Dictionary of language testing

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Dictionary of language testing

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University of Melbourne

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Alan Davies, Annie Brown, Cathie Elder, Kathryn Hill, Tom Lumley and Tim McNamara
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Series Editor's Note

The Language Testing Dictionary represents a substantial contribution to the field of language testing and credit needs to be given to the Melbourne team for undertaking the work. The dictionary has taken six years to write and has been rigorously reviewed on an on-going basis throughout this period. Its 600 or so entries are clearly written and aim to communicate to a wide range of readers with varied background experience. The team, led by Alan Davies, approached the project in a systematic and organised manner and their approach is documented in both the preface and appendix to this volume.

Many of those involved in Applied Linguistics and EFL/ESL have found language testing a daunting area. This is partly because of the emphasis on numbers and 'difficult' statistical techniques and partly because there is a large amount of terminology and jargon to contend with. I hope that the dictionary will contribute to making language testing more transparent, and help to demystify some aspects of it. In this way, it will strengthen the field and help it to mature. It should be useful to students at all levels as a source of reference and guidance. The entries are not unduly long, but are often accompanied by references to further reading thus making it valuable to most professionals in the field of applied linguistics as a reference document.

The dictionary will complement the multilingual glossary, published as volume 6 in this series. Both volumes will help to make language testing more accessible, which is consistent with the overall aims of this series.

Preface

Work on this Dictionary of language testing began in 1991, soon after the inception of the Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC) in the University of Melbourne. During the last six years, a number of colleagues[1] have participated in the preparation of the volume, but the final writing has been done by the listed authors (Davies, Brown, Elder, Lumley, McNamara from the beginning, Hill joining later). Progress has been irregular and always dependent on other commitments. But the slow pace can in part be explained by our insistence on making the Dictionary a team effort: draft entries have been prepared by one author and then panelled by the team, revised and often repanelled.

As the article contained in Appendix 1 (Davies 1996) explains, the process of writing was always as important to the team as the eventual product. When we started writing there was a clear felt need: we found ourselves establishing a Centre in which most members of staff were new to the field of language testing. Both to cater for learning about the field and at the same time to facilitate communication with one another, we realised our need for a common terminology, a dictionary. And, of course, if we needed one, then it was very likely that others new to language testing would have the same need. So we saw a role for our dictionary both as process and as product. And so it has turned out, at least as far as process is concerned. We have all learned through the need to be specific in our definitions and then to justify our decisions to colleagues who can be the severest of critics.

For the most part the division of first drafts was allocated randomly: we did not permit choices to be made on the basis of individual knowledge. Our thinking was that if language testing has a coherence as a profession then it should have a broad basis of common knowledge shared by all practitioners. Hence our early agreement that we would all attempt whatever entries came our way. To some extent as we have neared completion (and in order to ensure completion) that random principle has been retired; but until recently it has been an important principle to which we have adhered.

The Dictionary contains some 600 entries, each listed under a headword. Cross-referencing takes two forms: within entries, references to other entries are bolded; where there is no substantive entry, the cross-referencing follows

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[1] Chris Corbel, Lis Grove, Kieran O'Loughlin, Joy McQueen, Yap Soon Hock

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the stand-alone headword. Our selection of headwords is based on advice from colleagues, scanning of current textbooks in the field and of dictionaries and encyclopedias in adjacent fields (eg psychometrics, applied linguistics, statistics). Inevitably our choice is subjective and not final. But that is true of course of any selective dictionary. We have tried to keep in mind a potential colleague who may or may not have experience in the field but who has a need for information. Our dictionary is intended as a first stage in meeting that need, but it is not intended to do more than provide an orientation and where appropriate indicate where next to look. Hence the references which follow many of the entries and which are collected together at the end of the book. For the most part, the area of language testing sufficiently delimited itself for our selection purposes; this was not so with statistics where we found ourselves constantly tempted to add to its representation. That temptation we have tried to resist on the grounds that we were not in the business of offering a dictionary or indeed a mini-text on how to do statistics. There are, after all, many excellent such books available.

Our hope now is that the Dictionary as product will prove as valuable to others as the Dictionary as process has to us. We welcome suggestions for additions, emendations, etc., which we will be happy to incorporate in any subsequent edition.

Our thanks to Natalie Stephens who has maintained our data base over these last years and to Fiona Watson who has produced from our varied fonts a professionally formatted text.

Alan Davies,
November 1997

Reference

Davies, A. (1996) The role of the segmental dictionary in professional validation: constructing a dictionary of language testing. In Cumming, A. & Berwick, R. (Eds.) *Validation in Language Testing*. Clevedon Multilingual Matters: 222–35.