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An Appraisal of “Establishing a Life-Language Model of Proficiency: A New Challenge for Language Testers” by Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012)

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In the article, written by Dr. Pishghadam and his student Zabihi, the authors have outlined an interesting approach to language assessment that deserves wider discussion. We would note strengths in the manuscript, particularly the topic area under consideration which is a timely and important one as the authors try to offer a novel way of thinking about the issues at hand and ways of conceptualizing the notion of adequate English language testing. The statement of the problem is clear: the authors state that their aim is to “introduce Life-Language Test as a new concept in the field of language testing, drawing on recent trends in the field of English language teaching and, in so doing, try to explain ways in which language testing professionals can revise and devise tests for measuring both learners’ language proficiency and other issues which are of prime importance in their life” (p. 93).

The authors thoroughly evaluate the various models of English language proficiency (Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Farhady, 1980; Kramsch, 1986; Lado, 196; Oller, 1978; Upshur, 1979) and conclude that various models and tests of language were problematic. The major reason for the inadequacy of previous models, they argue, is that the sole focus was set on the learners’ language skills and neglected the basic purpose of education i.e. to launch the learner as a ‘whole-person’ in the ring of practical life. The article introduces life-language test with reference to Pishghadam’s (2011) notion of applied ELT in which he claims that English language teaching has achieved an autonomous status and, therefore, should not be considered as part of linguistics anymore. English language teaching is already enriched in theoretical foundation and now it is ready to export and contribute its ideas to other disciplines of knowledge.

This new theory (Applied ELT) seems to have some similarities with content-based instruction (CBI). In CBI, the focus is on the subject matter and language proficiency seems to play a marginal role (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Likewise, Life Syllabus seeks to achieve somehow the same aim, yet with more focus on life qualities. Moreover, Life Syllabus brings to mind Curran’s Whole Person in Community Language Learning. While in Curran’s (1972) Community Language Learning, teachers should use life qualities to enhance language proficiency, in Life Syllabus life qualities and language proficiency are developed simultaneously (Pishghadam, personal communication).

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They defend English language teaching *for life* (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2012) and suggest that the main task before language assessors is to mix the issues of life with language learning in order to make testing meaningful. They enhance their suggestions by summarizing the previous models of language proficiency and pointing to the fact that, in all cases, the end goal has mostly been the measurement of language-related skills. Overall, the message that ELT should reflect the goals of language learning that go beyond the mechanics of language is sound. According to the authors, Educational Language Testing (ELT) is a humanistic approach which aims to empower language assessors to know and measure learners' life skills. Therefore, the testing profession is deemed not only to assess the knowledge of language but it should involve the learners' emotions, modes of thinking, feelings, and relationships so that the learners can meet the personal and professional challenges of life. A similar point highlighted by the authors is their assertion that "much of such a decision as to what should be included or excluded in a language test relies highly on language testers' conception of language proficiency" (p 94). Thus, expanding what Educational Language Testing captures would require even more knowledge of other disciplines by testers.

The authors have persuasively supported their arguments through many famous philosophers and philosophies which strongly recommend the enhancement of life skills in education. In the following sections, however, we attempt to explain some of the issues that may contribute to future research on the expansion of the ideas presented by Pishghadam and Zabihi in this issue. We do hope they are helpful; as we think the underlying message is an important and timely one –but one that needs much more development and evidence, as well as more explicit connections between assertions in the introduction to how one would undertake the tasks. Below are some comments that can be considered.

The literature review relies heavily on articles by Pishghadam and Zabihi. In addition, the paper reads early on as one that would provide a new test. However, upon further reading, the paper gives some ideas as to *how to think about creating those tests*. Right now, this paper reads as a proposal for a project. Thus, there is one major approach to establish the model as a basis for test construction. The proponents, rather than outlining the areas the test could focus on, have to develop the actual test and validate it. Validity evidence for the test supports both the theory and its measure (Messick, 1989).

The authors have presented some notable language ability models. However, if the authors' focus is on improved testing, then the focus of the introduction should have likely been on the earlier tests derived out of these models and not just the models. That is, the current introduction would have benefitted by a more comprehensive discussion of prior tests and why or why not they contribute in positive ways to the goal of testing. Then, the authors would introduce their ideas for testing, followed with an appendix of the actual test. Further, the following statement is unclear:

Firstly, language teaching has received useful implications from the tenets of the Applied ELT theory in the sense that the theory has made the ELT practitioners center their attention on the importance of enhancing life issues in ELT classes, granted that these classes have unique features which other classes are mostly deprived (Pishghadam, 2011).

Why would language classes have goals, considerations, or applicability of motivation, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, etc. but others would not? This statement led us to doubt

its real life applicability after all. The claim would have had more support if the authors had clearly delineated “the unique features of ELT classes” in more detail.

Test developers should also note that tests have their limitations –and attempting to make them into a “catch-all” is a slippery slope. Although too many individuals use them as a finite measure of some construct, there are ample warnings against this practice –an issue related to the core of validity. Moreover, the authors refer to “life qualities” –but did not provide the necessary road map for the readers to understand what these exactly are, and much less, how they would be assessed. In the fourth section, just by referring to the table (in appendix), it seems as though the authors are arguing that language testing should reflect more life-wise applicability so that the actual use of language to meet the aim is assessed –but the message is buried in the way it is presented. The domains as presented seem disconnected in relation to the table. If the authors had taken the material in the table, and had developed each domain further (with a more explicit connection), the proposal would have been substantially improved.

Meanwhile, inserting life skills concept into language proficiency tests may induce the idea that there are global or fixed life skills to be acquired by all language learners and can be assessed through language tests. Adhering to such a concept, one may ignore the fact that different cultures or ethnicities follow their own patterns of life as a construct. As a result, this conception almost discards the introduction of local or regional language tests like an English language test for Asians or Africans. Deciding on a clear and unanimous construct for life skill is a major challenge that any test developer should consider before inserting life skill component.

Taken together, the writers’ comments and opinions, no doubt, imply that although the language testing professionals have struggled to discover a definite approach to language proficiency to date, all these attempts have sadly fallen short of solving the issues related to learners’ lives. Their point is valid that the primary focus of language testing is mostly on the measurement of language ability of learners, and that the involvement of the learners’ life skills in language tests has been left out to a great extent. This segregation of language abilities and life skills has limited the potentiality of language testing profession in illuminating those areas of learners’ life which need more cultivation.

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