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Principles of level b2 tests development for checking language competences at higher education institutions

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Key words: student-centered education, communicative skills, communicative activity, tests validity

Ukraine has been undergoing dramatic changes in many spheres of social life in the last decade being at the crucial stage of transformations to find its place in the in the new system of the international community and build and consolidate a new type of relations with the European institutions. Under the given conditions, further integration of the Ukrainian education sphere into the European education system depends on its conformation with the European principles and its active participation in international education programs. Ukraine has favourable geopolitical location and every prerequisite for sustainable development. However, this is only possible provided the elaboration and implementation of well-defined and well-balanced policy via large-scale internal transformations necessary for Ukraine's integration into the community of developed European countries. Elaboration of the clear and transparent legal and regulatory basis as well as establishment of the corresponding institutions, which provide great opportunities for future economic and social development as well as national security issues solution, and will enable successful integration into the European community and the European educational environment. Cooperation of Ukraine with the European Union under the modern domestic and foreign political

conditions gains particular importance and, bordering on the countries of the European Union, Ukraine has to improve and update its strategy for cross-border cooperation based on the European principles.

Provision of the high quality of educational services and their compliance with the world standards as well as informatization of the educational sphere, modernization of its methods and end techniques, transition to the open educational model, emphasis on the student-centered education, fostering well-balanced development of the student's personality and their ability to acquire knowledge, provide for their self-development as well as form their information and social skills [3;c.1-3] gain particular importance and, thus, may explain the topicality of research. One of the components of higher education modernization in Ukraine within the framework of this process is balancing the national legislative base in the educational sphere with the international standards, formation of the environment to provide for the equal opportunity to acquire higher education, continuity of the learning process and professional growth. Guarantee of the high level of educational services and their compliance with the world standards are the primary reason for the formation of the modern improved scientific and

technical base with the application of advanced information technologies.

The integration process presupposes not only common scientific interests but also uniformity of the scientific paradigm. Therefore, mastering language skills gains greater importance being a crucial prerequisite of training high-quality specialists. The process of learning foreign languages requires two components: language (communicative) competence formation and diagnostics of the level of its development, namely assessment of the academic progress as well as skills and competences development level. Academic progress assessment may pursue various aims, however, it should not be the primary aim, but enable to improve the learning process as well as provide reasoning for the replacement of ineffective teaching techniques with more effective ones and, thus, create better conditions for upgrading students' communicative skills. Academic progress assessment is also critical for students because it enables them to define both the level of skills they have already mastered and areas for further improvement. Moreover, marks that students receive in the learning process, on condition of being objective and unbiased, may foster students' academic work. Effective assessment of learning outcomes demands clear understanding and determination of the objects of control being the basic criteria for the assessment of language skills. In the context of training students' language skills, the object of control may be defined as linguistic (lexical and grammatical skills as well as oral perception and speaking activity) and communicative competences (the ability to conduct communicative activity in the form of speaking, listening, reading and writing with the account taken of cross-cultural differences).

The integrated academic environment has facilitated access to knowledge. The educational process in Ukraine is mainly aimed at educating specialists with the necessary skills to foster transition to the highly developed information and technological society [5;c.184-185]. Thus, integration of the educational sphere presupposes, primarily, integration into the common language environment and utilization of common knowledge assessment tools.

According to the system of skills and competences assessment established by the Common European Framework of Reference, six basic levels of language skills are distinguished being A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2. Every level is characterized by the development of certain skills, i.e. the ability to reproduce and generate information in a foreign language, participate in the discussion of certain topics and express opinion about them. Therefore, the process of tests elaboration requires taking into account competences, which may characterize every level determined in the Common European Framework, and selection of the appropriate type of tasks, which fully correspond to the certain level.

B2 level corresponds to the level of an independent user who is capable of understanding the basic idea of the text (understands lengthy expressions, lectures, possibly containing some complex argumentation on relatively familiar topics, reads articles on present-day problems), conducting free communicative activity with native speakers at a level of spontaneity and a speed which does not impede comprehension by any of the interlocutors, participating actively in discussions in familiar contexts, expressing and defending their viewpoint in the oral and written form as well as clearly and explicitly communicating on a wide range of topics, explaining their opinion for or against a certain issue and grounding it with a variety of arguments as well as summarizing the information [1; c. 22-31].

One of the most efficient assessment techniques, which has systemic nature and enables appropriate assessment of language skills formation, is testing [2; c.2-6]. A test is a form of control and training task aimed at definition of the skills formation level. A test, being a system, is characterized by a certain structure and a certain composition as well as integrity. It is usually composed of a complex of tasks, rules of their completion, criteria for their mastering level assessment as well as recommendations for the test results interpretation. Testing quality is determined by the criteria of consistency and validity. The criterion of consistency demonstrates how consistent the test results are, i.e. an appropriate test must exclude random results. Validity is distinguished by the eligibility of the test results. Test integrity presup-

poses interconnection of the tasks. Every task must be an integral part of the test and cannot be excluded from it without any loss in the quality of assessment. The structure of the test forms the method of their interconnection. Most often, tests have a factor structure characterized by the interconnection of tasks via their general content and general results variation. Time is another crucial factor because, on the one hand, tests reduce the amount of time necessary for learning outcomes evaluation and, on the other, the amount of time directly correlates with the quality of the results obtained. Therefore, it is necessary to calculate the optimal amount of time because its reduction or increase may result in inaccurate results.

Tasks quality assessment is necessary to define which knowledge and which skills are needed to for their successful completion, and, thus, to determine the competence of those who does the test tasks. The basic principles of tests formation and materials selection include: 1) significance (the need to include in the test only the key materials or competency elements the absence of which impedes full assessment of the knowledge level); 2) scientific validity (the use of materials which are unbiased and rationally reasoned and all controversial ideas and facts are eliminated); 3) representativeness (tasks fully reflect all structural elements of the discipline); 4) complexity (the level of the test corresponds to the learning content and provides for the high motivation of students); 5) integrity and balance (harmonious combination of tasks aimed at checking the knowledge of theory (notions, laws, facts, common factors, methods of academic and practical activity) and skills to complete common tasks; 6) tempering of complexity and workload (every subsequent task is relatively more complicated and labour intensive); 7) comprehensiveness (presence of all structural components of the discipline and their interconnection); 8) freedom of choice, particularly in computer-based tests (ability to do tasks randomly so that students can choose the most convenient algorithm of test completion); 9) stylistic relevance (the use of language patterns in tasks formulation, which are familiar to students); 10) verifiability of results (even distribution of tasks with various

forms and equal composition; correlation of results enables to define the way in which a student did the task) etc.

The testing process has a quite extensive methodological basis, which presupposes a wide range of test types (multiple choice, open questions, matching questions, context questions etc.), of test tasks and outcomes assessment techniques. A complex of tasks, which is developed based on a single principle in the corresponding format should be elaborated for its further storage and editing in word processors, generation of similar sets of tasks as well as results evaluation and analysis.

The majority of scholars distinguish two main types of tasks: 1) open questions presuppose formulation of the correct answer in the form of a word or phrase, figure, symbol or symbols, graph etc.; 2) closed (alternative) questions include a) tasks with a simple choice of single-element answers (used to check the ability to reproduce the acquired knowledge) consist of a concise, clearly formulated question and a selection of short answers, one of which is correct; b) tasks with a simple choice of multi-element answers (used to check the ability to characterize and establish correlation between phenomena under study) offer students to form the answer from several options; c) single-element cross matching tasks (used to check the ability to navigate freely in a group of allied notions, phenomena or processes) include tasks with the equal amount of questions and answers provided in two columns of a table or a scheme and require students to match one correct answer from the right column to a question from the left column; d) multi-element cross matching tasks (used to test the ability to generalize, retrieve and apply information in practical problems solution) include a series of questions in the left column to be matched with several answers from the right column; e) tasks with phased answer selection (used to test the ability to analyze and synthesize information, facts, processes or phenomena, and to sequence events) may contain single and multi-element answers; f) multiple choice tasks (used to check the ability to make the right choice or make a surrogated, abridged decision about the answer) may include “yes-no”, “1-0”, “permanent-variable” etc. alternatives;

g) gap-filling tasks (used to check clear understanding of phenomena, processes etc.) presupposes omitting key words or symbols, which students must fill in or select from a number of options; h) answer generation tasks (used to test knowledge and understanding of separate notions phenomena, as well as the ability to solve practical problems) demand independent answer generation without any given prompts and are suitable only in situations when the answer can be formulated unambiguously as one word, letter, symbol, figure, scheme etc. [4; p.18-20]

The main drawbacks of testing, closed-answer tests in particular, are considered to be a certain extent of formality, sometimes irrelevant difficulty of tests, the ability to guess the answer, mechanical errors when doing test tasks and checking them. However, the test format usually enables independent approach to knowledge and skills assessment. Foreign language tests are aimed at the determination of the level of students' foreign language and communication skills formation at higher education institutions in compliance with national standards. The objects of control include reading and writing skills as types of the language activity as well as the lexical and grammatical aspects of foreign language competences (the use of a language). Reading tasks are developed with the account taken of various evaluation strategies of foreign language development level: understanding of gist information (exploratory reading), full understanding of information (reading for detail) and search for separate facts (selective reading). Assessment of the lexical and grammatical competences presuppose definition of the level of skills formation namely the ability to select or form lexical and grammatical items with respect to the communicative need within formulated tasks. Selection of types and contents of tests are mainly grounded on communicative and cognitive tasks.

Therefore, valid and reliable B2 level tests should contain a set of tasks aimed at the assessment of various aspects of language competence (writing, listening, reading) designed to correspond to a certain level of difficulty. These tasks must demonstrate the level of skills characteristic of the independent user (upper intermediate) level established by the

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It is important to apply various control methods with regard to the level of students' knowledge and, possibly, their interests. Learning activity control process must be based on the principles of consistency, integrity, differentiation and due account taken of students' individual peculiarities.

Test preparation must have several stages of preparation including formulation of aims and tasks, definition of test conditions and task types, formation of an outcomes assessment system, determination of available test resources in particular the availability of test kits compatible with the available software, formation of a test matrix namely test structuring, which presupposes definition of the necessary number of test parts, the number of tasks, their complexity level and sequence, determination of test tasks specificity and setting of time limits necessary to complete each task, elaboration of instructions for tasks, selection of task evaluation methods, preliminary approbation of test tasks for the purpose of their quality definition, correspondence of test contents to the learning materials under study, test piloting in focus groups. Every stage fosters improvement of the test materials quality, but they can also create problems and cause errors. Therefore, it is important to monitor this preparation process in order to ensure elaboration of tests, which comply with the national educational standards with respect to acquisition of the necessary skills and knowledge, as well as with common European requirements to the educational process.

Therefore, self-development work being a crucial means of learning and cognitive activity organization, language skills upgrade as well as their drilling and further practical application plays an integral part in the Ukrainian integration into the common European educational space. An online testing system being one of the forms of self-development work, fosters formation of sound knowledge and skills, enables to work at an individual pace with a gradual transition from one level to another.

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