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On the Need for a New Model of Language Proficiency and its Implications for Language Testing: A Review of Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012)

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1. Introduction

The 2012 article, authored by Pishghadam and Zabihi (henceforth P & Z), published in the October issue of the Iranian Journal of Language Testing represents research in the area of language testing and test development that promises to go beyond the development of language tests that measure language per se by addressing learners' 'life-related' issues. The article purports to offer a new model of language proficiency and its applications in the area of language testing and test development.

The authors' attempt to redefine language proficiency in terms of other elements involved in learners' lives is in fact a worthy undertaking, particularly in light of the diverse and ever-expanding population of language learners. However, I am not sure the paper introduces anything new, or the model presented in the paper is an improvement over previous models of language proficiency. I have a few reservations about P & Z's argument: first, the article does not do justice to the previous literature; as a result, the case for the need for a new model of language proficiency is weakly introduced. Also, the theory (i.e., Applied ELT) underpinning the proposed model of proficiency is not sound; no evidence has been produced in support of its plausibility, internal consistency, and rationale. But more importantly, it is not clear what constitutes this new model of proficiency and how its application to the field of language testing is justified.

The objective of the article, as stated in the abstract, is the introduction of a "... *Life-Language Test* as a new concept in the field of language testing, drawing on recent trends in the field of English language teaching". Also stated in the abstract are the paper's discussion points, organized around mainly four sections that:

- a) provide a review of the models of language proficiency proposed to date,
- b) introduce the Theory of Applied ELT
- c) introduce a Life-Language Model of Proficiency,
- d) provide evidence in support of the construct validity of life-language tests, and argue that "language testers should now adopt new roles as *Educational Language Testers*"

The discussion below will proceed in that same order.

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2. The review of literature

Given the main premise of this paper – i.e., the introduction of a new model of proficiency – an in-depth and accurate review of the existing models of language ability/communicative competence and their focus areas is critical to this discussion. What is the definition of language proficiency adopted by previous models? What are the differences, if any? How do different conceptualizations of language proficiency manifest themselves in different models of communicative competence proposed to date? What is the definition of language proficiency adopted in this particular study? And, how the need for a new and improved model of language proficiency is justified? What is lacking? These questions need to be addressed in a coherent and clear manner to make a case for the new model proposed here. Although the paper is not clear on what exactly ‘life issues/skills’ represent, what it seems to suggest is that language tests should measure not only language abilities but also life skills that are important in learners’ lives, and that for this to happen, the existing models of language proficiency need to be revised. However, in order to convincingly argue the need for a new model, the authors would need to show that all models of proficiency/communicative competence since Lado (1961) do not account for such life-related elements. The review of literature should have therefore focused on how, and, the extent to which, the existing models do/do not account for non-linguistic real-life elements. P & Z should have then highlighted, with evidence, the inadequacies that justify the need for a new model. This of course requires that the authors first specify the constructs that completely account for what they call ‘life skills’ and ‘various issues from other disciplines’; if that is at all possible.

In fact, influenced by Hymes’ (1972) model, all later models of communicative competence contain the abilities underlying performance to different degrees. Canale and Swain’s (1980) model, for example, distinguishes between communicative competence and ‘actual performance’ in real-life contexts (Fulcher, 2010). Canale’s 1983 expansion of the model, on the other hand, included ‘actual communication’ in an attempt to account for the psychological and contextual factors affecting performances. Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996) present, in a detailed manner, the areas of language knowledge and meta-cognitive strategies that interact in actual language use contexts. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) then present a pedagogically adapted model of communicative competence based on Bachman and Palmer’s 1996 framework of language ability. Celce-Murcia et al. argue that by including ‘actional competence’, the model better accounts for the pedagogical needs of the communicative language teaching classroom. Celce-Murcia (1997), however, revises the model to account for learners’ intercultural needs by including a new component – the ‘interactional’ competence. More recently, Bachman and Palmer (2010), reintroduce their framework of language ability with certain modifications. The framework is intended to account for all instances of language use (i.e., creation or interpretation of discourse) in both test and non-test real-life contexts. P & Z’s assertion (in Section 3) that previous models’ “focal concern has been the measurement of language skills....” is, therefore, unsubstantiated.

3. The theory of Applied ELT

According to P & Z, the conception of language proficiency needs to be expanded in light of the ‘theory of Applied ELT’ (Pishghadam, 2011). This proposition is problematic on several levels:

First, it is not at all clear what ‘ELT’ in Applied ELT stands for. The abbreviation ELT is used – as part of Applied ELT, and independently – numerous times throughout the paper, yet it does not consistently represent the same concept rendering the text impenetrable. The source article (Pishghadam, 2011), where the concept of Applied ELT is supposedly first introduced, never provides a definition for ELT; the readers are left to guess their way through the article. I picked up scattered in many parts of that article that ELT in fact stands for ‘English Language Teaching’; there is certainly no reference to *language testing* in Pishghadam (2011). The present article however, in Section 3, defines ELT in Applied ELT as ‘Educational Language Testing’. This conceptual reversal undermines the very point the authors are trying to make here. The whole purpose of Figure 1 is to argue why a new fourth component, ‘educational language testing’, needs to be added to the model, but if ‘applied educational language testing’ is already at the core of the model influencing areas of ‘teaching’, ‘syllabus design’ and ‘teacher education’, adding a fourth component representing language testing is a moot point.

Second, assuming that ELT stands for ‘English Language Teaching’, I do not see how the application of a theory informed by *English* as a foreign/second language teaching can be a basis for a theoretical model of language proficiency that is supposed to account for language proficiency in general. Note that most recent models of language ability/communicative competence are language-neutral with principles applicable to different languages. They account for instances of language use in real-life, pedagogical, and assessment contexts. P & Z’s claim that their proposed model is an ‘extension’ of previous models is thus questionable.

Third, it is not clear what the main tenets of the theory of ‘Applied ELT’ (Pishghadam, 2011), frequently referred to throughout the paper, are. Apart from the ‘opinions’, ‘beliefs’ and ‘observations’ of the authors and references to EFL/ESL classrooms in limited contexts, the paper presents no evidence in support of the theory. The presentation and description of the theory in Figure 1 has two obvious shortcomings:

(a) Major links between Applied ELT and such areas as language teaching, syllabus design, teacher education, and language testing are not convincingly discussed. Consider ‘syllabus design’ component, for example; no explanation has been offered as to the implications of Applied ELT for syllabus design. Nor is it clear what a ‘life syllabus’ actually looks like. What are the criteria for the selection and organization of the language content and/or ‘life issues’ in such a syllabus? What are some examples of learning/teaching activities used in a life syllabus? What are the learners’ and teachers’ roles in such a syllabus? What form would the instructional materials used by a life syllabus take? These questions that are at the heart of syllabus design all remain unanswered. They are not addressed in Pishghadam & Zabihi (2012) either. The authors, nevertheless, underline that in their proposed life syllabus (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2012); the language learner is viewed as a ‘whole person’. The term *whole-person* was first used by Curran in 1972 to refer to learning taking place in a communicative situation in which both teachers and learners “experience a sense of wholeness” (p. 90). *Whole-person learning* view of language was a ‘holistic’ view of learning based on which the Community Language Learning method was developed (LaForge, 1983). Also, whereas Community Language Learning method was praised because of its emphasis on the learner and the humanistic aspect of language learning, its critics expressed concern over its ever-changing objectives that would in turn make the evaluation of language abilities difficult (see Richards & Rodgers, 2001). P & Z need to explain how a life-language test takes into account the complexities of a whole-person approach completely and reliably.

(b) The interrelationships between the components of Figure 1 are not explained, nor is it clear how the four components of the model relate to one another. The direction of the arrows seems to be haphazard since the type of input from one box to another is not specified. It is difficult to accept the assertions in the article if the concepts fundamental to the proposed theory are not described.

4. Life-Language Model of Proficiency

As for the model of language proficiency itself, what section 4 seems to suggest is a set of constructs (listed in the appendix) – based on the works of Bachman & Palmer (1996) and Watson & Glaser (1980) – that could be used for the development of a testing instrument that measures both language and critical language ability. What is presented in the appendix, however, does not qualify as a model of language proficiency that is expected to account for all instances of language use as well as the vast areas of ‘life-related’ issues, which seems to be the premise of this paper. It is not a test (or sample test) either. What a Life-Language model of proficiency and a life-language test look like remains to be seen.

In addition, contrary to the claims earlier in the paper, no link has been made between the model discussed in section 4 and the theory of Applied ELT much heralded in Section 3. In fact, the idea of teaching ‘critical thinking’ skills alongside language skills is not something new. It has previously been proposed and different techniques integrating critical thinking skills in both first and second language classrooms have been developed (see Witherhold, 1995; Kagan, 1992; Olsen & Kagan, 1992 among others). Cooperative Language Learning (CLL) is one example of a language teaching approach designed to develop critical thinking skills as well as the areas of communicative competence (see Richards & Rodgers, 2001). CLL has been extensively researched and its theoretical foundations as well as its pedagogical applications to first and second language development have been systematically presented before (e.g., see Johnson et al., 1994).

5. The construct validity of Life-Language tests

The paper provides no data-based evidence from empirical studies conducted in support of the construct validity of a Life-Language test. It is not clear how the process of construct validation is conducted and what tests have been subjected to this validation. The paper seems to ignore a number of basic details and fundamental distinctions that need to be taken into consideration in the process of validation. These include, but are not limited to: the test purpose, the intended test-taker population, their proficiency level, the context of language use, and the inferences to be made based on the test scores. None has been specified for the purpose of construct validation of a life-language test. Instead, key concepts are defined loosely causing great confusion. Repeated references, for example, are made to terms such as ‘life issues’ and ‘life skills’ throughout the paper without any clear definition offered for these terms. One important consideration is the balance between language-related and life-related constructs measured by a life-language test. Disciplines as diverse as psychology, sociology, neurology, and computer science have been cited as examples of the life-related topics that need to be measured by such tests, but what the authors do not specify is the extent to which they suggest such topics be addressed in a life-language test. How different are life-language tests from the previous tests designed to measure language for specific/academic/professional purposes? More importantly, no distinction has been

made between the first and second language; what are Life-Language tests supposed to measure? First or second language? Or both? At what level? Areas such as critical thinking abilities, self-esteem, and emotional intelligence are primarily developed in first language but usually measured only in advanced second language learners.

Finally, P & Z advocate ‘constancy’ and ‘uniformity’ in test design suggesting that standardized tests be revised to include more of life skills. It is unclear, however, why tests with markedly different purposes (i.e., SAT, GRE, CAT, IELTS, TOEFL) should uniformly represent samples of language proficiency and life skills. IELTS and TOEFL are tests of ‘language proficiency’ intended to measure, first and foremost, the ‘language’ proficiency of the learners of English as a Foreign Language. These tests are administered to hundreds of thousands of test-takers around the world; learners with different language and socio-cultural backgrounds. SAT and GRE on the other hand serve very different purposes; they are mostly taken by proficient academically-motivated native speakers. There is no question that each high-stakes standardized test needs to be validated regularly but this has to be done in light of purposes for which the test has been developed as well as the specific characteristics of the test-taker population and the context for which the test is intended. The paper’s proposal that these tests be revised to uniformly represent areas of life and language is unrealistic at best.

6. Final remarks

The ideas presented in this paper are interesting with potential applications in the field of language testing. Yet, for the reasons briefly discussed in this commentary, the arguments put forth by P & Z are not adequately compelling. This is partly due to the overwhelming conceptual ambiguity and the terminological inexactitude that span the entire paper. It is also due to the absence of a thorough and critical review of the relevant literature to lay the ground work for the new ideas presented here. Also lacking is a concise, focused, evidence-based argument to justify the theoretical framework and the resulting model of language proficiency that underlie the Life-Language Test. The authors need to clarify what exact hypotheses they are proposing, in what domain, for what purposes, in what contexts, and for what group of stakeholders.

The paper suggests, based on anecdotal evidence from *English* language teaching in mostly foreign contexts, that learners’ life issues should be taken into consideration in English language teaching. How this idea morphs into the theory of Applied ELT with applications for such vast domains as ‘educational language teaching’, ‘educational language testing’, ‘teacher education’, and ‘language teaching’ is unclear. This is not to say that the original hypotheses could not potentially be correct, only that substantial evidence derived from rigorous systematic methodology over a long period of time is required to generalize experiences from *English* as a foreign language classrooms to such vast fields as ‘educational teaching’, ‘teacher education’ and ‘educational testing’; and propose a new model of language proficiency.

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