



Language Needs Analysis as the First Step in Designing an LSP Test for Police Officers

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Abstract

Teaching languages for specific purposes (LSP) is becoming more popular and in demand in the teaching of adult learners. The aims and objectives of teaching and learning languages for specific and general purposes differ from each other. Should therefore the evaluation of specific language skills be different from general purposes language assessment?

I will try to answer this question on the basis of a language needs analysis of Polish police officers. In order to check whether police officers do actually have the need to be able to use a foreign language in their work-related tasks, statistical data and other research results were reviewed. Then a needs analysis among a group of Polish police officers was carried out.

As a result of the research a set of specific language skills and abilities necessary to perform work-related tasks by police officers was singled out. The selected skills and abilities differ from those assessed by general language tests which allows us to arrive at the conclusion that police officers' language skills should be measured by a tool other than a general language test. As a consequence of the observation that an LSP exam for police officers is very much warranted, a proposal of the format of a language test for the police was outlined.

The findings of the research will be presented in this paper.

Keywords: Lsp, Needs Analysis, Testing, Police

1. Introduction

While teaching English to pre-service and in-service police officers I searched for an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) exam for this group of professionals. To my surprise, among a vast selection of ESP tests – for pilots, soldiers, medical staff, the tourism industry, and many other professions – a test of English for the police turned out to be non-existent. The situation does not only limit itself to Poland, but pertains to other countries as well. The finding made me probe the reasons for the gap in the certification system and formulate some research questions. Do police officers (in Poland) not need to use a foreign language while performing work-related activities? Or is communication in the police force non-specific, thus a general language test is sufficient to measure police officers' language proficiency?

To find the answers to these questions and explore the topic I decided to perform a needs analysis (NA) of this group of professionals.

2. Needs analysis

To check whether or not Polish police officers have the need to communicate in a foreign language to best perform their work duties, I reached for a number of available studies. The research referred to the numbers of foreigners visiting and living in Poland (especially in the Krakow region), the reasons behind their visits, their countries of origin and the languages they spoke. The data also related to crime, traffic accidents and other incidents in which foreigners participated, which in effect led to their interactions with the Polish police.

The next step was a target situation analysis – a study of how the target group are required to use the foreign language in the target situation. In order to collect this information, I set out to assemble the work-related situations in which police officers would find it necessary or useful to use English or another foreign language, and to discover which particular language abilities these circumstances would require.

To ensure the quality of information, multiple measures and triangulation of sources should be used. According to Long [4], the possible sources of information in a NA involve published and unpublished literature, learners, teachers and applied linguists, as well as domain experts. The information collected using the different sources should be collated and compared.

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An example of published literature used as a source of information are job descriptions. These are formulated by domain experts on the basis of their background knowledge, performance standards, and tasks required. Therefore, they provide a more reliable source of data than those produced by language teachers and applied linguists [3]. For this reason I used the official job descriptions available in Polish national documents (e.g. acts of law, ministry websites).

I also gathered all the existing printed English for the Police coursebooks available in Poland. I searched for other teaching and learning materials available on the Web. The idea behind this stage was to prevent myself from reinventing the wheel. The literature analysis allowed me to make a provisional list of the aforementioned situations and tasks the job requires, as well as foreign language abilities useful or essential in the performance of these tasks. It is, however, important to realise that the information found in coursebooks might not have been collected using a valid data collection method, but could have been included in the book solely in effect of the authors' (teachers' or applied linguists') intuitions. Therefore, the findings should be verified by another reliable source.

To validate and complete the list comprised up until that moment, I turned for help to subject area specialists. I conducted a series of unstructured interviews with two retired police officers. The advantage of open-ended interviews is in-depth coverage of issues and the fact of not pre-empting unanticipated findings by use of pre-planned questions [4]. The informers were asked to supply examples of situations and tasks in which they thought a police officer might be required to use a foreign language and provide instances of the actual actions the officer would have to perform. The data acquired in the process of the unstructured interviews supplemented the inventory drawn up so far. Consequently, the lists were discussed with the experts (structured interviews), allowing them to introduce corrections, alterations and modifications.

The collected data served as a basis for a questionnaire. A survey was produced, asking police officers to state how often they find themselves in the enumerated work-related situations in which a foreigner is involved, and how important they consider the compiled communication abilities.

The survey was composed of a 5-point Likert scale paper-and-pencil questionnaire. 104 police officers based in Krakow, Poland, participated in the study. A majority of the respondents were police officers who were at the time studying at or have already graduated from the AFM Krakow University. Only in-service police staff were asked to complete the survey, as pre-experience learners were decided to be an unreliable source due to the lack of specific purpose background knowledge which was indispensable for the study.

3. The findings

The conducted NA proved – not surprisingly – that there exists a need for Polish police officers to be able to communicate in a foreign language when performing work-related tasks. It also showed that communication in the profession is specific.

As a result of the analysis, a list of target situations was produced. The respondents were asked how often they would find themselves in these work-related situations involving a foreigner. For many of the situations, the responses revolved around *rarely* or *very rarely*, which should make us expect that the language abilities connected with these situations would be considered as unimportant. On the contrary, most of the abilities were graded as *important*, *very important* or *rather important*.

A list of 80 specific work-related abilities necessary in the job of a police officer, ranked in the order of importance, was drawn up. Although they were ordered from the most to the least significant, it must be stressed that none of the abilities listed in the questionnaire was deemed *not very important* or *unimportant*. The inventory was subdivided into 4 groups – according to the appropriate language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) in which they could be realised.

Due to space restrictions neither the set of the target situations, nor of the work-related language abilities will be reprinted here.

The police officers asked about the importance of the four language skills declared listening as the absolute essential. Speaking was decided to be the second most important skill. Lesser values were given to reading, whereas writing received the lowest score of the four skills. Although writing was judged as definitely the least relevant foreign language skill, it still received quite a high mark with a mean of 3,36 out of 5.

These results correlate with the numbers of the individual abilities listed accordingly under the four language skills. An overwhelming majority of the enumerated abilities falls within the category of speaking and listening, while reading, and especially writing, are made up of just a few items.

4. Conclusions

What do the results of the NA mean as far as language certification is concerned?



General English (GE) examinations [5] usually consist of papers measuring independently the four skills. The weight of the particular skills in these tests is very often the same. Apart from testing the four skills, GE exams often measure the use of language (grammar and general vocabulary). Taking this into consideration, as well as the results of the conducted NA, it must be said that GE examinations do not meet the needs of foreign language certification in the police force. This must lead us to state that the specific language proficiency of these professionals should be measured using an LSP (Languages for Specific Purposes) test, designed purposefully for this subject area specialists and serving their particular needs. It is highly surprising that up until now such an examination has not been devised.

Authors writing on LSP assessment [1] [2] stress the importance of task authenticity. Test tasks should be as authentic as possible, which means that they should resemble real-life tasks and activities. Not only should the material used to form the exam task (input) be as genuine as possible, but the activity the test taker is going to be involved in should closely imitate the activities s/he would have to perform on the job. Thus, all the exam tasks in an LSP test for the police should be based on target situations. An inventory of such situations has been drawn up in effect of the study described in this article and can be used as a basis for such an enterprise.

Taking into consideration the content of police officers' job, the language exam should measure either solely listening and speaking, or test the four skills, but then greater weight should be placed on the two priority skills. What is more, an LSP exam need only measure abilities necessary to perform work-related tasks. A list of such abilities was another outcome of the study and is also ready to be used, should the project of designing an LSP test for this target group be undertaken.

Based on the NA, as well as in-depth research into LSP testing, I came up with a format of an LSP test for the police force, but this topic will be further developed in another article.

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