

ILTA Code of Ethics (approved March 6, 2026)

Introduction

Societally connected at heart, the discipline of language testing and assessment¹ is in a constant state of flux and transformation. The process of revising the ILTA Code of Ethics began in 2024, in a context vastly different from the world in 1992, when the writing process of the original ILTA Code of Ethics began (ILTA, 2000). As the use of test scores is linked to societal changes, many current uses of test scores were unthinkable a few decades ago. The increased use of language tests for migration, family reunification, access to human rights, and other high-stakes societal domains is a clear example of this. Additionally, as the operationalization of tests goes hand in hand with technological advances, so have leaps in artificial intelligence metamorphosed the development, analysis and operationalization of tests. As this is taking place, we need to be mindful of potential risks, such as the promulgation of test bias in automated scoring.

Just as tests and test score uses reflect the time and social space in which they exist, language testing ethics should be situated in a specific context (McNamara, 2001; Shohamy, 2001). However, although circumstances change, the Code of Ethics does strive towards a constancy in basic principles over time. As such, the ethical principles outlined in this document are inspired by considerations that respond to current practices, while continuing the deontological human rights-driven approach of the original Code of Ethics.

This code lists four essential principles. We acknowledge that adherence to ethical principles is easier in some contexts than in others (Durkheim, 1992; Koggel, 2006). For example, political circumstances differ and not all principles are as implementable as others in every context. Thus, the Code of Ethics can and should be considered an aspirational document, supporting testing procedures in a continuous process towards more ethical practices. In other words, language testers who live in a society in which adherence to the ethical principles of the Code of Ethics is challenging or even dangerous yet strive to uphold them are in full compliance with the Code of Ethics, even if they cannot meet all principles. At the same time, language testers who live in a society that offers the freedom to adhere to all ethical principles, yet choose to act otherwise, are in violation of the ILTA Code of Ethics. In such environments, failure to engage in regular ethical reviews, neglecting to address known biases, or using test scores inappropriately would constitute violations of the ILTA Code of Ethics.

Purpose and validity of this document

Codes of ethics state principles and guidelines that outline expected behavior in a specific professional context and promote individual and organizational compliance with ethical standards endorsed by the profession (Adelstein & Clegg, 2016). ILTA members, both institutional and individual, are required to uphold the principles stipulated in the Code of Ethics. They should adapt

¹ In this document we use the term *language testing* to include all kinds of testing and assessment, both formative and summative. The term *language tester* refers to any person engaged in testing or assessing any aspect of another person's language ability. *Language test* refers to any formal or informal instrument used to gauge language ability. This document does not incorporate specific principles of language program evaluation, although employing best practices in assessment in the selection of assessments as part of a program evaluation is critical to reliable program evaluation.

these principles only as necessary to comply with local legal and cultural contexts. However, these adaptations must still aim to uphold the integrity of the ethical values outlined in this document, actively seeking ways to embody these values as fully as possible within their specific environments. This also includes engaging with all stakeholders, such as educators, learners, and policymakers, to ensure that ethical practices consider the needs of those impacted by testing.

While the primary focus of the Code of Ethics is on the direct treatment of test takers, language testers should also be mindful of the broader societal and ethical context in which their work takes place. The indirect consequences of language testing, including the ethical standing of the organizations for which testing is conducted, should be carefully considered to avoid contributing to practices that harm or limit the rights of candidates.

These principles have to remain fit-for-purpose over time and for that reason, this document should be considered for revision on a bi-annual basis. To inspire and field these revisions and to keep ethics at the forefront of the discipline, this Code of Ethics should be seen as a living document that generates discussion and debate among language testers. This engagement could include public consultation, particularly with test takers and educators, to ensure that their perspectives are incorporated into revisions. One of the original goals of the Code of Ethics has been to promote the creation of an *ethical milieu* (Davies, 1997) in which ethical principles can stimulate and guide ethical debates on the workfloor, at conferences and in publications.

Who is this code for?

The principles described in this Code of Ethics apply to the professional categories listed below, grouped by impact on test operationalization and score use. While all principles apply to all language testers, the Code of Ethics holds the first category to the highest standards, as this category is able to shape the ethical milieu in which language testers work.

Institutions, organizations and individuals involved in decision-making processes based on language test scores. This includes:

- Testing organizations and exam boards
- Quasi-governmental institutions which produce large-scale language tests
- Score users, including university admission officers and immigration and integration officers²

Individual professional language testers involved in research or development, or indirectly contributing to decision-making processes. This includes:

- Researchers on language testing and assessment (e.g., academics conducting research on language testing/assessment)
- Language assessment/test developers (e.g., professionals who create tests or assessments, write questions, develop scoring guides)
- Freelance language testing experts (e.g., professionals who conduct independent research, support test development, or act as a consultant)

Individual professional and non-professional testers involved in potentially but not necessarily impactful decision-making processes. This includes:

- Language teachers who design and administer assessments for classroom use, directly influencing educational outcomes

² Score users are not expected to be acquainted with this document, but ILTA members are expected to inform non-specialist score users about the principles listed in this document when relevant.

- Professional examiners and/or raters who perform assessments and ratings for testing organizations, contributing to the broader implications of test results
- Test administrators who oversee the delivery and proper conduct of tests, ensuring the integrity and effectiveness of the assessment process

Who are test takers?

Test takers are individuals who participate in both formal language assessments and informal classroom activities that involve assessment. They may take assessments out of necessity or personal motivation. It is crucial to recognize the diversity among test takers, which includes but is not limited to educational background, literacy, gender, race, age, ethnicity, beliefs, sexual orientation, neurological factors, and socioeconomic status. Test takers also include students who are assessed via non-traditional assessments by their teachers in educational settings. Such assessments, while not always categorized as conventional tests, can have significant implications on learning and progression. When developing language tests or considering the use of test scores, it is essential for language testers to consider the wide-ranging impact on all candidates, including those in more vulnerable positions.

Principles of Ethical Language Testing

This Code of Ethics is grounded in four foundational principles, each crafted to guide the professional conduct of ILTA members across diverse contexts. The structure of each principle is designed to ensure clarity and actionable guidance:

- **Core:** Each principle begins with a concise statement that encapsulates its core idea, establishing the fundamental ethical standard that members are expected to uphold.
- **Explanation:** Following the core statement, each principle includes an explanation that outlines the reasoning behind it. This section clarifies what is generally expected of language testers to comply with the principle, providing context and justification for its importance.
- **Specification:** Each principle is further expanded with a non-exhaustive list of responsibilities that detail specific behaviors and actions members should follow. This part translates the abstract elements of the principle into concrete practices, offering clear guidance on how to implement these ethical standards in daily professional activities.

By structuring each principle in this manner, we aim to provide ILTA members with a clear, comprehensive, and practical framework for understanding and applying the Code of Ethics in their professional lives.

Principle of Respect

Respect³ refers to the acknowledgment of the dignity and inherent worth of each test taker, regardless of their background, capabilities, or situation.

Ethical language testers demonstrate respect to all test takers. They provide each test taker with the best possible professional consideration and respect test takers' needs, values and cultures in the provision of their language testing service.

This principle includes (but is not limited to) the following responsibilities:

Awareness and education

- Educating oneself on hidden conceptual, social or theoretical biases and instances of discrimination that impact testing practices, with a commitment to continuous learning and self-reflection.
- Actively working to identify and reduce the impact of these biases in all aspects of language testing.

Linguistic and cultural inclusivity

- Ensuring that the language tested and elicited is authentic human language, reflecting genuine linguistic communication.
- Promoting the value and legitimacy of linguistic and cultural diversities, especially those of minority and marginalized groups, and incorporating them into testing practices.

³ *Respect* as it is defined here was the backbone of the first ILTA Code of Ethics and it is a central notion in ethical and religious traditions across the globe. It aligns with Kantian ethics, in its emphasis on treating individuals as ends in themselves, not merely as means to an end (Kant, 1785; Wood, 2008). It also reflects principles in Confucianism, which values respecting and acknowledging each individual's role and status (Ames & Rosemont, 2010), and Ubuntu philosophy, which sees individuals as interconnected, deserving acknowledgment and dignity (Metz, 2011).

- Using respectful language and terminology when referring to and interacting with test takers, ensuring that no group is marginalized through testing language or content.

Fairness and accessibility

- Developing inclusive conceptual frameworks that recognize the diverse needs and backgrounds of test takers.
- Ensuring appropriate accommodations are provided for test takers with specific needs, promoting equal access and opportunity for all.

Principle of Beneficence

Beneficence⁴ emphasizes the ethical obligation to act in the best interest of the test takers, promoting their welfare and avoiding harm.

Ethical language testers acknowledge that test takers are their primary responsibility. They will not work to create language testing practices that knowingly and avoidably harm the human rights of test takers, or work to create language testing practices that impact the societal possibilities of test takers, without a solid empirical motivation for doing so.

This principle includes (but is not limited to) the following responsibilities:

Relevance and authenticity

- Ensuring that language testing practices are relevant to the profiles, needs, and goals of test takers, reflect the nature of authentic human communication, and are used appropriately in relevant contexts.
- Contextualizing tests in settings and communities of relevance to test takers, ensuring the tests reflect the social and cultural environments of the test takers.

Educational impact and empowerment

- Promoting positive washback by empowering language learners and educators through the accessibility of professional knowledge and resources.
- Supporting diverse language varieties, norms, and practices, ensuring language tests acknowledge and promote linguistic diversity and cultural inclusivity.

Political and social awareness

- Demonstrating awareness of the political and social implications of language testing, recognizing the broader societal impact of tests and how they can shape opportunities, rights, and societal structures.
- Collaborating with stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, and community representatives, to ensure testing practices are culturally and contextually relevant.
- Ensuring testing practices align with global ethical standards while being sensitive to local cultural, legal, and social contexts, ensuring that tests respect the specific needs and values of the communities in which they are applied.

⁴ *Beneficence* in this definition includes the duty of non-maleficence. In some fields of applied ethics the duty to do good and the duty to avoid harm are dealt with separately (Jansen, 2022). Beneficence has been discussed in the context of ethical language testing (Kunnan, 2018) and education (O'Donoghue, 2023), as well as in ethical theory. The principle of beneficence resonates with the capability approach, which stresses the moral duty of not denying individuals the opportunity of pursuing valued goals that are in line with their capabilities and interests (Nussbaum, 2002; Sen, 1993). It also reflects Buddhist ethics, which emphasize compassion and the avoidance of harm (King, 2005; Pandit, 2021) and Islamic applied ethics, which mandate acting in others' best interests to promote welfare and prevent harm (Mustafa, 2014).

Principle of Professional Integrity

Professional Integrity⁵ relates to the conduct of individuals and organizations engaged in language testing. It encompasses a commitment to honesty, fairness, transparency, and ethical practices throughout all aspects of test design, administration, and use.

In their work, ethical language testers show adherence to high ethical standards in professional behavior, decision-making, and the execution of all testing-related duties, thereby demonstrating scientific integrity, accountability, transparency and confidentiality. Language testers should not engage in testing practices that directly or indirectly support organizations that seek to limit the rights of others or engage in harmful actions against civilians. Such involvement is always unethical, and testers should exercise their professional judgment to avoid participation in such activities.

This principle includes (but is not limited to) the following responsibilities:

Professional knowledge and development

- Continuing to develop professional knowledge, including staying updated on new methodologies, technologies, and ethical issues in language testing.
- Providing training to test (score) users on appropriate, validated uses of tests.

Data integrity and transparency

- Ensuring sound data analysis and responsible interpretation of results, and reporting truthfully on all aspects of assessment design, including test quality.
- Providing transparency on the use of scales and concordance tables, especially for proprietary scales.
- Reporting conflicts of interest and ensuring openness about all lobbying activities.

Confidentiality and data handling

- Maintaining test taker confidentiality, including sharing candidate data only with designated parties and in accordance with local laws.
- Providing anonymized data for research purposes, with the consent of test takers and in accordance with local laws.

Ethical use and marketing of tests

- Actively reducing test misuse by providing clear information on appropriate test uses.
- In marketing testing instruments, avoiding to sell or market tests for uses for which they have not been validated.

Responsibility and accountability

- Taking responsibility for the consequences of professional decisions, ensuring they are made in the best interest of test takers and the broader community.
- Fostering collaboration and open communication with peers, stakeholders, and test users to ensure ethical testing practices.
- Regularly reviewing and revising testing practices in the light of new ethical challenges.
- Ensuring that the use of AI and technology is sustainable and that environmental impacts are justifiable.

⁵ *Professional integrity* is a staple of professional ethical codes. Philosophically, it can be seen through the lens of Rawlsian thinking, in its emphasis on fairness and institutional justice (Rawls, 2001). It also reflects Islamic principles of integrity and accountability, which emphasize fairness and honesty in all actions (Sachedina, 2011).

Principle of Technological Responsibility

Technological Responsibility⁶ refers to the ethical management and use of technology to ensure that it supports fair, accurate, and efficient testing processes. Ethical language testers embrace and manage technological advancements and innovations with diligence and foresight to uphold the integrity and fairness of language testing.

This principle includes (but is not limited to) the following responsibilities:

Ensuring authenticity and fairness

- Ensuring that language tests contain authentic human content that is human-produced and human-mediated, ensuring that test texts, passages, and items are generated from authentic human language.
- Utilizing diverse datasets in training AI systems to reflect a broad range of demographics and prevent biases, ensuring that technology supports fair and equitable testing for all.

Ethical management of AI and technology

- Ensuring that AI and other automated processes meet high technical standards and function as intended.
- Engaging in regular reviews of AI systems to ensure they meet ethical and legal standards, continually assessing and fine-tuning these systems.
- Reporting openly on AI's role in test development and scoring, promoting transparency in how AI impacts testing outcomes.

Transparency and Security

- Implementing AI and other technologies transparently and fairly, including:
 - Clear explanations of AI decision-making processes, making them understandable to non-experts.
 - Transparency about the limitations and influences on AI-made decisions.
 - Maintaining robust security measures to protect test taker information from breaches and misuse.

Promoting Digital Literacy and Stakeholder Engagement

- Promoting digital literacy and transparency among all stakeholders, ensuring that they understand how technologies are applied in language testing.
- Maintaining active engagement with stakeholders, including test takers, educators, and policymakers, to gather feedback and ensure that technological applications are culturally and contextually appropriate.

⁶ *Technological Responsibility* incorporates ethical concerns found in Rawlsian justice, now applied in the context of artificial intelligence and technology (Bay, 2023). It also parallels Confucian values concerning the appropriate use of tools and maintaining societal harmony through responsible actions (Ames & Rosemont, 2010).

Checklist for the Code of Ethics in Language Testing

The Code of Ethics is meant to be applicable in and adaptable to different contexts. To remedy a possible lack of specificity, the Code of Ethics provides a checklist for language testers to use as a roadmap.

General Compliance

- Are you familiar with the latest version of the Code of Ethics?
- Have you reviewed the ethical guidelines within the last year?
- Does your organization have designated personnel or a committee to oversee ethical matters?
- Are matters of ethical disagreement discussed with peers through conversations or papers?

Principle of Respect

- Are you doing the utmost to acknowledge the dignity and humanity of each test taker, regardless of their background, capabilities, or situation?
- Do you employ respectful language when referring to test stakeholders?
 - What could you improve in that regard?
 - Which steps are you taking to make those improvements?
- Have you conducted training on recognizing and mitigating hidden biases in the past year for test developers, item writers, raters, and other personnel?
- Are test designs and practices checked regularly for cultural sensitivity and inclusivity?
- Are the contexts for cultural sensitivity and inclusivity revisited at least annually?
- Are accommodations readily available and accessible for test takers with disabilities?

Principle of Beneficence

- Do you prioritize the best interest of test takers?
 - What could you improve in that regard?
 - Which steps are you taking to make those improvements?
- Are test designs based on the actual communication practices relevant to the test takers?
- Do you provide clear information on how test results can and cannot be used?
- Are efforts made to ensure that testing practices benefit language learners and educators alike?

Principle of Professional Integrity

- Are you doing the utmost to ensure honesty, fairness, and ethical practices in all aspects of the testing cycle?
 - What could you improve in that regard?
 - Which steps are you taking to make those improvements?
- Are test data analyzed with sound methodologies and reported accurately?
- Are confidentiality and data privacy upheld consistently?
- Is there a clear procedure for managing conflicts of interest in test design and administration?

Principle of Technological Responsibility

- Are you doing all you can to ensure ethical use of technology?
- Does test content reflect actual human language as used currently?
 - What could you improve in that regard?
 - Which steps are you taking to make those improvements?
- Are AI and other technologies used in testing clearly explained to all stakeholders?
- Do you conduct regular audits to ensure that technological systems comply with ethical and legal standards?
- Are security measures in place to protect test taker information from breaches?

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