

FOREIGN LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

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The following discussion will guide readers to mainstream scholarship in the assessment of foreign language education and will add new information on two active organizations in foreign language assessment, the Accrediting Council of Continuing Education and Training (ACCET) and Educational Testing Service (ETS).

The U.S. Department of Education, in classifying teachers who majored or minored in modern foreign languages, lists "French, German, Latin, Russian, Spanish, other foreign languages, foreign language education, bilingual education, English as a second language" (The Condition of Education 1996, 300). That definition should help begin the discussion of foreign language assessment. Those of us who work with foreign languages have grown accustomed, especially, to the inclusion of English (as a second or as a foreign language), but still meet enough resistance that its inclusion requires articulation.

The assessment of foreign language education takes at least three forms: assessment of trends in the number of students enrolled in foreign languages; assessment of standards of curriculum; and assessment of learner proficiency.

ASSESSMENT OF ENROLLMENT TRENDS

In 1948, 5,602,000 secondary students (grades 9 to 12) in the United States enrolled in foreign languages. These languages included ancient Greek--one of those "other foreign languages."

In 1976 the number of enrolled students in foreign languages almost tripled, to 14,314,000. In 1990 that number dropped back to 11,338,000. Also, in 1990 the average public high school graduate had completed less than two years of foreign language instruction (Digest of Education Statistics 1996, 69, 132).

At the post-secondary level, 418,000 students received Associate degrees in foreign languages in 1988; in 1992 that number increased slightly to 433,000; but in 1993 dropped down to 358. In 1994, 14,378,000 students received Bachelor's degrees in foreign languages; 3,288,000 received Master's Degrees, and 355,000 received Doctor's degrees (Digest of Education Statistics 1996, 255, 257, 261).

One can, of course, draw numerous assessments from these figures. The assessment that most likely characterizes foreign language education in the United States, however, lies in the heavy reliance upon post-secondary education. Exact parallels do not exist, but roughly speaking in 1990 a little more than eleven million students graduated from high school with an average of less than two years of foreign language; in 1993/1994 a little more than eighteen million students graduated from post-secondary institution with Associate, Bachelor, Master, or Doctorate degrees.

The Department of Education has drawn other assessments, based upon other data. In 1993-94, for example, roughly 85% of the high school students enrolled in foreign languages received their instruction from teachers who actually majored, minored, or were certified in the class subject (The Condition of Education 1996, 298).

In 1992, seven thousand high school students took Advanced Placement examinations in foreign languages; five thousand of those students received scores 3 or higher on those examinations. (Many colleges and universities accept scores of 3 or higher for college credit.) Also in 1992, more females than males took foreign language examinations (The Condition of Education 1993, 72).

Finally, in 1992 15% of college bound high school graduates had completed four years of a foreign language; more females than males took those four years of foreign language; more students from high socioeconomic families took two or more years of a foreign language than did students from low socioeconomic families; and at least one-third of the non-college bound graduates had taken at least two years of a foreign language (The Condition of Education 1994, 78).

Having assessed, albeit superficially, *who* is learning foreign languages, one obviously needs or wants to assess *what* aspects of foreign language they are learning.

ASSESSMENT OF CURRICULUM STANDARDS

Not until the 1980s did foreign language teachers effectively unite their efforts to standardize their programs. Well known among foreign language educators, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) initiated an active involvement in producing guidelines (Phillips 1981; Byrnes & Canale 1987). Individualized foreign language organizations soon followed with their own specific guidelines; typical were the American Association

of Intensive English Programs (AAIEP) and the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (Standards for Postsecondary Intensive English Programs (1990); TESOL Core Standards 1991).

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)

In 1989 a politically bi-partisan Education Summit initiated a national reform effort in U.S. education. As a result of that effort, the U.S. congress approved an National Education Goals Panel (NEGP). Unfortunately, NEGP's format did not include foreign language education. Acting quickly, ACTFL combined forces with the American Association of Teachers of French, The American Association of Teachers of German, and the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese. In 1993, this amalgamation of professional organizations convinced the NEGP to include foreign language education in its federal funding effort to develop national standards for elementary and secondary students (Lafayette and Draper 1996, 1-2).

In 1995, ACTFL introduced its completed standards at its annual meeting: "Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century" (Lafayette 1996, 211-219). Judith Liskin-Gasparro, an assistant professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Iowa, has thoughtfully attacked the problems of assessing these standards. Her observations echo those of many in the foreign language assessment field (see Assessment of Student Performance, below) that most assessment now has moved from rewarding knowledge of language structure to rewarding student performance of language.

In addition, however, she succinctly summarizes the real problems of assessment in the future:

As authentic assessment projects increase in number and are undertaken by larger and more diverse school districts, the administrative and technical issues . . . will have to be addressed. Districtwide and statewide assessment programs will have to incorporate a significant research component to meet the challenges posed by technical standards of validity, reliability, and fairness. In addition, research will be need on ways in which schools can make the most productive use of assessment information to improve instruction (Liskin-Gasparro 1996, 190).

Less, succinct, unfortunately, present-day assessment problems must muddle along with present realities. And the most obvious reality, unfortunately, lies in the present gap between guidelines and actual language programs.

Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET)

As startling as it may sound, only Intensive English Programs (IEPs) in post-secondary proprietary schools have documented goals and objectives for accrediting purposes. While numerous elementary, secondary, and post-secondary departments of language receive accreditation, none of the accrediting agencies specifically delineate the curriculum requirements for those departments.

The Department of Education officially "recognizes" about 200

accrediting agencies. Only one of those accrediting agencies, The Accrediting Council for Continuing Education and Training (ACCET), has strict guidelines for accrediting foreign language schools. Even though ACCET's accreditation includes all aspects of an institution--administration, management, personnel, and curriculum--ACCET isolated the curriculum of Intensive English Programs (IEPs) for specialized curriculum guidelines.

ACCET's impetus for this emphasis came from its membership. At the time, 38 of the 291 schools that had voluntarily joined ACCET specialized in IEPs. These schools needed accreditation, among other reasons, so that they could issue student visas to international students and/or so that their U.S. students could apply for government grants and loans.

Among the thirty-eight schools, three included a total of forty-four branch campuses: American Language Academy (twenty-three branches), EF International Language Schools (nine branches), and ELS Language Centers (twenty-two branches). In addition to the thirty-eight IEP-only schools, Berlitz International and Stanley H. Kaplan Educational Centers also included (or addressed the preparation for) IEPs in their curriculum. Berlitz had 80 branches, Kaplan 150.

In 1990, a three-person task force from ACCET solicited input not only from its members but also from leadership in the Teachers of English as a Second Official Language (TESOL) organization. In

addition to fifty ACCET members, seven TESOL members responded to the Task Force's Call-for-Comment. Included among the TESOL seven were a former TESOL president and TESOL's current executive secretary--both of whom later wrote unsolicited letters of support and congratulations when ACCET's specific IEP standards were adopted by the ACCET Commission.

ACCET's standards require that institutions offering IEP programs (1) specify communication skills for all sequential performance levels; (2) justify its student and instructor ratios in all classes; (3) document the relationship between all instructional materials and their sequential performance levels; (4) use valid and reliable (not in-house) instruments for both initial and exit assessment of student proficiency; (5) use interactive teaching strategies that recognize various modalities of learning (i.e., visual, audio, and kinesthetic); (6) demonstrate sensitivity to the particular cultural protocol of their clientele; (7) hire only faculty with at least a Bachelor degree, or equivalent, with demonstrated competency in instructional methodology as defined by the ESOL guidelines chosen by the institution (most institutions choose either TESOL or AAIEP guidelines); and (8) conduct timely continuing education and in-service training for its faculty (Field-Specific Goals and Objectives for IEPs 1991).

Because ACCET accredits only nondegree granting, postgraduate, proprietary schools, few educators know of (or have access to) its expertise. Encouraging to the profession, however, ACCET's

recognition of the practical problems of assessment, has implanted similar movements for accreditation among mainstream institutions such as AAIEP, TESOL; NAFSA: Association of International Educators, and the University Consortium of Intensive English Programs (Baird & Paladino 1994, 46; Harshbarger 1994, 46).

Having assessed *who* is learning foreign languages and *what* aspects of foreign language they are learning should provide us only with teasers to the real assessment problem in foreign language education--*how well* students are learning their languages.

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNER PROFICIENCY

Noting a major omission may, perhaps, provide a helpful beginning to the discussion of the assessment of learner proficiency.

As mentioned above, in the discussion of ACTFL's advocacy for the inclusion of foreign language programs at the national level, the U.S. Department of Education's attitude toward foreign languages still hurts more than helps, eliminates rather than invites, belittles rather than befriends. A second manifestation of this neglect lies in the absence of foreign languages in the current National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). This survey, under the auspices of the National Center for Education Statistics, "provides objective data on student performance at national and regional levels" in thirteen fields (National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), website). Those fields include the expected (reading, writing, and mathematics); they refreshing include the unexpected; (citizenship, art, music, computer competence, and

career and occupational development; but entirely the critically needed (foreign languages).

Terminology

One obvious source of confirmation of the cited need for foreign languages lies in the private sector's involvement in the "business" of foreign languages. Absolutely overwhelming in numbers, for example, testing instruments for foreign languages appear to spawn uncontrollably. Moreover, the involvement in foreign language instruction has long existed. In 1978, for example, the National Institute of Education contracted for a bibliography of testing instruments for bilingual education purposes only. Even that specialized bibliography, now two decades old, contains more than five hundred instruments (Pletcher, Locks, Reynolds, & Sisson, 1978).

Excellent explanations of procedures for utilizing these and more recent instruments, as well as for developing new ones, exist within most standard textbooks--even those randomly selected from one's own book shelves (Allen & Valette 1977; Brown 1987, 1994; Cohen 1991; Finocchiaro 1974; Lado 1961; Mackey 1965; Pimsleur 1966; Richard-Amato 1996).

Beware, however. The technical jargon in these explanations, while comfortable to those of us who have used it for several decades, takes its toll on neophytes: jargon such as achievement tests, analytic scoring, aptitude, authenticity, diagnostic tests, discrete items, cloze procedures, competence, construct validity, content validity, criterion referencing, holistic scoring, (in)direct

testing, integrative testing, norm-referencing, performance checklists, portfolios, practicality, proficiency tests, reliability, scoring, washback.

Fortunately one needs to be neither a veteran nor a neophyte to garner an initial understanding of the current status of foreign language proficiency assessment. Summaries abound.

A Summary of a Summary of Some Summaries

In 1991 TESOL celebrated its twenty-fifth birthday. An international professional organization for educators concerned both with the teaching of English as a second language and with the teaching of English as a foreign language, TESOL celebrated in part by publishing in their four-volume journal *TESOL Quarterly* a series of articles that combined "state-of-the-art discussions with reports of exploratory studies" (Silberstein 1991, 565).

The last of the journal's two dozen articles, "What Does Language Testing Have to Offer?," by Lyle Bachman, presents an excellent summary of contemporary foreign language assessment research (Bachman 1991, 671-704). (Part of the strength of Bachman's article lies in his opening summary of four other "state-of-the-art" essays--written by J.C. Alderson, 1991; by P. Skehan, 1988, 1989, 1991, and by Bachman himself, 1990.

Summarizing a summary of four summaries, as dangerous as the enterprise appears, does lead to one irrefutable conclusion: the assessment of a learner's proficiency in foreign language learning used to focus upon the learner's *understanding of the formal,*

linguistic, properties of language--its grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. At present, however, the assessment focuses upon the learner's *communicating through* the language.

Assessing communication skills rather than language knowledge, according to Bachman, has taken two different approaches: the "communicative" and the "AEI" (Bachman 1991, 678). (The acronym AEI derives from combining the A from the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages with the E from Educational Testing Service with the I from Interagency Language Roundtable.)

On one side, the communicative approach gains its impetus from language teaching; the approach requires its users to integrate a variety of tasks. On the other side, the AEI approach gains its impetus from oral interviews; it requires its users to show their proficiency through a solitary task. Bachman prefers the communicative approach, but gives due notice of the widespread use of AEI (Bachman 1991, 679). An excellent introduction to the AEI approach exists in P. Lowe, Jr.'s "The unassimilated history" (Lowe 1988, 10-14).

The work of Bachman, Alderson, Skehan and their cohorts focuses on theoretical aspects of foreign language assessment. For those of us who will be assessing our students' foreign language ability during the next several years, however, the movement from assessing knowledge of structure to assessing knowledge of implementation has indeed materialized in the practical workings of a variety of organizations. Among such organizations, the already mentioned

ACTFL, TESOL, and ACCET have taken an active role. Perhaps the most publicized organization, however, is Educational Testing Service (ETS).

Educational Testing Service (ETS)

In his 1991 summary of the state-of-the art in the research of language assessment, Lyle Bachman attacks the AEI (the oral interview) approach:

"This approach to oral language assessment has been criticized by both linguists and applied linguists, including language testers and language teachers, on a number of grounds. Nevertheless, the approach and ability levels defined have been widely accepted as a standard for assessing oral proficiency in a foreign language in the U.S. . . . (Bachman 1991, 678).

As mentioned above, Educational Testing Service (ETS) joined two other testing organizations in developing the AEI. Whether one agrees with Bachman (and the seven other scholars he cites to back his case) or disagrees, Bachman is disagreeing with a specific testing procedure, AEI; he is not attacking ETS. Other scholars most certainly have.

Most of the U.S. public knows well ETS's involvement in Advanced Placement examinations in French, Latin, German, Spanish, English language, and English literature; in English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL); and in the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT)--especially the SAT II-writing.

In all of its testing, ETS assumes the existence of formal, standard varieties of language. Theoretical linguists tend to dismiss the actual existence of such "varieties," thus Noam Chomsky's famous dismissal:

"Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-hearer, in a completely homogenous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance (Chomsky 1965, 3).

Nonetheless descriptive linguists, sociolinguists, and applied linguists (such as Bachman) have addressed actual language--as it appears to real speaker-hearers, in heterogeneous speech-communities, knowing the language less than perfectly. Most of us, in fact, have accepted David DeCamp's argument that real speech communities contain "continuums" from uneducated conversation to formal, written varieties. We also accept his argument that the continuum consists of minimally varying "lects," [varieties] that can be mathematically defined by implicational (socially unique) scales (DeCamp 1973).

Between 1979 and 1983, the existence of Standard English on such a continuum produced a linguistically cutaneous debate. While the debate concentrated on English, the arguments certainly applied

to the existence of any standard in any language. Found in the pages of the National Council of Teacher's journal *College English*, the debate centered around the problem of expertise--who knew more about standard written English, college composition teachers or ETS? (Rouse 1979, 1-12; Hilgers 1979, 324-329; Wolk 1979, 449-460; Odell and Cooper 1980, 44-58; Clark 1980, 217-227; Foster 1981, 80-82; Wolk 1981, 82-83; White & Thomas, 1981, 276-283; Vopat 1981, 285-292; Modu and Wimmers 1981, 609-629; Greenberg 1981, 743-745; Clark 1981, 744-745; Main 1982, 195-200; Pelton 1982, 200; Smith 1982, 201; Vopat 1982b, 201-207; Matalene 1982, 368-381; Vopat1982a, 532-539; Wimmers 1982, 539-540; Wicke 1982, 540-541; Vopat 1982b, 541-543; Tucker 1982, 543-544; Matalene 1983, 415; and White 1983, 414-415. While this particular controversy eventually gave way to other interests, it still typifies the centrality of language assessment, at least among college composition teachers. Moreover the controversy typifies the fulcrum that ETS sustains in language assessment, even today.

One reason for ETS's ability to survive all the scrutiny it receives lies, simply, in its success at language assessment. Using a combination of discrete item recognition and language production, either oral or written, ETS examinations successfully assesses the "old" ability to recognize language structure with the "new" assessment of communication.

The multiple choice questions about Standard English usage found in such ETS examinations as the GED, the SAT (with or without essay),

and the English Achievement all undergo extensive item analysis.

The analysis begins with pretesting. Either an item is included, but not scored, in an actual test or it is included in a set of items sent to college firstyear students for the specific purpose of pretesting. Two purposes are served by this pretesting: (1) the detection of flaws in the items themselves and (2) the assignment of degree of difficulty.

Flaws include mistaken keying of answers, printing errors, unforeseen ambiguity (in directions, samples, or keys), or changes in keying due to the recentness of real world happenings (as the creation of the Republics of Czech and Slovakia, dating the word Czechoslovakia).

Statistics on degrees of difficulty are computed in two ways. Obtaining the percentage of the tested group that answered an item correctly provides the easiest statistic. Accounting for items skipped in a test (skipped because it was too difficult? or skipped because of error) as opposed to items not reached because of lack of time produces a sophisticated statistic called a delta (Hecht & Swineford 1981).

One can draw two conclusions from this sophisticated type of pretesting: (1) changing the wording of a sentence often changes the degree of difficulty, the delta, and (2) degrees of difficulty are, indeed, measurable. For those who like to quarrel, the statistical methods used to compute both the percentages of usage

and the delta have been public for years (Bullock 1978).

A look at thirty years of ETS field testing and then actually using literally thousands of bits and pieces of Standard English reveals a measurable continuum of English--DeCamp's "lects." Already the largest data base in the world, it grows larger year by year. And each year thousands upon thousands of secondary and post-secondary students from virtually every part of the United States furnish undeniable evidence of actual language usage.

The continuum begins with the items that can be tested at a statistically relevant level for students taking Graduate Equivalency Degrees--basic High School English requirements. Standard English for these students includes spelling (ten basic categories, from variant symbols for one sound to plural endings on nouns); capitalization (thirteen categories); punctuation (nineteen categories); and usage and sentence structure (thirty-seven categories) (GED specifications 1978).

The next variety, or lect, in the continuum exists in the SAT examination. So well have these students learned the importance of spelling, capitalization, and punctuation that ETS has found it wisest not to test for such items--except for semicolons after certain conjunctions, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and comma splices (Problems not tested in TSWE 1981).

A third variety in the continuum exists in the English Achievement examinations. The list of thirty-seven categories within usage and sentence structure--used both by the GED and the

SAT--shrinks considerably. The list shrinks because nationwide, the Achievement students know, collectively and consistently, certain items such as the difference between *adapt* and *adopt*; *its* and *it's*; *each other* and *one another*; *figuratively* and *literally*, *precede* and *proceed* (Problems not tested in ECT Achievement Examinations 1981).

The ETS data used for this study were gathered in the summer of 1982. Since that time, ETS has opened its files for other scholars to scrutinize. And welcomes the scholarly scrutiny.

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