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Commentary on Establishing a Life-Language Model of Proficiency: A New Challenge for Language Testers

Dan Douglas¹

In their paper, Professors Pishghadam and Zabihi have presented the language testing profession with a challenge to begin to produce tests that measure not only language ability but also “issues of primary concern in learners’ life” (p. 7). They argue that English language teaching has matured to the point where it can be viewed as independent of other domains of knowledge and thus should abandon “the traditional linguistic syllabuses which are typically used in ELT” and focus more on “useful aspects of learners’ lives in the ELT curriculum” (p. 9). Consequently, they reason, English language testing should likewise change from a focus solely on language to “the incorporation of useful aspects of learners’ lives into a comprehensive test which underpins practical life issues as well as language-related issues” (p. 7). As a language tester who has a professional interest in assessing language for specific purposes (LSP), I was immediately attracted to this philosophy since LSP is all about assessing the ability to use language in situations of importance in the lives of language learners. I have argued, in fact, that a specific purpose language test is one in which “test content and methods are derived from an analysis of a specific purpose target language use situation” in which language users wish to engage (Douglas 2000, p. 19). Certainly the notions of “English for Life Purposes” and “Life-Language Test” that the authors of this paper outline appear to fit particularly well with my own vision of the importance of language for specific purposes and LSP testing.

LSP testing is important because language use varies with context, so that whenever we change aspects of the language use situation – e.g., the physical setting, the participants, tone of voice, the topic, the rhetorical style, the pragmatic purpose, or even the speakers’ posture or facial expression – our use of language changes to incorporate the changes in the context. The notion of context is paramount in my view of language testing. It is important to remember that we don’t use language in a vacuum: we never just ‘read’ – we read for a purpose, in a context, with some goal in mind; we don’t just ‘speak’ – we speak *to* someone, *about* something, with some communicative *intent* (Douglas 2010). Professors Pishghadam and Zabihi will, I think, agree, since they assert in their paper, as I have noted above, that language tests should incorporate useful aspects of learners’ lives. I have noted elsewhere (Douglas 2010) that we all acquired our first language naturally in social and physical contexts and have become so used to adapting our language to the situation that we find it impossible to conceive of using language for no purpose at all, in no context at all. Yet, very often that is what we are expected to do in language tests! We are told to read a passage and answer the questions that follow it. Why? We are told to write a description of a stapler. For what audience, and why would they wish to read a description of a stapler? We are told to listen to a conversation between two people discussing a

¹ Professor Emeritus, Iowa State University, USA.
E-mail: dandoug@iastate.edu

homework assignment, disregarding the fact that eavesdropping is a rather rude thing to do in real life. Of course, we know that there is in fact a purpose to these language use activities: to display our language knowledge so that someone can observe our performance and infer our level of ability. Yet, from the test taker's point of view, language use for sheer display is at best unnatural and at worst a distortion. If the performance we elicit is in some way abnormal, the inferences we make about the ability that produced the performance will stand a good chance of being wrong. Thus, the present authors' insistence that language tests go beyond mere linguistic bases to incorporate "useful aspects of learner's lives" is one I can support and believe should be discussed more widely in the language testing profession.

However, I must confess that I was a little disappointed in the fact that Professors Pishghadam and Zabihi didn't spend more time in their paper discussing the actual life-language model of proficiency they propose. They incorporate into their model a now fairly standard framework of language knowledge, that presented by Bachman and Palmer (1996), which includes organizational knowledge (consisting of grammatical and textual knowledge) and pragmatic knowledge (consisting of functional and sociolinguistic knowledge). To this they add aspects of critical thinking ability, as outlined by Watson and Glaser (1980): drawing inferences, recognizing assumptions, argument evaluation, deductive reasoning, and logical interpretation. They present this model in some detail as an appendix. I would like them to have shown how the model might be applied to the examples of test tasks they provide.

For example, they present a sample reading passage about a girl on a sea voyage from Hawai'i to New Zealand who falls asleep on a summer evening and wakes up in the middle of winter. They suggest that a test task would require test takers to discuss possible explanations of such an improbable event, using not only their language knowledge but also their background knowledge (about crossing the Equator and the resulting switching of seasons) and their critical thinking ability. What aspects of language knowledge and critical thinking ability might such a task elicit? It seems to me that the task would require learners to display vocabulary and syntactic knowledge as well as knowledge of cohesion in the construction of a response. They would have to incorporate ideational functions to state facts about the Equator and seasons and no doubt they would have to display control of a formal register to discuss the scientific reason behind the phenomenon. As for critical thinking, the learners would have to engage in inferencing ability in judging the plausibility of the conclusion that the girl slept from summer to winter and propose a different conclusion, they would have to discover a gap in the information they were given in the prompt, and to deduce the correct conclusion from a generalization about geography. In short, I would be interested in the authors' views about how their life-language model would be applied in assessing learner's abilities.

One final comment about the paper involves the authors' assumption that the burden of changing language testing in light of their model is on the shoulders of professional language testers. They say, for example, that they wish to "draw the attention of language assessment professionals to...the belief that promoting learners' life skills should be taken seriously in ELT classes" (p. 9). There is much interest currently among language testing professionals in the empowerment of classroom teachers themselves in the assessment of their learners' language abilities. For example, Fulcher (2012) notes that "It has long been argued that assessment for learning...is an essential component of classroom practice" (p. 114) and goes on in his article to

elaborate what classroom teachers need to know about language assessment. Since Professors Pishghadam and Zabihi advocate the extension of their model of English for Life Purposes in the ELT classroom to assessment, I think their proposals would fit remarkably well into the present focus on “assessment literacy” directed at practicing classroom teachers. I certainly hope that their paper and the challenge it contains comes to the attention not only of language assessment professionals but also that of language teachers themselves.

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