

## ILR TESTING COMMITTEE MINUTES

1. Purpose: to provide an account of the ILR Testing Committee meeting held 26 October 2012, at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) at the George P. Shultz National Foreign Affairs Training Center, Arlington, VA.
2. Minutes:
  - a. Christina Hoffman started the meeting by introducing the presenters and the topic – testing native and heritage speakers.
  - b. Stephanie Stauffer, Applied Linguist from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Language Testing and Assessment Unit, delivered a presentation on *Testing the native Speaker Using the ILR Speaking Level Descriptions (SLDs) for Speaking*. The FBI presentation
    - outlined the three main reasons why FBI tested native speakers: incentive pay, pre- and post-training information and hiring decisions, the latter one being the main reason. The biggest percentage of tests conducted is for linguist (translator/interpreter) applicants.
    - pointed out that the linguist candidates taking speaking proficiency tests (SPT), had already passed a battery of other tests in listening, reading and verbatim translation, thus making it quite likely that they would possess higher levels of proficiency. Each linguist applicant takes two SPTs in order to qualify to work: one in English and one in a foreign language. A question was asked how FBI tested verbatim translation. This topic was suggested as a possible topic for one of the upcoming ILR Testing Committee meeting.
    - described the speaking proficiency test outlining the process of eliciting a ratable sample. Ms. Stauffer stressed that the rating provided was a holistic rating that took into consideration the examinee’s ability to perform functions corresponding to an ILR base level, along with performance in other categories (organization, structure, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation and social-cultural appropriateness).
    - described the typical native speaker weaknesses demonstrated at various levels of proficiency. Ms. Stauffer noted that it is not unusual to see a linguistic breakdown at Level 3 among the native speakers who did not have higher education or professional work experience in their native language. Such breakdowns can be due to the lack of professional-level vocabulary. In response to a question, she noted that it is possible to encounter test takers who score higher in English than in their native languages.
    - provided information on how the testing team approached interpreting statements about native speakers’ production within ILR Speaking Level Descriptions. The testers identify native speakers mainly by the obvious native pronunciation. The testers are not allowed to ask about the test takers’ education or country of origin.
    - outlined a few issues with testing native speakers using ILR SLDs. She noted that the testers had to be level 5 themselves to qualify to be trained to test and that they undergo special training during which they were taught to consider non-stigmatized variants of their language as acceptable models. The testers are also

trained to be aware of a range of native speakers' errors and how to interpret the SLDs with regard to these errors.

- concluded the presentation by providing data on typical results for various groups of test takers.
  
  - Ms. Stauffer was asked about testing Arabic dialects. She reported that the testers start with the regional dialect and then move to MSA for elicitation at higher levels (except in the case of an MSA-only test). In response to a question, she noted that testing in other languages can differ in the way regional varieties are approached.
  - Ms. Stauffer replied to the question on how FBI sustained level 5 testers by saying that many testers communicate in their native language at work, they also communicate with each other, and many visit their country of origin on a regular basis.
  - Ms. Stauffer noted that FBI speaking tests do not currently test any stigmatized dialect (coded language, jargon).
- c. Dr. Cynthia Martin (*ACTFL/LTI*) delivered a presentation on *Testing Native and Heritage Speakers*. The presentation
- emphasized that the ILR scale is functional and, therefore can be applied to all speakers. The structural control does not trump function.  
[The narrow and broad definitions of “heritage” speakers were provided from Polinsky and Kagan, 2007. The following definition for “native” speakers was provided: “generally received most or all formal education in a country where the language is spoken and are therefore literate.”]
  - described speaking strengths and weaknesses of several groups of speakers: heritage speakers when rated 1+, heritage/native speakers when rated L2 or 2+ and heritage/native speakers when rated L3 and 3+.
  - mentioned challenges such as: confusion caused by the reference to “native” speakers in SLDs and native speakers shock at the ratings below L5. To deal with these two challenges ACTFL LTI prepared a document titled *Achieving Ratings of ILR 1,2,3,4,5 on the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI)* which is available to test-takers before their OPIs. The request was made to post a link to this document on ILR Testing Committee website.
  - concluded by emphasizing the importance of ILR criteria to be applied equally to all speakers which also means the heritage/native speakers should not be penalized for errors that testers would accept in learners. She also added that perhaps end-users might want to receive information if the speaker is a heritage or native speaker because their profile is considerably different. LTI currently produces speaker's profile reports upon request from clients. She noted, however, the potential dangers involved in automatically “labeling” speakers as learners when the assessment is not intended to provide information about how or when the speaker acquired the language, and that such labels could also result in discrimination against certain types of language users, depending on the context.

- d. Christina Hoffman reminded the group about the upcoming ECOLT ILR Plenary Session on testing Arabic.
  - e. Paul Tucker announced the upcoming ASTM meeting o and invited anyone interested in working on standards related to testing language for specific purposes to participate.
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