

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE: TEACHER DEVELOPMENT, TESTING AND ASSESSMENT

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In recent years, an increasing number of universities and training institutions have been offering modules to develop pre-service or in-service teachers' knowledge and understanding of issues in language testing and assessment. This special edition of *English Language Teacher Education and Development (ELTED)* seeks to capture a range of recent developments in promoting "assessment literacy" in different locations across the world. The articles included in the present volume fulfil at least two purposes: firstly, they provide outlines of how an understanding of issues relating to assessment and testing can be fostered in specific, local contexts, so as to develop professional practice in this area; and secondly, and equally importantly, they show how the success of such teacher education initiatives may be further evaluated, often collaboratively, so as to develop a more refined awareness of the particular needs of participants in such modules.

The publication of Bachman and Palmer's *Language Testing in Practice: Designing and Developing Useful Language Tests* (1996) heralded an increased, and undoubtedly welcome focus on the quality of language tests at the design and production stage. This text, along with others similar handbooks, has become an essential reference point in many modules involving language testing and assessment. Since 1996, the concepts of validity, reliability, transparency and practicality have been reconceptualised several times, for example by Weir (2005) through his "socio-cognitive" process of language testing. Yet as may frequently be seen, describing the anticipated qualities of language tests in supposedly "objective" ways may trigger top-down, "quality-driven" approaches to language testing that bring with them specific and justifiable concerns.

For one thing, a test must fit appropriately to its context. Hence, "normative" approaches as to what is, or is

not considered to be a "good test" can remain unhelpfully directive. This is especially true where teachers have heavy timetables, and are often seeking to assess students in large numbers, with little preparation time. In addition, it is all too easy for language testing practices to be framed within an overtly western-dominated, or Euro-centric tradition. For instance, Cambridge ESOL examinations and IELTS are based on Western concepts, while the increased prestige enjoyed by the Common European Framework of Reference, and the relative priority given to a handful of selected language testing methodology textbooks written by 'experts' in the field, reinforce a somewhat Western view of best practice in testing. Indeed, it seems that there is a very real danger of becoming blind to the specific contextual issues that face testing specialists in different parts of the world, and it may be all too easy to ignore the social, as well as the cultural issues facing such practitioners: for example, identity issues, "native-speakerism", teaching background and government policies, amongst others. All too often, benign, well-intentioned efforts to improve testing and assessment literacy and practice may result in a "paternalistic", top-down approach, where a normalising vision of assessment comes to be upheld as the standard to which all work in this area must aspire.

A further, significant challenge when setting up any language testing course is achieving an appropriate balance between the "theory" of language testing and its practical application. What, in fact, should students following such courses in language testing and assessment learn? And how far can relatively short courses in this area really teach participants to be language testers at all? These questions become all the more relevant because students coming to this topic within teacher education contexts, whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level, often have little previous experience

of analysing and critiquing tests, or developing test items of their own. Seemingly entrapped within a minefield of terminology and an apparently scientific and directive data-driven process, for which language specialists often feel inadequately prepared, participants in such modules will undoubtedly face numerous challenges, and may struggle to make sense of how concepts and ideas can readily translate into more effective participation in local schools, colleges and tertiary institutions. Again, the answer to this conundrum is not clear, but as all of the papers in this volume argue, it is crucial to listen to the voices of the participants, to develop an understanding of their needs, and to work with them to arrive at a shared understanding of what language testing is, or might be, in their own context, when confronted with a range of constraints that are unique to groups of individuals. As we must continually remind ourselves, the novice language testing students of today may well be called upon to become the experienced testing specialists of tomorrow: by initiating an authentic process of learning at an early stage in teachers' careers, it thus seems more likely that local, national and indeed, international needs can come to be better served, to the benefit of all.

The present volume of *ELTED* consists of four research papers and one review. Each of the research papers showcases an attempt to develop assessment literacy within a specific context. The volume opens with the evaluation of an MA module in language testing offered by the University of Balamand, North Lebanon. In this paper, Mike Orr provides a strongly learner-centred evaluation of the postgraduate module offered at this institution, drawing upon evidence from learner diaries and his own reflective diary, maintained during the progression of the course. Orr's article places emphasis on the need for collaborative learning on a course such as this, as well as the need for the tutor to be able to gain a clear picture of student needs and requirements. While Bachman and Palmer's (1996) seminal text is used as a starting point for the students' exploration of the key features of language tests, a point of tension is witnessed between a potentially normative approach to what a good test should look like and the needs of the trainees themselves. In Orr's research, the

use of diaries proves to be a crucial device for collecting the on-going views of trainees regarding the usefulness of the course content and its potential practicality in their later-life situations. Çiler Hatipoğlu's paper, later in the volume, continues the important theme of evaluating language testing courses, by focusing in detail on an undergraduate programme in Turkey. Hatipoğlu, like Orr, engages in a detailed, informative evaluation of her students' views of the language testing course they have followed. Whilst Hatipoğlu's research adopts different research methods to those of Orr, including interviews and questionnaires, the outcome of the research enables her to reflect, as does Orr, on the fine balance between theory and practice and how a training module on testing may be made as relevant and useful as possible. Hatipoğlu's findings reveal, in particular, that participants in the course would have welcomed even more opportunity to improve their own test writing skills.

The challenges raised by testing situations are invariably contextual, an issue poignantly raised in Achu Charles Tante's article on primary school testing practice within Cameroon. As Tante reveals in this article, a relatively top-down assessment system, which he sees as both "routine" and "ritualised", appears to leave little room for the development of more formative types of assessment, but at the same time, raises the need for more sophisticated in-service training for those involved in the assessment process itself. The main challenge identified in Tante's article is to enable teachers to contribute meaningfully to assessment systems that have been given an increasingly directive structure. The trajectory of Tante's research process is in itself of interest: it was difficult, for example, to find participants who might be able to contribute authentically to the discussion. It seems clear that this type of research within the Cameroon context has hitherto been rather unusual, and little has been documented up to now about the views of primary school teachers themselves, central as they are to the process of "séquence" required. In direct counterbalance to the top-down system outlined by Tante, Ravinarayan Chakrakodi's presentation of portfolio assessment within an in-service training

context in India appears to be a model of collaboration and sharing. Not only does the portfolio assessment process outlined by Chakrakodi develop the participants' writing skills, but the assessment criteria are designed collaboratively, with participants contributing their views about what should be assessed and why. This de-centred, participant-centred view of assessment is the very antithesis of the top-down approach to assessment outlined in Tante's earlier paper, and reveals how assessment practice can be deployed to take into consideration local factors and needs. Both Tante's and Chakrakodi's papers, together, show the need for continuing sense-making processes within the field of assessment practice, which provide practitioners with a heightened sense of their own, and others' identities.

While all of the articles in this volume reveal specific "truths" about assessment at a local and contextual level, it is refreshing to see that they avoid any simplistic answers to the question of what should be taught on such modules, and what participants should be learning. As such considerations are socially constructed rather than "given", and are negotiated in nature, there is always a need to take into account a broad spectrum of evidence for such modules to be effective. The *Cambridge ESOL Teaching Knowledge Test*, whose practice materials are reviewed by Darío Luis Banegas at the end of this volume, is one notable attempt to provide a clearer definition, or perhaps delimitation, of the key theoretical aspects that a new, or relatively novice teacher should "know" when engaging in classroom practice. Naturally, as Banegas's review demonstrates, there remains a persistent gap between theoretical input and the successful implementation of pedagogical principles. Put more simply, we find that the mere fact of "knowing about" particular principles in testing and assessment does not automatically translate into the proficient, or appropriate use of such principles. The implications of Banegas's view for language testing and assessment are particularly relevant. In the final analysis, it seems that pre-service and in-service modules can only serve as starting points in a lifelong learning path, in which information about testing is acquired slowly but surely, over a significant period of time, through interaction with a

specific context or set of circumstances. In order to achieve this, those who organise the training itself, as our contributors show, have a pressing responsibility to negotiate with their trainees, the better to devise programmes that are closely targeted to local geographical requirements, and which do not merely serve to reflect Western preoccupations with testing that may (or may not) be relevant or apposite.

References

- Bachman, L. and Palmer, A. 1996. *Language Testing in Practice: Designing and Developing Useful Language Tests*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weir, C. J. 2005. *Language Testing and Validation: An Evidence-Based Approach*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.