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Admission exams in international organisations: The United Nations' Language Competitive Examination (LCE)

Los exámenes de admisión en las organizaciones internacionales: la oposición para intérpretes en plantilla de las Naciones Unidas

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Abstract: In most cases, prior to being admitted into an international organisation as a conference interpreter, candidates need to be tested. The Language Competitive Examination (LCE) is the test that the United Nations organises to assess the level of proficiency of candidates and decide who possesses the necessary skills to work at the UN. Since 2001, an increasing number of examinations have been held to establish a roster from which to cover present and future vacancies. Despite the large number of applicants, very few of them actually pass. One reason might be that LCE speeches present specific challenges that candidates have to master beforehand in order to pass the examination. An analysis of LCE procedure was carried out to shed light on the main features of the LCE. The results show that UN topics, speed and accents are the main challenges that candidates must be aware of if they are to prepare appropriately. These

findings are corroborated by a survey targeted at UN staff interpreters, who suggest that the challenge lies in the very modality tested at the LCE, which is simultaneous interpreting.

Key words: Language Competitive Examination, United Nations, conference interpreting, UN topics, speed, accents.

Resumen: En la mayoría de los casos, antes de ser admitidos en una organización internacional, los candidatos deben superar un examen de admisión. El *Language Competitive Examination* (LCE) es la oposición para intérpretes en plantilla que la Organización de las Naciones Unidas realiza para evaluar el nivel de los candidatos y decidir quién posee las competencias necesarias para trabajar en la organización. Desde 2001 se han venido organizando más exámenes para establecer una lista al objeto de cubrir los puestos vacantes actuales y futuros. Aunque son muchos los candidatos que se inscriben en la prueba, muy pocos consiguen aprobar. Uno de los motivos podría ser que los discursos del LCE presentan una serie de dificultades que los candidatos deben dominar para aprobar. El presente estudio examina las características del LCE a través de un análisis de su procedimiento. Los resultados indican que la temática, la velocidad y los acentos constituyen las dificultades principales del examen, y los candidatos deberían tenerlas en cuenta a la hora de desarrollar un proceso de preparación adecuado. Estos hallazgos quedan corroborados por una encuesta dirigida a los intérpretes permanentes de las Naciones Unidas, quienes también afirman que la dificultad del LCE estriba en la modalidad misma que se evalúa, a saber, la interpretación simultánea.

Palabras clave: oposición para intérpretes en plantilla, Naciones Unidas, interpretación de conferencias, temas de la ONU, velocidad, acentos.

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to ensure a demographic transition and to progressively fill future vacancies, the United Nations (UN) Department of General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM) decided in 2009 to hold a greater number of competitive examinations in order to establish a roster of successful candidates from which to cover present and future vacancies. In its resolution A/res/63/248, adopted in February 2009, the General Assembly requested that the Secretary General

[...] seek a more effective strategy to fill current and future language post vacancies at all duty stations in a timely manner and to hold competitive examinations for the recruitment of language staff well in advance.

Since then, there have been progressively more entrance exams, which in the context of the UN are called Language Competitive Examinations or LCEs. Despite

the large number of applicants, very few of them actually pass, the pass rate seldom exceeding 20 per cent. This prompted the DGACM and the Office of Human Resources Management (OHRM) to start a revamping of the LCE system. Although this initiative will probably improve the LCE procedure, it might not have a direct impact on the success rate.

Against this background, we started to reflect on the causes of this relatively low pass rate and develop the hypothesis that UN speeches in general and LCE speeches in particular present specific challenges that candidates have to learn to overcome in order to pass the examination. Thus, we decided to examine the LCE procedure and carry out a qualitative study in order to delve deeper into those particular features of the LCE that might pose a challenge to candidates.

2. THE LANGUAGE COMPETITIVE EXAMINATION (LCE)

Although simultaneous interpreting (SI) was tried out for the first time at the League of Nations in the 1920s, it was only in 1946, after the Nuremberg Trials, that the UN decided that more and more meetings were to be held using simultaneous interpreting. This General Assembly decision prompted the conference management section of the DGACM to recruit more interpreters. The first generation of UN interpreters, who were self-taught interpreters, worked only in consecutive. Then came the second generation, in the period covering the two decades from 1960 to 1980 (Baigorri 2004). During those years, a large number of trainees or associate interpreters were recruited. At that time, once selected, interpreters were considered trainees and received training within the scope of the UN's own training programme. Trainees often came from other sections of the conference services, especially from translation. At the end of the three-month training period, trainees were required to pass an exam. Success in the exam meant becoming a fully-fledged UN interpreter. This training programme disappeared at the beginning of the eighties for the following reasons: due to the implementation of the programme, all the vacancies in the interpreting section had been filled; there were fewer internal candidates; and an increasing number of interpreters were being trained in interpreting schools in Europe and the United States (Baigorri 2004).

In 1980, the Secretary General told the General Assembly that

[...] having been faced at the beginning of the year with the prospect of recruiting 12 interpreters, 50 translators and 30 typists he had undertaken an extensive publicity effort to advertise competitive examinations for that purpose (UN 1980).

Those competitive examinations were the predecessors of the LCE. The LCE in its current form was introduced during the nineties for the main purpose of establishing a

roster of successful candidates from which to fill present and future vacancies, it now being the only path to becoming a career UN language professional. It is worth noting that UN Regulations expressly prohibit the recruitment of candidates outside the LCE process.

The LCE has never been systematically organised at regular intervals, it generally being organised every two or three years for certain booths and certain language combinations according to current needs. In the case of the English and French booths, the LCE usually takes place every year for interpreters with passive Russian, given the high number of vacancies to be filled for this combination.

As regards the procedure, candidates have to go through an application process before they can take the LCE. First of all, they must create a profile in the Careers Portal. In order to do that, candidates must register on a specific website where they are asked to fill out a questionnaire with their personal information. Once registered, the candidate can start the application for the LCE. The application is received by Human Resources personnel, who proceed with a first screening against the eligibility criteria and send all the successful applications to the heads of the respective booths in New York. The heads of booth, together with the other senior interpreters in New York, assess all the applications and those candidates considered eligible are informed accordingly. The unsuccessful candidates are also notified. It is important to understand that, in contrast to other organisations such as the EU, the UN does not require an interpreting diploma. Another important feature that distinguishes the UN from the EU is that neither the in-house training nor later on the LCE have ever included consecutive interpreting (CI), only simultaneous interpreting (SI).

The LCE consists of two parts. In the first part, which is eliminatory, candidates whose main language (or mother tongue) is English, French, Russian or Spanish are asked to interpret three speeches of progressively increasing difficulty in terms of density, accent and delivery rate, from each of their foreign languages. Each speech lasts approximately between 5 and 10 minutes. Candidates whose main language is Arabic or Chinese are asked to interpret three speeches from their foreign language into their main language and three speeches from their main language into their foreign language. Candidates are recorded and their interpretation from English is assessed first. Those who fail to interpret any one of the speeches in a satisfactory manner are automatically eliminated and the jury does not listen to the remaining speeches. Today, even though French, English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and Russian are all official working languages, English is still the main spoken language at all UN meetings. This explains why English is eliminatory. Only candidates who have successfully interpreted all six speeches are then invited to a competency-based interview, which constitutes the second part of the LCE, having previously only received a pass or fail message from the Human Resources department, with no other information being given. It is worth mentioning, as explained on the UN website, that the decisions of the Board of

Examiners (which is composed of senior interpreters from a given booth) are final and cannot be appealed against (Diur 2014; Ruiz Rosendo & Diur 2017).

In order to understand the admission criteria established by the UN, we have chosen the French booth as an example. Applicants applying for the examination must (UN 2015):

- Have French as their main language.
- Have a perfect command of French and an excellent knowledge of English and Spanish or Russian. The Board of Examiners, appointed by the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management, requires that applicants' claims to knowledge of official languages be supported by relevant documentation.
- Hold a university degree from a recognised school of interpreting in which at least one full academic year is devoted to interpreting. Alternatively, applicants must hold a degree or an equivalent qualification from a university or institution of equivalent status at which French is the language of instruction, and have 200 days of experience as conference interpreters or 200 days of work experience in the field of translation, editing, verbatim reporting or related fields. The Board of Examiners may, at its discretion, admit an applicant graduating from a university whose principal language of instruction is other than French provided he/she has adequate secondary educational qualifications from an establishment at which the principal language is French.
- Not have reached their 56th birthday by the deadline for submission of applications.

In the case of the other booths, the requirements are the same, with changes in the language combination and directionality. In the English booth, candidates must have a perfect command of French and Russian or Spanish. In the Spanish and Russian booths, the passive languages have to be English and French. For the Arabic and Chinese booths, candidates are requested to have an active language, which is usually English or French, although Spanish is also allowed since this is an active language that some interpreters in the Arabic booth have. It is worth noting that interpreters in the Chinese and Arabic booths work in groups of three instead of in groups of two, which is the case for the other booths.

As far as assessment is concerned, the UN Board of Examiners has developed assessment criteria for the LCE that need to be followed by the evaluation panel, meaning that candidates will be assessed against those criteria only. As a transparency tool, the aforementioned criteria have been posted on the Outreach Programme website. Examinees must demonstrate the following qualities: excellent passive comprehension of their two source (or foreign) languages; accuracy in interpretation

into grammatically correct target (or main) language; the ability to construct complete sentences; an understanding of the appropriate style and register; an ability to keep up with speed; intelligent editing of logically redundant words and phrases; the ability to cope with difficult or dense passages; and good diction and delivery.

In conclusion, after analysing the LCE procedure, we concluded that candidates are faced mainly with three explicit challenges: speed, topic and accent. As we have mentioned previously, during the exam candidates are exposed to three different UN speeches that are increasingly difficult in terms of these three factors.

3. CHALLENGES OF THE LCE

3.1. *Speed*

Speed has often been raised by both UN staff interpreters and candidates as a factor that might explain the low success rate. As a matter of fact, in the workload study on interpreter stress and burnout commissioned by the AIIC (Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence/International Association of Conference Interpreters) in 2001, 78 per cent of all respondents rated fast delivery rate as the major source of stress in their work. This high percentage can be easily explained: Gile (2009) in his Effort Model explains that interpreting requires a type of mental energy that is only available in limited supply. He declares that when a speech is too fast or too dense, interpreters can experience interpreting failure because the activity requires more capacity than is available, at which point cognitive resources exhaust and performance deteriorates. Over the years, numerous studies have been carried out on the problems associated with interpreting fast speeches (e.g. Gerver 1969/2002; Barik 1973, 1994; Sunnari 1995; Pio 2003; Meuleman & Van Besien 2009; Pym 2009; Changshuan 2010; Barghout, Ruiz Rosendo & Varela García 2015). In these studies, it is often argued that since the total cognitive capacity of the interpreter is limited, there exists the possibility of his or her working memory becoming overloaded when confronted with speeches delivered at a high rate.

There are some scholars who have specifically examined the impact of speed on the interpreter's rendition. In his study, Gerver (1969/2002) compares the relevant measurements of the interpreter's performance with those of shadowers to determine the extent to which any variability in an interpreter's rendition could be due to difficulty in transmitting speech at faster rates. His findings show that there is indeed a correlation between increase in speed of delivery and omissions. Barik (1973) establishes that the faster the speaker's delivery rate (both spontaneous and read), the greater the degree of omission on the part of the interpreter. Along these lines, Pio (2003) shows that students and professionals alike double the number of omissions in fast speeches compared to in slow ones. On her part, Shlesinger (2003) states that there is a clear and robust inverse

correlation between input rate and the interpreter's ability to process a text. When the rate of input increases, the interpreter no longer has the time necessary to process all the information and will resort to a strategy based on the selection of more or less words for the purpose of understanding what is considered to be most important.

Speed is a factor that affects both novices and experts, in that even experienced interpreters are disturbed by a high delivery rate (Altman 1990). Nevertheless, in their experiment, Liu, Schallert and Carroll (2004: 19) show that, although there are no differences in working memory capacity between experienced interpreters and students, professional interpreters have developed skills (the ability to constantly judge and select) that allow them to better manage competing demands on limited cognitive resources and «select more important ideas from the speech input under conditions where stringent task demands jeopardize the completeness and accuracy of the output».

In an experimental study carried out in the context of the UN, Barghout, Ruiz Rosendo and Varela García (2015) aim to elucidate the strategies that expert interpreters resort to when confronted with different speed rates (120, 160 and 200 wpm), specifically the omission of redundancies. Ten staff interpreters from the UN French booth were asked to interpret three UN speeches of similar lexical density delivered at different speeds. The findings show that the participants omit more information when confronted with 160 and 200 wpm than with 120 wpm, and that the omission of redundancies is one of the strategies that experts resort to when dealing with high and very high delivery rates.

Some authors mention the speed they consider to be optimal and comfortable for SI (Gerver 1976; Seleskovitch & Lederer 1984; Gile 2009), this normally ranging from 100 to 130 wpm, but there is no consensus in the literature on what the recommended speed should be. The comfortable input rate for SI, according to Seleskovitch (1965), is between 100 and 120 words, whereas rates between 150 and 200 words per minute provide an upper limit for effective interpretation (Seleskovitch & Lederer 1984). The same conclusion was reached by Gerver (1976) himself when he conducted an experiment in which ten interpreters were asked to simultaneously interpret a speech at different delivery rates (95, 112, 120, 142 and 164 wpm); the optimal input rate for SI was found to be between 95 and 120 wpm, with a higher rate leading to an information overload that would negatively impact the interpreter's performance. According to AIIC guidelines, there should be three minutes for a page of 40 lines in a text written to be read out loud, which would work out as an average of about 130 wpm. However, all interpreters working in international organisations know that speakers tend to speed up throughout the course of a speech due to the limited amount of time allotted to them. In the context of the UN, Barghout, Ruiz Rosendo and Varela García (2015) found a delivery rate of close to 150 wpm when they analyse a sample of United Nations speeches¹ to

1. The authors analysed two weeks of the 16th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC). They selected two speeches per day, one corresponding to a member state and one to

determine the actual average rate. In the results of this study, the highest delivery rate is 188.57 wpm and the lowest is 106.44 wpm, with the average of the twenty speeches being 149.12 wpm, which is higher than the rate that is usually recommended. In another study (2016), the same authors calculated that the average delivery rate is 161 wpm. The findings here show that the average is similar in the speeches in French and in English (162 and 160 wpm, respectively), with a maximum speed of 193 wpm (English speeches) and 191 wpm (French speeches), and a minimum speed of 128 wpm (English speeches) and 121 wpm (French speeches)².

The inability to cope with speed was probably already one of the factors used to screen out most applicants for the job of SI during the Nuremberg Trials (Gaiba 1999), and this parameter is still being used to screen candidates in the first part of the LCE. One might add that this is rightly so, since interpreters who eventually pass the LCE can be recruited immediately, and on the first day of their contracts these interpreters can be randomly assigned to any type of meeting, with, as we have already seen in the context of the UN, a potentially very high delivery rate. Therefore, it is important to test beforehand if they will be able to cope with the kinds of speeches that are increasingly frequent at the UN.

3.2. Topic

The materials used for the LCE are speeches taken from those given in the General Assembly or in the Security Council. In contrast to other international organisations, where staff interpreters are asked to prepare speeches for the freelance test or the staff examination, at the UN the standard practice is to choose speeches from real meetings, particularly speeches that have been interpreted by staff interpreters. Giving candidates a speech that has been interpreted by a UN interpreter in a UN meeting gives the jury an immediate idea as to whether a candidate can cope with such a speech. It also shows whether a candidate has come prepared for the LCE. This approach has never been debated at the UN. However, for the last LCE in 2013, some heads of booth decided to use a speech that had been delivered by a representative of civil society. Although the speech had been given before one of the Commissions and

an NGO. The 20 speeches were randomly selected, the transcripts downloaded from the UN website and the recordings listened to on the webcast. The transcripts were then corrected, and for each speech the words were counted and the time of delivery was measured. Finally, the average number of words per minute was calculated.

2. The speeches were taken from the 24th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) working group. Two countries were selected at random (Belgium and Namibia) to calculate the number of words per minute for English and French, respectively.

was on the Middle East, candidates reported great discomfort at this deviation since they had prepared for the usual UN material (Diur 2014³).

The General Assembly is the main deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the UN. The subsidiary organs of the General Assembly are divided into categories: Boards, Commissions, Committees, Councils and Panels, together with Working Groups and others. General Assembly speeches for the LCE can be taken from the General Debate (speeches given by Heads of State or Government delivered from the UNHQ in New York at the beginning of the General Assembly session) or from one of the Committees. There are six main Committees:

- The First Committee deals with disarmament, global challenges and threats to peace that affect the international community, and seeks out solutions to the challenges in the international security regime.
- The Second Committee deals with issues relating to economic growth and development, such as: macroeconomic policy questions (including international trade, the international financial system and external debt sustainability); financing for development, sustainable development, human settlements, poverty eradication, globalisation and interdependence; operational activities for development; and information and communication technologies for development.
- The Third Committee discusses the advancement of women, the protection of children, indigenous issues, the treatment of refugees, the promotion of fundamental freedoms through the elimination of racism and racial discrimination, and the right to self-determination.
- The Fourth Committee, also known as the Special Political and Decolonization Committee, deals with a variety of subjects, which include those related to decolonisation, Palestinian refugees and human rights, peacekeeping, mine action, outer space, public information, atomic radiation and the University for Peace.
- The Fifth Committee is the Committee of the General Assembly, with responsibilities for administration and budgetary matters.
- The Sixth Committee is the primary forum for the consideration of legal questions in the General Assembly. All of the U.N. Member States are entitled to representation on the Sixth Committee as one of the main committees of the General Assembly.

The Security Council, under the UN Charter, has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. It has fifteen Members (five permanent

3. This study was carried out in the context of an MA thesis that was written at the University of Geneva and supervised by Dr. Kilian G. Seeber.

members with veto power) and ten non-permanent members elected by the General Assembly for a two-year term, and each Member has one vote. Under the Charter, all Member States are obliged to comply with Council decisions. Members take turns at holding the presidency of the Security Council for one month. Meetings of the Security Council are held at the call of the President at any time he/she deems necessary. Formal meetings of the Security Council may be both open and closed. Closed meetings are not open to the public and no verbatim record of statements is kept.

The Security Council takes the lead in determining the existence of a threat to peace or an act of aggression. It calls upon the parties involved in a dispute to settle it by peaceful means and recommends methods of adjustment or terms of settlement. In some cases, the Security Council can resort to imposing sanctions or even authorise the use of force to maintain or restore international peace and security. It also recommends to the General Assembly the appointment of the Secretary-General and the admission of new Members to the UN. Also, together with the General Assembly, it elects the judges of the International Court of Justice.

For the LCE, the speeches chosen are speeches that were given in one of the organs described above. Usually, the speeches chosen are of a general nature and tend not to be too technical. Fifth and Sixth Committee speeches deal with budgetary and legal matters, respectively, and, given the technical nature of the debates, the participants are experts. Consequently, for the LCE, First, Second, Third and Fourth Committee speeches tend to be chosen, given that they deal with disarmament, social, humanitarian or cultural issues, decolonisation and human rights, respectively (Diur 2014). Speeches from the Security Council are, since closed meetings are not open to the public, necessarily from the open meetings. They are usually on a theme related to peace and security or on a specific country that is on the current agenda of the Security Council.

On the day of the LCE, applicants listen to the recordings of the three selected speeches. Prior to the start of each speech, the voice of a commentator indicates to the applicants the name of the speaker, his or her position, the venue and occasion, and the date on which the speech was delivered. When the LCE speech corresponds to a speech delivered during the General Debate, speakers usually begin by referring to the general theme chosen for that particular session, and this theme is also indicated to the LCE applicants a few minutes before the actual recording starts. LCE speeches are usually taken from the previous year (although the heads of booth might sometimes decide otherwise), which means that if the candidates have had adequate preparation, they should already have a clear awareness of the topics that are to be discussed before the exam begins.

The LCE portal includes a link to the UN languages website, where candidates are given tips on how to prepare themselves for the LCE. The tips given are very useful in that they explain clearly that preparing for the LCE does not mean focusing exclusively

on speeches from the UN webcast, and that candidates should become familiar with the organisational structure of the UN (links are given to the UN website itself) and read the UN Charter in their working languages. It is also suggested that candidates be thoroughly familiar with the wording of the Preamble and other key articles of the Charter.

Some UN interpreters have suggested that candidates should be allowed more time to prepare a given topic before they take the exam. However, the common understanding is that the themes most likely to come up in the speeches can be identified by referring to the Secretary General's and the Security Council's annual reports from the year prior to the LCE. Therefore, preparation for the LCE, according to the UN, should start long before the actual day of the exam and not just before the speech begins. Even when the speeches chosen have been a departure from the usual speeches, the overall theme has always been one of those mentioned in one of the two annual reports. A lack of adequate preparation could be one of the causes of the low success rate.

3.3. Accents

Accents represent another challenge for candidates during the LCE. There are 193 members of the UN. This means that for the LCE a speech that has been given by any one of the 193 delegations can be chosen. In contrast to the EU, where there are 24 languages and where each delegate is usually allowed to speak in his or her mother tongue, at the UN there are only six official languages. It is therefore self-evident that the majority of the delegates at the UN are not able to speak in their mother tongue as they have to use one of these languages. The resulting wide variety of accents in each of the six languages may be a source of added stress for the candidates taking the LCE, in that previous training might not have been adapted to this particular challenge. It is worth noting that most of the training institutions usually use native speakers throughout the pertinent courses, and students are seldom confronted with other accents.

Few studies have been conducted on the impact of non-native accents on the interpreter's performance (Mazzetti 1999; McAllister 2000; Sabatini 2000; Lin, Chang & Kuo 2013). Some studies, however, have been carried out on the effect of interpreters' foreign accents on the users' perception (e.g., Hale, Bond & Sutton 2011; Cheung 2013), and other studies indicate that non-native accents can adversely affect listener comprehension (Derwing & Munro 2009). Also, in the workload study commissioned by the AIIC in 2001, difficult accents were one of the main stressors mentioned. Although the results of the study are more than a decade old, the fact that accents are quoted as a factor in stress and burnout is significant. These results confirmed those of a

study previously conducted by Mazzetti (1999) that aimed to assess whether, and if so to what extent, the delivery of a speech by a non-native speaker affected the interpreter's comprehension skills and the semantic quality of his or her performance. Fifteen students at the University of Trieste were asked to simultaneously interpret from German into Italian a written text that was read out using different accents. Ten of the participants were Italian native speakers and five had German as their mother tongue. The author identified certain segmental and prosodic deviations in the delivery of the source text (ST) that he considered to be a possible cause of both misunderstanding of the ST meaning and loss of rhetorical effect, and deduced that these deviations might have influenced the semantic quality of the students' renditions in the target language. In the results, the percentage of incorrect renditions varied between the two subgroups of participants in that the German native-speaker interpreters produced a lower percentage of incorrect renditions compared to the Italian native-speaker interpreters. Moreover, the renditions delivered by the German interpreters proved to be semantically less incorrect. The findings of this study would appear to confirm that ST presentation by a non-native speaker can give rise to remarkable difficulties for interpreters. These results are similar to those produced by Lin, Chang and Kuo (2013), who conducted an experimental study to examine the effect of a non-native speaker on the rendition accuracy of native Mandarin Chinese interpreting students. According to the results, both non-native phonemics and non-native prosody significantly deteriorate accuracy, but prosody has a stronger effect on target-speech accuracy. In fact, interpreters have to dedicate more effort to analysing ideas in the source speech due to the difficulties posed by a non-native prosody that does not reflect the sentence structure and intended focuses. Sabatini (2000) obtained the same results. The participants in her study (10 final-year interpreting students) had a number of difficulties in simultaneously interpreting a speech delivered by a non-native speaker, but far fewer in the other tasks using the same speech (listening and shadowing), which means that the difficulties triggered by accent are more related to the processes inherent in SI than to an inability to understand and repeat the input message correctly. An interesting conclusion of this study is that not only non-native accents have a negative impact on the interpreter's comprehension and rendition, but also strong native accents.

There are studies that focus on the topic of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) but that have also analysed the impact of accents on the interpreter's performance (Albl-Mikasa 2010; Reithofer 2010). Albl-Mikasa (2010), through a survey of professional conference interpreters, explores the impact of ELF on the interpreter's work, on interpreting processes and on the interpreter's performance quality. Her results show that interpreters are increasingly faced with non-native speakers who use ELF, and this has a clear impact, which is more negative than positive, on the interpreter's work. Moreover, there seems to be a general consensus that non-native speakers are more difficult to interpret because they produce an overload in the comprehension task,

this having consequences in the production task. Another interesting result is that the interpreters in her study claim that the challenge is to maintain high quality in this increasingly difficult situation of interpreting non-native speakers.

Reithofer (2010) carried out an experimental study to compare the communicative effectiveness of a non-native speaker with that of a simultaneous interpreter working into the audience's mother tongue or L1. The participants in this study, who were experts on the topic of the simulated conference speech, were divided into two groups: one group listened to the original speech in English being delivered by an Italian speaker, and the other half listened to the SI into German, their L1. They then had to answer a series of comprehension questions on the content of the speech. The findings show that the group listening to the interpreter understood the content of the speech better than those listening to the original non-native speaker, even if they were used to listening to English speeches and were experts in the field. In short, one might argue that speed and accents represent a challenge to conference interpreters. In the LCE, these two factors are tested, together with a third one that may be considered as another challenge to the interpreter, UN topics. This could be among the main reasons why the percentage of candidates who pass the exam is low. In order to confirm this assumption, we decided to carry out a survey among UN staff interpreters that would corroborate whether or not these are the main challenges of the LCE.

4. QUALITATIVE STUDY

4.1. *Research questions*

After analysing the LCE procedure, a qualitative study was carried out in 2015⁴ (see Ruiz Rosendo & Diur 2017) in order to examine in greater depth, among other aspects, the challenges of the LCE. Specifically, one of the objectives of the study was to explore the perceptions of UN staff interpreters vis-à-vis the LCE. In this article, only the question related to the LCE will be mentioned, that is, «What are the challenges inherent in the LCE?» It was hypothesised that speed, topic and accent are the main challenges of the LCE.

4. This study was carried out in the context of a PhD thesis that was defended in 2015 at Pablo de Olavide University (Seville, Spain).

4.2. Methodology

4.2.1. Study design

Given the research questions and objectives of the study, we decided to carry out a qualitative study through semi-structured questionnaires designed with LimeSurvey. The questionnaire was divided into seven sections:

- Section 1: Personal and professional information
- Section 2: Training
- Section 3: Interpreting modalities at the UN
- Section 4: The LCE
- Section 5: LCE and MoU schools
- Section 6: Teaching in schools and coaching young interpreters

4.2.2. Pilot study

The questionnaire was piloted with eight interpreters, seven of whom were UN staff members. There were three prerequisites for the selection of the participants in the pilot study: first, that the six UN languages had to be represented, which meant one interpreter (or at most two) per official UN language; second, that the sample had to include interpreters with a certain knowledge of research in general and surveys in particular; and third, that they had been involved in outreach activities and had been working with students in schools and/or at the UN for them to be aware of the potential gap between training programmes and what is demanded at the LCE.

4.2.3. Participants

Since the survey itself was to be carried out in the context of the UN, the survey population only included UN staff interpreters. There are usually 250 UN staff interpreters working at four different duty stations. This number may vary slightly due to retirements and/or transfers to other duty stations. As our research study needs to be viewed only in the context of the UN and its results cannot be extrapolated, the sample population was limited to these 250 UN interpreters. However, since seven staff interpreters had been involved in the pilot study, they could not then participate in the final study. As a result, the study population was composed of 243 interpreters.

The questionnaire was sent via a group email to all the UN interpreters on the same day and two reminders followed after three weeks and one month, respectively. Eighty interpreters completed the questionnaire.

4.2.4. Results on the challenges of the LCE

For the purpose of this study, we will only describe the results related to the challenges of the LCE, from Section 4 of the questionnaire. This section focuses on the training received by UN staff members before taking (and, of course, passing) the LCE, the staffers' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their training, the challenges of the LCE and the respondents' views on the low pass rate.

According to the answers to the questions, a clear majority of the respondents (82.5 per cent) acknowledged that their training had been very useful for passing the LCE. Only 6.25 per cent considered that their training had been inadequate. It is worth noting that 61.25 per cent of the interpreters had been trained at a MoU school and 38.75 per cent had been trained elsewhere. 13.75 per cent of the non-MoU-trained interpreters were self-trained.

When the self-trained interpreters were asked if they considered that they had been as well prepared as the formally trained interpreters to pass the LCE, 50% felt that their preparation had been on a par with that of formally trained interpreters. Of the other half, 3.75% answered the opposite, and 46.25% considered that in some respects they had been even better prepared.

Regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the training received, the lack of exposure to accents, high speed and UN topics was mentioned as shortcomings. Five participants thought that candidates are not used to non-native accents because schools are still using today native speeches to train students, and nine interpreters considered that the majority of candidates are not properly introduced to UN terminology and jargon. The lack of training in SI and SI with text was also mentioned. Three interpreters highlighted the overlong duration of CI training (see Ruiz Rosendo & Diur, 2017) and twelve considered that SI should be emphasised in training programmes. This is a legitimate concern given that SI with text is one of the main techniques used by interpreters in their everyday work at the UN and that sometimes new recruits have to learn this new technique while on the job.

As far as the main challenges of the LCE are concerned, the participants mentioned the following:

Challenge	Number of respondents
Speed	47
Stress	23
Accents	14
Artificial conditions	13
Poor quality of recordings and technical problems	9
Complexity of UN speeches and lack of familiarity with UN speeches	7

Table 1. Challenges of the LCE

A question on the reasons why the LCE pass rate is low was also included in the questionnaire. The reasons mentioned included the challenges mentioned in the previous question (speed and stress), but included other reasons such as problems with C languages (which is related to accents), problems with the A language, lack of general knowledge and lack of awareness of assessment criteria.

Reason why the LCE is low	Number of respondents
Stress	53
Lack of knowledge of UN subjects	45
Problems with C languages	45
Excessive speed of speeches	44
Problems with the A language	38
Lack of general knowledge	37
Lack of knowledge of UN structure	31
Adequacy of criteria for selecting candidates	19
Choice of exam material	16

Table 2. Interpreters' opinions on the low pass rate for the LCE

Other factors mentioned by the respondents were the lack of appropriate preparation, foreign-accented speeches, technical problems during the exam, the density of written texts and the lack of experience of young candidates.

5. CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the LCE procedure led us to consider that there are three factors that are tested in the examination, apart from the modality of simultaneous interpreting per se: speed, topic and accent. The results of the survey carried out with UN staff

interpreters confirm that these are indeed the main challenges of the LCE, even if they do not consider accent to be one of the reasons why the LCE pass rate is low. There were other challenges put forward by the interpreters, such as stress, lack of comprehension of C languages and lack of command of the A language, among others. The challenges put forward are not always the same as the reasons given for not passing the LCE, although the three challenges are included as potential reasons for not passing the exam. We consider that the third challenge, accent, might be included in the umbrella reason «problems with C languages» If we look at the reasons put forward by the participants, we could argue that a command of the working languages constitutes an invaluable asset for passing the examination. This is in line with the conclusions of other authors, who highlight the importance of mastering both the passive and the active languages in order to gain admission, at the first stage of the process, to interpreting schools (Moser-Mercer 1994; Donovan 2003).

An interesting result is that the participants in the survey considered that one of the challenges is the modality tested in the LCE, that is, SI itself, and, in fact, they consider that the lack of training in this modality could have a detrimental effect on the candidate's performance. Along these lines, it has to be taken into consideration that the LCE is and has always been a test of SI only. As explained on the UN website, candidates should have an excellent passive comprehension of their two foreign languages and should be capable of providing an accurate simultaneous interpretation into grammatically correct target language and constructing complete sentences with good diction and delivery. These skills should be taught at interpreter training schools and are a prerequisite for any candidate who intends to work for an organisation as a freelancer or staff member. A diploma in conference interpreting should ideally attest that the holder has acquired all the necessary sub-skills that will allow him or her to work in simultaneous at a professional level. However, interpreting schools train interpreters for a wide range of markets. For obvious reasons, they cannot concentrate on the UN market alone, as not all students will end up working exclusively for the UN. This might explain why some candidates sometimes find it difficult to cope with UN speeches.

Given that the portal asks candidates to be aware of some categories of topics featured on the UN website, and that all the relevant information is available on the internet in general and on the UN website in particular, it is always surprising to note that in some cases candidates are still lacking the required basic knowledge. However, even though being able to deal with UN topics and the associated specific terminology constitutes one of the many challenges of the LCE, in general terms it is our belief that with proper preparation and a detailed explanation of what to expect, candidates taking the LCE in the future will have a greater chance of success. Hence the objective of this article is to try to define the main challenges provided by LCE test materials and understand the main features of LCE speeches in an attempt to help candidates

anticipate the difficulties that they will encounter and prepare more effectively for the LCE, thereby increasing their chances of passing.

This study attempts to shed light on the characteristics and challenges of the United Nations LCE. Further studies could be carried out with other stakeholders, such as candidates in general rather than only those who become UN staff interpreters, to gather more data and obtain a better insight into the challenges of the LCE.

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