Practice, Practice, Practice!

Practice tests, which are available in every language pair in which the exam is offered, are an often overlooked and under-utilized resource for preparing for the exam.

There’s an old joke in which a tourist asks a New York police officer how to get to Carnegie Hall. The cop’s reply: “Practice, practice, practice!” That could also be the answer to the question “How can I improve my chances of passing ATA’s certification exam?”

Practice tests, which are available in every language pair in which the exam is offered, are an often overlooked and under-utilized resource for preparing for the exam. Because practice tests are actual exam passages that have been retired, candidates can use them to get an idea of the sort of text they will see on the exam and prepare accordingly.

Unlike exam results, where candidates are provided with a pass or fail notice as well as information about their overall numerical score, practice tests are returned with markings and feedback. The candidate receives the marked text, together with a point breakdown by error category and brief explanations of any marked errors that aren’t self-explanatory (such as misspellings). This feedback can be quite helpful to prepare for the actual exam.

At $80 per test for ATA members ($120 for nonmembers), the practice test costs a fraction of the actual exam registration fee and is well worth it for candidates who aren’t sure if they’re ready. Even seasoned translators taking the exam for the first time can benefit from taking a practice test.

Here are a few tips for using the practice test:

- Allow plenty of time. Practice test grading turnaround depends on volume and other factors, so candidates should allow up to eight weeks to receive results. You’ll also need to plan ahead. By the time you register for an exam sitting, it’s probably too late to get practice test results back.
- Read and follow instructions carefully. This includes not just the translation instructions that are part of the practice test passage, but also information about how to take and submit the test.
- Take the test under exam conditions. Try to set aside 90 minutes of uninterrupted time and translate the passage in one go. Use only print reference material and online resources that have been cleared for the computerized exam.
- Consider the feedback you receive carefully. The comments your receive may tell you the areas where you need to focus. For example, do you need to proofread more carefully? Should you work on target-language grammar or usage?
- Upgrade old tests. If you requested and paid for a practice test more than a year ago and never got around to translating it or having it graded, ATA Headquarters will send you a current version of the passage for the same language pair upon request for no additional charge.
- Get other practice as well. The practice test is intended primarily as a way to practice taking the exam. Practicing your translation skills is a secondary benefit. Look for ways to practice translating, perhaps with others in your language pair who are also preparing for the exam.


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Peer Reviewed: Collaborative Preparation for the Certification Exam

Currently, the main option available to help candidates prepare for ATA’s certification exam is the practice test. An obvious advantage of taking the practice test is that it’s representative of the actual exam: the passages used for the practice test are retired exam passages. However, unlike the actual exam, which is pass or fail only, a practice test is graded and returned with error markings clearly visible and classified as to type and seriousness. This feedback should give candidates a reasonable idea of whether they are ready to take the exam and, if not, the areas where they need more work.

Even though the practice test is still the best option, candidates may want to do even more to prepare. Not all practice test passages are updated annually, so candidates will find it difficult to reliably measure their performance. So, what else can you do to prepare for the exam? Although ATA does not offer preparation courses, candidates are encouraged “to look for ways to gain more translation experience and improve language proficiency skills.”

In addition to the practice test, candidates should consider enrolling in a translation program or class, attending an exam workshop offered at ATA’s Annual Conference or by an ATA chapter or affiliate, or asking translators who have passed the exam for advice. Practicing on your own is an option, but it won’t do much good without feedback to gauge improvement.

So, what about forming a practice group? The following details how we set up an online platform for ATA’s Slavic Languages Division (SLD) to help prospective exam-takers in the division practice on a regular basis and exchange feedback.

CHOOSING A PLATFORM
After taking the practice test in 2016, Maria was looking for colleagues with whom she could exchange translations and feedback. Coordinating that effort through individual e-mail exchanges proved to be overwhelming and didn’t meet the needs of all candidates interested in practicing. Encouraged by SLD Administrator Ekaterina Howard at the division’s annual meeting in 2016, Maria and I set out to find an online platform that would allow members to exchange and translate passages into and out of Croatian, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian (the Slavic languages offered on ATA’s certification exam).

We chose Slack as the platform for coordinating practice sessions. Slack is an online tool for group communications, organized into custom “channels” (message boards). It also allows participants to send each other private messages, which is useful for exchanging feedback discreetly with a practice partner. In addition to two default channels, we created a channel for each combination in the Slavic languages that is currently available for ATA certification.

Some of the reasons for choosing Slack were:

- A free trial version with robust features that met the group's needs.
- The ability to communicate asynchronously, which is useful for participants in different time zones.
- File upload and sharing options that eliminate the need for e-mailing attachments.
- Integration capabilities with external applications (e.g., polls, calendar reminders).

We posted information about ATA’s certification exam, including the framework for standardized error marking and the flow chart for error point decisions, so it could be available to all members of our practice group. These resources were “pinned” to each active channel, making them easily accessible from a side panel.

Slack’s linear interface has not always been straightforward. At its most basic, Slack is organized like a newsfeed. As a result, some participants had trouble joining the channel for the appropriate language combination or finding the necessary instructions and reference material. Hopefully, this shortcoming can be solved through additional training or an external application.

PRACTICE STEPS
Once the medium for the group had been chosen, we invited prospective participants and volunteer reviewers to join the Slack platform. New members to the group were encouraged to join the channel for the language combination(s) in which they wanted to practice. The following process has evolved through trial and error after several rounds of practice.

Signup:
- Candidates in a specific language combination opt in for each round of practice.
- Organizers compile a list of all participants for the month.

Translation:
- A practice passage is posted.
- Participants translate the passage independently under exam conditions.
- Candidates send their translation via a private message to the person listed before and after them on the list of participants (all participants exchange translations with two colleagues).

Grading:
- Using the Track Changes feature in Word, each participant corrects and scores the received translations according to ATA’s grading framework.
- Everyone returns the graded translations with comments back to the original authors.

Discussion:
- All participants share the challenges encountered and discuss possible solutions in the public channel reserved for their language combination.

Expert Feedback:
- The organizers put together a list of challenges encountered and solicit feedback from volunteer experts (certified translators or ATA graders).
- Unlike the official ATA practice test, the reviewers do not grade each individual translation, but do provide overall guidance on common challenges. We’ve...
found that the official practice test and the practice group complement each other.

- The organizers share the reviewers’ comments and suggestions with channel members.

The entire cycle for one passage normally takes a month, with overlaps between cycles. We have recently added a calendar integration linked to a public Google calendar listing the important dates of the practice cycle. This setup has helped the group work consistently and manage participants’ expectations at every stage of the process. At the same time, it has required some hands-on involvement from the organizers, such as compiling participant lists every month and preparing questions for the reviewers. Slack features could further automate some of these tasks. For instance, the Donut app can pair up members of a specific channel “via direct message on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis” so practice partners don’t need to be assigned manually.

**CHOOSING THE PRACTICE TEXT**

Since it’s impossible to use real ATA exam passages, we’ve been choosing passages from online journalism and print sources such as textbooks and academic publications. We pull an excerpt of 225-275 words from a general text that matches the features of a typical ATA exam passage: “chosen in such a way as to avoid highly specialized terminology challenges requiring research.”

As much as possible, we’ve tried to include challenges similar to those candidates will encounter on the exam: a line of argument that may be tough to follow, a few terminological challenges, interesting syntax, and a professional or semi-formal register. While there have been a couple of missteps, such as terms too obscure to be found in a general dictionary or a register that skews a little too colloquial, we’ve become more proficient at finding appropriate passages thanks to the group’s expert consultants.

**PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT**

As of mid-May 2017, 60 participants had joined the Slack platform. Since the group launched in December 2016, the two most active channels—English>Russian and Russian>English—have worked through one round of practice passages each month. Since settling on the procedure described above, we’ve held steady at about 10 participants per text in each channel, which is enough for us to switch partners and get feedback from different people. We’ve also been exchanging messages about exam procedures, strategies, and resources.

- Recruiting participants and reviewers.
- Choosing passages for languages other than English and Russian—the organizers, who don’t speak the other languages, must rely on volunteer submissions.

Because the group is designed for practice in several language combinations, this variation in activity is probably inevitable. However, despite limited resources for the languages that are less well represented, the group’s organizers can develop ways to allow candidates working in those languages to continue to practice. As a bare minimum, two participants working in the same language combination can exchange translations and feedback as described above.

**PRACTICE OUTCOMES**

At this point, a few participants have registered or taken the certification exam. (One has passed and the rest are waiting for their results.) In a recent survey conducted by the organizers, members pointed out the practice group has helped them become familiar with the exam format and error categories. They also appreciated free, recurring rounds of practice and the opportunity to discuss translation challenges with their peers. At the same time, several respondents pointed out that peer feedback varied in quality, with some of their partners not following ATA’s grading rubric, making erroneous corrections, or failing to review their translation altogether.

These drawbacks could be mitigated by making sure all participants have basic familiarity with ATA’s standards and grading process. In addition, having each translation reviewed by two different colleagues lets the translator compare the feedback and identify any common threads. In the end, our practice group is meant to complement, not replace, the official ATA practice test, where the translator does receive detailed feedback from an ATA grader.

**BLUEPRINT FOR OTHER GROUPS?**

SLDs practice group has helped prospective exam takers get regular, evaluated translation practice and become accustomed to ATA’s exam format and grading criteria. Although this format presents its own set of challenges—e.g., a new interface, fluctuating participant engagement, the need for input from organizers and expert reviewers, and the varying quality of peer feedback—we hope that other groups will find our experience helpful and might consider starting their own practice activities to complement the resources offered by ATA and third parties.

**NOTES**

2. Although the practice group discussed in this article was not organized or sponsored by ATA’s Certification Program, the Certification Committee recognizes the value these types of groups have for candidates.

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Who Wants to Fail ATA’s Certification Exam?

Self-help books and websites have recently been featuring “not-to-do” lists as a way of improving work habits, enhancing productivity, and generally boosting quality of life. ATA’s certification team can’t claim to offer anything so grand, but we can enumerate several (unfortunately) tried-and-true actions that have stood in the way of candidates passing ATA’s certification exam.

1. **Cut to the chase.** Who reads instructions anymore? Actually, we expect you to use the valuable resources available at your fingertips, from the general information on ATA’s website down to the specific translation instructions (TIs) printed at the top of each exam passage. Ultimately, it’s up to you to educate yourself about the exam process before registering, to click on the link that comes with your registration confirmation, and to read the TIs. Or not! In which case, you’ve already turned the page. If you’re still with me, read on.

2. **Skip the practice test.** Life isn’t a dress rehearsal, right? Well, when it comes to the certification exam, rehearsals are a good thing. Like all exams, ATA’s certification exam is a hybrid of a real-life situation combined with exam conditions. The practice test is a retired passage marked by ATA graders and is the only chance to receive direct feedback prior to the exam. Don’t miss this opportunity—unless you like surprises.

3. **Use the exam as your ticket into the profession.** Despite its description as “an exam that assesses the language skills of a professional translator,” many new graduates and career changers sign up with no experience, assuming the exam is an entry-level credential. Caveats against this appear on ATA’s website, as well as in this column, webinars, and candidate preparation sessions, but you’ll be unaware of this if you “cut to the chase” (see point 1 above).

4. **Start with your native language.** As a general rule, our native language is our strongest, but this doesn’t mean we should use it as our source language (i.e., the one from which we translate). As language teachers know, the most difficult skill to master is writing—and that’s what translation is. This is why most experts recommend we translate into our native language, even if we’ve spent many years learning and using others. There are exceptions, of course, but should you assume you’re one? ATA’s exam is difficult, so taking the exam into a non-native language will likely increase the difficulty. In addition, not checking your exam registration email to ensure you’re actually registered for the correct language and direction will definitely add unwanted challenges. Showing up on exam day only to discover that you don’t have passages in the right language will definitely hurt your chances for success. Bottom line: double-check everything!

5. **Travel light.** Don’t assume that all test-taking resources will be provided at the exam site. Actually, the only thing ATA promises to provide is your exam packet. If you’re taking the computerized exam, you must bring your own laptop, as clearly stated on the website and in the registration information. (And yet there have been cases where candidates have left theirs at home!) Also, ATA cannot ensure that links to online resources will be up and running on exam day. I know, I know, nobody carries books around anymore, but do you want to take a chance and leave your dictionaries at home that day?

6. **Be spontaneous.** Actually, some advance planning is crucial. If you join ATA and register immediately for the next exam sitting, even if it’s only a few weeks away, you deprive yourself of the opportunity to familiarize yourself with the exam by taking a practice test, listening to a webinar, attending a candidate preparation session, or working with colleagues. Some people perform better under stress, but the certification exam is not the time to find out if you’re one of them.

7. **Cross the bridge when you come to it.** If you wait until exam day to ask an important question (or to realize you have one), you may be out of luck. Many exams are given on weekends, when ATA Headquarters is closed. The head proctor’s contact information is included with your registration in case you have a last-minute question or need directions to the venue. Your registration email containing this information is sent to
you twice, once when you register and again just prior to the exam date. But if you don't open the link or read the instructions ahead of time, you may find yourself in a pickle. If you do manage to reach someone, whether it's the proctor or ATA staff, even if you feel desperate or stressed, try to remember the advice of authors like Dale Carnegie and Stephen Covey: treat folks with respect and you’re more likely to get what you want!

8. Think of yourself as a snowflake—unique and exceptional. Well, yes, everybody is exceptional, but that doesn’t mean ATA will make exceptions for you. Perhaps you asked a question about using a certain resource, but didn’t get the answer you wanted. Perhaps you are someone who always runs late. Whatever the case, don’t assume exceptions will be made to accommodate you. If the answer was “no” from ATA staff, the answer from the proctor will still be “no” on exam day.

Rooms for exam sittings are rented for a certain period of time, which cannot necessarily be extended to accommodate latecomers. ATA relishes the diversity of its members, but you may have to stifle some aspects of your uniqueness on exam day. Rules are rules.

This all might seem to be just common sense, but ATA’s certification team has seen candidates make these mistakes more times than we can count. Sure, candidates don’t set out to fail. But certification is just one of many short- and long-term goals in our busy lives, so we may not feel we have time to “sweat the small stuff.” We might skip over instructions in our rush to meet the registration deadline, and when exam day is upon us we may even forget basic guidelines in the stress of the moment. So, if you want to give yourself the best chances for success on the exam, take the time to inform yourself and prepare. Good luck! ☺

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Ergonomics for ATA’s Certification Exam: Unspoken Advice with Untold Benefits

Shortly after I took the computerized version of ATA’s certification exam in 2017, I received an e-mail from one of the proctors—whom I had thanked for stepping up to proctor at the last minute—in which she commented on the contrast between my “ergonomic” setup and the hunched posture of my fellow test takers. It would make for a great ad, she mused.

I had to laugh. I didn’t go into the exam with ergonomics in mind, but having seen the difference a few ergonomic upgrades to my home office earlier that year had made in my focus and overall well-being, it seemed like a no-brainer to apply the same principles to ensure my comfort and efficiency during the exam.

It may have seemed silly to focus on the details of a workstation I would only use for three hours, but the proctor was right: it ended up making all the difference, not only in terms of comfort, but more importantly, in terms of efficiency and state of mind. If you’re anything like me, sitting up straight and looking directly ahead fosters greater confidence and alertness than does being stooped over a mess of pages and books. Perhaps there’s something to be said after all for social psychologist Amy Cuddy’s widely discussed research on the impact of body position on our confidence and, in turn, our chances of success.

While ergonomics wasn’t at the forefront of my mind going into the exam, it’s now the first thing I mention when colleagues ask for advice on how to prepare. There’s plenty of guidance out there on the theoretical side of the assessment, but how often do we hear about the importance of a comfortable and efficient workspace?

By sharing some of what worked for me on exam day, I hope to encourage others to discover the difference that straightening up and finding comfort and confidence can make, both during the exam and in our everyday work.

If you work with a laptop on a regular basis, you might consider investing in a laptop stand, which will serve you well not only on exam day, but also in your everyday work. There are many to choose from, but it’s worth procuring one that you can easily carry with you to the exam or when working away from home. I use the Roost Stand, a favorite among digital nomads for its transportability: it collapses into a baton that’s just over a foot long and it weighs a feathery 5.5 ounces. It’s also height adjustable. (See photo at left.)

If you’re in a pinch on exam day or you aren’t sold on investing in a new gadget, you could just as well set your laptop on a large book or two—dictionaries work wonderfully.

Do keep in mind that you’ll need an external keyboard and mouse for either of these setups. There are affordable options out there, and I consider it a worthwhile investment, price notwithstanding.

**Page Holder:** Unlike the source texts in a translator’s daily work, which are almost invariably in digital format, exam passages are on paper and cannot be typed into the computer.

So what to do? Ideally, for the same reasons discussed above, the source text should be positioned at eye level. For this purpose, I used a small, dome-shaped page holder during the exam to prop up the source texts. (See photo above.)

I purchased mine on www.etsy.com, but you can find one at just about any major office-supply retailer by searching for a “page-up holder.” Most are priced at under $10. You may need to set the holder on top of a dictionary to match your screen height.

Not only will this relieve neck pressure, it’ll save you time and trouble when glancing from sheet to screen.

**Earplugs:** Consider bringing earplugs to the exam to block out noise. Chances are you’ll be absorbed in your work, but you never know when the clickety-clack of a keyboard or the hum of a fluorescent light will distract you. Here’s where...
cognitive ergonomics come in: decreasing distraction lightens cognitive load, allowing you to focus on the task at hand.

**Review Techniques:** Speaking of cognitive ergonomics, the exam involves the demanding cognitive task of not only translating, but also reviewing, two dense texts in the span of three short hours. This means no opportunity to review with fresh eyes, which is a crucial step in actual practice. And without a computer-assisted translation tool or other application to help break the text into segments, the task becomes even more prone to errors. The accidental omission of a word or an entire line of text can be hugely detrimental. The good news is that these errors can be avoided by employing some simple review techniques.

One of these is to enlarge your font size: try increasing it 300% by using the zoom feature on your word processor (i.e., WordPad or TextEdit, the two applications permitted for use on the exam), or by increasing the font size to 72 points. This will help you catch errors you may otherwise overlook after staring at your translation for so long.

Another tip for getting a fresh perspective: change the typeface itself. Finally, try reading the completed text “aloud” in your head, or reading it backwards—two old copy-editor’s tricks.

**Miscellaneous:** With the big ones out of the way, here are a few final pieces of advice to optimize ergonomics during the exam and help you focus on your work:

- Keep your feet flat on the floor, if possible. You may be able to choose from different chairs the day of the exam, but don’t count on it.

- Make sure your elbows are at a right angle when typing. Consider bringing a pillow to sit on for this purpose.

- Have water on hand (drink it).

- Take at least one stretch break. Do a forward bend and gently stretch your arms, legs, and neck to get your blood flowing before returning to the task with fresh eyes.

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**Final Word**

As the authors of the aforementioned article in *The ATA Chronicle* propose, taking ergonomics into account “will allow translators to do what they do best instead of wasting time and energy dealing with non-ergonomic conditions, interfaces, and tools.” What better opportunity to conserve time and energy than during the rigorous three-hour ATA certification exam?

I may have been amused by the proctor’s comment about my setup, but it cost me nothing to implement these simple principles, and the benefits of certification are already evident just one year later.

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**Notes**


Am I Ready for the Exam?

Why does ATA’s certification exam have such a low pass rate? Readers of The ATA Chronicle tend to be a savvy bunch when it comes to translation. If you’re reading this, you probably don’t suffer from any of the classic illusions about translation. You know that being a competent translator takes more than bilingualism. You appreciate the complexities of human thought and language that make it so difficult to transmit all the nuances of any utterance into another language. You probably know more about the niceties of grammar and style than many a high school English teacher.

So maybe this article will, for the most part, be read by people who already know what I’m about to say. Nevertheless, here goes.

Every year, hundreds of people take ATA’s certification exam and approximately (on average, across all language pairs) 80% of them fail to produce translations that earn them ATA certification. This pass rate suggests an epidemic of overconfidence mixed, perhaps, with a lack of understanding of ATA’s certification standards.

Of course, there is a certain subset of exam-takers who miss attaining certification by a few points because of nervousness, one unfortunate but impactful error, or because they were simply having a bad day. Such candidates had good reason to take the exam and should probably try again.

Based on 15 years as a certification grader, I would urge anyone interested in taking the exam to ask themselves the following questions:

Do I have extensive experience writing and being edited in the target language? It’s one thing to speak a language well, it’s another to write well in it. All ATA exam passages come with a set of translation instructions (TIs). Those instructions provide information about the purpose of the translation. Although the TIs vary, they all indicate that the translation is to be used either for publication or professional use. This means that the translation must not just be comprehensible, but adhere to the standards of the target language’s grammar and style and be easy to read and understand. The reader should not be confronted with non-standard collocations, mangled idioms, syntax that might be fine in the source language but highly distracting and confusing in the target one, or the misapplication of definite and indefinite articles (a frequent problem in into-English exams).

No one becomes a good writer in a particular language without doing a lot of writing and reading in it and having their writing critiqued by others. This often means having been through a target-language university program that included extensive writing and feedback on that writing.

It’s hard not to feel bad for candidates who have paid hundreds of dollars to take the exam when they are clearly nowhere near ready.

In addition to reading dozens if not hundreds of books in the source language, have I kept up with current writing in it (e.g., periodicals, newspapers, blogs)? Excellent reading comprehension is just as important as good writing, and developing this ability in a given language takes more than a large vocabulary. It takes practice. Any experienced translator knows: languages and the cultures in which they develop are complex living entities that constantly evolve.

Have I successfully translated thousands of words in this language pair? ATA’s certification exam is a “mid-career credential for experienced, professional translators.” In other words, it’s not designed for recent graduates just starting their translation careers.

Have I taken an ATA practice test? Prospective candidates who cannot answer the first three questions with a wholehearted “Yes!” should, at the very least, test their chances of attaining certification through a practice test(12,11),(980,992).
In recent years, ATA has focused on providing those individuals who are interested in becoming ATA-certified with opportunities to learn more about the exam and hone their skills. Besides informational updates on ATA’s website, regular columns by members of the Certification Committee in *The ATA Chronicle*, and a variety of sessions at ATA’s Annual Conference, ATA has also explored options for holding regional exam preparation workshops for candidates. The first workshop, held in Boston in January 2018, was well attended and well received.

**Participants left with a very good sense of whether they were ready for the exam.**

The second workshop in this series took place in mid-April in Alexandria, Virginia. That same weekend, ATA’s Board of Directors met in conjunction with the Certification Committee and Language Chairs meetings. (Each exam language combination has a language chair administering the passage selection and graders. ATA currently offers testing in 30 language combinations.) Scheduling the workshop to coincide with these meetings, which also took place in Alexandria, certainly made the logistics easier.

The April workshop was for Spanish only: an English into Spanish session in the morning, and a Spanish into English session in the afternoon. Each session was presented by two veteran graders working in the respective language pairs. Below are some highlights from these sessions, which are similar to those offered in recent years during ATA’s Advanced Skills and Training (AST) Day, which takes place the day before the ATA Annual Conference.

**Two Graders for Each Practice Test:**

Those who registered for the April workshop were sent a sample ATA practice test to translate and submit.

Participants were instructed to try to simulate actual exam conditions when working on the test (e.g., only using approved software and reference materials, and completing their work within 90 minutes). These tests were graded exactly the same way as a regular practice test, with the grader supplying brief explanations of errors and acceptable solutions, as well as some overall comments to the translator. However, the advantage of participating in this workshop was that the two presenters from each session graded the practice tests in the respective language pairs. (A regular practice test is only graded by one grader.) After grading the practice tests, the presenters selected typical errors to include as examples in the workshop. If participants returned their practice tests by the deadline, they got the graded tests...
back at the end of the workshop. Those who did not return their practice test by the deadline received marked tests later.

**More Time Spent Discussing Translation:** In some earlier iterations of the workshop, a substantial amount of valuable time was spent discussing the mechanics of taking the exam and the grading process. For the April workshop, once they registered, participants received reading materials and a video link where they could review all that information in advance so that the actual workshop could focus exclusively on translation activities.

*As in previous instances, the workshop was very well received. Participants were especially appreciative of the detailed feedback, and the hands-on approach of using the participants’ own work was considered especially effective.*

**Dispelling Myths about the Exam:** Following a discussion of the common reasons why people fail the exam, the various error categories were reviewed, including specific examples taken from actual exam passages used in the past. This was an opportunity to dispel some common myths: that punctuation rules are the same in English and Spanish (they actually differ substantially, and error points on that account can mount rapidly), or that the syntax of the original must be preserved in the translation (this is not the case if the result will sound awkward or unnatural). The English into Spanish presenters addressed the misconception that candidates should write in a particular “flavor” of Spanish. They reassured participants that as long as they’re consistent in the variety chosen and avoid obscure localisms, they will be fine.

**Detailed Error Review:** In the second part of each session, the presenters reviewed the submitted practice tests. Each sentence was discussed in detail, looking at typical errors as well as acceptable solutions. In some cases, the participants themselves were invited to use the Certification Program’s own grading tools to assess each rendition and compare notes. The presenters then offered their assessment, along with the rationale behind each grading decision, which prompted additional discussion. Participants were encouraged to ask specific questions about anything not covered or to request further explanation or clarification as needed. For example, at the end of the Spanish into English session, the presenters demonstrated how the Corpus of Contemporary American English can be used by translators to verify the usage of terms and collocations.

**MAXIMIZING CANDIDATE POTENTIAL ON THE EXAM**

As in previous instances, the workshop was very well received. Participants were especially appreciative of the detailed feedback, and the hands-on approach of using the participants’ own work was considered especially effective. Participants left with a very good sense of whether they were ready for the exam, with some deciding that they needed more time and study.

ATA plans to continue offering these workshops at various locations and hopes to expand them to other language pairs in the future. Both Spanish sessions will also be offered at this year’s AST Day during ATA’s Annual Conference in Palm Springs, October 23–26.

**NOTE**

1 Information on the Corpus of Contemporary American English can be found at www.english-corpora.org/coca.

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Common Errors Found in the English>Spanish Certification Exam

ATA certification continues to be a sought-after credential. As a way to prepare for this demanding exam, ATA has been offering practice tests for many years, which are real exam passages that have been “retired.” In addition to the practice test, ATA has been offering exam preparation workshops taught by ATA exam graders to help candidates better understand how to prepare for the exam. In the past three years, ATA has offered regional workshops in Boston, Alexandria, Houston, and Mexico City. These workshops are also offered at ATA’s Annual Conference, including this year in Palm Springs.

The three-hour workshop for Spanish<>English includes an analysis of the different error categories and a practice test that registered participants are invited to complete and submit prior to the workshop. The graded practice tests are returned during the workshop and used as the basis for discussion of the passage. Here are some of the most common errors made by candidates in the English>Spanish combination.

Mimicking English Syntax: Many candidates mimic the English syntax without stopping to consider that Spanish sentences often have to be organized differently. English is a more concise language than Spanish, and sometimes it’s necessary to change word order in a translation, or to provide a verb or an article that is not present in English. Common errors include the absence of definite and indefinite articles, the mimicking of the passive voice, and the use of prepositions that don’t reflect Spanish usage.

False Friends: These are English words that resemble Spanish words in their spelling, but have a different, sometimes opposite, meaning. As their name indicates, these words are very untrustworthy. Many candidates tend to choose the word that looks like the English for their translation, and, in so doing, make a transfer error. The more an English word resembles a Spanish one, the more necessary it is to verify that the meaning is the one that we need in the target language. Always confirm this using a monolingual dictionary.

Incorrect Use of Present Continuous Tense and Gerund/Present Participle: This is one aspect of grammar that’s very different in English and Spanish. Most of the time, in Spanish we cannot imitate the use of the present continuous tense or gerund/present participle. In fact, this is an aspect of Spanish grammar that requires study and practice. Just because you see a verb ending in -ing in English doesn’t mean you can replicate it in Spanish. Candidates lose a lot of points because they don’t understand the correct use of the present continuous tense and gerund/present participle in Spanish.

Mechanical Errors: These are what we call “controllable” errors. Mechanical errors are those evident to a Spanish reader without having to compare the text to the English original. Such errors include punctuation, capitalization, spelling, diacritical marks, grammar, and syntax. I say they are “controllable” because ATAs certification exam is an open-book exam. It is therefore possible, and encouraged, for candidates to consult dictionaries, grammar books, and style manuals during the exam. As graders, we’ve found a number of candidates who fail due to mechanical errors. In other words, the candidate transfers the meaning well from English into Spanish, but makes too many mechanical errors.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

If you’re planning to take the certification exam in the English>Spanish combination, a practice test is the place to start. Brush up on your Spanish grammar and consult some style manuals to guide you in avoiding mechanical errors. And if you’re able, attend one of the regional workshops that are being offered a few times a year in different parts of the country and at ATA’s Annual Conference in the fall.

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