What does an analysis of C-test gaps tell us about the construct of a C-test? – A comparison of foreign and heritage language learners

C-TEST | TEST CONSTRUCT | HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS | GENERAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY | RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

This study investigates the construct of a C-test by looking into the question whether the aspects of language proficiency tapped into by the C-test format are the same if the test is taken by different learner populations. The main tools used in the study are a DIF analysis and a subsequent error analysis of some of the biased gaps for two learner populations: foreign and heritage language learners of Russian.

C-tests are written integrated language gap-tests based on the principle of „reduced redundancy“ (Klein-Braley, 1997). In a classic C-test short texts are mutilated by deleting the second half of every second word, beginning with the second sentence. Each text can be viewed as a representative sample of the language and the test score thus provides a good estimate of a person’s general language proficiency in that language. Correct responses to C-test gaps can be achieved by applying and integrating several facets of language competence (Hastings, 2002). These aspects of proficiency may be elicited to a different extent depending on the test-takers’ language ability and passage difficulty, a feature Sigott (2004) defined as a fluid construct.

Heritage language learners

**Heritage speakers**
Early bilingual speakers of ethnic minority languages typically born outside the parents’ home country or living outside of it from an early age (Benmamoun et al. 2010)

**Language use**
The heritage language is used at home; starting from kindergarten heritage speakers typically become more proficient in the language of the schooling system and use it at the expense of their home language

**Proficiency profiles:**
- (near)native like phonetics
- quite extensive vocabulary
- underdeveloped reading skills
- very often no written skills or those acquired unsystematically
- deficiency on different linguistic levels including morphology and syntax
- in languages with irregular grapheme-phoneme correspondences, additional difficulties with orthography (Brehmer 2007; Polinsky 2006)

Research questions and analyses

- Do the C-test items function similarly for both foreign and heritage language learners?
- Do learners of the same ability levels in the two groups make similar kinds of mistakes on the same C-test items?

To account for parallel and interdependent reconstruction of the meaning and form of an individual gap, the error analysis focused on four biased C-test gaps eliciting the same grammatical phenomenon: nouns in the prepositional case:

**Results and discussion**

- C-test is differentially sensitive to different aspects of language ability (cf Hastings 2002)
- scoring system of 1/0 does not seem to reflect the complexity of the processes involved in solving a C-test gap
- C-test is skewed towards production of the right form rather than recognition and production of meaning when scored 1/0 (20 points on the test received by a heritage language learner reflect a different kind of proficiency than those of a foreign language learner)
- construct fluidity of a C-test potentially leads to construct underrepresentation when used with heritage language learners – the focus shifts from general language proficiency to overemphasizing the orthographic dimension of the language ability, especially for more proficient heritage learners
- as a result, some items may disadvantage this learner group (threat to test fairness)
- with heritage language learners, a different scoring method should be used which accounts for the partial reconstruction of C-test gaps (semantically correct answers) and reflects the receptive skills of the test candidates (cf Bau & Spettmann 2007 in the context of testing German as a second language)

References


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