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# The Sociopolitics of English Language Testing

Edited by  
Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini  
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## Preface

Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini and Peter I. De Costa

Doctoral students in all Iranian universities are required to take an English language proficiency test and provide the official certificate as a compulsory requirement for a PhD degree, *regardless* of their field of study. This means that even for a doctorate in a field like Persian Literature, Islamic Theology, or Arabic Language and Literature, a certain threshold score of a high-stakes test of English is mandatory. The high point of the story is that no university, department, or individual presenting or pursuing a PhD is exempted from this requirement and that no other foreign language is accepted. Thus, it is not unusual to see a doctoral student of History of Islam, Quranic Studies, or Ancient Iranian Languages struggling to obtain a certificate of an English proficiency test, after several rounds of failure to achieve the required score. If anything, cases of comprehensive exams and thesis approvals being delayed or halted are not uncommon because of a pending “language certificate,” as it is usually called.

In a very different setting, literally far away in terms of geography and contextually different in terms of culture, society, economy, and politics, students and teachers in the United States also have to grapple with tests that sort and sieve K-12 students. Teachers in these settings thus have to negotiate the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (the *standards*) as they prepare English language learners for success in college, career, and life by the time they graduate from high school. Students who do not pass tests administered by educational consortia, therefore, run the risk of being academically and socially left behind.

One way to understand the underlying layers of the two situations briefly sketched here is to scrutinize these instances in terms of the ideological and political essence of language tests and testing practices. Evidently, beyond the technicalities of test construction and administration based on mainstream views of formal linguistics and psychometrics, such bizarre entanglements of issues related to English language testing are to be understood as part of the politics of language and knowledge (Pennycook, 2001). Numerous questions can be raised

about *why* policies that lead to such situations are adopted and *who* the policy makers and stakeholders behind them are. More profoundly, serious questions about the *fundamental beliefs* underlying such policies and practices of English language testing emerge, leaving us to unpack their ideological underpinnings (Mirhosseini, 2018; van Dijk, 1998, 2006). Elevating the English language to a point that creates such dilemmas is an ideological concern, one that casts its shadow on the cultural, social, economic, and political aspects of people's lives (Al-Issa and Mirhosseini, forthcoming).

\* \* \*

Within applied linguistics and language education, language testing in the form of limited-scope assessment, as well as administering high-stakes international proficiency tests, continues to be a significant concern at the institutional, national, and international levels. Mainstream trends of language testing research and practice have been mainly viewed from *asocial* perspectives, often pivoting around cognitive considerations, linguistic constructs, and psychometric measurement technicalities that tend to overlook socially situated understandings of language assessment. However, related to earlier conceptual discussions of the ethical aspects and social consequences of language tests (e.g., Hawthorne, 1997; Messick, 1981; Sarig, 1989; Shepard, 1997; Spolsky, 1986, 1997), the notion of *critical language testing* has been proposed as a standpoint that “assumes that the act of testing is not neutral . . . [but] both a product and an agent of cultural, social, political, educational and ideological agendas” (Shohamy, 1998, p. 332). The scope of such discussions on testing acts was later extended to the realm of language policy and learner identities (Shohamy, 2007, 2013).

Among the later explorations of language testing as a critical and social practice (e.g., Fulcher, 2009; Khan, 2009; Lynch, 2001; McNamara, 1998, 2001; Schissel, 2010; Templer, 2004) are two landmark works. First, Shohamy's (2001) book *The Power of Tests: A Critical Perspective on the Uses of Language Tests* problematizes the ways language tests are used and the social and political consequences of relying on them. The applications of tests as means of exercising power and control as well as resisting the power and misuse of language proficiency tests are the focal discussions of this pathbreaking book. Second, *Language Testing: The Social Dimension* by McNamara and Roever (2006) also addresses the social dimensions of how language tests are used. It elaborates on—and attempts to move beyond—the notion of fairness in examining the social concerns surrounding language testing (for a more updated and in-depth discussion of

fairness and justice in language assessment, see McNamara, Knoch, and Fan, 2019). Considerably, both of these books centrally deal with test *use* rather than the essence of English language proficiency tests and their integral ideological features that can also be scrutinized from a critical perspective.

Up to the present time, the literature of the field has steadily continued to accommodate a tiny stream of theoretical discussions and research reports of issues of the cultural, social, and political aspects of English language testing at global and national levels (Booth, 2018; Hamid, 2016; Karatas and Okan, 2019; Pearson, 2019; Schissel, 2019). However, the spread and dominance of internationally reigning high-stakes tests of English language proficiency—as briefly exemplified in the two instances raised at the beginning of this preface—demands extensive discussions and research that extend beyond the meager contributions that can be counted in the past two decades (Jenkins and Leung, 2019). This thin body of literature remains clearly marginalized in mainstream theoretical discussions of the field. Even Shohamy's (2019) own most recent contribution highlights the scarcity of critical accounts of English language testing by opening up new areas of inquiry. She argues that the perspectives of English as a lingua franca and translanguaging tend to be overlooked in language assessment, and that testing practices need to accommodate such views of language and language education (Shohamy, 2019). This can be counted as an invitation to expand the theoretical domain of sociopolitical debates surrounding English language teaching and testing.

In the actual practice of English testing in classroom life and local level, as well as national and international levels, there is arguably little trace of socioculturally sensitive testing practices. Even the limited considerations of such concerns in practice tend to fall within the conceptual confinements of measurementist views of language testing in the form of discussions of washback (Xu and Liu, 2018) and test fairness (Karami and Mok, 2013). “Fairness” has even been used as an index to accuse critical language testing of extremism in confronting psychometric perspectives (Karami, 2013). Therefore, the prospect of the actual embrace of sociopolitically sensitive understandings of language assessment is still far away, and an indispensable prerequisite for that prospect is considerable further development in the theoretical discussions and empirical investigations of the sociopolitics of language testing.

\* \* \*

The contributions in this volume highlight marginalized but significant perspectives on the sociopolitical essence of English language tests and testing

processes by exploring the implications of testing theories and practices from a critical perspective, that is, a view that foregrounds concerns surrounding power inequalities. In addition to further discussing the politics of test use, the book addresses issues of ideology, diversity, and dominance in English language testing. We hope this collection yields valuable insights for the language education community who have focused on positivistic and cognitively oriented conceptions of language testing and also sparks interest for a new generation of scholars and students who may wish to venture beyond the traditional boundaries of the field. The eleven chapters, which are organized in two parts, consider the contextual differences and the extant literature on English language testing concerns in English-speaking countries (e.g., Hawthorne, 1997; Schissel, 2010, 2019) and other contexts around the world (e.g., Crossey, 2009; Hogan-Brun, Mar-Molinero, and Stevenson, 2009).

“Part I” comprises five chapters that examine “The Ideologies of Testing in English Speaking Countries.” In Chapter 1, John Yandell, Brenton Doecke, and Zamzam Abdi illustrate key moments of classroom life in a school in London that are overshadowed by the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination in English Literature as a high-stakes test. They explicate the ideological functioning of such tests through shaping everyday school activities. They argue that this very reconstructive role of testing mechanisms makes them a neoliberal apparatus but at the same time constitutes a possible means of resistance as enacted by both students and teachers. Also concerned with standardized national-level testing, Chapter 2 by Leonard Freeman and Gillian Wigglesworth turns to the context of Australia. They critique the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLaN) in terms of how it measures the impact of school attendance on the literacy and numeracy achievement of children in remote indigenous communities. Through a reanalysis of school-level achievement data of schools in the Northern Territory of Australia, the chapter illustrates how the English language learning needs of students from indigenous-language-speaking communities often remain unnoticed within national standard literacy and numeracy assessment practices. Disturbingly, children who speak indigenous languages as their mother tongue are seen to be in need of specific procedures of teaching and assessment.

Luis Poza and Sheila Shannon, in Chapter 3, shift the focus to English language testing in the United States. They raise the concern that the burdens created by the use of English language testing as a measure of school achievement for bilingual learners is rooted in the hegemony of English. Referring specifically to certain settings in Southwest United States, Poza and Shannon view the

AQ: Both "NAPLaN" and "NAPLAN" have been used in the book. Please confirm if this should be made consistent.

uncritical embrace of tests by teachers as an element that perpetuates this condition, and they advocate a form of teacher education that encourages teachers' transformative roles. In Chapter 4, Netta Avineri and James Perren call for socially situated language testing within the practices of service-learning. Following extensive reviews of various issues related to language testing in service-learning, the chapter briefly examines two instances of service-learning in which the authors themselves were involved in order to illustrate aspects of their proposed critical language assessment framework.

In the final chapter of the first part of the book, Jamie Schissel's Chapter 5 provides a discussion of English language tests exploited as gatekeeping tools that rely on a deficit view of language-minoritized individuals. Broadly situating her arguments within the sociocultural context of the United States, she revisits some hitherto marginally considered aspects of language test validity such as cultural considerations and the role of values. The chapter culminates in a call for testing practices that are sensitive to sociopolitical dynamics as mediated through heteroglossic English language testing approaches that can be specifically developed for language-minoritized bilinguals. In depicting heteroglossic testing, in addition to referring to studies in the United States, Schissel presents a case of adopting such approaches in classroom-based English language assessment in Mexico and an example of the successful integration of students' multilingual background into large-scale language testing in South Africa. These examples from contexts where English is not the first language of the society transition us into the next part of the book that focuses on such contexts.

The six chapters in "Part II" explore "The Politics of Testing in the Non-English-Speaking World." Ruanni Tupas, in Chapter 6, investigates the politics of language testing within the context of a US development project—the Jobs Enhancement English Programme—that was committed to teaching the English language in the Philippines. Highlighting the role of colonialism on the lives and social relations of colonized nations that gained independence, the chapter concentrates on the coloniality of language testing. Tupas argues that testing practices can be shaped by sediments of colonialism and can, therefore, conflict with the values of test takers in these given communities. In Chapter 7, Masaki Oda explores the place of standardized tests in language teaching policies in Japan. He analyzes some Japanese newspaper articles that promote the application of commercial tests as part of university entrance exams. Based on his findings that reveal that these articles reflect Japanese educational policy makers' inclination toward the standardized language tests, he exhorts teachers to actively project more realistic images of such tests in the public sphere.



The next two chapters turn to the context of South Korea. Gwan-Hyeok Im, Liying Cheng, and Dongil Shin address issues of policies and public opinions with regard to the application and functioning of language tests in their discussion of the National English Ability Test (NEAT) in this country. They examine a number of official policy documents as well as media reports to understand the sociopolitical considerations related to the development and subsequent abandonment of the NEAT. The test is portrayed as a social practice intertwined with values and political purposes within the society. In the same national setting (South Korea), Miso Kim and Mari Haneda focus on the ideological climate surrounding the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) that forms a crucial part of the job market gatekeeping system. The authors examine jobseekers' perspectives of the problem of English proficiency and its assessment as well as the candidates' actual test performance. The chapter underlines the gap between the tests and real-life communication and, therefore, problematizes the exclusionary nature of these English proficiency tests.

In Chapter 10, Ali Al-Issa addresses the application of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as a measurement tool for selecting English language teachers at a university in Oman. Through a critical discourse analysis of semi-structured interviews with teacher candidates who took the IELTS, he probes the ideological underpinnings of the testing practices. The chapter demonstrates how some hegemonic aspects of such a high-stakes test can cause possible harm. Finally, Chapter 11 presents Prem Phyak's study of the construction of imagined communities through the promotion of international English language tests in Nepal. He analyzes a body of multimodal data comprising various promotional materials that were produced and displayed by educational consultancy institutions. The promotion of native-speakerism and the commodification of the English language are discussed as major ideological aspects of such discursive practices. Importantly, these issues are shown to be mechanisms for creating imaginaries of transnational migration and dream life opportunities in other countries.

\* \* \*

Inevitably, the title of our volume invites comparison to Hall and Eggington's (2000) edited volume, *The Sociopolitics of English Language Teaching*. Nearly two decades ago, and underscoring macro-level cultural, social, and political concerns about English language teaching, they argued that such dimensions of language education are a crucial part of the decisions we make. Highlighting

the *sensibilities* and *awareness* of language teachers with regard to sociopolitical issues, they maintained that their main purpose was “to introduce these issues to aspiring teachers of English from myriad educational contexts and geographical locations for the purposes of provoking their sensibilities, stimulating discussion, and ultimately raising students’ awareness of these important issues” (p. 1). Building on Hall and Eggington’s astute observations as well as the wider *critical turn* in language education that had started much earlier (e.g., Graman, 1988; Pennycook, 1990) and has continued to this day (e.g., López-Gopar, 2019), our volume was motivated by a need to usher in a much overdue discussion on the sociopolitical essence of English language testing. By initiating and extending this conversation on the ideological nature of standardized English language tests, we hope to inspire policy makers, academics, language educators, and English language learners around the world to be more aware of the inequalities embedded in language tests and testing practices and possibly to engage in concrete acts of transformation within English language testing.

April, 2019

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