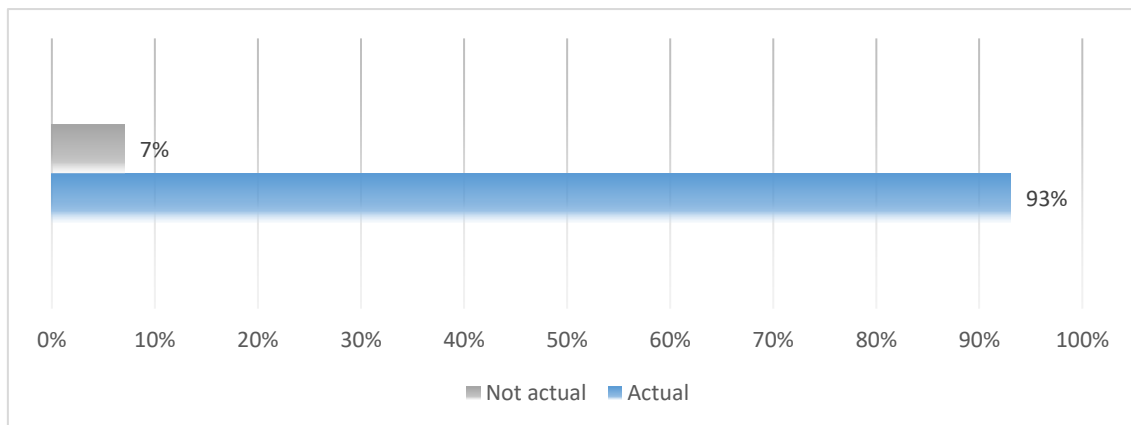


Diagram 1. Were the test situations relevant for you?

When asked as to whether the font of the test items was readable enough, some students answered that it was difficult for them to read the text. However, they then clarified that the

organizers at the beginning of the test reported that there were handglasses in case of problems with reading the text.

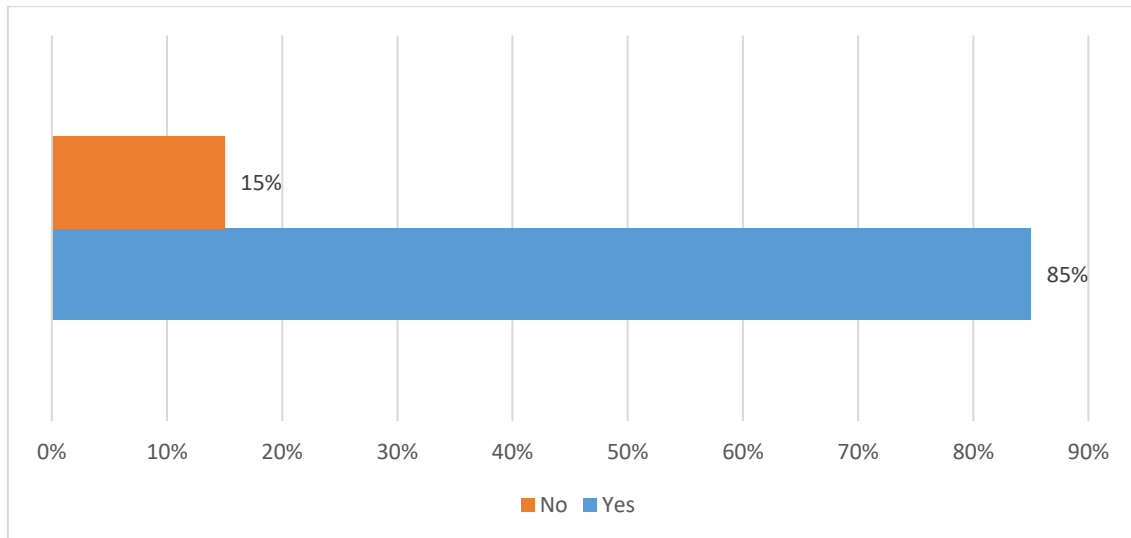


Diagram 2. Was the font for the test items readable?

As for the third question as to whether the students had enough time to complete the test, the answers were different. Most of the students gave a positive answer. But some said that they had not enough time. Further analysis showed that the lack of time was due to the fact that the test

was too difficult for students. One student replied that he had a lot of free time. A subsequent check of his work showed that the student had failed the test and received a negative result. In this case, we can say that the student had overestimated his abilities and had not checked his work properly.

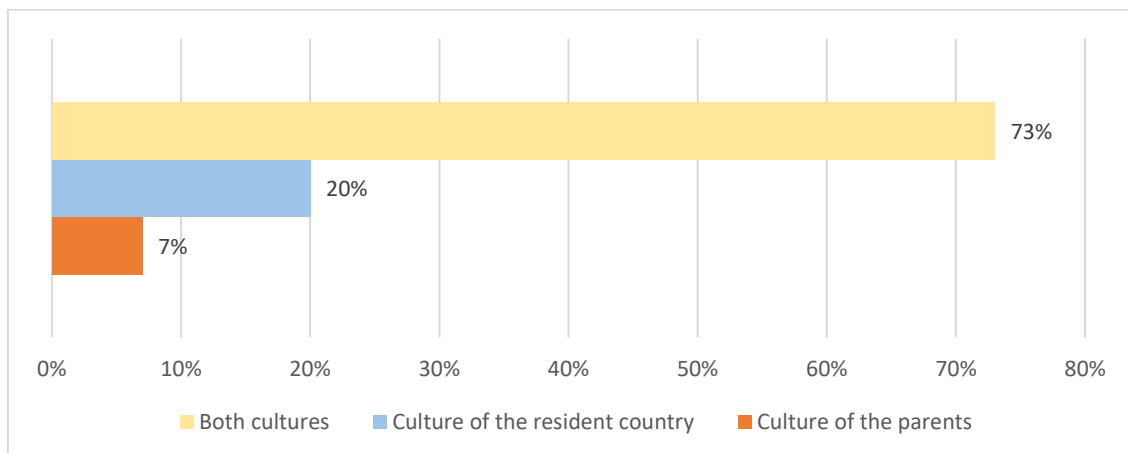


Diagram 3. Did you have enough time allotted to complete the test?

The working matrix was convenient for all the respondents who unanimously noted that it was important for them that the answer matrix was included in the test itself.

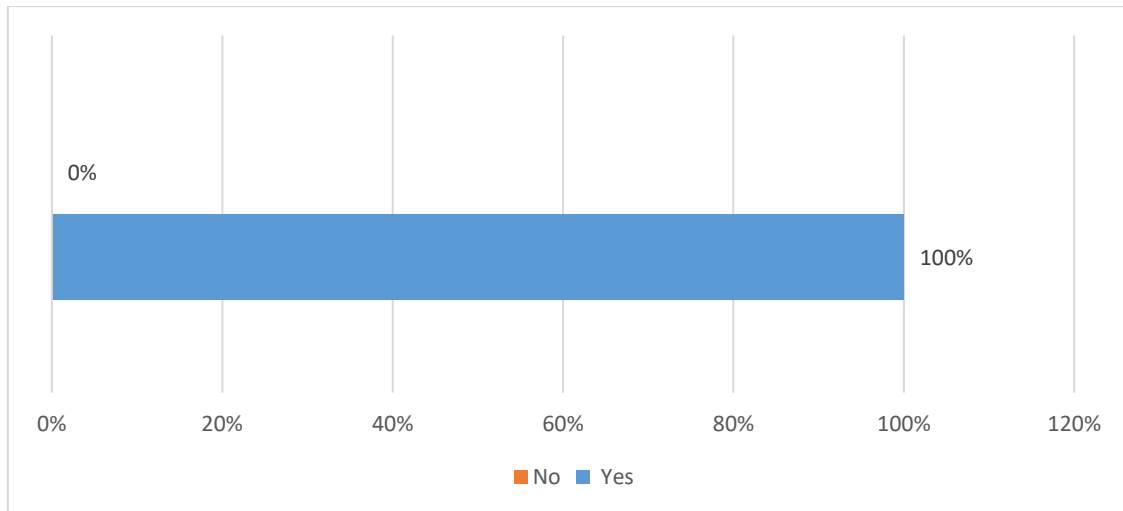


Diagram 4. Was it convenient for you to use the working matrix?

To the last question about the atmosphere during the exam, all the testees answered that the atmosphere was in accordance with the format of

the exam. Great help was provided by the tutors, whom they could turn to for clarification of the provisions of the instructions.

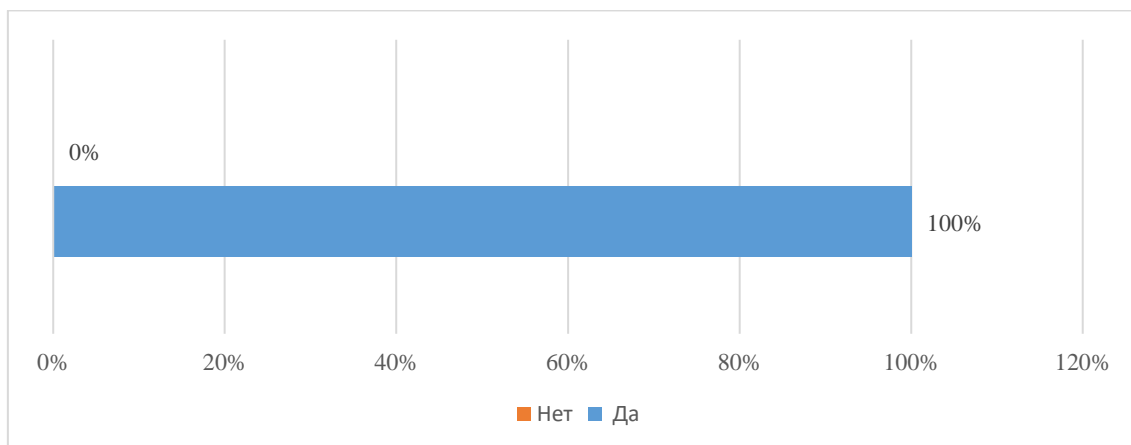


Diagram 5. Did you feel comfortable during the test?

Conclusions

The analysis conducted in this article shows that test materials in a foreign language for people with health problems should have their own specifics and content. They must meet the requirements of discursive expediency and discursive priority; have structural, conceptual and functional flexibility and variability; be available to all categories of testees; and involve professional testers and testologists possessing inclusive competence in developing testing materials and conducting exams.

These provisions were verified empirically: a survey was conducted of testees with partial and complete loss of vision, who answered a number of questions that confirmed the idea that tests in a foreign language for people with disabilities should be different from ordinary ones.

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