**Three Screening Techniques for Language Proficiency: Language Biography, Self-Review of Recorded Text and Review by Guided Interview**

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While there are a growing number of languages with some type of standardized proficiency test, there are still many languages for which there is no resource. It is tempting to assume that someone from a LLD community has native speaker abilities in the LLD. However, many immigrants are not able to come directly to the U.S. from the country or region of origin. Refugees may spend years in camps where a different language is spoken officially or as a *lingua franca* (language used between communities speaking different languages). In the camps, there may be more contact with speakers of languages that belong to the same language chain, which influences the linguistic development of a child. For example, an Arabic speaker from the Sudan may spend years in a camp in Kenya, where their Arabic will be modified by speakers of Egyptian or Ethiopian Arabic. This may actually be an advantage for an interpreter, but if the interpreter’s first language is Mündu, he or she may have more characteristics of a heritage speaker than a native speaker. Such a speaker may have restricted levels of vocabulary, grammar and politeness conventions as to be unable to help someone who has not had the same acquisition history.

It is important to say that the three techniques presented here should be considered more as a “screening” tool than actual language proficiency testing. The difference is that standardized, normed assessments require months of preparation for the instrument and then months of preparation for the evaluators who have proven their proficiency level in the focus language. To develop such reliable assessment techniques is very costly. Screening techniques can be useful to give a rough idea without actually confirming a candidate’s proficiency level.

The first screening technique is a language biography form, which provides information about age and manner of acquisition. Below is a sample focusing on speaking skills:

Candidate name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Country of Origin\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Languages: 1\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_2\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_3\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Age started speaking languages: 1 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 2\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 3\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate from what age to what age you have been speaking each language and in which setting you have used or still use it.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Language | At home | In community | In school  | Refugee Camp or other temporary location | Other |
| 1 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3 |  |  |  |  |  |

Additional information on literacy can be obtained through charts like the one below. If the candidate does not claim literacy skills, this form is not necessary.

Candidate name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Country of Origin\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Can read in language: 1\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_2\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_3\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Can write in language: 1\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_2\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_3\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Age started to read/write languages: 1 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 2\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 3\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate from what age to what age you have been speaking each language and in which setting you have used or still use it.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Language | In formal school | In community (friends, parents, elders, etc.) | As part of study as a second language | Through on-line course | Other |
| 1 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3 |  |  |  |  |  |

This sample form allows for the collection of information on written as well as oral acquisition. This is important to keep in mind when discussing sight translation. How a candidate responds to this form will give clues about the range of language proficiency. It may be that a facilitator will have to help a candidate fill out the information since many people who have potential to interpret may not be literate in English or their other language(s).

A second screening technique is to ask a candidate to talk about something in a non-English language. A topic should be chosen which will be applicable to life in the U.S. Ask the candidate to talk as though speaking with an elder from the country of origin who has never been to the U.S. This should be recorded. Then ask the candidate to discuss the same topic in English. If the candidate’s non-English discourse is heavily loaded with loan words, is shorter than the English version and/or has many hesitations or false starts, this may indicate that the person does not have full fluency even orally.

A third technique is if possible, to use the taped non-English version as above and to have it played to one or more of the older members of the community or to an interpreter from the same language group for input on the candidate’s proficiency. Interview questions should be carefully phrased to avoid putting a community member in the position of “evaluating” the speech directly and the interpreter candidate should not be named nor present during the interview. Possible discussion questions are: Does this person sound like they were born and raised in your community? Is this person respectful? Did you understand this person?

Again, none of these techniques should be considered an accurate assessment of proficiency, but they can generate good discussion with the candidate who may not be aware of any language proficiency issues.

Please take a minute to respond to a brief survey.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/LLDTrainingTip>