



# Language Testing Options



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*IMPROVING PATIENT-PROVIDER COMMUNICATION FOR LATINOS*

## **Language Testing Options**

*As a courtesy to Hablamos Juntos grantees, we have compiled a list of testing options to be used for informational purposes only. Inclusion in this resource list does not imply any endorsement, recommendation, or approval by either The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation or Hablamos Juntos.*

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September 27, 2002

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## Language Testing Options

**T**he testing of language capabilities is a beginning step to assess the abilities of a person used in an interpreter. Language competency is an important consideration in recruiting and hiring interpreters as well as in determining whether a bilingual employee is able to function in an interpreter role. The attached information details the criteria for assessing interpreter competence, which includes language ability. This is an introduction for understanding testing options currently available.

This report provides readers with information on assessing language skills and is designed to provide a snapshot of organizations currently testing language ability and oral skills. Tests for language proficiency are available in a variety of forms. Some are internationally recognized and standardized while others are newly developed for specific environments and specific purposes. Several health organizations also have developed organization specific means to test for language proficiency. Collectively, these options provide a snapshot of the field in terms of testing language ability and oral skills.

The NCIHC *Guide to Initial Assessment of Interpreter Qualifications*<sup>1</sup> (*Guide*) describes both informal and formal (objective) models for assessing basic oral language skills. A summary of the guide follows. The *Guide* was produced under a contract between the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health and the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care. Readers are encouraged to obtain a complete copy of the *Guide* from the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care website, [www.ncihc.org](http://www.ncihc.org).

Updated information on various organizations that test language ability and oral skills is provided in this report.<sup>2</sup> Included are organization's names, websites, e-mail address, and updated information on the cost of testing, length of testing, and any specialties that are offered (such as healthcare testing).

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<sup>1</sup> *Guide to Initial Assessment of Interpreter Qualifications* (April, 2001) Maria-Paz Beltran Avery, Ann Chun, Bruce Downing, Marcia Maynard, Karin Ruschke, Shiva Bidar-Sielaff, Cindy Roat; The National Council on Interpretation in Health Care Working Paper Series

<sup>2</sup> Updated information on oral proficiency testing services was obtained by telephone from the agencies listed in July 2002.

The NCIHC *Guide to Initial Assessment of Interpreter Qualifications (Guide)* lays out a strategy for the assessment of interpreter’s qualifications at the point where they are being hired by an organization or being admitted to an interpreter’s pool. The *Guide* outlines the issues that need to be considered by health care organizations in developing their own internal strategy or policy for assessing candidate’s skills and may offer suggestions for assessing language skills of bilingual staff used as interpreters. Language testing—an assessment of language proficiency—is one component of the more comprehensive process of assessing an interpreter’s ability outlined by the guide. The key points made in the *Guide* with regard to the testing of language ability are summarized below.

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**OVERVIEW OF THE GUIDE** The guide lays out a strategy for the assessment of interpreter’s qualifications at the point where they are either being hired by an organization or being admitted to an interpreter’s pool. The authors provide an outline of issues that need to be considered by health care organizations in developing their own internal strategy or policy for assessing candidate’s skills. Language testing, which is an assessment of language proficiency, is one component of the more comprehensive process of assessing an interpreter’s ability, as outlined by the guide.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE GUIDE** Feedback should be given to those being assessed to identify specific needs for training and personal development.

The need for assessment does not disappear after hiring.

Certification requires formal assessment with a valid and reliable instrument. Examples include the State of Washington, CHIA, MMIA, and NCIHC.

An official certificate or college degree from an interpreter program does not imply that a person is certified.

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**SIX COMPONENTS SUGGESTED FOR LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTING**

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**1. BASIC LANGUAGE SKILL**

This includes speaking and understanding the two languages being interpreted. The Guide describes both informal (subjective) and formal (objective) models for assessing basic oral language skills. Language proficiency can be tested via unstructured informal oral interview, semi-structured formal interview, or the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview. English may be assessed with the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Basic English as a Second Language (BEST), or SPEAK. Tests for basic language skills usually cover the following:

- English oral comprehension
- English oral production
- Non-English comprehension
- Non-English production

There is debate about comprehension and production of written language.

**2. ETHICAL CASE STUDY**

This includes knowledge of code of ethics and decision-making. Examples include MMIA, Bridging the Gap, CHIA, and NCIHC. Testing of ethics is based on a written or oral scenario to which the candidate reacts. Components of ethical principles include confidentiality, accuracy and completeness, impartiality, respect and professionalism, conveying cultural information, and acceptance of assignments.

**3. CULTURAL ISSUES**

Ability to respond to cultural misunderstandings brought on by language and culturally based beliefs, values, and assumptions. This is assessed through the presentation of scenarios that describe cultural barriers, and candidates are asked how they would respond.

**4. HEALTH CARE TERMINOLOGY**

Terminology and concepts such as anatomy, symptoms, illnesses, procedures and tests, equipment, treatment, specialists, hospital departments, and medications can be included. Oral and written tests can assess health care terminology by translating a list of terms from one language to the other. Role-play can also be used to test terminology.

**5. INTEGRATED INTERPRETING SKILLS**

Ability to interpret a simulated cross-linguistic review with accuracy and completeness to maximize communication and understanding. Examples of skills include asking for pauses and clarification, using mnemonic devices to remember key information, and managing communication flow. Scripted role-play (which can be audio or video-taped) is used to assess these skills. Evaluators look at whether the candidate used the consecutive mode of interpreting, whether the candidate was positioned unobtrusively, and how well the candidate intervened.

**6. TRANSLATION OF SIMPLE INSTRUCTIONS**

Includes application forms, signage, notices, surveys, brochures, invoices, bills, discharge instructions, appointment cards, and medication labels. Interpreters should be able to both translate written messages into spoken messages and translate short passages of written text into written form in another language. The literacy of the patient needs to be considered. Assessing translation ability is done through using actual text commonly encountered in medical settings. A candidate may translate written text into spoken form (usually English to the target language) or translate from English into written form of another language.

The *Guide* suggests that the order of testing the above components is based on cost and efficiency and that these different components of assessment can be weighted differently based on importance. For example, basic language skills may constitute a larger percentage of the overall score on an interpreter test than translation skills.

Assessment may also be done before (as a standard for accepting applicants) or after training (to determine how much the applicant benefited from the training).

## Testing Oral Skills

The *Guide* references the following two companies that provide oral proficiency testing services.

### Language Testing International (LTI)<sup>3</sup>

Helen Hamlyn, Testing Director [hamlyn@languagetesting.com](mailto:hamlyn@languagetesting.com)  
Phone 914-948-5100 or 800-486-8444, extension 4  
[www.languagetesting.com](http://www.languagetesting.com)

LTI provides formal oral language testing services over the telephone in 37 languages, including Spanish (the test can also be conducted face-to-face). LTI uses the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) oral proficiency interview and rating system, which is an internationally recognized test of language proficiency. The test lasts 30 minutes and consists of a structured conversation between a trained and certified interviewer and the person being assessed. The interviewer probes and asks questions about the interviewee's interests, and the conversation escalates in level of difficulty. A second part is a role-play in which the interviewee is asked to play one role. The tape is rated first by the interviewer and then again by the second rater. The test is conducted and rated by ACTFL certified interpreters who are academics or language professionals. The test costs \$139 and the rating takes 2-4 weeks. The conversation and role-play can be adapted to the medical context. However, the test assesses general language proficiency and does not assess medical terminology. The rating scale has ten proficiency levels ranging from Novice Low to Superior. LTI can also consult with organizations to determine what level is acceptable as "passing," depending on the needs of the organization. LTI works with the Mayo Clinic in assessing their interpreters.

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington D.C  
Laurel Winston  
Phone: 202-362-0700  
[laurel@cal.org](mailto:laurel@cal.org)  
[www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)

CAL offers a Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI)—a type of tape-mediated test of speaking proficiency. All SOPI items are based on the ACTFL speaking proficiency guidelines. The test can be self-administered by the candidate with a master tape and a test booklet. It can also be used in a language laboratory setting to test groups. Responses are recorded and evaluated by a trained reviewer using the same ACTFL guidelines. The test takes around 25-50 minutes depending on the examinee level of proficiency and is available in 11 languages. Each test costs \$115 per examinee. CAL also conducts rater-training workshops to prepare internal raters for any organization and has developed a Self-instructional Rater Training Kit to make rater training more accessible.

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<sup>3</sup> Information obtained during a telephone conversation between Bob Katz, President and former Hablamos Juntos Deputy Director Dania Wasongarz.

## Other Testing Resources

The following are other testing resources:

Language Line

Contact: Danyune Geertsen

Phone: (831) 648-5819

[danyune@languageline.com](mailto:danyune@languageline.com)

[www.languageline.com](http://www.languageline.com)

1-877-351-6636

The Language Line University provides over the phone medical interpreter testing in 22 languages. The tests assess language proficiency and cover medical and health insurance terminology knowledge. After the completion of the tests, a test scorecard is issued. The cost is \$125 per person tested.

UNAM-San Antonio

Martha Elena Cortes

Academic Coordinator

Phone: 210-222-8626

Fax 210-225-1772

[mecs@servidor.unam.mx](mailto:mecs@servidor.unam.mx)

[www.usa.unam.mx](http://www.usa.unam.mx)

UNAM (Universidad Autónoma de México) in San Antonio is a branch of the National University of Mexico. The UNAM-San Antonio organizes academic activities and seminars on cultural issues, and offers English and Spanish classes. It operates under the supervision of the UNAM School for Foreign Students (CEPE), located in Mexico City. UNAM-San Antonio faculty designed and provide an oral and written test to evaluate Spanish proficiency. The City of San Antonio contracts with them to evaluate the Spanish proficiency of their employees. The oral test is rated with the ACTFL rating scale. Individuals take the test at the University Language Lab. A taped interviewer asks questions about different subjects. At each level the abilities of the speaker are defined. The oral responses of the individual being tested are taped and assessed by the faculty. The test lasts twelve minutes and costs about \$60. UNAM-San Antonio has the institutional capability of designing a test to measure Spanish oral proficiency for individuals that work in the health care field.

CEPE has another test called *Examen de Posesión de la Lengua Española*. It is a written multiple choice test that measures listening comprehension, reading comprehension, grammar, writing, and oral skills. It is similar to the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), with the difference that it includes the measurement of the oral ability. CEPE faculty in Mexico City scores the tests.



## Healthcare Organization Testing

The NCIHC Guide outlines the issues that need to be considered by health care organizations in developing their own internal strategy or policy for assessing a candidate's skills. In order to understand how different organizations manage the assessment of interpreter's and/or bilingual employees' language skills, Hablamos Juntos spoke to Gayle Tang, Director, National Linguistic & Cultural Programs at Kaiser Permanente, Shiva Bidar-Sielaff, Manager of Interpreter Services/Minority Community Relations at University of Wisconsin Hospital & Clinics, and Beatriz Solis, Director of Cultural and Linguistic Services at LA Care Health Plan.

Both Kaiser Permanente and University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics developed their own internal process and tools to assess interpreter's skills rather than contracting out with language testing services. Below is a summary of the process that Shiva was instrumental in developing and is currently managing for the UW Hospital and Clinics. The language testing process was developed to meet the needs of a coalition of medical clinics and hospitals in Madison, WI in terms of assessing the minimum skills applicants need to have to be considered for interpreter positions. The test assesses the English and Spanish ability of the applicant to interpret within the medical setting.

The test has two components: an oral and a written part. The test is rated on a scale of 150 points. 120 points (80%) is the minimum to pass the test. The oral component counts 85 points because oral ability is considered to be more important than written skills. The oral part is structured as a role-play. Two raters play the role of a patient and a doctor. A real-life situation is role played and the applicant is asked to interpret. The test is recorded and the applicant is rated on different criteria such as omissions, repetitions, retention, flow, etc. This part counts as 75 of the 85 points. Applicants are also asked to verbally respond to an open-ended question on interpreter's ethics. A situation is described and the applicant is asked to respond how they will handle it applying the Hospital Interpreters Code of Ethics that they are given in advance in an informational package. The questions have a value of 10 points. The oral part takes about 20 minutes.

The written section of the test asks applicants to translate 20 medical terms from Spanish to English and 20 from English to Spanish. They are also asked to translate a paragraph from English to Spanish. The paragraph is taken from common instructions given to patients (i.e., post-operation care instructions). The duration of the written portion is approximately 1.5 hours.

Two to three raters evaluate the taped role-play and the written section. A written evaluation is provided to the applicant. One rater is a federally certified court interpreter. The percentage of applicants that pass the test is only about 10%. An average of eight tests are performed each month. Raters are paid about \$25 hour. It takes raters about 2 hours to evaluate the candidate in addition to the test time. The total estimated cost for the medical institution per test is about \$100. For more information please review Shiva's e-mail with attachments.

LA Care Health Plan contracts out with Berlitz for testing the Spanish language proficiency of their bilingual employees. Employees get a bonus of 50 cents extra per hour for passing the written test and 50 cents for passing the oral test (1 dollar for passing both), Employees have an incentive for passing the test. Their income can potentially increase by 2,000-3,000

dollars per year. Depending on their job responsibilities, bilingual employees take the written, the oral or both. LA Care worked with Berlitz to include medical terminology and health plan vocabulary into the test. Employees get rated on a scale of 1-5, with 3 as the minimum for passing. Employees that score a 3 are looked at more closely to see what level of skill their job requires. The cost is \$75 per test. LA Care does a quality check by having a second reviewer, external to Berlitz, assess the score. LA Care prefers to contract out the testing services with an external company partly because they want to avoid biases in the testing process LA Care's Berlitz contact is Stephanie 310-276-1101.

## Other Resources

International Language Services, Chicago  
Karen Ruschke (refer by Shiva)  
Phone: (773) 728-8804  
[kruschke@mindspring.com](mailto:kruschke@mindspring.com)

Interpreters & Translators Associations  
SCATIA (Southern California Area Translators &  
Interpreters Association)  
Phone: (818) 725-3899  
Fax (818) 340-9177  
[www.scatia.org](http://www.scatia.org)

### State Certification Testing

Washington State DSHS  
Oscar Cerda, Manager  
Language Interpreter Services & Translations  
Phone: (360) 664-6020  
Fax (360) 664-6179  
[cerdaoe@dshs.wa.gov](mailto:cerdaoe@dshs.wa.gov)

### Bilingual Education Testing Resources

Several language-testing tools have been developed in the field of bilingual education. Through Internet research, I found the following organizations that provide these tools/services for assessing language proficiency in English and Spanish.

### Idea Proficiency Test

Ballard & Tighe Publishing Company  
480 Atlas Street  
Brea, California 92821  
Phone: (800) 321-4332,  
Fax: (714) 255-9828  
[www.ballard-tighe.com](http://www.ballard-tighe.com)

### Language Assessment Scales

CTB/McGraw Hill  
20 Ryan Ranch Road  
Monterey, CA 93940  
Phone: (800) 538-9547

FAX: (800) 282-0266

[www.ctb.com](http://www.ctb.com)

### MAC II Test of English Language Proficiency

Touchstone Applied Science Associates  
4 Hardscrabble Heights  
PO Box 382  
Brewster, New York 10509  
Phone: (845) 277-4900  
(800) 800-2598 (Customer Service)  
FAX: (845) 277-3548  
[www.tasaliteracy.com](http://www.tasaliteracy.com)

### Handbook of Spanish Language Proficiency Tests found at

[www.ncbe.gwu.edu/miscpubs/eacwest/slptests.htm](http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/miscpubs/eacwest/slptests.htm)

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