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0521544726 - Testing the Spoken English of Young Norwegians: A Study of Test Validity  
and the Role of 'smallwords' in Contributing to Pupils' Fluency

Angela Hasselgreen

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Angela Hasselgreen  
Bergen, March 2002.

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*Series Editor's notes*

## Series Editor's notes

To improve test fairness we need an agenda for reform, which sets out clearly the basic minimum requirements for sound testing practice. Stakeholders in the testing process, in particular students and teachers, need to be able to ask the right questions of any examinations commercial or classroom based. Examination providers should be able and required to provide appropriate evidence in response to these questions.

It is now axiomatic that a test should be constructed on an explicit specification, which addresses both the cognitive and linguistic abilities involved in the language use of interest, as well as the context in which these abilities are to be performed (**theory based validity and content validity**). A particular administration of a test may fulfil the requirements of both these validities to a greater or lesser extent.

Next in the implementation stage when the test has been administered, we need to look at the data generated and apply statistical analyses to these to tell us the degree to which we can depend on the results (**reliabilities**).

Finally we can collect data on events after the test has been developed and administered (**concurrent and consequential validities**) to shed further light on the well foundedness of the inferences we are making about underlying abilities on the basis of test results. The focus here is on the value of the test for end users of the information provided and the extent to which such use can be justified. This takes us into the area of **concurrent** validity evidence where a test is measured against other external measures of the construct, and also that of **consequential** validity where the impact of the test on society and individuals is investigated. This consideration implies that validity does not just reside in the test itself or rather in the scores on the test but also in the inferences that are made from them.

In Chapter 2 of this volume Hasselgreen provides a clear exposition of the nature of test validation and offers a comprehensive working framework for the validation of a spoken language test. The reader is also referred to Volume 15 of this series where the operational procedures for test validation adopted by Cambridge ESOL in terms of Validity, Reliability, Impact and Practicality (VRIP) are described. It is interesting to compare the extent to which Hasselgreen's broad conceptualisation of this area matches that of Cambridge ESOL's operationalisation of these VRIP categories. Together they provide a solid grounding for any future work in this area.

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In Chapter 3 she examines in detail how communicative language ability (CLA), a central element of a test's theory based validity, might be operationalised in the evaluation of the Norwegian speaking test, for lower secondary school students of English (EVA). As such it represents one of the few reported attempts to operationalise Bachman's seminal cognitive model of language ability.

In Chapters 4 and 5 she takes the broader validation framework developed in Chapter 2 and applies it to the EVA test and so provides test developers with a working example of how validation might be done in practice. She was able to evaluate all aspects of communicative competence in EVA as it had been defined in the literature to date. Published studies of this type are regrettably rare in the testing literature and Hasselgreen's case study illuminates this vital area of our field in an accessible well written account of a validation carried out on this spoken language test in Norway.

Her validation of the existing test system throws up serious problems in the scoring instruments. In particular the band scale relating to fluency does not adequately account for the aspects of CLA measured by the test particularly as regards textual and strategic ability because it lacks explicit reference to the linguistic devices that contribute to fluency. Low inter-rater correlations on *message* and *fluency* discussed in Chapter 5 in the discussion of a posteriori validation based on test scores further points to the problem of vagueness in the existing definitions of these criteria. This provides the link to the second part of the monograph; how to establish 'more specific, unambiguous, data-informed ways of assessing fluency'. As such it addresses the emerging consensus that rating scale development should be data driven.

In Part 2 Hasselgreen accordingly focuses on one aspect of the validation framework that frequently generates much discussion in testing circles, namely how should we develop grounded criteria for assessing fluency in spoken language performance. In Chapter 6 she examines the relationship between small words such as *really*, *I mean* and *oh* and fluency at different levels of ability. According to Hasselgreen such smallwords are present with high frequency in the spoken language and help to keep our speech flowing, although they do not necessarily impact on the content of the message itself. A major contribution of this monograph is the way she locates her argument in relevance theory as the most cohesive way of explaining how smallwords work as a system for effecting fluency by providing prototypical linguistic cues to help in the process of interpreting utterances.

In Chapter 7, based on a large corpus, she reports her research into the extent to which students taking the EVA test used smallwords. She used three groups of students: British native speaker schoolchildren of 14–15 years of age, and a more fluent and a less fluent group of Norwegian schoolchildren of the same age allocated on the basis of global grades in the speaking test. The results support the case that the more 'smallwords' a learner uses, the better

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their perceived fluency. Critically she found that the more fluent speakers of English clearly used this body of language more frequently than high and low achieving Norwegian learners, and the range of the words they used was larger especially in turn-internal position to keep going. The more fluent learners used smallwords in a more nativelike way overall and in most turn positions than the less fluent, and also in terms of the variety of forms used and the uses to which they were put. More nativelike quantities and distribution of smallwords 'appear to go hand in hand with more fluent speech'. The clear implication is that because small words make a significant contribution to fluent speech, such features have an obvious place when developing effective fluency scales. In Chapter 8 she analyses in more detail how students use their smallwords in helping create fluency in communication, what smallwords actually do, providing further corroboration of the findings in Chapter 7.

In Chapter 9 she looks at background variables in relation to small word use such as gender and context, and considers the acquisition of small words. She then looks at the implications of the findings of her research for language education, assessment (task and criteria) and for teaching and learning and in Chapter 10 she summarises her data in relation to the original research questions.

This volume presents the reader with a valuable framework for thinking about test validation and offers a principled methodology for how one might go about developing criteria for assessing spoken language proficiency in a systematic, empirical manner.

Cyril Weir  
Michael Milanovic  
Cambridge 2004