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978-0-521-77576-2 - Experimenting with Uncertainty: Essays in Honour of Alan Davies

Edited by C. Elder, A. Brown, E. Grove, K. Hill, N. Iwashita, T. Lumley, T. McNamara
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Section One

The contribution of Alan Davies

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[More information](#)

1 Alan Davies and British applied linguistics

Christopher Brumfit
University of Southampton

For many applied linguists Alan Davies is identified with 'Testing', and undoubtedly he has been for many years the major British theorist in this field. But it would be quite wrong to see him as a researcher exclusively in this area; on the contrary, within British applied linguistics he has been a major humanising influence across the whole discipline. His publications and conference papers range across topics as diverse as language in Quaker meetings, the role of the native speaker, teaching methods, and the politics of English.

He has been of course, at different times, chair and committee member of the British Association for Applied Linguistics, head of the oldest and most distinguished Department of Applied Linguistics in UK at the University of Edinburgh, editor of *Applied Linguistics*, and sometime secretary-general of AILA. As a contribution to the internal and external politics of British applied linguistics that is an outstanding record. But his contribution was distinguished as much by his manner as his matter; his particular style gave British applied linguistics much of its character: grounded partly on empirical and technical work, closely allied to the world role of English, but humane and contextualised within a broadly classical tradition.

My own first encounter with Alan typifies his approach. My first ever paper to a BAAL conference, in Edinburgh in 1974, addressed the subject of the relationship between applied linguistics and teachers of English as a first language in UK. I argued that an applied linguistics without central interest in such work was failing to address its most important questions, and that English teachers without a similar central interest in applied linguistics were failing to address the central issues in their subject. As I crept away from this nerve-racking initiation, Alan followed me. 'We'll never succeed, you know,' he said. 'However hard we try, we won't get them interested – English teachers are too suspicious and we are too tied to EFL.' A conversation developed, in which many of the themes of our subsequent meetings emerged. It was only many years later, after I had watched sympathetic questioning from the floor of many rough and ready papers from home and overseas students at BAAL conferences, that I realised how typical this was of Alan's style. First of all, he bothered to come and say something. Second, he

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[More information](#)*1 Alan Davies and British applied linguistics*

immediately included the new and unknown speaker in the community of applied linguists – ‘We’ll never succeed.’ Third, without being arrogant, it was clear he had been there before; he had thought about the same issues, and was anxious to continue the debate with anyone else concerned. Fourth, he was pursuing the interaction between academic matters and the socio-politics of applied linguistics activity. Fifth, he was mildly and deprecatingly pessimistic: applied linguistics could not offer grand and up-beat solutions to human problems. What we could do was try to be clearer about the nature of language, about where we stood as individuals, and about the role of language in society. If we did that, things just might be a little better than before.

Unlike most British applied linguists, Alan Davies came from a humanities and arts background rather than from modern languages. But (as he discusses in the preface to his 1991 book on *The Native Speaker in Applied Linguistics*) his Welsh background gave him an awareness of multilingualism – but of multilingualism attached to power. ‘My South Wales had been part of what in Ireland is called the Pale. It included most of Southern Glamorgan and Southern Pembroke and had been settled by Normans, later by Flemings and Huguenots and always by English speakers’ (p. vii). Note how resonant and how economical the ‘always’ is, and also how inclusive: it links his experience to those of his foreign students, of the receivers of English, those to whom it is done, rather than those who do it.

For in all his work, Alan retains the ambivalence which English-speaking applied linguists necessarily must have. Too individual and western to accept an inheritance of guilt from ancestors for whom he could not personally be held responsible, he none-the-less worries away at real issues of human ambition, personal choice, and language as an institution. His preface continues to point out how the Welsh learnt English, ‘very rarely the other way round’, how Welsh- and English-speaking groups intermarried and how Welsh declined ‘as all languages have in the path of a juggernaut like English’. But he then develops the argument with a careful consideration of the pros and cons of access to English, from the point of view of individual speakers and their families, and links the discussion to worldwide issues, concluding an exploration of personal identity in his own return (in his forties) to learn Welsh with ‘We all want to belong, we all want to be native speakers’ (p. viii).

The book which emerges from this preliminary, personal account, explores a wide range of psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic literature to clarify the concept of ‘native speaker’, demonstrating that there are indeed psycholinguistic differences between native and non-native speakers, but that sociolinguistically these are not significant. He concludes with the assertion that ‘if a non-native speaker wishes to pass as a native speaker and is so accepted then it is surely irrelevant if s/he shows differences in more and more refined tests of grammaticality’ (p. 166). For him, applied linguistics exists

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firmly in the social world, and the impact of language on that world is central to his conception of the discipline.

Since this book was published, there has been much more discussion of the 'native speaker' issue, most of which is angrier than Alan Davies' book and none of which is more thoughtful. But unlike many of his contemporaries, he has never been a polemicist. Even when, as with his work on testing, the implications have been ideologically highly contentious, he has tended to accept that there is a job to be done, to define the issues and carefully explore the implications, but to leave it to individuals to decide on the best path for them to follow. Indeed, as he indicates in another autobiographical preface (to *Principles of Language Testing*, 1990) he almost came in to his work on testing by accident, having started to work on an MA on African writing in English, but being diverted by a paid research post developing the English language proficiency test. And if this appears to reflect passivity rather than activity in career creation, it also draws attention to one of Alan's strengths. He is indeed typical of his time, caught up inexorably in the astonishing spread of English since the second world war, and providing throughout his career a commentary on the academic preoccupations of those who are being driven along by a force which they cannot entirely control.

But it is a humane and civilised commentary. Like many of his generation, he left university to teach in Africa, returned to Britain for further study and found himself pulled into the EFL/ESOL machine, as publishers and the British Council provided the bases for student funding and the dissemination of research work. Particularly through the British Council, he travelled widely, and his movements (up to and including his recent connection with Australia) reflect the shifting centres of English language/applied linguistic activity in the late twentieth-century world. With his predecessor at Edinburgh, Pit Corder, he maintained a civilising influence on developments in language teaching by commenting from a standpoint where values came primarily from outside the work environment. If Pit Corder had one big idea and Alan Davies had many, their influence was similar, for each provided ways of conceptualising the enterprise, but more importantly provided a tone of careful clarification of specific problems, with an emphasis on getting the ideas right, and a suspicion of dogma. Both would have acknowledged that they were lucky in their times and institutions, but the tradition to which both were central figures, in different generations, is a powerful legacy for Edinburgh, and British applied linguistics, to have provided for the world.

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[More information](#)

2 Ten years of the Language Testing Research Centre

Tim McNamara
University of Melbourne

The Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC) at the University of Melbourne was founded late in 1989, one of the fruits of the National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco 1987). Ten years on it is a good time to review the history of the establishment of the Centre and its subsequent achievements, and to consider Alan Davies' contribution to both.

The founding of the LTRC was a stroke of extraordinary good fortune. It is a very Australian story, a happy combination of historical circumstance, idealism and improbability. It is necessary to appreciate something of the distinctive history of applied linguistics in Australia to understand the circumstances of the creation of the LTRC. Applied linguistics established itself as an area of teaching and research later in Australia than in Britain, the United States or Canada. Moreover its origins lay in the teaching of foreign languages (what came in Australia to be called Languages Other Than English or LOTE) rather than in the teaching of English; this alone distinguishes Australian applied linguistics from its counterparts in the UK and the USA.

Why an LTRC at Melbourne? The Melbourne applied linguistics programme, like others in Australia, had only been recently established. It was the creation of Terry Quinn, whose background was in French, and who was at the time Director of the Horwood Language Centre at Melbourne. Quinn had helped found the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia with other colleagues in French language teaching in the 1970s, and became the most influential thinker in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s on the teaching of foreign and second languages. He was active and influential in government language policy in the 15 years of rapid social and cultural change following the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972. In this period he became a friend and mentor to Joe Lo Bianco, whose Master's thesis he supervised and with whom he interacted on key policy committees, and who subsequently became the leading Australian figure in language policy.

Although the origins of applied linguistics in Australia were in University foreign language teaching, the British tradition of applied linguistics was nevertheless a crucial intellectual influence. The first appointment to the Melbourne applied linguistics programme was Tim McNamara, a graduate of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Tim McNamara

the University of London Birkbeck MA, who had an interest in language testing. McNamara encouraged Quinn to use the presence of international experts on language testing at the AILA conference in Sydney 1987 as the basis for an invitational colloquium on language testing in Melbourne following AILA (McNamara 1988). One of those invited was the eminent British scholar and expert in language testing, Alan Davies. Quinn secured further funding for Alan to return as a Faculty Visitor for eight weeks in 1988. As the senior figure in British language testing, and someone who epitomised the British research tradition in Applied Linguistics, he seemed a very fitting visitor for a newly established programme with a burgeoning research focus in language testing.

Meanwhile, Lo Bianco's remarkable document, the *National Policy on Languages*, which appeared in 1987, ushered in an unprecedented era of generous government support for research in many areas of applied linguistics, particularly those to do with LOTE. This area encompassed both community languages (the languages of indigenous and recent immigrant communities) and languages of strategic significance for the country, including traditional European languages and the languages of Australia's neighbours and main trading partners, Indonesia, Japan, China and Korea.

One of the outcomes of Lo Bianco's document was to be the establishment of what was initially known as the National Languages Institute of Australia (NLIA), a multi-site organisation with research centres in a number of states, each focusing on an aspect of applied linguistics research. After a year of tortuous negotiations, transformations, disappointments and deals, the NLIA came into being in 1989. The political realities had led to the creation of two centres for research on language testing.

The first was at Griffith University and was headed by Professor David Ingram, perhaps the best known language tester in Australia following his work in the late 1970s on the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR). This was an interview-based oral proficiency procedure designed to accommodate the needs of English teaching to adults within the context of Australian immigration.

The second was at Melbourne, to be known as the Language Testing Unit (LTU). Melbourne had been actively lobbying for involvement in the NLIA throughout the period prior to its establishment. But despite Lo Bianco's loyalty to Melbourne, it was politically difficult to justify funding a second testing research centre at Melbourne, given McNamara's junior status (Quinn had now retired owing to ill health), the seniority of Ingram, and the desirability of avoiding the creation of two research centres in language testing. The key to the success of the Melbourne bid to be included in the NLIA was an invitation to Alan Davies to act as Director of the Centre for an initial three-year period. He agreed, bringing the necessary seniority, vision,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Ten years of the Language Testing Research Centre

experience and maturity. His mixture of informality, sharp critical judgement, encouragement of junior staff and democratic administrative style was to set a stamp on the character of the Centre and strengthened its 'British' feel; this was melded with an Australian enthusiasm and idealism that was in stark contrast to the ailing mood in Britain after ten years of Thatcherism.

The University of Melbourne, without the advocacy of Quinn, was bemused by the project, happy to get the funding and the prestige but unsure what to make of an energetic junior lecturer and a very British professor, whose dry sense of humour was largely lost on the administrators with whom he had to deal. The University offered accommodation but no salaries; if the LTU could fund itself, then well and good; let it be seen but not heard. Regular external reviews heaped praise on its achievements, but did not succeed in substantially altering the nature or tenor of relations between it and the University at large.

The upshot was that the LTU was left to itself, largely ignored; this had the advantage that it had the freedom to determine its own fate. Core infrastructure funding was supplemented with project funds secured from State and Federal governments, largely for occupationally-based performance tests in a range of languages (following McNamara's PhD research on the development of the Occupational English Test for immigrant and refugee health professionals [McNamara 1990]). But who would do the work? The most likely source of recruits were the best graduates from the MA programme, which, once established, attracted the pick of language teachers and teacher educators in Melbourne, people who would have done MAs years earlier had a suitable programme been available. The first appointments were all graduates of the MA programme: Cathie Elder, a specialist in LOTE, with many years' lecturing experience in Italian and in LOTE teacher education at various universities in Melbourne; Annie Brown and Tom Lumley, British-educated Australians, friends and colleagues, both ESL specialists recruited from the English language programme at a Melbourne College of Advanced Education; Joy McQueen, a colleague from the same college; Kieran O'Loughlin, a senior ESL teacher at the leading adult migrant education centre in Melbourne. In time, most of these undertook PhDs in language testing, which they completed concomitantly with their work as research officers. The tradition of employing Melbourne graduates has continued with current staff members Lis Grove, Kathryn Hill and Noriko Iwashita. Former staff members who have also made a significant contribution to the life and work of the Centre include Jill Wigglesworth, Ruth Evans and Helen Lunt.

In time, the work of the LTU began to take many new directions. Major research projects were secured, in both LOTE and English, in each of the school, university and private sectors. A hallmark of the work was the extent of collaboration with other centres in Australia; this was in the spirit of the

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[More information](#)*Tim McNamara*

National Languages Institute, but Melbourne did it more than any other Centre. It was a product of the youth, idealism and energy of the staff, who flourished under Alan Davies' benign leadership. The feeling in the Centre in its early years was of a family business; it was characterised by an extreme friendliness and level of good will; the feeling of neglect by the University only inspired people to greater efforts. As the operation grew larger – it had now become the Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC), after a favourable University review in 1993 – it necessarily grew more impersonal. At the height of its growth, in 1994, when the Centre was a partner in the development of the *access* test (Brindley and Wigglesworth 1998), a major government initiative to test the English language proficiency of immigrants to Australia, the Centre employed some 20 research and administrative staff. It became fragmented, with staff being scattered both on- and off-campus because of space limitations.

The ending of this testing contract led to a resumption of the earlier scale of the operation, and a return to greater intimacy coinciding with a move to a small Victorian terrace house adjacent to the main University campus. This move also coincided with the return of Alan Davies for a second three-year period of Directorship. During his absence (when he returned to Edinburgh to take up a personal chair) the Directorship of the Centre had been taken over by Tim McNamara who now also found himself Head of the newly formed Department of Applied Linguistics and Language Studies. Ultimately, it became clear that a full-time Director was required and a decision was made to invite Alan to return. Alan served his second term as Director from 1995 to 1998.

The Centre now has a core staff of seven, with Cathie Elder as its third Director and its former Directors Alan Davies and Tim McNamara closely associated and supportive of its activities. The Centre remains affiliated to the National Languages Institute (now called Language Australia) but core funding has now ceased due to a general shrinking of Commonwealth funds to education. As of 1998 the Centre has been entirely reliant on funds secured through competitive tender and consultancy work. Current projects include a nationwide study of the comparative language proficiency attainments of school-age learners of Japanese, Italian, French and Indonesian over a five-year period, an evaluation of different programme models for delivering school-based minority language maintenance, and research into task-based language testing as part of the TOEFL 2000 project at ETS in Princeton. The early focus on performance testing continues with the recent development of a test of oral communication for ESL undergraduates admitted to Melbourne University's Faculty of Medicine. The Centre remains a marvellous place to work and to be associated with, never quite having lost its independence, humour, inventiveness and spontaneity, qualities which are attributable in

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Ten years of the Language Testing Research Centre

large part to the style of its first Director, Alan Davies, and which stand out within the institutional setting of a traditional university.

The productivity of the Centre in terms of research has been extraordinary. In terms of Alan's contribution, this may be seen as a reflection of his commitment to scholarship above all else and to his own prolific output, but also to his encouragement of his younger colleagues, many of whom came to the Centre with little experience of academia. As measured by publications in *Language Testing* (the main refereed international journal in the field), the Language Testing Research Centre has emerged as highly prolific. At the annual Language Testing Research Colloquium, the main international language testing research conference, Melbourne has over a period of five years been responsible for more papers than any other centre in the world. Since its inception in 1996, the ILTA Robert Lado award for best graduate student presentation has been given each year to a member of the LTRC. The Centre has also made its presence felt on a regular basis at AAAL, AILA, SLRF, PacSLRF and, of course, closer to home, the Australian Applied Linguistics Association conference.

Melbourne Papers in Language Testing, a working papers series which has become essential reading for most serious language testing researchers, was established on the initiative of Annie Brown in 1992, and is still going strong. Important books on language testing by Davies (1990) and McNamara (1996) were published during the first years of the Centre. The Davies volume was at once a synthesis of Alan's previous work in the area of language testing and an attempt to position this relatively new discipline squarely within the realm of applied linguistics. McNamara's volume drew on the wealth of project work and research undertaken by himself and other members of the Centre to illustrate a theoretical approach to performance testing.

Particularly worthy of comment are two projects which reflect the spirit with which the Centre operates: highly collaborative, and employing the twin strengths of the Centre, a broad understanding of issues in testing theory, and years of practical experience in test development. In 1997, on an initiative of Alan Davies and following a survey of potential users, the Centre was awarded research funding which enabled it to create a series of 6 beautifully produced teaching videos entitled *Mark My Words* (Davies *et al.* 1996). Interest in the videos worldwide indicates a serious need for more such user-friendly materials to introduce graduate students and practising teachers to assessment theory.

But perhaps the most enduring achievement of the Centre coincides with its tenth anniversary: the publication by Cambridge in 1999 of the first *Dictionary of Language Testing* (Davies *et al.* 1999), prepared by Alan Davies and his Melbourne colleagues. The dictionary, like the video series, owes its existence entirely to Alan Davies' imagination, perseverance and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Tim McNamara

commitment, and is likely to be the Centre's most enduring achievement. Work on the dictionary has served as a means of professional development for Centre staff and has involved years of intensive team work in a number of different locations, including a period in the basement of the Edinburgh Department of Applied Linguistics.

It has been a very good ten years, a wonderful opportunity to create a leading international research culture from scratch, and one unlikely ever to be replicated. Perhaps only in Australia would the goodwill, the resources, the energy and the sheer improbability of the enterprise have been possible. And without Alan Davies it would never have happened at all, or developed the character which has always distinguished it.

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