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978-0-521-16391-0 - Language Testing Matters: Investigating the Wider Social and Educational Impact of Assessment

Edited by Lynda Taylor and Cyril J. Weir

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# Language Testing Matters

Investigating the wider social and  
educational impact of assessment

Proceedings of the ALTE Cambridge Conference, April 2008

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**Edited by**

**Lynda Taylor**

Consultant

University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations

**and**

**Cyril J Weir**

Powdrill Professor in English Language Acquisition

University of Bedfordshire



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## Series Editors' note

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The 3rd International Conference of the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) was held in Cambridge in April 2008, hosted by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, a non-teaching department of the world-famous Cambridge University. This third conference built upon the success of two previous ALTE Conferences: the first held in Barcelona in July 2001, hosted by the Generalitat de Catalunya, on the theme of 'European Language Testing in a Global Context' to celebrate the European Year of Languages; the second in Berlin in May 2005, hosted by the Goethe-Institut, on the theme of 'Language Assessment in a Multilingual Context' to support the 50th Anniversary of the European Cultural Convention. Edited proceedings from both events were published as Volumes 18 and 27 in the now well-established and highly regarded *Studies in Language Testing* series.

The theme of ALTE's 3rd International Conference – 'The Social and Educational Impact of Assessment' – was particularly topical in 2008, given the level of public debate around the use of language tests in the context of migration and citizenship, higher education and employment. A key challenge for us all is to ensure that the tests we provide are not just accurate, reliable, transparent and fair, but that they are explicitly designed to have as positive an impact on society as possible.

The Cambridge conference formed part of the International Year of Languages 2008, announced by the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. As language issues are central to UNESCO's (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) mandate in education, science, social and human sciences, culture, communication and information, the organisation was named the lead agency in promoting this special year. UNESCO invited governments, United Nations organisations, civil society organisations, educational institutions, professional associations and all other stakeholders to increase their own activities to promote and protect all languages, particularly endangered languages, in all individual and collective contexts. As a non-governmental organisation (NGO) with special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, ALTE offered its 3rd international conference in support of the International Year of Languages.

ALTE 2008 was one of the largest language testing conferences ever to have taken place. Over 300 abstracts were presented for consideration by the panel from which over 150 papers were accepted. Well over 500 delegates

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attended from more than 50 countries around the world representing over 300 organisations. It was also a multilingual event, with presentations in five of the many different languages represented at the conference. The interest ALTE 2008 generated demonstrates the growing importance of language assessment in today's world as well as the increasing number of experts who are playing ever more important roles in policy making and implementation.

The conference organisers were particularly pleased to offer a forum on Language Testing, Migration and Social Inclusion, held under the auspices of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Mr Terry Davis. The forum focused on the work of European bodies, including the European Union and the Council of Europe, in relation to the integration and social inclusion of migrants and an exploration of intercultural dialogue. This contributed to the work programme of the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe and specifically its project on language policies and the integration of adult migrants. The conference also welcomed the European Commission Directorate General for Education and Culture to talk about the important work of the European Indicator of Language Competences and its context.

The ALTE Cambridge conference marked another important stage in ALTE's development since it was originally founded with eight members in 1990, primarily to work on common levels of proficiency and common standards for the language testing process. Over nearly two decades, the association has contributed to a wide range of important international projects, many of which were featured during this and previous conferences and which are described in the opening pages of the conference proceedings volumes. Membership of ALTE has grown to the present total of 31 members – including many of the world's leading assessment bodies – who between them represent the testing of 26 languages. Europe thrives on diversity and it is the need to respect and value this diversity while at the same time trying to find common ground that binds us together. The event in Cambridge was a great opportunity for all of us to participate in a conference that reflects the diversity of Europe and the importance we all place in languages, language learning, the certification of language competence and the significance of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in the development of plurilingualism and intercultural competences. But improving mutual understanding is equally important in the wider global context. The event in Cambridge was a gathering of assessment professionals focusing not only on professional matters in our field but also engaging positively in debate on language in a social, economic and political context. If our voices are to be heard then we need to participate positively. We also need the capacity to see things from a number of perspectives and in organising this conference, one of the main aims was to allow for the divergence of views, opinions and perceptions in order to help this process of building mutual understanding.

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ALTE provides a forum where assessment professionals can work together effectively and there are two particular projects where ALTE members have been working together effectively in recent years. The first is in relation to the survey of language competences in Europe. The survey was first mooted in March 2002, as part of a European Council strategy to ‘improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age’. Invitations to tender were issued in mid 2007 and SurveyLang, a consortium made up largely of ALTE members and led by Cambridge ESOL, was finally confirmed as the successful bidder in February 2008. The survey will provide information on the general level of foreign language knowledge (in five languages: Italian, French, German, Spanish and English) of the pupils in 32 Member States and other participating countries. It will provide strategic information to policy makers, teachers and learners in all surveyed countries and it is anticipated that the collected data from the survey will help policy makers, teachers and practitioners to take decisions about how to improve foreign language teaching methods and thus the performance of pupils in foreign languages. This is an enormously challenging but also potentially extremely useful project.

ALTE members are also working increasingly with national ministries of education to help provide high quality language assessment. The Lingua 2000 project in Italy was a highly successful example of this work some years ago when the Italian government made great use of international language certification to help in the learning and teaching of languages in Italian schools. More recently, ALTE members – the Cervantes Institute, the Goethe-Institut and Cambridge ESOL – have been working with the French Ministry of Education to provide language testing materials to international standards and linked to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

While seeking opportunities for effective collaboration and while seeking conformity to standards of good practice, respecting and understanding our differences is a key aspect of ALTE’s work. To advance these aims, ALTE has developed guidelines for the writing of test materials, ways of describing the content of examinations so that they can be compared more effectively. ALTE has also built a framework of examinations that allows users to see how the different exams relate to each other and, importantly, members of ALTE have defined a multilingual glossary of language testing terms (developed and published in 10 languages in the late 1990s and now available in numerous additional languages). For instance, the latest edition was published in Basque in 2007, clearly demonstrating the sustainability of ALTE’s work. Much of this work has been supported by funds provided by the European Commission through its Lingua programme, and much of it has been done in collaboration with the Council of Europe which has played and continues to play such a significant role in language policy in Europe and now through the

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CEFR far beyond. All of this work is available on the ALTE website or from individual members of ALTE.

ALTE published its first international code of practice for language testing in 1994 and much work on refining this concept and documenting principles of good practice took place in the 1990s. Between 2000 and 2002 ALTE set up a Code of Practice Working Group which developed a Quality Management System leading to a Quality Auditing System that was piloted in 2005 and 2006 and introduced in 2007. ALTE has now audited many of its members on at least one of the examinations they provide. As a consequence of these developments, membership of ALTE is now based on demonstrating, through the Auditing System, that an organisation's examinations do conform to internationally recognised systems in a transparent and open way.

ALTE is in the process of developing web forums in English, French, German and Spanish in the first instance and we anticipate that the number of language forums will increase over the next few years. Within these, members will have access to the ALTE network, training materials, publications and training courses offered by ALTE throughout Europe on a relatively frequent basis.

Most recently, ALTE has taken steps to widen participation in its activities by bringing in new categories of Institutional and Individual Affiliates, allowing a wider range of organisations and individuals to make a real contribution to the development of a truly international approach to language testing. One of ALTE's main aims is to share ideas and know-how. Events such as the 2008 ALTE Conference in Cambridge provide an ideal opportunity for language teaching and testing professionals from around the world to meet and to pool expertise, and to consider together how best to resolve some of the important challenges facing society today. Not surprisingly, plans are already well in hand for a 4th ALTE International Conference to be held in Krakow, Poland, in early July 2011.

A full listing of all the presentations given at the ALTE 2008 Conference can be found at the end of this volume. As will be apparent, the 20 conference papers presented here represent only a selection of the many excellent presentations made in Cambridge reflecting a wide range of topics and concerns; they provide a flavour of the key themes addressed at the conference. The Introduction to this volume by Lynda Taylor and Cyril J Weir helps to highlight and summarise for readers the various strands that resonated throughout the conference, and points to important implications for the language testing community.

Michael Milanovic  
Cyril J Weir  
April 2009