

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE TESTING IN SUPPORTING MULTILINGUALISM

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1. Testing and multilingualism: friends or foes?

The most popular language tests, those which are marketed by the big language testing industries, are monolingual projects, with a vested interest to remain so. They are the tests that classroom language teachers are taught how to make as exclusively monolingual products and the exam papers of the international exam batteries always constructed as monolingual instruments, intended to measure test-takers' language competence or performance in a *single* language.

There is, of course, a very sound reason for the profound monolingualism of the international testing enterprise. The purpose of tests and exam papers is to measure what is taught, to assess knowledge and skills considered to be of value in language programmes. That is to say, since language education programmes in Europe are still built around the 'native speaker' competence ideology –and indeed they are–, it is only natural that language exam papers and tests be developed to assess linguistic competence measured against the 'ideal native speaker'. This is why assessment criteria of standardised language tests, in particular, commonly focus on vocabulary range, vocabulary control, ability to produce grammatically accurate speech and writing, and skills to understand information directly or indirectly stated.

Teaching and testing are not two sides of a single coin, in the sense that teaching does not necessarily result in learning, and learning does not necessarily require teaching. Yet, there is an interdependency between the two, since the most common function of tests is to measure the outcome of teaching. Therefore, it is only logical that the aims of teaching programmes should change so that testing changes can follow. Of course, it is also true that tests can bring about changes to teaching (especially when high stakes exams are involved), because of the backwash effect that tests are known to have (Shohamy et al., 1996).

Given that teaching and testing are mutually supporting, it is only natural that we expect the aims of both to change focus. Both should shift attention from a monolingual to a *plurilingual* paradigm. To agree with the authors of the infamous CEFR, i.e., the *Common European Framework of Reference for Language* (2001: 4):

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... the aim of language education [should be] profoundly modified. It [should] no longer be seen as simply to achieve 'mastery' of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the 'ideal native speaker' as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim [should be] to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place. This implies, of course, that the languages offered in educational institutions should be diversified and students given the opportunity to develop a *plurilingual competence*.² Furthermore, once it is recognised that language learning is a lifelong task, the development of a young person's motivation, skill and confidence in facing new language experience out of school comes to be of central importance. The responsibilities of educational authorities, qualifying examining bodies and teachers cannot simply be confined to the attainment of a given level of proficiency in a particular language at a particular moment in time, important though that undoubtedly is.

In further agreement with the authors of the CEFR (ibid), "the implications of such a shift have not yet been worked out and they have most certainly not been translated into action in either language education or language testing." The tools produced by the Council of Europe, such as the European Language Portfolio (ELP), are constructed in hope that their use will facilitate the promotion of plurilingualism as it "provides a format in which language learning and intercultural experiences of the most diverse kinds can be recorded and formally recognised" (ibid). Likewise, the CEFR itself is supposed to be used by language professionals as a tool for plurilingual education and competence assessment by helping language practitioners "specify objectives and describe achievements of the most diverse kinds in accordance with the varying needs, characteristics and resources of learners" (ibid: 5).

Despite the noble aim of the Modern Language Division of the Council of Europe (authors of the CEFR), so far the CEFR has chiefly been used for the validation and endorsement of the tests produced by international exam conglomerates. In practice, the CEFR has rarely served as a tool for the promotion of multilingualism or the enhancement of plurilingualism. This, however, should in no way belittle its significant role in testing. It has indeed provided objective criteria (which warrant further investigation) for describing different levels of language proficiency that facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications gained in different learning contexts, hopefully aiding European mobility.

The European goal of a truly multilingual topos is still unfulfilled and education has a key role to play, as we rethink language programmes and language testing enterprises, turning attention to the development and assessment of literacies required in an increasingly

² The emphasis of the term is mine, to mark the fact that the term 'plurilingualism' is used by the CEFR as distinct from the term 'multilingualism'. The CEFR authors (ibid) point out that whereas 'multilingualism' is used to refer to a variety of languages co-existing in a social context or in the repertoire of a language user, *plurilingualism* refers to languages users who have what I call a 'multilingual ethos of communication' (Dendrinos, 2004); that is, language users who do not keep the languages they know speakers he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact.

globalised world, with its diversity of communication technologies and its multilingual contexts in which European citizens operate on a daily level. It is imperative that we look closely at the multimodality of the world in which we have to survive –a world in which multiple modes of meaning are developed, expressed and obtained through the mass media, multimedia, electronic hypermedia, etc. We need to look at the new type of literacy/ies demanded of us –a kind of *multiliteracy* or rather of *multiliteracies*, which require new decoding competencies and skills from today's and tomorrow's citizens, enabling them to navigate though and interpret a variety of media.

2. The current state of affairs

Language testing is a big industry in Europe, which has been exporting language testing products among and beyond its member states, just as it has been exporting its languages in the form of merchandise and its language services as commodities for many decades. This testing industry sells its produce for the big languages, especially English, but also German, French, Spanish and Italian. Language exams for certification in these languages are available through exam batteries developed for a single language, in a monolingual manner, because to involve a language, other than the target one, would mean less profit given that the tests could not be sold as international products. Since then these testing products do not involve any adjustments to the cultural, linguistic, or other needs of particular markets, it is common practice that the language exams are developed by those who 'rightfully own' the language in question, and it is in fact these testers that organisations like ALTE (Association of Language Testers of Europe) accept for membership. That is, British testers are the legal owners and therefore testers of English (e.g. Cambridge ESOL), Spanish testers for Spanish (Instituto Cervantes), French testers for French (Alliance Française), and so on. It is only in more recent years that localised exam batteries are developed for languages other than one's own. Two cases in point are the Finnish and the Greek national language exams for certification, required as work qualification (hiring, promotion). The Finnish national language exams also include Finnish language tests required for citizenship, which other member states are also beginning to demand. There are also an increasing number of tests, especially in the 'big' languages, to certify academic proficiency in the home language of a country where someone wishes to carry out university studies. None of these tests however are developed to measure anything else than the test-takers' monolingual/ monocultural skills and awareness. The same is true of diagnostic, adaptive e-tests, self-assessment techniques and feedback systems, increasingly available, especially for the 'big' languages.

Other, alternative forms of language testing are rare but there is an increasing number of educational and work-related institutions which use alternative forms of assessment, including the ELP mentioned earlier.

3. Challenges and recommendations

As has become obvious from the two sections above, the European language testing industry offers services and is serviced by the 'big' languages, leaving the 'smaller' ones unattended. This has serious repercussions. If people cannot be certified for their language competence, they cannot be credited for their knowledge. This knowledge is in some way socially delegitimated. Therefore, the first challenge in Europe is to create conditions which provide opportunities for people to be tested and credited for the competences they do have in different languages. One way of achieving this goal is to facilitate the development of localised exam batteries which cater to the needs of the local linguistic job markets. Such samples are now available in few countries in Europe –the Finnish and Greek example already mentioned, there are also interesting ideas by the Dutch testing organisation CITO, and a few others which seem to respond more readily to social language needs rather than aim primarily on symbolic and financial profit.

The second and most serious challenge is to create incentives for the development of examination batteries which test and treat equally a variety of languages, in a comparable manner. Again, localised language exam batteries could perhaps contribute to achieving this goal, as such projects are much more likely to be concerned with the use of language(s) in different social contexts rather than focus on their language commodity as an autonomous meaning system, as international exam batteries have to be.

Thirdly, but perhaps the most challenging endeavour of all is to shift from monolingual to plurilingual paradigms in language testing and teaching. That is, a paradigm which has its basis on a view of the languages and cultures that people experience in their immediate and wider environment not as compartmentalised but as meaning-making, semiotic systems, interrelated to one another. In a paradigm such as this, there is language switching, 'translanguaging',³ drawing upon lexical items and phrases from a variety of contexts and languages; there is also use of alternative forms of expression in different languages or language varieties, exploitation of inter-comprehension, utilisation of paralinguistic features (e.g. facial expressions and gesture), and generally optimum use of various modes of communication to make socially situated meanings. In this paradigm, where people learn to make maximum use of all their linguistic resources so that they can resort to different aspects of linguistic knowledges and competences to achieve effective communication in a given situational context, cultural and linguistic mediators have a most valuable function. In the absence of a mediator, such individuals may nevertheless achieve some degree of communication by activating their whole communicative repertoire.

³ Translanguaging is defined by Baker (2001: 292) as the "concurrent use of two languages, which may involve random switching to a more justifiable purposeful use of each language, varying the language of input and output in a lesson. Garcia (2009) defines the term as sense-making bilingual practices from the speaker's perspective, rather than from a language perspective (as code-switching has been viewed). Moreover, she explains that it's a *bilingual* speaker's perspective, and not from a monolingual or monoglossic perspective. It includes all student or teacher use of these bilingual/multiple discursive practices as 'sense-making' of learning or teaching in multilingual classrooms.

Mediation, understood as extracting information from a source text in one language and relaying aspects of it in another for a specific purpose, is an important cultural activity in our contemporary multilingual contexts (Dendrinos, 2006). However, mediation skills and strategies have not found a principal spot in language teaching programmes or international examination batteries, for reasons which are again related to the monolingual practices of European language teaching and testing. This is why, although mediation is included in the CEFR (ibid: 87-88, 99), it has not been possible to come up with illustrative scale descriptors of mediating competence. The only examination battery in Europe which measures test-takers' performance in written and spoken mediation is the KPG, the Greek national foreign languages examination system, which is mentioned below as a best practice example.

There are many other challenges if we begin to view teaching and testing within a framework of multilingualism and we should perhaps add multiculturalism. There is the question of teaching/learning materials and test content not as artifacts for cultural indoctrination but as cultural products to raise and measure intercultural awareness. Of course, this means creating projects where such efforts would be valued. If language materials publishing and test preparation is not given incentives to change, the free market is bound to reproduce the dominant ideology which has kept a fertile ground for monolingualism in the foreign language business.

Finally, where language teaching and testing is concerned, one additional great challenge is to collaborate on projects that would help the calibration of language competence descriptors on the basis of the performance of test-takers across Europe, and by extension to help make the CEFR an even more useful tool that it is now.

4. Testing research

Research in testing principally involves issues of validity and reliability, how best to test what it is that is taught or learnt one way or another and how to assess performance in the fairest way possible, how to develop reliable and easy-to-use rating grids. Electronic testing has recently occupied an important chunk of researcher's time though the main concern here is automatisisation and efficiency. There has been limited concern with the effects of tests, testers' and test-takers' attitudes and very little critical research around testing. There is even less attention paid to how different testing systems construe cultural reality, the testing subject, etc., which is an area which would warrant investigation, as would research into mediation practices and types of literacies required for and developed for different tests.

Given the power that tests have (cf. Shohamy, 2001) the most interesting project to be developed in the near future is how to promote multilingualism but also plurilingualism through testing. A European network for multilingualism testing research might be a most valuable project.

5. Conclusions and best practice examples

Assessment of language competence may well be served through means and tools other than tests, such as the ELP. However, given the impact of tests, especially high-stakes national or international standardised formal examination batteries, it is important to reconsider their monolingual orientation.

A best practice example is the Greek national foreign language examinations system (see Annex), which at the moment offers exams in six European languages. Viewing all languages as equal, the testing specifications are the same across the languages which are tested. Following the six level scale of language competence of the CEFR, it is the only high-stakes exam battery which does not abide by the monolingual and monocultural 'rules' of the international exam batteries. Rather than focusing on each language and its formal properties, tests are designed with a focus on the use of language in contexts that the language user may be familiar with. It takes an intercultural perspective and measures mediation competence.

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Annex: BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLE

Project Title:

KPG: NATIONAL EXAMS FOR THE (GREEK) STATE CERTIFICATE OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

<p>Administrative organisation: The Greek Ministry of Education and Lifelong Learning is responsible for the administration of the National Exams for the State Certificate of Language Proficiency, which is known as KPG (a Greek acronym). The examination board, composed of seven language testing experts, is appointed by the Minister of Education.</p> <p>Partners: Foreign Language Departments of the Universities of Athens and Thessaloniki are responsible for preparing the standardised exams. They build up the test and item banks and carry out extended research on related issues.</p> <p>Languages: The languages involved in the KPG project presently are: <i>English, French, German, Italian, Spanish and Turkish.</i></p>	<p>Project Location(s): The project is being carried out in Athens and Thessaloniki.</p> <p>Duration: 2002 to the present.</p>
<p>Please specify the Target Group(s) of the project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The KPG is targeted to Greek and other citizens living, studying and/or working in Greece. • Constituting proficiency (rather than achievement) testing, the exams do not measure school gained knowledge, but language performance –regardless of where one learned or acquired the target language. • The A level KPG exams are designed for young learners • B level and C level exams are designed for adolescents and adults. 	<p>Topic / aims of Project:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bearing in mind that “in a multicultural Europe, with its linguistic diversity and variety of institutions, it is essential for citizens to have language qualifications which are recognised by all,” a new suite of national exams, known as KPG, was developed, leading to the certification of different levels of language proficiency in various European languages. This suite has been built taking into account the <i>Common European Framework of Reference for Languages</i>, respecting that it provides a common basis for the recognition of qualifications in all member states. Certification occurs on the scale set by the Council of Europe. • Recognising the importance of languages, and believing that degrees of literacy in several languages help us address the challenges of globalisation, increased mobility and immigration, in this new suite of language exams, all languages are tested and assessed on the basis of common specifications and test formats. • Believing that certified language proficiency is essential for employability and that bi-, tri- or plurilinguals, acting as intercultural mediators, are a precious asset to Europe, the exams lead to low-cost language proficiency certification (lower than in any international exam), in <i>various</i> languages (not just those which can afford to develop international exams).
<p>Financing:</p> <p>By the Greek state and the Social European Fund.</p>	<p>Websites:</p> <p>http://www.kpg.ypepth.gr/</p> <p>http://rcel.enl.uoa.gr/rcel/</p>
<p>Contact address(es):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning & Religious Affairs, Directorate for the Certification of Language Proficiency, 37 Andrea Papandreou Street, GR – 151 80 Maroussi, Athens 2) National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, School of Philosophy, University Campus 	

<p>Zographou, GR 15784, Athens</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Faculty of English Studies ▪ Faculty of German Studies ▪ Faculty of Spanish Studies ▪ Faculty of Turkish and Asian Studies <p>3) Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, School of Philosophy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Faculty of French Studies ▪ Faculty of Italian Studies 	
<p>Main reason(s) why this project is a “best practice” example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It has led to the development of a system which: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ endorses and supports multilingualism and plurilingual citizenry ▪ is concerned with the <i>language user</i> – rather than the language itself (as international exams unavoidably are). • Because of the project, a global system has been created; i.e., a system that takes into account local needs, global conditions of knowledge and production, and international concerns regarding testing and assessment. • It has facilitated conditions so as to include an innovative aspect of intercultural communication, for the KPG is the only language exam battery to date which tests <i>mediation</i> performance; performance that entails relaying messages from one language to another but that is distinct from translation. Operating as a mediator between cultures, languages, discourses and texts requires strategies not necessarily taught but required for effective citizenry in multicultural and multilingual societies. • The project has offered possibilities for extended and systematic research on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the input and the output of the exams in the different languages tested through KPG so as to make reliable comparisons ▪ the profile of KPG candidates, their attitudes and opinions regarding test papers in each of the languages ▪ the quality of the oral test in English, the validity of speaking and mediation tasks, examiner attitudes toward the test and specific activities, and examiner conduct and communication strategies ▪ the quality of script evaluation, ways that script raters use evaluation criteria, sustainable inter-rater reliability, and characteristics of scripts which systematically cause serious problems in 	<p>Project description:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project has led to the development of the KPG exams, in which candidates between the ages of 10 to 70 (!) take part, wanting to be certified as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>Basic users</u> of a European language through an integrated A1+A2 level exam, whose purpose is to motivate young language learners to build their language learning skills and language testing strategies. ▪ <u>Independent users</u> of a European language through separate exams at levels B1 and B2. ▪ <u>Proficient users</u> of a language through separate exams at C1 level and soon also at C2 level. <p><u>The B and C level exams are for adults</u> needing to have qualifications for studies and/or employment inside or outside Greece. The tests measure performance on the basis of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reading comprehension and language awareness ▪ Writing production and written mediation ▪ Listening comprehension ▪ Oral production, spoken interaction and oral mediation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project has also involved among other actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The design of tools to measure test quality and effectiveness ▪ The development of candidate script corpora ▪ The development of tools and systems for the quantitative and qualitative analysis of data ▪ The development of different applications for the management of data and resources ▪ The systematic training of a total of 7.000 examiners in the different languages and about 600 script raters. <p>Project objectives:</p> <p>The socially sensitive objectives of the KPG exams are the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are affordable to everyone as the KPG does not aim at material profit or symbolic gain.

<p>inter-rater reliability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Also, it has created ground for academic research on issues such as the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The effect of text and reader variables on reading comprehension and the effect of listener audio text variables in the KPG exams ▪ Different world representations and ideologies in the reading texts of different exam batteries in English ▪ Interlocutor performance variability at different exam levels and in different KPG language exams ▪ Writing and listening task difficulty and the effect of task and assessment variables ▪ Mediation tasks and mediation performance by Greek users of English ▪ Source text regulated written mediation performance in the KPG exams resulting in hybrid formations ▪ Corpus-based research of text grammar in KPG candidates' scripts ▪ Investigating literacy requirements of reading and listening comprehension tasks in the KPG English and French exams ▪ Effective listening comprehension test-taking strategies in the KPG exams. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their point of reference is not the language as an autonomous meaning system but language use in particular social contexts in ways that are based on social needs and which are socially meaningful. • Founded on the view that all European languages are of equal value, they are treated as such. • They make full use of the literacies test takers have in (at least) two languages. • They promote the parallel use of languages and intercultural awareness.
<p>Sustainability:</p> <p><i>Is a continuation of the Project foreseen?</i></p> <p>Yes, the project will continue and, as the system develops, it is the intention of the Greek state to include standardised exams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • for more European languages • for different social groups 	<p>Give another good practice example you know of</p> <p>The Bilingual-Bicultural Programme for the Education of Muslim Children in Greece, with the motto MULTIPLICATION NOT DIVISION, which followed Action Line 1: Promotion of equality in accessing the labour market for all and especially for those in danger of social exclusion, Measure 1.1: Improvement of the conditions under which persons of special categories could integrate into the educational system, Action Category 1.1.1.a :</p>
<p>The follow-up Project will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development of integrated exams, so that the KPG is even more cost-effective both for the state and the candidates. • The development of adaptive tests to be taken on and off-line. • Tests which cater for candidates with special needs and particularly the hearing and the visually impaired. 	<p>Integration of children from target-groups -- Muslims, Roma, Returnees, Foreigners, and Ethnic Greeks from Abroad –into school, Activity 1.1.1: Integration of children with distinct cultural and language characteristics into the educational system.</p>