Chapter 14
A Common Final Exams Project in an IEP: Rationale and Methodology

Tahnee Bucher
University of Arizona, USA

Angelina Serratos
University of Arizona, USA

Mariana Menchola-Blanco
University of Arizona, USA

Tara Chandler
University of Arizona, USA

Nadia Moraglio
University of Arizona, USA

Eddy White
University of Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a common assessment project in a university intensive English program (IEP). In the program, the authors developed, implemented, and supervised the common finals project (CFP) to standardize final exams in all courses through collaborative teacher-made test development. The report provides details regarding why and how the project was implemented, with test samples, and test development and review instruments provided to demonstrate the theoretical and practical issues involved. While still ongoing, this chapter covers the beginning stages of the project, covering a time frame from August 2015 to May 2016, and involved dozens of teachers and hundreds of students. After explaining the rationale for the CFP, and details about its methodology and implementation, this report shows that the standardization project has been successful in developing and administering better final exams for IEP students.

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INTRODUCTION

For tests designed to assess the examinee’s knowledge, skills, or abilities, standardization helps to ensure that all examinees have the same opportunity to demonstrate their competencies. ~ The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (Eignor, 2013)

The central role that assessment plays in language teaching and learning has become more clearly recognized in recent years, as has been the recognition of assessment of student learning being one of the teachers most demanding and complex tasks (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Relatedly, the concept of fairness has long been a critical component associated with assessment and testing, including in the crucible of the classroom. Teachers, as developers of a variety of testing instruments and procedures, have long known this and indeed learned it through their own experience as former students (Gareis & Grant, 2015). Linked to the testing standards epigraph opening this report, having students taking tests in which they ‘have the same opportunity to demonstrate their competencies’, and having teachers develop such tests that are ‘fair to all examinees’ is a primary focus of the assessment project described in this chapter.

This report describes an assessment project developed and implemented in the Center for English as a Second Language (CESL), at the University of Arizona. It focuses on collaboratively designed assessments, specifically, course final exams created (or adopted) and implemented by a team of teachers in the Intensive English Program (IEP).

Implementing these collaborative, teacher-made final exams that conclude courses in the IEP at CESL has been a large-scale project starting in the summer of 2015 and continues at the time of this writing. This report, authored by administrators and teachers who initiated, developed and supervised the plan, describes the beginning of this wide-ranging and multi-faceted classroom-based assessment story. It sets the scene by primarily focusing on why and how the Common Finals Project (CFP) was implemented. This report will provide information about the context of the project, examples of individually created teacher-made tests, the rationale for collaborative test making, the process of implementation of the CFP, as well as an example of a collaborative teacher-made test. These examples and excerpts of teacher-made tests help bring the story to life, and provide a backdrop to this initial report of a project intended to inject more fairness and rigor into a final exams process in a university IEP. The report begins with an accentuation of some key assessment concepts that helps frame the processes and instruments involved.

RELEVANT ASSESSMENT TERMS AND CONCEPTS

‘Standardization’ is a term viewed with disdain by many teachers, often rightfully so if in reference to an externally developed, large scale test that has negative washback effects on the classes they teach, or the program they are in. However, this is just one possible meaning of the term, and not the one used here. For our purposes, and in reference to the classroom assessments in this report, the term ‘standardized test’ uses the following definition:

Tests are standardized when the directions, conditions of administration, and scoring are clearly defined and fixed for all examinees, administrations, and forms (Cohen & Wollack, 2006, p. 358).