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### Regarding Language Assessment

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## EDITORIAL

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# Regarding Language Assessment

I

Let us never cease from thinking—what is this ‘civilization’ in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them? What are these professions and why should we make money out of them? Where in short is it leading us . . . ?

—Virginia Woolf (1936, pp. 62–63)

This new quarterly journal seeks to offer space to scholars, researchers, and practitioners in language assessment so that they can address contemporary issues that concern the field.<sup>1</sup> It is dedicated to the advancement of theory, research, and practice in first, second, and foreign language assessment in school, college, and university students, for employment and for immigration and citizenship. It also encourages focus on language assessment practices from countries and regions and focus on languages not widely documented and researched. The journal urges novel ways of thinking about emerging issues (conceptual, empirical, clinical, historical, methodological, or interdisciplinary), the use of varying research methodologies (quantitative, qualitative, ethnographic) and narrative styles (research articles, essay reviews, interviews, and practitioner perspectives). Issues of *LAQ* will include articles, interviews, book reviews, commentaries, short articles on practical test development, and occasional thematic article series (such as a thematic issue of the journal).

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<sup>1</sup>The term “assessment” is used in the *LAQ* as the overencompassing word to include all methods and approaches to testing and evaluation whether in research studies or in educational contexts (e.g., testing with rigorous measures, alternatives to testing that may be or may not be qualitatively or quantitatively analyzed—portfolios, interviews, questionnaires, observation, journals, etc.). Submissions are therefore encouraged from this wide area of language assessment.

The recorded study of modern language testing arguably began in the 1930s and 1940s. J. O. Roach's papers (1931, 1944; cited in Weir & Milanovic, 2003) on the Certificate of Proficiency in English and the Cambridge Examinations in general and Walter Kaulfers practical papers (1933, 1937; cited in Spolsky, 1995) regarding testing Spanish and French language are evidence of early study of language testing. Later, two papers from John Carroll, the first in 1954 titled "Notes on the Measurement of Achievement in Foreign Languages" and the second (a more widely cited paper) in 1961 titled "Fundamental Considerations in Testing for English Language Proficiency of Foreign Students" along with Robert Lado's 1961 book titled "Language Testing" offered specific insight and ideas for language testers. In addition, academic study of language testing began in earnest: Jesse Villareal in 1947 at Northwestern University and Robert Lado in 1949 at the University of Michigan completed doctoral dissertations and T. S. Percival a master's thesis at Durham University in 1950 (cited in Spolsky 1995). All these works can be collectively counted as the start of a professional identity for the field of language testing or language assessment.<sup>2</sup>

Fifty years after Carroll's 1954 article, the field has expanded greatly: Hundreds of tests, books, edited volumes and reports have been published, thousands of researchers have received advanced training, and conferences and organizations have multiplied. Language testers have also met annually at their flagship conference called the "Language Testing Research Colloquium" which has completed 25 years of outstanding meetings. In addition, researchers have published articles and reviews in the journal titled *Language Testing* which has completed 20 years of intellectual success. It is also not hyperbolic to imagine that in most communities in the world today, language assessment is widely used for feedback, certification, employment, and social and geographical mobility. Although we can look back at these successes and celebrate the growth and the better understanding we have today, we also need to acknowledge the great lengths we need to travel for a comprehensive understanding of what it means to assess a person's language ability and how to make language assessment educationally and socially beneficial.

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<sup>2</sup>Spolsky (1995), Hamp-Lyons (2002), Miyazaki (1976), and Amano (1990), among others, have documented the introduction of examinations: Spolsky cites the 12th chapter from the Book of Judges from the Old Testament to show how the conquering Gileadites were able to identify the Ephramites whom they conquered by asking them to say the word *shibboleth* (the "ear of corn") that the Ephramites mispronounced as *sibboleth*. Hamp-Lyons pointed out that in China, examinations were known as early in the Chou period (1111–771 B. C. E) and used systematically in later periods, in Europe and the United Kingdom written tests were introduced in the 17th century but consolidated in the 18th century and 19th centuries. Miyazaki chronicled the use of examinations in the Chinese civil service. Amano showed that in Japan systematic examinations were introduced in the 19th century. However, there is scant evidence of academic and professional study of tests and testing practice until the early 20th century. *LAQ* joins this exciting enterprise that started more than 50 years ago.

I hope that *LAQ* will contribute to this enterprise through the debates and discussions it fosters in its pages and the comments and critiques made by the Editorial Advisory Board and all its readers. With the highest regard for the illustrious scholars, researchers, and practitioners in language assessment who have made distinguished contributions and others who continue to make similar contributions, I take on the responsibility as first editor of *LAQ* and share it with my associate editors, Fred Davidson, Nick Saville, Carolyn Turner and, to help, in Alister Cumming's words, "broaden, deepen, and consolidate" the field. Wherever it is leads us.

## II

like the shapes of snowflakes  
 we are the words on a journey  
 not the inscriptions of a settled people  
 —W. S. Merwin (1977, p. 11)<sup>3</sup>

This issue opens with two invited articles authored by Alister Cumming and Constant Leung. Alister encourages *LAQ* editors to continue, and to extend, three directions that are integral to the development of the field of language assessment: (a) to broaden the scope of inquiry and contexts that inform knowledge about language assessment; (b) to deepen the theoretical premises and philosophies of language assessment; and (c) to consolidate through systematic, critical reviews the information base of prior research on language assessment. Constant discusses key constitutive issues in his approach to classroom-based formative teacher assessment. This discussion raises a number of research and development issues in respect of (a) the conceptual basis of investigating this kind of student-oriented contingent assessment, (b) some methodological questions concerned with classroom-based research, and (c) the need to understand teacher development and teacher change with reference to teacher assessment practice.

These two articles are followed by an interview with John Carroll conducted by Charles Stansfield and Dan Reed. Carroll was considered by many to be one of the premier psychologists in the 20th century for his contributions to the study of intelligence, verbal abilities, educational psychology, factor analysis, educational measurement, language testing, and as the lead developer of the Modern Language Aptitude Test. In August 2002, Carroll traveled to Chicago to attend the American Psychological Association's 110th Annual Convention where he received the American Psychological Foundation's "Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Science of Psychology." In retrospect, this interview has very special significance for *LAQ*, as it was one of the last interviews that he granted. He died on July

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<sup>3</sup>©1977 by W. S. Merwin printed with permission of the Wylie Agency, Inc.

1, 2003 at the age of 87. Although he did not have the opportunity to see this interview in print, he enthusiastically edited the manuscript in great detail during the early spring of 2003.

Three reviews by David Qian, Gary Ockey, and Rama Mathew focus on books assessing different language abilities. This is followed by a test review by David Gorman and Megan Ernst of the California Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS, renamed the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System) that was developed to create curriculum and testing materials to assess this unique group of students. CASAS tests are used throughout the United States to evaluate adult basic skills in a wide variety of workforce and academic programs. This review focuses on the most widely used CASAS exams: the multilevel criterion-referenced life skills tests that assess basic literacy and reading ability.

In the Commentary section, Fred Davidson writes on the identity of language testing by discussing the two works by Lado and Carroll in the early 1960s that gave the field its modern professional identity. Lyle Bachman records his personal reflections of the 25 years of the Language Testing Research Colloquium that he was instrumental in starting. This section of the journal is intended as a forum for commentary and dialogue; responses to these opening pieces are encouraged.

In closing, we hope you will consider this first issue of *LAQ* to be “not the inscriptions of a settled people, but words on a journey,” a journey it has just begun.

Antony John Kunnan  
*Editor*

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