



Cambridge Research Update

A quarterly digest from Cambridge ESOL

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Validity

A socio-cognitive framework for legal English

The International Legal English Certificate (ILEC), introduced in 2006, assesses language skills in a legal context at B2 and C1 levels of the CEFR.

Ivana Vidaković and Hugh Bateman have explored how Speaking skills are tested through an English for Specific Purposes test (such as ILEC), within a socio-cognitive framework for test development and validation. The presentation then focused on the performance of the revised ILEC Speaking assessment scales and the quantitative and qualitative methodologies used in the validation of the scales.

ILEC: Testing Speaking in a Legal Context, was presented at the 2009 conference of the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes in May.

Lexis as an indicator of proficiency levels

A recent study by Ivana Vidaković and Fiona Barker analysed lexical progression in general English writing of second language learners through quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysed dataset consists of 100 passing Skills for Life writing scripts sampled from the Cambridge Learner Corpus. The findings revealed that the average length of words and sentences, the number of word tokens and types, lexical diversity (vocabulary range), sophistication (proportion of infrequent/rare words) and the frequency, diversity and functions of lexical bundles (word sequences) differentiate well between proficiency levels (A1-C1).

Lexical Development Across Second Language Proficiency Levels: A Corpus-Informed Study was presented at the Conference of the British Association for Applied Linguistics in September.

Item banking and valid assessment

Cambridge ESOL's item banking methodology enables tests to be constructed to very consistent levels of difficulty and also facilitates the interpretation of test performance by linking tests at different levels to a single framework such as the CEFR. In a recent presentation to the Chinese

National Education Examinations Authority, Neil Jones outlined the important role of item banking in supporting valid assessment.

The presentation introduced latent trait theory and the measurement model behind item banking, explaining how assessment can be seen as a two-stage process: first constructing a valid measure and then constructing meanings for points on the measured scale.

For a fuller presentation of this model see Scales and Frameworks, (Neil Jones and Nick Saville) in The Handbook of Educational Linguistics (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

Frameworks

Research Notes focus on the CEFR

Cambridge ESOL's relationship with the CEFR is the subject of a special edition of Research Notes. Contents include an introductory piece from Dr Michael Milanovic, who has been involved in the CEFR since its inception. Other articles outline in detail how Cambridge ESOL exams are aligned to this important international framework and describe the work of the English Profile project in developing the criterial features of English across the CEFR levels.

Research Notes 37, August 2009, can be downloaded from:

www.cambridgeesol.org/rs_notes

IELTS as a companion to credentialing programmes

Increased global mobility has led to greater opportunities for those whose skills are in demand to live and work around the world. In critical areas such as healthcare, programmes are set up to validate the credentials of overseas job applicants and, where necessary, make sure they have additional skills. English language ability is increasingly becoming part of these credentialing programmes. A paper by Ardeshir Geranpayeh has examined how the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) in its two variants (General Training and Academic modules) is being used as a companion for credentialing examination programmes around the world: examples include the UK's General Medical Council, the USA's

National Council of State Boards of Nursing, the Nursing Council of Australia and the American Association of Veterinary State Boards.

Use of Language Testing as a Companion for a Credentialing Examination Programme was presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, in San Diego in April.

Impact

Language learning and migration

The findings of an impact study focusing on test takers in the context of migration were outlined in a recent presentation by Szilvia Papp. The presentation looked at the subject through the experiences of those who had taken the Cambridge ESOL Skills for Life tests with the intention of applying for indefinite leave to remain in the UK or obtaining citizenship. The study extended Cambridge ESOL's model used for investigating test impact within an educational setting to include individuals within the main stakeholder groups, especially from the test takers themselves. In addition to analyses based on routinely collected data for test validation purposes, the study reported on the analysis of questionnaire data and interviews with Skills for Life test takers. This data documented their own narratives in relation to their personal language learning and test taking experiences, as well as their views about the government policy and the qualities of the tests themselves.

The Voice of the Stakeholders: Language Assessment for Migration and Integration in the UK, was presented at the Language and Integration Conference at the Goethe Institut, Berlin, in September.

Migration and language testing

The wider issues surrounding language assessment for migration were discussed at the end of October in a special migration supplement published by the Guardian Weekly. The supplement, printed in association with Cambridge ESOL, presented views from a number of leading experts in language testing and applied linguistics.

It included articles from Dr Nick Saville, Director of Research and Validation at Cambridge ESOL, Janna Fox, Associate Professor, Applied Language Studies at Carleton University, Ontario and Tim McNamara, Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Melbourne.

To read the supplement, Migration and language testing (published 30 October), please visit: www.guardianweekly.co.uk

● ***Nick Saville and Szilvia Papp have written a further paper looking at the impact of ESOL Skills for Life and immigration. ESOL Skills for Life: a micro-level impact study of the exams, has been shortlisted for publication in a special issue of Research Papers in Education, to be published by Routledge in 2010.***

Partnerships

Using the CEFR to inform assessment criteria development

Cambridge ESOL has long held that the alignment of its exams to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) pervades all aspects of exam production. A short paper by Lucy Chambers illustrates an example of how this works. Taking the example of the Business Language Testing Service (BULATS), it shows how CEFR alignment can be built into one of the early stages of the test development cycle; the development of performance assessment criteria. The article outlines the use of tools developed by the Council of Europe such as the Global Oral Assessment Scale and the Written Assessment Criteria Grid for mapping test criteria against the CEFR. ***Using the CEFR to Inform Assessment Criteria Development for Online BULATS, is published in Research Notes 38, November 2009, available for download from:***

www.cambridgeesol.org/rs_notes

Multi-faceted Rasch analysis for certifying IELTS examiners

IELTS examiners are subject to rigorous standardisation and certification procedures. In 2008 Cambridge ESOL's Research and Validation Group introduced multi-faceted Rasch measurement (FACETS) as a supplementary quantitative measure to confirm expert judgement in writing and speaking certification. How this approach is helping to improve the reliability of measuring the performance of raters is described in an article in *Research Notes 38* by Sacha DeVelle.

Certifying IELTS Writing and Speaking Examiners is published in Research Notes 38, November 2009, available for download from:

www.cambridgeesol.org/rs_notes