

Adapting Examination Content for a Second Language

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Question: *What issues should be considered when translating or adapting an examination?*

Answer: Two questions should be answered by policy makers who have already made decisions (e.g., content, eligibility, passing standard) about the examination in the first language. In other words, the governing board or regulatory agency should answer these questions:

1. **Will the same passing standard be compared to scores earned while taking the examination in the second language?**
 - Comparing scores from the adapted examination to a different passing standard is an alternative.
 - Policy makers should digest as well that using the same passing standard without supporting evidence is a misstep.
2. **Will people who pass the examination in the second language achieve the exact same designation as the people who take the examination in the first language?**
 - Modifying the designation in some way to indicate that a second language examination was taken is an alternative.

Affirmative answers to both questions might be assumed when a second-language examination is first proposed. Proceeding based on these assumptions alone falls below best practice, so it may be necessary for policy makers to rewind their thought process.

A group called the International Test Commission (<https://www.intestcom.org/>) offers sets of guidelines to entities that intend to offer an examination in a second language. An entity headed down this path would be wise to apply these guidelines to the particulars of their program. This document only intends to highlight some crucial points to start the process of exploring what really should be done when an examination in a second language is proposed.

First, using the word **adapt** instead of **translate** reflects the influence of the Commission. It is possible that some technical words should not be translated when migrating content to the second language. Further, some words may not have a parallel in the second language, and some scenarios described in items may not cross over to cultural, societal, or economic norms. Hence, the task is to adapt examination content so it will be perceived equally by both populations of candidates.

Second, if one adapted item becomes less challenging than the original item while another adapted item becomes more challenging than the original item, then those changes might cancel out leaving the examination scale unchanged. What matters is what happens across all pairs of items. However, an examination typically has many items, so evaluating the aggregate effect becomes complicated. The task is to adapt examination content while sorting out the aggregate effect on the level of challenge

created by the adapted items. The key question becomes, "Who is best positioned to evaluate each pair of items?"

The answer is a panel of subject matter experts who are proficient in the first and the second language. The panel should be instructed about the goal behind the adaptation after which they should iterate their way through the process. Efficiency might be encouraged when one or two of the panel members make the first pass through the adaptation process; however, there should be a phase when the whole group does the subtle, fine-tuning together. The system is still left open to a potential aggregate scale shift created by the examination in the second language. Either this shift should be measured so it can be reflected in the passing standard to which scores will be compared in the second language or the shift should become feedback the panel uses through further iterations of the adaptation until there is no shift. Data collected along the way down this latter path should be summarized and documented as the rationale for using the same passing standard for examination scores in both languages.

It is hoped that this makes clear that a plan to hire a translation company and continue using the same passing standard without evidence that it is fair to do so is a pathway to avoid. Returning to the second question that opened this paper, support for using the exact same designation is more strongly supported after a true adaptation occurs. However, one should also expect to document that the examination content and design (weightings of items of different types) fits well with the population of potential candidates who will take the examination in the second language. In other words, a formal comparison should be done of what people who speak the second language do and what the examination demands. The comparison should document enough overlap that policy makers can feel confident about awarding the same designation to candidates taking the examination in the second language.

A final issue to consider at a high level is the format for presenting examination content to candidates. A plan to use the same designation could be better supported when candidates who take the examination in the second language also see each corresponding item in the first language. This is referred to as a diglot administration format. Doing so is better supported when it is known that some candidates are bilingual. However, presenting twice the reading content deserves more testing time, so this factor should be considered when making the decision about the administration format.