

UCLES/ILTA Lifetime Achievement Award

Invited Lecture Abstract

From critique to change: Building on the power of tests

Professor Elana Shohamy

The paper begins with reflections on biographical and personal episodes of encountering informal language tests as prime definers of personal and national categories, a phenomenon which is common in linguistically diverse societies where 'one language' serves as the marker of fixed identities and collective ideologies. In many multilingual contexts life is a series of language tests with meaningful consequences. Research in language testing in the past few years focused on various dimensions of test consequences and impacts, demonstrating the enormous power of institutionalized formal tests as devices that establish fixed categories. Indeed this work led to increased awareness of test consequences, such as washback, as well as activism in the form of codes of ethics and practice. Yet, institutionalized language testing is being expanded at an accelerated rate as tests, often with high stakes, are imposed on those who traditionally have not been included in the testing endeavors, and are backed by powerful institutions (governments, testing corporations and academic institutions). What are the implications of such policies for the language testing profession? What should the responses of language testers be when faced with these realities?

The main argument of this paper is that the very 'power of tests' puts an enormous amount of responsibility in the hands of those who wield those tests. A 'responsible language testing' approach therefore emphasizes the need to create tests that truly reflect language acquisition and use in the multiple and diverse contexts where they are used. This approach not only attempts to minimize the negative consequences of tests as tools of punishment or categorization but also constructs tests as devices for the improved functioning of society. Responsible language testing thus goes beyond research into consequences and impact - although not excluding it - expanding the language construct so as to match tests with learning processes and functionality. Such an expansion embraces multiple contextual variables, research findings on processes and products of language acquisition and uses of languages in diverse situations in today's multilingual world. In these situations languages are far from being homogenous as they consist of bi-, multi-, hybrid and digital varieties, beyond simplistic criteria of one size fits all. Such an approach rejects the ideological role of tests as definers of what language knowledge should be but rather follows actual practices of what language proficiencies are so as to minimize the contradictions between ideology and practice. This implies negotiating with policy makers regarding unrealistic language goals and the exploitation of test makers to comply with these intentions. It calls for growing awareness and knowledge of intentions behind test driven policies as well as of research in applied linguistics regarding language learning and use in this day and age. It means taking a mediating role between governments and centralized policy makers as they interact with the schools and communities who are faced with the need to respond to these policies. These approaches will be discussed as a constructive response building on the power of tests and recommending that it becomes our future research and policy agenda.

Biodata

Dr Elana Shohamy is a professor of language education at the School of Education, Tel Aviv University. Her research and writings focus on a variety of topics related to language testing and language policy in the context of conflicts, co-existence and rights in multilingual societies. Her research and publications in language testing address the political, social, educational and ethical dimensions of tests within a critical framework. These studies point to the power and misuses of tests in education and society, and the consequences of tests for immigrants, minority and majority language learners and adults in the context of migration and citizenship. Her work in language policy introduced an expanded policy framework which showed how various mechanisms (e.g., tests, regulations, linguistic landscapes), create *de facto* language policies. These implicit policies lead to inequalities, lack of rights, suppression of diversity and marginalisation.

Her current work in language testing builds on an understanding of the power of tests and its consequences to create tests which are not driven by ideology with questionable goals but based instead on a valid construct that reflects the actual processes, uses and functioning of languages by diverse populations; such tests build on research into language learning processes, bi/multiple and hybrid varieties of L-1s and L-2s, variety of familiar contents, multi-modalities, the diverse literacies of the digital world and multiple types of assessment. Her current work in language policy is situated within the framework of 'language policy from below', incorporating personal experiences, biographies and narratives of language users about the processes, costs and benefits of acquiring and functioning in new languages.

Elana's publications in the past decade reflect the above interests: *The languages of Israel: Policy, ideology and practice* (with Bernard Spolsky, Multilingual Matters, 1999); *The power of tests*, Longman 2001; *Language policy: Hidden agendas and new approaches*, (Routledge, 2006); *Encyclopedia of Language and Education: Language Testing and Assessment, Volume 7* (ed. w/ Nancy Hornberger, Springer, 2008); *Linguistic landscape: expanding the scenery*, (ed. with Durk Gorter, Routledge, 2009); and *Linguistic landscape in the city* (ed. With E. Ben Rafael & M. Barni, Multilingual Matters, in press); she is currently working on a book entitled: *The cost of reviving a language*. Elana is also the current editor of the journal *Language Policy*. She has been an active member of the Language Testing Research Colloquium since its inception in 1979.