

Introducing *The Companion to Language Assessment*

Almost all of us in the world have experienced an assessment or a test of our language ability at one time or another. It surely would have started in an elementary/primary school classroom where a teacher asked us to say the letters of the Roman alphabet, or read a paragraph or recite a poem in English, or learn the written script in Arabic, or write a description or a story in Korean, or converse in Hindi. In high school, the teacher might have asked us to perfect the kanji or Chinese characters, or the fall-rise tone in Cantonese or Swahili, or delve into a Shakespeare or Miller play, or a Tagore or Gibran poem, or watch a Fellini or Renoir film, and speak eloquently and write elegantly on the finer points of such masterpieces.

A history teacher might have asked us to write a report on the horrors of wars or a science teacher to report on recycling waste or a debate teacher to consider the pros and cons of the death penalty. Beyond school and into college and university, there were probably more such activities and related assessments. If we started working as a nurse, we would have had to read doctors' prescriptions to help patients with medications, or as a repair technician, to read a manual to repair a TV, or as a train driver, to understand the schedule for the morning, or as a tour guide, to speak about exhibits in museums, or as an air traffic controller, to communicate with pilots. If we were considering immigration or citizenship, we might have been asked to demonstrate our language ability of the new country or to take part in social integration programs. In all these activities and assessments, from elementary school to the workplace to a new country, language is the central component in our ability to succeed, whether it is by using our first/native or home language or a second or third language. And, in all these contexts, a teacher, a supervisor, an examiner (or a standardized examination) would have assessed our performance and graded us in order to select us into a program, promote us to the next level of study, certify us as competent, offer us a job, qualify us for a pay raise, or permit us to immigrate or gain citizenship.

Broadly speaking, this is the wide arena where language assessments are used: from a village or town elementary school to the urban professional workplace, from the local district to the international arena, from a public college or university

to a multinational corporation, and from first language ability to bilingual and multilingual abilities. This is certainly a vast arena of operation. Therefore, in order to carry this out successfully, an increasingly complex training program, along with sophisticated assessment development and research expertise, is required. Various types and levels of expertise are needed for different personnel: school and college teachers, teacher trainers, principals; the small assessment agency staff, the large corporate professional researchers; and assessment policy officials in business, military, and government.

The Companion to Language Assessment, the first multivolume collection of 140 chapters on language assessment, has been developed to address all these issues. It is comprehensive in terms of topics and themes, theories and practice, technical and research expertise, and international in coverage in terms of authors, assessments, and languages. It is a four-volume set of state-of-the-art chapters with forward-looking perspectives useful for readers of every persuasion and training.

The *Companion* also celebrates the history and success of the field by bringing together authors from 45 countries from various professions: school teachers, college and university professors, assessment administrators, assessment researchers, and policy makers.

Celebrating History

If we were to outline the history of language assessment, depending on how wide we draw this circle, we could include the Chinese imperial civil service examinations as the earliest recorded public assessments. These assessments had language elements such as poetry writing, calligraphy, and knowledge of classic Chinese texts. Many scholars believe that the examinations were established in AD 605 during the Sui Dynasty, expanded during the Song Dynasty, and finally discontinued in 1905 before the fall of the Qing Dynasty. The almost 1,300 years of examinations, despite some interruptions, is the longest use of an examination system, which lasted until a little more than 100 years ago.

On the European side, scholars have documented that a Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci, brought back ideas of the Chinese examinations in the late 16th century. France soon started using examinations in Catholic schools but it was under Napoleon, in 1808, that the Baccalauréat was introduced. The examination has many subject areas, such as French, philosophy, and science. It is still in use and is employed to admit students into college as well as qualify them for certain government positions. This examination was started just a little more than 200 years ago.

In the USA and the UK, the year 1913 was important. In the USA, it marked the formation of the first committee appointed by the Association of Modern Language Teachers of the Middle States of Maryland for the assessment of French, German, and Spanish. In the UK, the Certificate of Proficiency in English, the first examination in English as a foreign language, was established by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (now Cambridge Assessment, an umbrella organization that includes Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages, the developer of the CPE and other academic examinations). A quick

review of the components of the 1913 examination shows they are not very dissimilar to the ones used today. These components included translation from English into French or German, translation from French or German into English, questions on English grammar, English essay writing, English literature, English phonetics, dictation and reading aloud, and conversation. This examination was started over 100 years ago.

More recently, in 1961, three important events took place in the USA. First, a conference sponsored by the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC, and other relevant organizations adopted a plan to assess the English ability of foreign students entering US colleges and universities. This later became known as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL, now known as the Internet-based TOEFL or iBT). Second, Robert Lado's *Language Testing: The Construction and Use of Foreign Language Tests*, the first full-length textbook on language assessment, was published by Longman. As the title indicates, it was primarily focused on the development and construction of tests. Finally, John Carroll's significant paper titled "Fundamental Considerations in Testing for English Language Proficiency of Foreign Students" was published. He promoted the idea of integrative testing (of skills and components) with focus on what has come to be known as communicative ability. Many scholars, therefore, consider 1961 as the start of the modern era of language assessment. This occurred a little more than 50 years ago!

Davies (see Chapter 1, Fifty Years of Language Assessment) takes 1961 as the starting point of his survey of the last 50 years of language assessment and brings us up to 2012.

Celebrating Success

Another reason to celebrate language assessment is the success the field has had in the last 50 years, especially the enormous popularity of many standardized assessments. Three international English language tests for college entrance dominate the college/university entrance market. The Internet-based TOEFL (iBT), developed and administered by the Educational Testing Service, Princeton, has had the largest success with a sustained test-taker base over the last 50 years. The iBT assesses the readiness of test takers in English to take college and university courses (in English-medium institutions) in the USA and Canada. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), administered by the University of Cambridge, the British Council, and the International Development Program, Australia, is a relative newcomer but has gained a large test-taker base in the last 20 years. The Pearson Test of English (PTE) is the newest entrant into this arena and is poised to gain substantial market share in the next decade. The University of Cambridge also administers several important assessments such as the First Certificate in English, the Certificate of Proficiency in English, and the Certificate of Advanced English, and many assessments for young learners, legal and business professionals, and teachers of English. These large nonprofit, university, or private organizations employ many dozens of staff to cover all the development, operational, and research needs and have worldwide affiliations to market and administer their assessments.

Several regional standardized language assessments have also been successful. For example, members of the Association of Language Testers of Europe have developed 33 language assessments from Basque to Welsh. A few examples are the Test d'évaluation de français, the Test Deutsch als Fremdsprache, and the Certificati di Italiano generale/commercial. Similar assessments have been developed in Asia. The most well-known are the College English Test and the National Matriculation English Test in China, the General English Proficiency Test in Taiwan, and the Step Eiken in Japan. As these assessments are developed and administered by organizations that are smaller, they vary in their capacity to conduct research and to be innovative.

Language assessments are also entering the workplace arena. Assessments for aviation professionals (air traffic controllers, pilots), health professionals (doctors, nurses, and pharmacists), business professionals, court translators and interpreters, language teachers and teaching assistants, and tour guides and domestic helpers have been developed in many parts of the world. In addition, language assessments are now being used for immigration, citizenship, and asylum.

While these standardized assessments mentioned above always capture the limelight, the unrecognized school and college teacher is in the midst of classroom assessments on a daily basis all over the world. Their assessments often mimic those of the standardized assessments but their practices generally suffer from lack of exposure to good language assessment practice. It is this group of assessors who need attention in terms of assessment literacy so that they can better help their students.

The Volumes

The *Companion's* 140 chapters are presented in four volumes that focus on different language assessment matters. The first three volumes deal with theories, interests, and expertise, and the last volume offers a wide view of assessment practices from around the world. Here is a brief summary of the chapters in each volume.

Volume 1, titled "Abilities, Contexts, and Learners," presents chapters on **assessing abilities** (aptitude, listening, literacy, responses to literature, grammar, pragmatics, pronunciation, speaking, vocabulary, reading, writing, integrated skills, language and content, translation, language varieties) in different **contexts** (international assessments, school exit and college admissions examinations, government and military, courts, immigration, citizenship, and asylum), and for diverse language **learners** (young and adult learners, teachers and teaching assistants, workplace professionals in aviation and health care, and learners with communication disorders).

Volume 2, titled "Approaches and Development," offers chapters on **approaches** to assessment (large-scale, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced, and task-based and computer-assisted), assessment and **learning** (performance assessment, monitoring progress and achievement, portfolio assessment, dynamic assessment, diagnostic feedback, self-, and peer assessment, assessment literacy), assessment **development** (defining constructs, writing specifications and items, item banking, developing source material, writing scoring criteria and score

reports, response formats, field testing, test-wiseness, using standards and statistics, standard setting, planning administration, and detecting cheating), and **technology** (media, corpora, eye-tracking technology, acoustic analysis, and automated scoring).

Volume 3, titled “Evaluation, Methodology, and Interdisciplinary Themes,” includes chapters on issues related to **evaluation** (designing evaluations, fairness and justice, accommodations, and consequences), **quantitative analysis** (classical test theory, reliability, dependability, generalizability theory, factor analysis and structural equation modeling, questionnaire development and analysis, item response theory, differential item functioning, and Rasch analysis), **qualitative and mixed method analysis** (content analysis, introspective methods, raters and ratings, spoken and written discourse, mixed methods research, research reports), and **interdisciplinary** themes (philosophy, language acquisition, bilingualism, classroom-based assessment issues, program evaluation, forensic sciences, and law and ethics). The volume concludes with a chapter on ongoing challenges.

Volume 4, titled “Assessment Around the World,” first describes assessment practices in **English language assessment** (as a lingua franca, and in Australia and New Zealand, Canada and the USA, Mexico and Central America, the Middle East and North Africa, South, East, and Southeast Asia, South America, and Europe). The rest of the volume addresses **language assessment practices in languages other than English in Africa** (Swahili and Shona and Ndebele), **North and South America** (American Sign Language, Hawaiian, North American indigenous languages, and Spanish), in the **Middle East and South Asia** (Arabic, Farsi, Hebrew, Hindi, Malayalam, Nepali, Sinhala, Tamil, and Telugu), **Southeast and East Asia** (Bahasa Melayu and Indonesia, Cantonese, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese indigenous languages, and Thai), **Australia and New Zealand** (Australian and New Zealand indigenous languages and Māori indigenous languages), and **Europe** (Armenian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Welsh).

These 140 chapters are all accessible to interested readers with some background in assessment and education. A few technical chapters may need more background as they deal with psychometric matters related to development and research. On the other hand, a few chapters bring outside knowledge and relate it to language assessment in an interdisciplinary fashion. All chapters have cross-references to other chapters and references.

For those who have imagined that language assessment is a “one-note samba,” I hope reading the *Companion* will reveal the rich variety and diversity of theories, interests, expertise, and themes, and a 360-degree view of practices from around the world. Language assessment, like language learning, is one of the activities that all children and adults alike engage in, from birth to death, by using language, and in making and negotiating meaning.

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December 2012

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