



В начале ноября 2008 года в г. Токио, Япония, прошла 7-я Международная конференция Пан-Азиатского консорциума Ассоциации преподавателей иностранных языков (Pan-Asian Consortium of Language Teaching Societies), на которой в качестве приглашенного докладчика выступила М. В. Вербицкая, председатель Федеральной предметной комиссии по иностранным языкам, профессор МГУ им. М. В. Ломоносова. С разрешения Марии Валерьевны ее выступление на тему “Международные стандарты и национальные экзамены: российский опыт” публикуется в нашем журнале.

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International Standards and National Examinations: the Russian Experience

What's new in Russian FLT?

Foreign language teaching (FLT) has a long and well-established tradition in Russia. For more than a century, a foreign language has been a must subject at schools, colleges and universities. For decades German, French and English were competing in numbers of Russian students studying a particular language; it is no surprise that English has become the absolute winner.

The last twenty years have brought many changes into Russian education on all levels and in all subjects. With the advent of information society, the teacher has ceased to be Mr/Ms Know All; the teacher-centered model has given way to the learner-centered model and the teaching process concentrated on developing language skills rather than learning rules. FLT textbooks used in secondary schools have also changed: now they aim at teaching reading and listening strategies, contain role-plays and are all accompanied by CD-roms with listening comprehension tasks.

In a traditional Russian exam, do we test what we now teach?

The changes in teaching foreign languages (FL), however did not immediately affect the assessment system. For generations of Russians, traditional examination in a FL has typically included the following tasks:

- read and translate the text
- read and retell the text
- translate the sentences from Russian into English
- speak on a topic (from “My family” to “Environmental protection” and “Technological progress”)

To enter a university humanities department, an applicant has to take an entrance examination of the same format but based on texts that are more difficult. Every university has specific requirements and applicants, as a rule, prepare for the admission exam with a private tutor from this very university. The given examination format is obviously a relic of the grammar-translation method and, with the method no longer in use, becomes meaningless. It corresponds neither to what we teach in class nor to what is required for further study and successful career.

Is there an alternative to this traditional examination?

The obvious contradiction between what is being taught and what is required for the examination led, 6 years ago, to introducing standardized testing (Bachman, 1990, p. 74; Stoyoff and Chapelle, 2005) in the form of the Russian State Examination (also referred to in English as Unified State Examination) experiment. The Russian State Examination (RSE) has two purposes: final secondary school assessment in FL and selection for university enrollment, which makes it a high stakes test.

2008 is the last year of the experiment and in 2009 the RSE becomes a must for all school-leavers. To get their general education certificate, students will have to pass two mandatory examinations (in Russian and in mathematics) and three other examinations of their choice (out of 8 subjects). Universities will enroll students on the basis of their RSE results.

For various reasons standardized testing has never been popular in Russia and RSE in this form has many opponents. Their main argument is that paper-and-pencil tests do not really show the level of communicative competence and that RSE will lead to teaching for the test.

What is tested in the Russian State Exam in FL?

RSE includes five sections: Listening Comprehension, Reading Comprehension, Usage (Grammar and Vocabulary), Writing and Speaking (Table 1).

Table 1

No	Section	Number of items	Section's weight in total score	Maximum raw score	Item format
1	Listening	15	20%	20	Multiple Choice and Short Answer
2	Reading	9	20%	20	
3	Usage	20	20%	20	
4	Writing	2	20%	20	Constructed Response
5	Speaking	2	20%	20	
Total		48	100%	100	

The first three sections include tasks of three levels which correspond to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (See Common European Framework..., 2001) in the following way:

RSE Basic level	— A2+
RSE Intermediate	— B1
RSE Higher level	— B2

RSE basic level requirements are indicated as A2+ because they are somewhat in between A2 and B1 as described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Writing and Speaking sections contain tasks of Intermediate and Higher levels only. Recommended allocation of time for different sections:

Listening comprehension	— 30 min.
Reading comprehension	— 30 min.
Language usage	— 40 min.
Writing	— 60 min.

Time for an interview (Speaking) is up to 10 minutes per candidate.

What are the results of the RSE experiment?

The experiment and related research suggest some important conclusions:

- Linguistic competence (the ability to use grammar patterns and vocabulary items effectively in the given context) is more effectively measured on the material of connected texts than separate sentences.
- Communicative competence, the real ability to use a FL effectively, can hardly be measured by paper-and-pencil tests only. Performance tests (the composing of whole written texts and oral interviews) should be included into the test battery.
- Performance tests require specially trained interlocutors and raters who after taking an in-service training course become agents of change in FLT, thus enhancing the synergetic

effect. Recruiting teachers without special qualifications for marking the writing test or rating the speaking test can be fatal for the whole national examination system.

Does what we test affect what we teach?

We do already feel the RSE washback effect on the process of teaching:

- listening comprehension, which was previously neglected, is given due attention in the classroom as a skill in its own right
- writing has become part and parcel of ELT programmes
- the understanding of speaking tasks has changed: there is a shift from mere reproduction (learned-by-heart model presentations or dialogues) to speech production with a special emphasis on communication goals
- in classroom practice traditional, very impressionistic and highly subjective assessment gives way to criterion-based, more objective assessment
- teachers' attitude to mistakes and error-correction methods are changing (the aim of communication is not to make no mistakes but to get the message across).

Is RSE a panacea or a problem for Russian FLT?

The RSE experiment is still a subject of much debate in Russia. However, after years of experiment, both the advocates and the opponents see the strengths and limitations of RSE more realistically. Few people think of RSE now in terms of "a panacea or a problem" dilemma. FLT professional community views RSE as a challenge (something that needs a lot of skill, energy, and determination to deal with or achieve, especially something you have never done before and will enjoy doing) because it:

- promotes competence-based approach and up-to-date FLT techniques
- contributes to developing testing methodology in Russia
- gives an impetus to designing quality testing materials
- necessitates training qualified examiners who become agents of change in FLT

To sum up, for Russian FLT the eternal "to be" or "not to be" turns into "to test" or "not to test" question and this is my answer to it (with some help from William Shakespeare):

To test or not to test: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous parents,

Or to take arms against traditional assessment,

And by testing end it? Norm-referenced tests;

No more topics; no more translation;

and by RSE to say we end

The heartache and the thousand natural shocks

That admission examination brings

to an examinee, 'tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wish'd ...

References

1. *Bachman L. F. Fundamental Consideration in Language Testing.*— Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
2. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment.*— Council of Europe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
3. *Stoyanoff St. and Chapelle C. A. ESOL Tests and Testing.*— Baltimore: Victor Graphics, 2005.