

Reframing the discourse and rhetoric of testing and assessment for the public square

UCL Centre for Applied Linguistics Research Seminar, UCL Institute of Education, University College London

Professor Lynda Taylor, Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA), University of Bedfordshire

Wed. Dec. 15th, 12 PM to 1:30 PM (UK time via Zoom)

Registration link: <https://forms.gle/FKZQtE1to68Gvpr39>

Abstract: The rapid changes required during 2020/21 due to the global Covid19 pandemic caused significant disruption in UK society, including the replacement of annual national school examinations with teacher-based assessments for school pupils (i.e. using estimated grades). This in turn provoked considerable public debate about the relative merits and failings of differing assessment approaches, not just among language testing professionals but in wider society, in the news media and among the general public. Newspapers and social media contrasted the 'rigour' and 'fairness' of standardised school examinations with the potential 'unreliability' and 'unfairness' of pupil assessment by teachers. The ensuing debate, even within Parliament, touched upon important issues of public confidence and trust in standards, teachers and schools.

This raises interesting questions about representations of testing and assessment in the news and other media, and the language and imagery that surround them. What sort of representations are recycled in the public domain and to what do they orientate? How does the dominant rhetoric help to frame our consciousness and discourse in the public square? Would public debate, for example, be better served by less confrontational media coverage that refrains from setting up differing approaches in opposition to one another and instead presents a more positive and balanced perspective? Public debate around matters of testing and assessment (not just in education but also in public health matters, e.g. Covid19 testing) often seems characterised by poor understanding of certain fundamental concepts, such as reliability, validity and fairness.

Language testing, and English language testing in particular, has become a locus for investigating the social context, consequences and power of testing and assessment. Exploration of language test washback and impact has led to growing interest in 'assessment literacy' (Taylor, 2009), defined broadly as the skills, knowledge and abilities that different test stakeholders (e.g. teachers, university admissions officers, curriculum designers) need to carry out assessment-related activities. But, as Taylor and Harding (2020) assert, there may be real benefit in raising the general level of assessment literacy in society more broadly given that all our lives are affected by tests of one sort or another: school exams, medical tests, job interviews, professional certification, citizenship tests (for some). Furthermore, politicians, the news media and the general public are also important stakeholders in the assessment enterprise.

Acknowledging the consequential nature of assessment, recent validity scholarship (Chalhoub-Deville and O'Sullivan, 2020) stresses the need to tailor communication for effective stakeholder engagement in education and wider society. Improving assessment literacy and ensuring effective communication with stakeholders in the public square is likely to depend upon two strategies: first, gaining a deeper understanding of current representations of testing and assessment and how these shape public attitudes; secondly, finding a common language and a shared discourse, including

accessible images and meaningful metaphors, for communicating key principles and practice to enhance public understanding and engagement (Taylor, 2013).

This talk will begin by briefly illustrating some of the issues highlighted above and then go on to consider how applied linguists and language testers might set out to help reframe public discourse and rhetoric more positively for the public good. We shall reflect on some of the current language and imagery used by the language testing and assessment field to evaluate its communicative effectiveness for non-specialists. Could we adopt more familiar and accessible metaphors to help us engage more effectively with politicians, media and the general public? And if so, what might they be? And what can we learn from recent applied linguistics research into the use and manipulation of language in society as it relates to other important public issues, such as social care or health?

References:

Chalhoub-Deville, M. & O'Sullivan, B. (2020). Validity – Theoretical Developments and Integrated Arguments. British Council Monographs on Modern Language Testing 3. Equinox: Sheffield, UK.

Taylor, L. (2009). Developing assessment literacy. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, Vol 29, 21-36. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190509090035>

Taylor, L. (2013). Communicating the theory, practice and principles of language testing to test stakeholders: Some reflections. *Language Testing*, 30(3), 403–412.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532213480338>

Taylor, L. & Harding, L. (2020). A testing time for testing: Assessment literacy as a force for social good in the time of coronavirus. <https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/hub-of-hubs-social-sciences-responding-to-covid-19/>

Biodata

Lynda Taylor is Visiting Professor at the Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA) at the University of Bedfordshire, UK. She holds a PhD and MPhil in Applied Linguistics from the University of Cambridge and she has worked for over 35 years in the field of language teaching, learning and assessment, particularly with IELTS and the full range of Cambridge Assessment English qualifications. Her research interests include speaking and writing assessment, testing accommodations for language learners with special needs and the development of language assessment literacy. For several years she was Assistant Research Director with Cambridge Assessment English and she has advised on test development and validation projects around the world, including the Baltic States, mainland China, Taiwan and Japan. She has presented invited plenaries, research papers and workshops internationally, published extensively in academic journals and authored or edited many of the volumes in CUP's Studies in Language Testing (SiLT) series, for which she is also a series co-editor. She is currently President of the UK Association for Language Testing and Assessment (UKALTA) (2020-2022).

Free Event, All Welcome!