LOCAL LECTURERS, INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THEIR LINGUISTIC COMPATIBILITY

VITA KALNBĒRZIŅA

University of Latvia

Abstract. The aim of this study is to compare the linguistic proficiency levels of lecturers and students, using an online lecture passage dictation as an anchor item between the two tests developed for students and lecturers. The article also reports on the use of the said dictation as a means of the assessment justification (Bachman, 2013) of the proficiency test offered via at a University in Latvia Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) system (Online 1), making the test available in different parts of the world. The main finding is that the lecturers and their students' language proficiency is comparable when using Gary Buck's (2001) and Common European Framework of Reference (2006) frameworks of phonological, orthographic, lexical, syntactical and discourse competence levels.

Key words: language proficiency levels, academic English, anchor item, online assessment, assessment justification, acoustic input, output, dictation

INTRODUCTION

The academic environment has always been international, but these days the growth of the student population in different parts of the world has also increased the flow of students from one country to another. However, the physical move-ment of students and lecturers is only the tip of the iceberg, because we are also constantly exchanging information using different learning-platforms, data basis and electronic journals, online lectures have become everyday experience, technological literacy is expected of lecturers and students to register for the courses, access the course materials, to submit, assess papers and grade students.

Language testing at universities can be divided into pre- and post-entry tests. The pre-entry testing is normally carried out by external examination boards, while the universities themselves are more concerned with the post-entry assessment, see for example, Read and Van Randow (2013) for the description of the Post-entry (English) Language Assessment (PELA) and the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA), the purpose of which is to identify the needs of the students and help them make use of the resources available at the University. Read and Van Randow (2013: 91) describe the screening process consisting of three stages: (1) a computer-based vocabulary and speeded reading test, (2) a paper-based reading, listening and writing

test, (3) an interview-based session with a language advisor. The validation of the screening procedure was carried out using the student and university staff survey.

This article will report on the challenges and findings of a new online academic English test at a University in Latvia, discuss the measures taken to establish the validity of the test, the language level of the lecturers and students and the use of dictation as an anchor item to establish comparability of the tests of different levels.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT OF THE TEST

When developing a test, Bachman (2013) suggests that we need to ask our-selves four questions: (1) What beneficial consequences do we want to bring about? (2) What decisions need to be made in order to promote the intended consequences? (3) What do we need to know about test takers' ability in order to make these decisions? (4) What test taker performance do we need to elicit or observe, and how will we arrive at an assessment record based on this performance? Bachman's (2013) framework allows us to collect the evidence and support the Assessment use argument (AUA); therefore, it will be used here to validate the University of Latvia test.

In order to answer the first question on the beneficial consequence of the test, we need to understand the university context. If online lectures do not demand interaction, then the universities that are enrolling the students expect language test certificates that would promise that the students will be able to be active participants in the learning process. Students living in Bangladesh or Iraq do not have examination centres nearby, so an online language certification is their only option to obtain a language proficiency certificate.

It is also expected from the lecturers of the receiving university that they will be able to teach their subject in English, so there is a need for a certification system to enable the staff members to claim that they know the language in which they teach. There is also a need for the university administration to verify the claims of the lecturers, as it would be too expensive to ask all the lecturers to take international examinations.

The second question regarding the decisions to be made in order to promote the intended consequences concerns the levels of the language proficiency of the test takers necessary to be able to operate in the academic context. The studies at any tertiary institution involve reading of contemporary research in the chosen field, discussing the findings of the research of others and developing one's own research. Therefore, it was decided at the University of Latvia that the entry level of the students will be B2, but the lecturers who teach in English will be expected to have level C1 language proficiency. If we look into the CEFR (2001), we will see that professional and academic use of texts is expected of learners

starting from level B2 in language reception, production and interaction (as shown in Table 1), while level C1 signals longer text comprehension, flexibility in interaction and ability to manipulate different text patterns. The CEFR (2001) definitions of all the competences will be used here because the University of Latvia administration has chosen the levels of the CEFR to describe the expected competences of their students and lecturers.

Table 1 **Level descriptions expected from the local lecturers and the international students** (CEFR 2001)

Level B2: international students	Level C1: lecturers
Reception: Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation.	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning.
Interaction: Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party.	Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes.
Production: Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and Independent disadvantages of various options (2006: 54).	Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.

Bachman's (2013) third question 'What do we need to know about test takers' ability in order to make these decisions', concerns the language skills and strategies that need to be addressed. In order to study at a University, we need to be able to listen to lectures, take notes, make presentations, read and discuss texts, we also need to read and produce academic papers, which demand a high level of language proficiency.

The main text of the academic input, the lectures, have nowadays changed from texts memorised and read out to the illusion of fresh talk (Goffman, 1959: 171) and multimedia experiences. Morton (2009:60) suggests that lecturers should share their passion and enthusiasm for the subject by telling students why they are personally interested in this topic, link it to their personal research, to current news or activity; use relevant and current examples to illustrate the point; draw on the students' experiences; use rhetorical questions to encourage students to keep on track; use live links to the web to demonstrate currency of the material being presented. This kind of input involves a variety of language skills and language strategies, which need to be assessed for both lecturers and students.

To successfully answer Bachman's (2013: 2) fourth question: 'What test taker performance do we need to elicit or observe, and how will we arrive at

an assessment record (score, description), based on this performance?' we need to choose tasks from the academic environment and assign a number of points to each to represent their importance in the academic context.

At the same time, the task should focus on the language competence (ability to recognise sounds, parse into words, and recognize lexical and syntactical units). Perception of speech was conceptualised by Field (2013) as consisting of five levels: decoding input, lexical search and parsing (lower-level processes), and constructing the meaning and building discourse representation (higher level processes). This kind of ability was normally assessed using the traditional dictation method, which has been well documented and researched.

Buck (2001) discussed the benefits of the dictation in the assessment of listening, suggesting that it involves testing one's phonological, grammatical, and lexical knowledge as well as one's language competence at a discourse level.

First, however, we need to discuss the types of dictations, to find out if they test the skills and competences necessary in academic context. Kong and Nie (2002:10) suggest four different types of dictations:

> passage dictation test in which learners are asked to write down everything in a passage they hear several times; (2) spot dictation test (also called partial dictation in which learners write down the missing words in the blanks while listening to a passage); (3) compound dictation test (in which learners are asked to write down missing words and a few sentences in the blanks while listening to a passage); and (4) dicto-com (also called reproduction in which learners work in groups to recreate a passage they have just heard by taking notes).

In researching the use of dictations in assessment a problem arises due to unclarity whether the text was taken from naturally occurring speech, or it was read out, see e.g. Peng Mei, (2013) or Ying Zheng and De Jong, (2011), or the depiction of Versant test validation (2013).

The final issue that the test developer needs to resolve is the medium via which the language contents is delivered, if it is face to face or computer mediated, audio or video, linear or interactive, i.e., whether the listener is in control of the listening source and can listen to it as many times as needed or is the test administrator in charge and plays the text only so many times. Nowadays that lectures are recorded and made available to the students for their perusal it would be more authentic to give the students the chance to listen to the recording as many times as they wish.

METHOD OF ASSESSMENT

The situation at the University of Latvia has been affected by the general demand for university internationalisation. In 2014 there were more than 10 per cent of foreign lecturers at the University of Latvia (93 out 822), the number of

international students had already increased to 600; the University website informs us that the 'University of Latvia has signed more than 500 agreements with 326 institutions in 31 European countries within ERASMUS programme' (Online 2), so we can expect more students in the future. If we look at the statistics of the entrance examination of English, which the University offers starting from 2016, we can see that most of the applications come from countries outside Europe, for example, Bangladesh, Iraq, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan and Brazil, as the students come from rural areas where the internationally recognized tests are not available. The availability of the Internet, however, allows the students to enter the University of Latvia website and take the examination online.

The online test taking procedure for applicants to the entry test of the University of Latvia is as follows: Applicants register for the test date and the level by providing their name, surname, country of origin and Skype username (Online 3) in the UL website, they are enrolled in the Moodle test course, they receive the date and time of the trial session. During the trial session the quality of the Internet connection, Skype and camera are checked and adjusted, one task of the mock examination is administered, and the applicants receive information about the date and time of the examination session.

During the live examination session, the applicants log in Skype 10 minutes before the examination and wait for a response of the examination centre representative, the interviewer sends input materials for the speaking test via Skype, the applicant prepares for 2 minutes, the representative(s) of the examination centre observe the preparation process via Skype.

The spoken examination is managed, recorded and assessed via Skype. The applicants receive the password for the written examination, log in for the written examination in the Moodle test course, do written tasks online and the examination centre representative observes the examination process via Skype. After they have finished the test, the examination centre representative checks if the examination responses are registered and informs the applicant about the date when the results will be communicated.

TEST PROCEDURE AND POPULATION

The test was pre-tested on 10 lecturers teaching medicine, biology, history and humanities at the University of Latvia, who volunteered to take the test. They could choose levels B2, C1 or C2. Two chose level C2, eight chose level C1, out of which only three got the certificate of level C1. The interviews were carried out face to face while the test was administered in Moodle.

The trialling of level B2 for students was carried out in two ways, at first it was taken as a paper version by 12 teacher training programme students, then the test was edited and administered via Moodle and Skype to 11 international

students from Russia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Iraq, Iran and Azerbaijan, who applied for entering the University of Latvia.

The volunteers of the teaching staff, who trialled level C1 and level C2 examinations, took the dictation, so did the students; thus, it was the only task that was taken by the whole population and allows us to compare the two populations and also the two tests.

The Online Academic English Language Examination is a proficiency test assessing reading, listening, writing and speaking skills to measure the test takers' ability to use the English language in the academic context, see the generic test specification for all the levels in Table 2.

Table 2 **Test specification framework**

Test and technology	Tasks	Points	Skills
Reading (Skype plus MOODLE)	Gap fill, multiple choice	25	Detailed understanding, vocabulary, text interpretation
Listening and writing (Skype plus MOODLE)	Multiple choice, dictation	25	Detailed understanding, syntax, spelling
Reading and writing (Skype plus MOODLE)	Abstract for C1, Summary for B2	25	Academic discourse development skills
Speaking (Face to Face or Skype)	Presentation followed by questions	25	Presentation and interaction skills

Development of a test battery for different levels of language is a challenge for any assessment system. In the case of the University of Latvia, the test battery was developed with levels B2, C1 and C2 in mind, and we had the option of including the test already in the contents of the test battery itself, i.e., to use an authentic lecture recording as an input and produce a dictation task on the basis of it as the anchor item for all the tests. This allowed us to compare the texts produced by the test takers of different levels, and thus to collect the evidence to justify the assessment, see Bachman (2013: 2), according to whom 'the process of "assessment justification," includes two interrelated activities: (a) articulating "assessment use argument" (AUA) and (b) collecting evidence to support the claims and warrants in the AUA.'

The passage that was chosen for the dictation was a publically available Technology, Entertainment and Design (henceforth TED) talk by Patricia Ryan entitled 'Don't insist on English!' (Patricia, n.d.: Online) and dealt with the importance of multilingualism in science. The speech was delivered in the framework of TED talk and posted in 2011. It was what Goffman (1959) would have called 'Fresh talk illusion', i.e., it is prepared and then delivered without a script. The transcript of the speech is also available on the Internet; therefore, it is important to make sure that the students do not have access

to the Internet source during the dictation. The whole test dictation lasts 83 seconds.

The text itself has been uploaded in the Moodle system and the students can listen to it as many times as they wish, thus reproducing the learning situation with the online lectures. There is, however, a time limit of 90 minutes for the whole examination.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section consists of the quantitative and qualitative evidence in order to support the claims and warrants in the assessment use argument (Bachman, 2013).

The quantitative analysis is based on the text analysis of all the dictations collected in two separate corpora: a student corpus and a lecturer corpus. As we can see from Table 3, the student performance is lower in all aspects; they have spent more time, produced fewer words and three times more words with incorrect spelling or used an incorrect word. The only parameter that is nearly the same is the medium length of the word.

Table 3 **Comparison of the students' and lecturers' performance**

	Student text corpus	Lecturer text corpus
Total No. of words in the dictation task	965	1524
The average number of words per script	107	169
The average number of characters per script	493	761
The proportion of incorrect words (lexical or spelling mistake in per cent)	965/67=14 %	1524/32=47%
The average number of minutes spent on the task	23	28
The average number of points obtained (out of max. 18)	8	14
The mean length of the word	4.5	4.6

For the analysis of the scripts produced by the test takers, we will use Gary Buck's (2001) framework, discussed above. First we will look at the phonological and orthographic competence of the test takers, then at the lexical and, finally, at the syntactical competence as seen in the scripts in Table 4.

Two scripts have been selected for the analysis from the international students group and two scripts from the local lecturers group: the scripts who got the highest and the lowest score will be analysed. The same marking criteria will be applied to both groups of the scripts: the number of words that were written correctly was counted.

Table 4 **Sample Test taker scripts**

	Students	Lecturers
Maximum points in their groups	'Let me tell you a story about two scientists; two English scientists, They were doing an experiment to do with genetics and the fallings and hindings of animals but they couldn't get their results they want to, they really didn't know what to do until along came a german scientist who realised that they're using two words for falling and hinding, whereas genetics does not differentiate and neither does german, so bingo problem solved. If you can't think a thought, you are stuck but if another language can think that thought then by cooperating we can achieve and learn so much more.' (102)	(2) 'Let me tell you a story about two scientists, two English scientists. They were doing an experiment to do with genetics – on a for-limbs and a hind-limbs of animals, but they couldn't get the results they wanted. They really did not know what to do, until along come a German scientist who realised that they were using two words for for-limb and hind-limb whereas genetics does not differentiate and neither does German. So, bingo! Problem solved. If you can't think a thought, you are stacked. But if an another language can think that thought, than by cooperating we can achieve and learn so much more.' (105)
Minimum points in their groups	(3)'Let me tell you about history about two scients, two English scients. They are doing a experiment, to do in genetics and than a following and than a highten animals, than they could not take the results the realive not to do I tell a long term a germ scients realise the usem two word for following and highten was than were was genetics does not differenciet nither does german. So bingo problem solved, if can thing a though, you are stank, but if a another langague can thing that thought cooperating and achiave learn so much more.' (98)	(4) 'Let me tell you a story about two scientists, two scientists English scientists. They were doing an experiment to do with genetics an hundreds of animals but they could not get results they wanted. They really didn' t know what to do. Untill along come a German scientists who realized that they were using two words for fooling and hidden whereas genetics does not differentite and neither does German. So, Bingo, problem solved. If you can nat think of thouth you are stuck. Other language can think of thougt can and by cooparating we can achieve and learn so much more.' (101)

The transcript of the TED talk available online is as follows:

> Okay. Let me tell you a story about two scientists, two English scientists. They were doing an experiment to do with genetics and the forelimbs and the hind limbs of animals. But they couldn't get the results they wanted. They really didn't know what to do, until along came a German scientist who realized that they were using two words for forelimb and hind limb, whereas genetics does not differentiate and neither does German. So bingo, problem solved. If you can't think a thought, you are stuck. But if another language can think that thought, then, by cooperating, we can achieve and learn so much more. (106 words, speaking time: 49 seconds, standard British pronunciation, one speaker) (Patricia, n.d.: Online).

The scripts will now be analysed according to their authors' phonological, orthographic, lexical, syntactic and discourse compatibility.

1 PHONOLOGICAL AND ORTHOGRAPHICAL COMPATIBILITY OF THE LECTURERS AND STUDENTS

The CEFR definition of the two basic competences, phonological and orthographic, involved in writing a dictation can be seen in Table 5 and deal with the perception and production of sounds and letters. In the case of a dictation it would mean the ability to perceive and process the stream of sounds and convert it into a written text.

Table 5 **Phonological versus orthographic competence in the CEFR** (2001: 116)

General phonetic awareness and skills	Orthographic competence
• an ability to perceive and catenate unfamiliar sound sequences • an ability, as a listener, to resolve (i.e. divide into distinct and significant parts) a continuous stream of sounds into a meaningful structured string of phonological elements	• the form of letters in printed and cursive forms in both upper and lower case • the proper spelling of words, including recognised contracted forms • punctuation marks and their conventions of use

It is clear that the test takers' phonological competence will be seen in a dictation task via their orthographic competence, as in this task test takers do not get a chance to demonstrate their ability to produce sounds themselves; nevertheless, if we look at script 1 (S1) in Table 4 we can see that the two competences are separate when it comes to writing down an unknown word, the sound of the words *forelimb* and *hind limb* is nearly correct, but the orthographic representation of the word is incorrect: 'They were doing an experiment to do with genetics and the fallings and hindings of animals' (see S1) .

The example shows that the student heard the sounds of forelimbs and hind limbs, the consonant phonemes /f/, /h/, the long rounded vowel /ɔ:/, the diphthong /ai/, have all been catenated and perceived correctly, but the lack of the lexical competence did not allow producing the appropriate spelling. The author of script 3 (a student) obviously did not know the words *forelimbs* and *hind limbs* either, therefore, substituted with the phrase *hundreds of* animals, and later with *fooling and hidden*, showing that the lecturers can also apply phonological knowledge to substitute the missing lexical knowledge.

We can also see some signs of creativity, for example, the introduction of the neologism *Scients*, maybe in parallel to *Gents*, which has been repeated in script 3 several times. Thus, dictations allow us to see the reasons of test taker difficulties, and the decisions they make for resolving the difficulties, not only register the results of their performance.

2 LEXICAL COMPATIBILITY

According to the CEFR (2001: 111) lexical competence is 'knowledge of, and ability to use, the vocabulary of a language, it consists of lexical elements and grammatical elements'. In the phonological analysis, we already saw how the perception of phonemes activates words starting with the same phoneme; then evidently, the closest sounding word is selected for its semantic and syntactic compatibility. As to lexical analysis, the most direct measurement is the quantitative one, as we can see from the statistical analysis of the corpora that the higher level test takers have registered more words.

As to the recognition of the fixed phrases, for example 'Let me tell you a story', all four authors of the scripts have recognised the phrase, but the word *story* has been replaced by *history*, which is a similar sounding noun, but the phrase is lost.

3 GRAMMATICAL COMPATIBILITY

According to the CEFR (2001: 112), 'the grammar of a language may be seen as the set of principles governing the assembly of elements into meaningful labelled and bracketed strings (sentences)'. The lack of grammatical competence can explain the difficulties the author of script 2 had when producing the following phrase: "a for-limbs and a hind-limbs of animals", where the lexical meaning (here the plural form) clashes with the indefinite article, signalling difficulties of controlling grammatical information. Another quite frequently observed feature is the repetition of the word *an another* (see, for example script 2).

The same lecturer faces the difficulty of control of the tense forms 'They really did not know what to do, until along come a German scientist who realised that they were using two words' as the present verb form *come* and the past verb forms *did* and *were* clash.

If we look at the students' scripts 1 and 3, we can see a striking difference, as script 3 is not comprehensible, the words are there, but the syntactic links between them have not been reproduced, thus suggesting the fact the test taker has not reached the language acquisition level that handles either complex or even compound sentences.

The reaction to the linguistic challenge, however, depended on the stakes of the test. The lecturers were volunteers who pretested the tasks, so if they felt challenged, they just gave up, as a result there were three lecturers who did not write a single word; the students, however, mobilised all their competences to fill the gaps, for example, if they did not know the lexical unit, they wrote down the phonological representation or found a similar word; if they could not write a sentence, they wrote strings of words. This reaction, however, suggests an additional problem for the marking criteria, as we counted the number of correctly written words. Obviously we need to include the condition that it is the number of correctly written words in the cohesive text. Interestingly enough, the introductory and the concluding sentences of the text of script 3 have been

reproduced, signalling the recognition of the text organisation pattern has helped to process the sentences.

This leads us to discourse competence, which will be dealt with in the next section.

4 DISCOURSE COMPATIBILITY

The CEFR (2001:123) defines *discourse competence* as

> the ability of a user/learner to arrange sentences in sequence so as to produce coherent stretches of language. It includes knowledge of and ability to control the ordering of sentences in terms of topic/ focus; given/new; 'natural' sequencing: e.g. temporal, cause/effect (invertible) ability to structure and manage discourse in terms of: thematic organisation; coherence and cohesion; logical ordering; style and register.

The ability to manage discourse can be seen first of all from the introductory phrase, which has been more or less reproduced by all the writers, and which signals that they all know what will follow, they recognize the story format, which has been preserved even in script 3, where the person has run into syntactical difficulties trying to parse the utterances.

The difficulty to structure the time sequence of the narrative seems to have also been experienced by both lecturers and students, hence the usage of the inappropriate conjunction *than* instead of *then* in the top level script 3.

Although the qualitative analysis suggests that both, the students and the lecturers, had phonological, lexical, syntactical problems while transcribing natural speech, the statistical analysis suggests that the quantitative measures of the students and the lecturers signal a different level of proficiency, as the lecturers spent less time listening and writing, produced more words, made fewer mistakes and obtained more points for their efforts.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief comparison has shown that theoretical frameworks used for the qualitative data analysis, that is the CEFR (2001) in combination with Buck's (2001) framework, can be used for validating the claims of the assessment use (Bachman, 2013) by addressing the issues of the test development process and test result interpretation.

Another conclusion of this analysis is the following: notwithstanding the different countries of origin, different levels of education and different language learning contexts and levels, achievements and problems in language acquisition are surprisingly similar: the texts produced by the international students and local lecturers have the same kind of difficulties in perception

and production of the orthographic, phonological and lexical elements. When more data are collected, further analysis of the mistakes could be useful for distinguishing the levels of performance.

However, the syntactical processing by the lecturers and the students differs, none of the lecturers have produced a text that signals problems of syntactical parsing, which suggests that the author of script 3 had difficulties not only with specific lexical items, but could not process the whole text.

The syntactical and statistical analysis of the performance allowed us to clearly see that the lecturers have a higher level of language proficiency than that of their students as they had fewer mistakes and produced more words in the same amount of time (with the exception of the three lecturers who did not write the dictation).

The conclusion regarding an online lecture as a dictation input is that, although the test takers were in full control of the recording and could listen to it as many times as they wished, both lecturers and students perceived it as a challenge.

The conclusion regarding the language competence represented in the online dictation is that it does assess the phonological, orthographic, lexical, grammatical and discourse competences, all of them interacting during the text perception and production process.

The conclusion regarding the online test administration via Moodle and Skype is that it is available and operable in Iraq, Iran, Brazil, Russia, Bangladesh and Azerbaijan, that Skype allows the test administrator to help the applicants to log in and take the test. The most useful function is that of the Share screen in Skype, as it allowed resolving the technical issues test takers had.

The final conclusion is personal, the online assessment via Skype and Moodle allows the test administrator, which in this case was also a lecturer and test taker, to virtually enter each other's homes, to hear the voices of the family, friends and pets and thus get to know each other before the study process.

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Vita Kalnbērziņa is a Doctor of Philosophy, Associate Professor at the University of Latvia. Her research interests include language acquisition, language assessment and intercultural communication. Email: vita.kalnberzina@lu.lv