

TIM MCNAMARA: *LANGUAGE TESTING*

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Published by Oxford University Press within a series of *Introductions to Language Study*, this recent book by Tim McNamara was designed to provide a large-scale view of what “is often thought of as an arcane and difficult field, and politically incorrect to boot” [1, p. XIV]. It offers the reader a clear presentation of the essential concepts of language testing, thus preparing the ground for a more detailed and specialized inquiry into this area of study, which can be quite daunting to the novice.

The book is made up of four major sections: **Survey**, **Readings**, **References**, and **Glossary**, following the basic pattern of all the books in the *Oxford Introductions to Language Study* series.

The **Survey** section, the bulkiest of the four, contains an up-to-date overview of language testing, covering its scope and underlying principles, its key concepts and basic concerns. It draws a map of the subject, from the primary question on “What is a language test?”, to the design of language tests in relation to the concept of communication, and to the whole cycle involving test construction, trialling and evaluation; from the rating process and the issue of test validity, to measurement (i.e. the theoretical and empirical analysis of scores and score meanings), and hence to a consideration of the social and educational dimension of language assessment.

Each chapter in the **Survey** section provides a clear and straightforward - but in no way simplistic - description of the area concerned, looking at both traditional and newer forms of language assessment, and the challenges posed by new views of the nature of language and communication. The reader is faced with a host of - often intriguing - questions, and invited to explore ideas with a critical and open mind. Here are only a few of the issues explored in the book:

- “How and why has the nature of language testing changed over the years?”
- “How have views about the nature of language had an impact on test design?”
- “What are the constraints of test development and test operation?”

- “What form should the test task take in order to yield reliable evidence of the test taker’s ability to perform in a certain skill area identified as relevant to the target situation?”
- “How can fairness in the testing process be ensured?”
- “What implications does our choice of test method have on the judgements we make about candidates?”
- “Do identical scores given by different raters mean the same thing?”
- “Which consideration - validity or reliability - should predominate in the assessment of real-life performance?”
- “What counts as proper assessment?”
- “Should access of international students to educational opportunity be restricted on the basis of a language test?”
- “What ethical issues does the test developer face?”

The **Survey** is thus meant to stimulate thought and make the reader aware of something which is, as the author puts it, “a universal feature of social life” [1, p. 3]. It looks at the various facets of language testing from many different perspectives, helping the reader understand its conceptual basis and evaluate its procedures. Significantly, the section ends with a chapter devoted to “**New directions - and dilemmas?**” [1, p. 79], outlining the challenges posed to language testing by new theories of performance, in the context of accelerated technological advance. Looking at the current move towards **computer based testing (CBT)**, and the development of computer adaptive tests, the author analyzes the advantages, as well as the limitations of using computers for the delivery of test materials, raising important questions concerning the validity and reliability of such tests.

Among the dilemmas and the challenges posed by new views, McNamara raises a number of issues related to the assessment of speaking, which has been revealed - both through discourse analysis and pragmatics - as an essentially interactional activity. In particular, a fundamental dilemma for language testing is that of “isolating the contribution of a single individual (the

candidate) in a joint communicative activity” [1, p. 84], which does not depend simply on the individual candidate’s performance, but also on that of the interlocutor(s), equally responsible for the success (or failure) of the communication. Questions like “Whose performance are we assessing?”, “Should we not take the interlocutor into account in our predictions of successful communication?”, “How can that be pinned down in any testing procedure?”, “How can measurement do justice to the multiplicity of selves in interaction in a multiplicity of interactional contexts?” [1, p. 85] appropriately conclude this comprehensive and informative overview of the subject, triggering the need for a closer, inquiring exploration of the “complex and perplexing activity” [1, p. 85] which is language testing.

The second section of the book - **Readings** - contains a selection of texts extracted from the specialist literature on the subject, meant to provide those who want to pursue certain topics in more detail with the specifics of what is said, and how it is said, by various authors. The **Readings** are thus a necessary transition to the more specialist idiom of the linguistics literature, helping the reader to focus on various points in each text, in relation to the issues discussed in the **Survey**, and to the other texts. The extracts come from the works of well-known authors in the field of linguistics and language assessment: Alan Davies, Robert Lado, Bernard Spolsky, Michael Canale and Merrill Swain, Lyle F. Bachman, Dianne Wall and J. Charles Alderson, and other influential writers. Each excerpt is accompanied by questions designed to direct attention to important issues raised in the text and to encourage the reader into close critical reading.

The third section of the book includes annotated **References**, a selection of works (books and articles) for further reading, grouped around the main aspect of language testing which is dealt with in each chapter of the **Survey**. The author has accompanied each title with comments indicating how they deal in more detail with the various issues discussed in the different chapters of the book.

The final section of McNamara’s book is a **Glossary**

of terms used in a special or technical sense in the discipline, explained and cross-referenced to the **Survey**. In this way, it also functions as an index, enabling the reader to locate the term and relate it to the more general discussion in the chapter(s) where it occurs.

The structure of *Language Testing* makes the book flexible in use, allowing different groups of readers to focus on different parts, according to their interests and needs. The various components enable the reader to move from one chapter or topic to another, to select, recap and go deeper into those areas which they find most relevant to their needs. The book is written in clear language, intended to make the explanations and illustrations as accessible as possible to people who have little prior knowledge or expertise in the field. It is therefore particularly suitable for young students who are being initiated into the discipline of linguistics, as well as for teaching practitioners who want to clarify the conceptual ground of the subject and apply its basic principles for their own practical purposes in the classroom. Along with earlier books designed as an introduction to the subject [see 2 and 3], McNamara’s *Language Testing* provides access to specialist knowledge in this complex area of language study, stimulating an awareness of its significance, and an interest to explore it in depth, which, he proves, can be an exciting and illuminating experience. While stressing the complexity - even uncertainty - of the field, the writer invites us to take up the challenge and try to solve some of the dilemmas posed by our evolving understanding of language and communication and by the dazzling technological developments that we have been witnessing lately:

“Language testing is an uncertain and approximate business at the best of times, even if to the outsider this may be camouflaged by its impressive, even daunting, technical (and technological) trappings, not to mention the authority of the institutions whose goals tests serve. (...) A language test is only as good as the theory of language on which it is based, and it is within this area of theoretical inquiry into the essential nature of language and communication that we need to develop our ability to ask the next question. And the next.” [1, p. 86]

REFERENCES

1. McNAMARA, T. - *Language Testing*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000
2. HARRISON, A. - *A Language Testing Handbook*, London, Modern English Publications, Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 1993
3. BAXTER, A. - *Evaluating your Students*, London, Richmond Publishing, 1997

