25 years of language assessment in Vietnam: Looking back and looking forward

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Project 2020
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Conclusion: Cooperation is the way to go!
Introduction: The role of assessment in Project 2020

- One of the seven components of the overall mission of Project 2020
- First time mentioned in details in a governmental document.
- Paragraph 7, Section II, Article 1 of Decision 1400 / QD-TTg:
  - *Innovation of testing and assessment methods in language education;*
  - *Construction of test item banks to support the assessment of foreign language proficiency of learners;*
  - *Strengthened application of information technology in foreign language education;*
  - *Improved efficiency and effectiveness of proficiency testing and quality assurance of foreign language education.*
A quick overview of language assessment in Vietnam

**Pre-scientific stage: First half of 1990s**

- Explosion of student number → increased needs for entrance test papers in all subjects
- Solution: sets of “pre-constructed subject test papers” (bộ đề thi) by subject experts chosen by Ministry of Higher and Vocational Education released to the public
- Higher education institutions required to draw from these sets then mix and match to “construct” their own version
- Efficiency, reliability and fairness achieved?
- Encouragement of rote learning? Narrowing down of curriculum? Teaching to the tests?
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Pre-scientific stage: First half of 1990s
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**Standardization-as-reliability stage: 1996 to 2007**

- Growing disappointment with the “pre-constructed subject test papers”
- Growing awareness of efforts at exam reform in 1974 in the South of Vietnam
- In 1996, for the first time in unified Vietnam, a university entrance examination using the MCQ format and technology such as the optical mark reader (OMR) took place in the University of Da Lat. This was seen as an experiment to test the feasibility of MCQ testing.

(From Trắc nghiệm và Ứng dụng, Lâm Quang Thiệp, NXB ĐHQG 2008, p. 185)
In 2002, a new university entrance exam policy was promulgated, called “the three common exam” policy.

- Same exam papers
- Same exam dates
- Exam results used by all universities for admission selection

The MCQ format (and other objective test formats) is used in most subjects. For English, objective test formats are used predominantly.
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Standardization-as-reliability stage: 1996 to 2007

Read the following passage and mark the letter A, B, C, or D on your answer sheet to indicate the word or phrase that best fits each of the numbered blanks from 41 to 50.

Postsecondary institutions and private schools are corporations under U.S. law. They are approved to operate as non-profit, for-profit, or public corporations. (41) _____ education and training. Increasingly, state authorities are requiring approved educational providers to apply (42) _____ and receive accreditation as a condition of need and continued approval.

As corporate entities, U.S. institutions are internally self-governing and are (43) _____ to make property, facilities, equipment, and utilities transactions. They may then pass their own personal decisions. Decide whom to admit to study and to graduate (44) _____ their own funds from outside sources; enter into contracts; compete for grants; and do most of the other things that corporations do. Institutions complete (45) _____ one another for students, research funding, faculty, and other benefits. Public institutions may compete within the same state or territory for budget appropriations. It is the corporate nature of institutions and the competition within the system that (46) _____ Americans to refer to the concept of the educational or academic marketplace – an important distinctive element of the way U.S. education is organized.

Some institutions are governed (47) _____ under multi-campus arrangements. These include most local public schools (governed by school districts) and many state community college and university systems. Whether single- or multi-campus, institutional corporations (48) _____ by boards of directors, both alumni and non-students, who are ultimately responsible for operations. They appoint senior (49) _____ such as principals, headmasters, presidents, and deans; and approve the actions taken (50) _____ their name.

Mark the letter A, B, C, or D on your answer sheet to indicate the correct answer to each of the following questions.

Answer Sheet:

From A Diverse Educational System: Structure, standards, and challenges. AHEA (CD version)

Question 41: A. provided B. provision C. provide D. providing

Question 42: A. with B. to C. for D. on

Question 43: A. able B. able C. probable D. possible

Question 44: A. raise B. rise C. cell D. lend

Question 45: A. to B. for C. for D. at

Question 46: A. causes B. creates C. prevents D. makes

Question 47: A. collective B. controlled C. are controlled D. being controlled

Question 48: A. controlled B. are controlling C. are controlled D. being controlled

Question 49: A. trainees B. judges C. assistants D. leaders

Question 50: A. on B. in C. above D. at

Mark the letter A, B, C, or D on your answer sheet to indicate the sentence that is CLOSEST in meaning to the sentence given in each of the following questions.

Question 51: "Believe me, it's no use reading that book," Janet told her boyfriend.

A. Janet tried to convince her boyfriend that the book was not worth reading.
B. Janet opposed her boyfriend's idea that reading the book was not useful.
C. Janet managed to persuade her boyfriend that reading the book was worthwhile.
D. Janet suggested to her boyfriend that reading the book was useful.
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*Standardization-as-validation stage: 2008 till now*

- Project 2020 started in 2008 as an ambitious project whose sole objective is to enhance English language education in Vietnam so that by 2020 most Vietnamese will have acquired a good functional level of English.

- Language assessment is a major component of this project. The biggest achievement of this component is the emergence of the first ever standardized English test: V-STEP.

- V-STEP is closely linked to the CEFR, covering all 4 skills, using a variety of item formats which resembles as much as possible real communication activities.

- Items were developed based on a carefully prepared specifications; training of item writers were provided; internal validation conducted before making the test live.

- Right now V-STEP is being used as the exit test of English proficiency for VNU students and is recognized by a number of other universities in the country.
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Standardization-as-validation stage: 2008 till now

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ĐỊNH DẠNG ĐỂ THI</th>
<th>NGHE</th>
<th>ĐỌC</th>
<th>VIỆT</th>
<th>NỘI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THỜI GIAN</td>
<td>40 phút</td>
<td>60 phút</td>
<td>60 phút</td>
<td>12 phút</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SỚM CÂU HỎI</td>
<td>3 phần: 35 câu hỏi đa lựa chọn</td>
<td>4 bài đọc: 40 câu hỏi đa lựa chọn</td>
<td>2 bài viết</td>
<td>3 phần: Tương tác xã hội, Thảo luận giải pháp, Phát triển chủ đề</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

V-STEP levels 3-5 description
A quick overview of language assessment in Vietnam

Standardization-as-validation stage: 2008 till now

**Listening: Flight announcements**

**Directions:** In this part, you will hear EIGHT short announcements or instructions. There is one question for each announcement or instruction. For each question, choose the right answer A, B, C or D. Then, on the answer sheet, find the number of the question and fill in the space that corresponds to the letter of the answer that you have chosen.

**Now, let’s listen to an example. On the recording, you will hear:**

**Woman:** Hello. This is the travel agency returning your call. You left a message about the holiday you’ve booked, asking which meals are included in the cost during your stay at Sunny Hotel. Lunch and dinner are free but if you wish to have breakfast in the hotel, you will need to pay an extra amount of money, depending on what you order. Let me know if I can help you with any other information. Goodbye.

**On the test book, you will read:**

Which meal is NOT included in the price of the holiday?

A. Breakfast  
B. Lunch  
C. Dinner  
D. All

*The correct answer is A. Breakfast. Now, let’s begin with the first question.*

1. How many languages are taught at Hanoi International Language School?

A. 1  
B. 2  
C. 3  
D. 4
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Standardization-as-validation stage: 2008 till now

In this part, you will hear THREE talks or lectures. The talks or lectures will not be repeated. There are five questions for each talk or lecture. For each question, choose the right answer A, B, C or D.

Questions 21 to 25. Listen to a presentation about summer job searching.

21. What factor deserves initial consideration when a summer job search is launched?
   A. Sort of jobs within the field
   B. Flexible working hours
   C. Employees’ hobbies
   D. Commitment to the job

22. Why does the speaker mention photography?
   A. To highlight the importance of hobbies in job searching
   B. To illuminate a job search process
   C. To prove the role of local area in job searching
   D. To suggest looking for a job on the internet

23. What principle does a person necessarily stick to when looking for the second job?
   A. Value the second job over the current one
   B. Ask for the current employer’s permission
   C. Make all the contact out of company time
   D. Have interviews scheduled during official working hours

Listening: Longer talks or lectures
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*Standardization-as-validation stage: 2008 till now*

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**Reading: Working day**

**Luc**

My day typically starts with a business person going to the airport, and nearly always ends with a drunk. I don’t mind drunk people. Sometimes I think they’re the better version of themselves: more relaxed, happier, honest. Only once have I feared for my life. A guy ran out at a traffic light and so I sped up before his brother could run, too. He seemed embarrassed and made me drop him at a car park. When we arrived, the first guy was waiting with a boulder, which went through the windscreen, narrowly missing my head. But the worst people are the ones who call me “Driver!”

**Harry**

I not only provide appearance for my client, I also do damage control. We’ve had clients involved in lawsuits, divorces or drugs. One mistakenly took a gun to an airport. On the red carpet – at the Academy Awards or the Golden Globes – I’m the person making my client look good. The other day at an Oprah Winfrey event, the carpet wasn’t put down properly and my clients almost went flying – I had to catch them. They can make some strange requests, too. At a black-tie gala at the White House, two clients hated the dinner and insisted that we circle around Washington DC to find a KFC open at 1a.m. I had to go in wearing a gown and order so they could eat it in the car.

**Jennifer**

I could teach you to do a basic brain operation in two weeks. But what takes time and experience is doing it without wrecking the brain of the patients - learning your limitations takes years.
TASK 1

You should spend about 20 minutes on this task.

You received an email from your English friend, Jane. She asked you for some information about one of your friends. Read part of her email below.

I’ve just got an email from your friend, An. She said she’s going to take a course in London this summer. She asked if she could stay with my family until she could find an apartment. Can you tell me a bit about her (things like her personality, hobbies and interests, and her current work or study if possible)? I want to see if she will fit in with my family.

Write an email responding to Jane.

You should write at least 120 words. You do not need to include your name or addresses.

Your response will be evaluated in terms of Task Fulfillment, Organization, Vocabulary and Grammar.

TASK 2

You should spend about 40 minutes on this task.

Read the following text from a book about tourism.

Tourism has become one of the fastest growing industries in the world. Millions of people today are travelling farther and farther throughout the year. Some people argue that the development of tourism has had negative effects on local communities; others think that its influences are positive.

Write an essay to an educated reader to discuss the effects of tourism on local communities. Include reasons and any relevant examples to support your answer.

You should write at least 250 words. Your response will be evaluated in terms of Task Fulfillment, Organization, Vocabulary and Grammar.
Part 1: Social Interaction (3’)

Let’s talk about your free time activities.

- What do you often do in your free time?
- Do you watch TV? If no, why not? If yes, which TV channel do you like best? Why?
- Do you read books? If no, why not? If yes, what kinds of books do you like best? Why?

Let’s talk about your neighborhood.

- Can you tell me something about your neighborhood?
- What do you like most about it?
- Do you plan to live there for a long time? Why/why not?

Part 2: Solution Discussion (4’)

Situation: A group of people is planning a trip from Danang to Hanoi. Three means of transport are suggested: by train, by plane, and by coach. Which means of transport do you think is the best choice?

Part 3: Topic Development (5’)

Topic: Reading habit should be encouraged among teenagers.

- What is the difference between the kinds of books read by your parents’ generation and those read by your generation?
- Do you think that governments should support free books for all people?
- In what way can parents help children develop their interest in reading?
Looking back: Achievements and drawbacks

Bachman and Palmer’s (1996) framework of “usefulness” of foreign language proficiency tests

“Usefulness” =

Reliability (consistency of scores) +
Construct validity (appropriate interpretation of scores) +
Authenticity (correspondence between test tasks and target language use) +

Interactiveness (engagement of test takers’ various competences in performing test tasks) +
Impact/washback (positive influence on teaching and learning) +
Practicality (efficiency and feasibility)
Achievements and drawbacks

Achievements:
- Reliability and fairness ("bo de thi", objective testing, normal distribution of test scores)
- Practicality (efficiency in scoring, re-using items in item banks)
- Emerging awareness of construct validity in test construction → CEFR and the emergence of VSTEP

Drawbacks:
- Test tasks lack authenticity and contextualization
- Low level of interactivity
- Predominant use of MCQ in high-stakes tests have negative effect on learning
Looking forward: Issues to ponder upon

Pluralism:
- One national English language test, a few centrally recognized tests, or a myriad of language tests to choose from?
- Recognition of international English tests: which one and why?

Contextualization:
- How to have good items which authentic language (written for native speakers by native speakers) while at the same time reflect local views about local topics and interests?

Occupational tests:
- Yes or No?
- If yes, how many occupations and which ones? Why?
Conclusion: Cooperation in the midst of competition is the way to go!

- Cooperation is badly needed, especially at this stage of development.
- But language assessment as an industry is fiercely competitive. Competition is already here and here to stay.
- We need to be creative to be cooperative in the face of competition, in order to find a model which allows this to happen. This conference may provide a good model.
References


