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European language testing in a global context

Proceedings of the ALTE Barcelona Conference

July 2001

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Series Editor's note

The conference papers presented in this volume represent a small subset of the many excellent presentations made at the ALTE conference – European Language Testing in a Global Context – held in July 2001 in Barcelona in celebration of the European Year of Languages – 2001. They have been selected to provide a flavour of the issues that the conference addressed. A full listing of all presentations is attached at the end of this note.

The volume is divided into three parts. The first, with two papers, one written by Charles Alderson and the other by Antony Kunnan, has a focus on more general issues in Language Testing.

Alderson looks at some key issues in the field; he considers "the shape of things to come" and asks if it will be the "normal distribution". Using this pun to structure his paper, he focuses on two aspects of language testing; the first relates to the technical aspects of the subject (issues of validity, reliability, impact etc.), the second relates to ethical and political concerns.

Most of his paper chimes well with current thinking on the technical aspects and, as he admits, much of what he presents is not new and is uncontroversial. Within the European context he refers to the influential work of the Council of Europe, especially the Common European Framework and the European Language Portfolio; he describes a number of other European projects, such as DIALANG and the national examination reform project in Hungary, and he praises various aspects of the work of ALTE (e.g. for its Code of Practice, for organising useful conferences, for encouraging exchange of expertise among its members, and for raising the profile of language testing in Europe).

In focusing on the political dimension, however, he positions himself as devil's advocate and sets out to be provocative – perhaps deliberately introducing a "negative skew" into his discussion. As always his contribution is stimulating and his conclusions are certainly controversial, particularly his criticism of ALTE and several other organisations. These conclusions would not go unchallenged by many ALTE members, not least because he misrepresents the nature of the association and how it operates.

Kunnan's paper discusses the qualities of test fairness and reflects his longstanding concerns with the issues involved in this area. The framework he presents is of great value to the field of Language Testing and Kunnan has contributed significantly to the on-going debate on the qualities of test fairness within ALTE.

The second part of the volume presents a number of research studies. Anne

Lazaraton focuses on the use of qualitative research methods in the development and validation of language tests. Lazaraton is a pioneer of qualitative research in language testing and her involvement dates back to the late eighties and early nineties when such approaches were not yet widely used in the field. It is in part due to her efforts that researchers are now more willing to embrace approaches that can provide access to the rich and deep data of qualitative research. Readers are encouraged to look at her volume in this series (*A Qualitative Approach to the Validation of Oral Language Tests*).

Vivien Berry and Jo Lewkowicz focus on the important issue of compulsory language assessment for graduating students in Hong Kong. Their paper considers alternatives to using a language test alone for this purpose and looks at the applicability of variations on the portfolio concept. Jim Purpura's work on the validation of questionnaires, which addresses the interaction of personal factors and second language test performance, represents an interesting and challenging dimension of validation in language testing. Readers may also wish to refer to Purpura's volume in this series (*Learner strategy use and performance on language tests: A structural equation modelling approach*), which looks in more depth at the development of questionnaires to determine personal factors and a methodology that can be used to investigate their interactions with test performance.

Annie Brown's paper is particularly relevant as we move towards greater use of computers in language testing. Such a move is of course fraught with issues, not least of which is the one of legibility that Brown addresses here. Her findings are interesting, giving us pause for thought and indicating, as she suggests, that more research is required. In the context of IELTS, such research is currently being conducted in Cambridge.

Barry O'Sullivan's paper attempts to model the factors affecting oral test performance, an area of particular significance in large-scale assessment. The paper is part of on-going research commissioned by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and it is hoped that a collection of research studies into the dimensions of oral assessment will be published in this series in due course.

Finally, Sari Luoma's paper looks at self-assessment in the context of DIALANG. The DIALANG project, also referred to in Alderson's paper, has been one of the key initiatives of the European Commission in relation to language testing. As such it has benefited from significant funding and generated much research potential.

The last two parts of the volume cover aspects of work in progress. On the one hand, Joe Shiels and Wolfgang Mackiewicz summarise aspects of the on-going work of the Council of Europe and the European Union in relation to language policy. On the other, a number of researchers bring us up-to-date with test development work largely, though not exclusively, in the context of ALTE. These papers provide the reader with a reasonable overview of what is going on in a number of European countries.

In the context of the conference reflected in this volume, it is appropriate to overview how ALTE has developed over the years and what is of particular concern to the members of ALTE at the moment.

ALTE has been operating for nearly a decade and a half. It was first formed when a few organisations, acknowledging the fact that there was no obvious forum for the discussion of issues in the assessment of one's own language as a foreign language in the European context, decided to meet with this aim in mind. The question of language assessment generally is an enormous one and dealt with in different ways by national and regional authorities throughout Europe and the world. Trying to bring together such a large and diverse community would have been a very significant task and far beyond the scope of ALTE's mission. ALTE's direct interests and aims are on a much smaller scale and it important to underline that it seeks to bring together those interested in the assessment of their own language as a foreign language. This is often in an international context, particularly with the more widely spoken languages but also in a national context, as is the case with lesser spoken languages in particular. While some ALTE members are located within ministries or government departments, others are within universities and cultural agencies. The members of ALTE are part of the international educational context and ALTE itself, as well as the members that form it, is a not-for-profit organisation. As a group, ALTE aims to provide a benchmark of quality in the particular domain in which it operates. Should ALTE's work be of relevance outside its own context, then so much the better, but ALTE does not set out to establish or police the standard for European language assessment in general.

The recent history of language testing in the European context is very mixed. In the case of English we are fortunate that there has been significant interest and research in this field in English speaking countries for many years. In relation to some other European languages this is not the case. ALTE recognises that the field of language testing in different languages will be at different stages of development and that developing a language testing capacity in the European context, albeit in a relatively narrow domain, is an on-going venture. Similarly, progress, in contexts where participants are free to walk away at any time, cannot be achieved through force or coercion but rather through involvement, greater understanding and personal commitment. ALTE operates as a capacity builder in the European context, albeit in a relatively narrow domain.

As with any association, ALTE has a Secretariat, based in Cambridge and elected by the membership. The Secretariat has a three-year term of office and is supported by a number of committees, made up from the membership, who oversee various aspects of ALTE's work. The group is too large for all members to be involved in everything and there are a number of sub-groups, organised by the members and focusing on particular areas of interest. The sub-groups are formed, reformed and disbanded as circumstances and

interests dictate, and at the moment there are several active ones. We will briefly describe the work of some of these here.

The whole of ALTE has been working for some time on the ALTE Framework which seeks to place the examinations of ALTE members onto a common framework, related closely through empirical study, to the Common European Framework. The process of placing examinations on the framework is underpinned by extensive work on the content analysis of examinations, guidelines for the quality production of examinations and empirically validated performance indicators in many European languages. This work has been supported by grants from the European Commission for many years and is now being taken forward by a number of sub-groups which are considering different domains of use such as language specifically for work purposes, for young learners or for study through the medium of a language.

A group has been established to look at the extent to which teacher qualifications in different languages can be harmonised and placed on some kind of framework. The group is not looking specifically at state organised qualifications but rather those common in the private sector for example, those offered by The Alliance Francaise, the Goethe Institute, the Cervantes Institute or Cambridge amongst others. It seeks to provide greater flexibility and mobility for the ever growing body of language teachers often qualified in one language and wishing to teach another while having their existing qualifications recognised as contributing to future ones in a more systematic way than is possible at present.

The Council of Europe has made and continues to make a substantial contribution to the teaching, learning and assessment of languages in the European context and in recent years has developed the concept of the European Language Portfolio as an aid and support to the language learning and teaching community. ALTE and the European Association for Quality Language Services have collaborated on the development of a portfolio for adults, which is now in the public domain. It is hoped that this will be a valuable aid to adult learners of languages in the European context.

An ALTE sub-group has been working with the Council of Europe and John Trim in the elaboration of a Breakthrough level which would complement the Waystage, Threshold and Vantage levels already developed. ALTE's work in this area has also been supported by the European Commission in the form of funding to a group of members from Finland, Ireland, Norway, Greece and Sweden who have a particular interest in language teaching and testing at the Breakthrough level.

Another ALTE sub-group has been working on the development of a multilingual system of computer-based assessment. The approach, which is based on the concept of computer adaptive testing, has proved highly successful and innovative, providing assessment in several European languages and recently won the European Academic Software award in 2000.

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ALTE members have developed a multilingual glossary of language testing terms. Part of this work has been published in this series (*A multilingual glossary of language testing terms*) but is ongoing, and as new languages join ALTE, further versions of the glossary are being developed. The glossary has allowed language testers in about 20 countries to define language testing terms in their own language and thus contributes to the process of establishing language testing as a discipline in its own right. The European Commission has supported this work throughout.

In the early 1990s, ALTE developed a code of professional practice and work has continued to elaborate the concept of quality assurance in language testing through the development of quality assurance and quality management instruments for use initially by ALTE members. This work has been in progress for several years and is now in the hands of an ALTE sub-group. As noted above, developing the concept of quality assurance and its management has to be a collaborative venture between partners and is not prone to imposition in the ALTE context. ALTE members are aware that they carry significant responsibility and aim to continue to play a leading role in defining the dimensions of quality and how an effective approach to quality management can be implemented. This work is documented and has been elaborated in ALTE News as well as at a number of international conferences. Details are also available on the ALTE website: www.alte.org.

Members of ALTE are also concerned to measure the impact of their examinations and work has gone on in the context of ALTE to develop a range of instrumentation to measure impact on stakeholders in the test taking and using constituency. Roger Hawkey discusses the concept of impact in the context of the Lingua 2000 project in one of the papers in this volume – see contents page.

ALTE members meet twice a year and hold a language testing conference in each meeting location. This is an open event, details of which are available on the ALTE website. New ALTE members are elected by the membership as a whole. Members are either full – from countries in the European Union – or associate – from countries outside. For organisations which do not have the resources to be full or associate members or who operate in a related field, there is the option of observer status. Information on all of these categories of membership is available on the ALTE website.

Finally, following the success of the Barcelona conference ALTE has agreed to organise another international conference in 2005. Details are available on the website.

Mike Milanovic
Cyril Weir
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UCLES, UK
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Lászlo Szabo
Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest,
Centre for Foreign languages, Hungary
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List of contributors

J. Charles Alderson
Department of Linguistics and
Modern English Language,
Lancaster University

Antony Kunnan
California State University

Anne Lazaraton
University of Minnesota,
Minneapolis, USA

Vivien Berry and **Jo Lewkowicz**
University of Hong Kong

James E. Purpura
Teachers College,
Columbia University

Annie Brown
University of Melbourne

Barry O'Sullivan
University of Reading

Sari Luoma
Centre for Applied Language
Studies, University of Jyväskylä,
Finland

Joseph Sheils
Modern Languages
Division/Division des langues
vivantes, DGIV Council of
Europe/Conseil de l'Europe,
Strasbourg

Wolfgang Mackiewicz
Conseil Européen pour les
Langues/European Language Council

Rüdiger Grotjahn
Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany

Roger Hawkey
Educational Consultant, UK

Silvia María Olalde Vegas and
Olga Juan Lázaro
Instituto Cervantes

Mònica Pereña and **Lluís Ràfols**
Direccío General de Política
Lingüística, Departament de Cultura,
Generalitat de Catalunya

Piet van Avermaet (KU Leuven),
José Bakx (KUN), **Frans van der
Slik** (KUN) and **Philippe
Vangeneugden** (KU Leuven)

Nicholas Gardner
Department of Culture/Kultura Saila,
Government of the Basque
Country/Eusko Jaurlaritza, Spain

Giuliana Grego Bolli
Università per Stranieri di Perugia,
Italy

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Issues in Language Testing