

Diversity and Depth: Report on World Languages Conference

University of Macau

November 8 to 11, 2017

This conference brought together a remarkable range of unique perspectives on the diversity and depth of current knowledge about principles, practices, and research for language assessment. The impression of contextual diversity stood out most prominently but this quality brought to the fore important insights into the depth of knowledge about language assessment that has been developing around the world across various languages, educational programs, and populations.

The conference spanned four days. The first day-and-a-half featured workshops on specific research methods relevant to practicing assessors and teachers, prompting them to develop their skills for inquiry into and development of their usual work assessing languages either through verbal reports on thinking processes, analyses of writing or of reading tasks (Cumming and Zhao), and methods of statistical analysis (Choi). The following days involved 21 presentations in plenary by leading scholars from various regions of Asia and North America on their recent research on specific aspects and contexts of language assessment.

As has been widely observed, publications, research, theories, and knowledge about language assessment have increased dramatically in recent decades but have focused mostly on large-scale tests of English for young adults seeking admissions to English-medium university programs or relocating for employment or immigration. The present conference built on these precedents but, in contrast, made evident that other diverse forms and purposes of language assessments are widely practiced, well developed, and of fundamental importance for a wide range of additional contexts, populations, and languages around the world. This design of the conference benefited from, but also notably extended, the perspectives of diversity and depth represented in Kunnan (2013) as well as the work of the other conference organizers, Cecilia Zhao, Matthew Wallace, and Christine Liao.

The focal contexts represented in presentations and discussions at the conference spanned a broad range of: cities in Asia (Macau, Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Beijing, Shanghai, Jinan, Changchun, Taipei, Delhi, Hanoi, Kuala Lumpur, Nagoya, Kobe, Singapore) and North America (California, Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Ontario); different languages (English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Portuguese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Sinhala, and Hindi alongside numerous other Indian languages of varying statuses); and types of educational institutions and program types and learner or test-taker populations (universities, schools, pre-schools, study abroad, teacher education, foreign languages, academic studies, and testing agencies with an international or regional focus). This scope was, in itself, an impressive and informative dimension of the conference.

The foci of analyses represented in the research also spanned a diversity of: aspects of languages or communication (including the conventional aspects of writing, reading, speaking, reading and listening comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation but extending to many other

important but less commonly assessed aspects such as classroom interactions, child-parent interactions, text analyses, graphic representations, mental state verbs, speech acts, transfer between languages, demonstrating academic knowledge through citations of sources, language represented in textbooks, multimedia student presentations, or distinctions between language varieties) as well as uses of languages (for establishing or developing family, individual, educational, or national identities or intergroup relations, classroom interactions, academic study in schools and in specific disciplines, determining the expectations for and the outcomes of language programs, various types of work, travel, or cross-cultural understanding).

This diversity indicated how particular assessment practices, methods, issues, and opportunities relate integrally, uniquely, and often differently to specific educational and societal contexts. Language assessment is not a single, uniform, static, or monolithic activity. Rather, it is an amalgamation of diverse, systematic methods for documenting, sampling, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting on particular aspects of people's learning, knowing, using, teaching, or judging a language (or languages for multilinguals) to make decisions about people's abilities to achieve purposes expected in education or interactions with each other in homes, communities, societies, or workplaces. Research and development help to refine and improve language assessments and ensure that the inferences made from them are valid, fair, relevant, and equitable. The field progresses. Even response formats in language tests are not uniform, but rather vary over space and time, just as language is multi-faceted and complex so must be evaluated and investigated from diverse perspectives and for differing purposes and populations.

Presentations at the conference revealed how language assessments are realized differently around the world in settings that may be dominantly monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual. Multilingual interactions may be so commonplace in parts of India, for instance, that teachers and students barely notice their frequent, casual mixing of languages, whereas at universities in the Midwestern US, English is so singularly the focus of language assessments (and assessments for academic courses) that students' individual multilingual abilities are usually ignored or unacknowledged, and if they are actually brought to the fore are given the innovative label of "translanguaging". Expectations for proficiency in world languages such as English, Mandarin, or Arabic or regional languages such as Cantonese, Portuguese, or Sinhalese differ greatly around the world as do the methods used to assess them, the consequences of tests of them for academic or career advancement, and the opportunities available for learning and using the particular language. In cities like Hong Kong, language assessments focus on three languages—Cantonese, Mandarin (Putonghua), and English--of importance for political, institutional, historical, individual, and community identities, and many people make multiple, daily complex uses of each language, although hundreds of other languages are commonly used, taught, and studied but only rarely assessed except within language courses. In countries like Sri Lanka or Canada, formed from two dominant cultures, language assessments focus on bilingualism in official languages (Sinhalese or Tamil; English or French, respectively) while paying scant attention to the great diversity and resources of other languages used by distinct but varied minority, indigenous, or migrant populations.

Presentations at the conference observed how language assessments can shape policy expectations, for example, through the creation of frameworks for curricula, targeted proficiency levels for language programs or for academic study, selection or streaming of students or immigrant populations, implicit promotion of status varieties of a language, as media for learning about other cultures abroad, descriptive criteria that define macro- and micro-aspects of language proficiencies, or requirements for bilingualism in official documents and services. A key understanding that the conference helped me (and I presume, others, too) to appreciate further is the great many purposes that language assessments serve, ranging from subtle, informal observations to inform teaching and learning or the quality of parent-child interactions to the conventionalized forms of large-scale tests that exert great consequences for large numbers of people's academic or vocational careers in heavily institutionalized ways. Assessment purposes may be confining, as in the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes in school textbooks or teaching to fixed testing formats, or be liberating, as in teachers' incorporation of personally relevant experiences from students' lives or their guiding students to explore internet resources to discover and consolidate their knowledge about foreign languages and cultures.

Presentations of research about language assessments also revealed limitations in the current state of knowledge about language abilities because of their multifaceted complexity, integral interactions with other human abilities such as literacy, knowledge, and education, and contingency on social contexts and relationships. Researchers at the conference did not present any single, definitive approach or answer to the research questions they had posed, but rather researchers displayed ways they had begun to probe systematically and critically into particular aspects of language assessments, behavior, and knowledge, arriving at new insights but also inviting further investigations, the development of useful principles, and broadening of the scope of inquiry as well as understanding of what languages are and do and how they vary in their evaluation in particular settings.

Reference

Kunnan, A. (Ed.) (2013). *The companion to language assessment*. Volumes 1 to 4. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Report submitted by Alister Cumming, January 2018.