

Teaching and Learning English
in East Asian Universities

Teaching and Learning English
in East Asian Universities:
Global Visions and Local Practices

Edited by

David D. Qian and Lan Li

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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PREFACE

ENGLISH IN EAST ASIA: TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSING

ANTONY JOHN KUNNAN

Starting from Deng Xiaoping's *Open Door Policy* period (1978 to the 1990s), there has been rapid growth in every public sector endeavor in China. Since then anything about China has involved world-record statistics, mainly because of its geographic and demographic size. It is no different when it comes to English language teaching, learning, and assessing in the university context. According to estimates from Wei and Su (2012), Mainland China has about 390 million learners of English, 30% of these learners (about 130 million) use English often or sometimes, and 20% of these learners (about 78 million) have the ability to at least conduct daily conversations in English. At the tertiary education level, 27 million university students in China are learning English and taking English language tests (Cheng & Curtis, 2010). For instance, the College English Test (CET) was taken by 18 million college students in 2012 (Jin, personal communication), and the number of college applicants who took *Gaokao* (National Matriculation Entrance Test) - the all-important college entrance examination which has an English component - was about 9.5 million in 2011, just a slight drop of one million from previous years (Chen, 2011).

According to a *Xinhua* News Agency report (2013) and TESOL President Deena Boraie's blog (2013), these high volumes may not hold as there have been lower enrolments in recent years due to the lowering of weightage of English from 150 to 100 points in the *Gaokao* (see Murphy, 2013, for similar views). These statistics, of course, are only from the Chinese Mainland, which boasts the largest number of English language learners in East Asia at the university level, and thus, do not include English language learners from other East Asian regions and countries (such as Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Japan and Korea). Nor do the

statistics include the English language learners who use the ubiquitous private tutorial schools and centers - where much teaching and learning of English takes place before and after college hours particularly before all major examinations. If all the regions, countries and organizations from East Asia are included in a survey of English language learners, the English language operation in East Asia could easily be considered the largest in the world.

But as East Asia is large and diverse in terms of socio-economic, linguistic, and ethnic parameters, statistics alone cannot give us an understanding of what goes on in rural and urban university contexts. For example, from just numbers we would not understand the complexities of teaching and assessing listening, speaking, reading and writing, and grammar, vocabulary, and pragmatics; training teachers of English so that the quality of teaching is high with reasonable consistency; designing curriculum and textbook writing well aligned with national/regional language policy and teaching/learning goals; using corpora to investigate linguistic and discourse features of written and spoken discourse; designing, piloting, and researching assessment systems in universities; and the different kinds of learners in terms of their strategies, preferences and so on. To understand this wide gamut of applied linguistics activities in East Asia is thus a very large undertaking. Still, an honest beginning has to be made.

This is what we have in the present collection edited by David D. Qian and Lan Li titled *“Teaching and Learning English in East Asian Universities: Global Visions and Local Practices.”* The 25 papers in the volume were chosen, through a rigorous blind peer review process, from about 91 paper and colloquia sessions at the 7th International Symposium on Teaching English at Tertiary Level held at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in 2011. They are arranged in five sections: Assessing Language Performance, Teaching English Writing, Learner Autonomy, Corpus and Discourse Research, and Learning English in East Asian Contexts. Many of the papers are on familiar topics such as linking assessment to teaching, learning and curriculum, conducting assessment validation research, examining meta-cognitive strategies, investigating teaching and learning English for academic purposes or as a lingua franca, profiling prevailing word lists for language learners, and understanding contextual and cultural influences on the use of first person pronouns. Other papers are on lesser known topics such as non-verbal delivery in speaking assessment, the use of visualization as a reading strategy, learner strategies in a Facebook corpus, effects of discourse signaling cues and rate of speech, and an ontogenetic analysis of college English textbooks, to

name a few. Collectively, the papers showcase English language learning, teaching, and assessing in a range of contexts using a variety of methods and techniques to deal with issues relevant to East Asian teachers, learners and researchers.

If similar collections are produced regularly, over a period of time, a comprehensive picture of the practice and research in teaching, learning, and assessing English in the complex plurilingual communities of East Asia will surely emerge.

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The chapters in this volume were primarily selected, through a blind peer review process, from research papers presented at the 7th International Symposium on Teaching English at Tertiary Level (ISTETL), which was held at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University on the 13th and 14th of October, 2011. The Symposium was attended by over 130 researchers and practitioners from 15 countries in the field of English language teaching at the tertiary level. The 7th ISTETL witnessed the presentation of 91 papers, which were chosen from a large number of submissions, also based on the result of rigorous peer reviews.

We wish to acknowledge the support from the Department of English and PolyU-Tsinghua U Centre for Language Sciences at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, whose generous sponsorship made this event possible. We would like to thank all colleagues and research students who contributed to this Symposium in various ways in the process of organizing and running the Symposium, including reviewing the abstracts and papers, providing logistic support, and chairing the presentation sessions. We would also like to thank all the Symposium participants who made this Symposium an enjoyable and successful event. In particular, we are grateful to our supportive colleagues at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Tsinghua University, who have made valuable contributions to the continuous development of academic collaboration between the Department of English at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Tsinghua University.

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SECTION 1:
ASSESSING LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE

CHAPTER ONE

LINKING ASSESSMENT TO CURRICULA, TEACHING, AND LEARNING IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

ALISTER CUMMING

How should curricula, assessment, and learning be related in programs of language education? I describe four alternative approaches that have emerged, been widely discussed, and variously developed in recent decades: (a) proficiency tests, (b) curriculum standards, (c) diagnostic and self-assessments, and (c) dynamic assessment. Each approach represents a relatively distinct option, arising from unique conceptual bases, asserting certain kinds of authority, using specific technologies, and with differing values, implications, and limitations. In educational practices the approaches often converge, and their combinations may even be necessary to achieve effective instruction and program organisation. For these reasons, educators need to distinguish the respective values, functions, and limitations of each approach so as to avoid confusing them when making particular policy and pedagogical decisions.

Keywords: assessment, curriculum, teaching, learning, language education

Introduction

A primary focus of language educators round the world in recent decades has involved efforts to relate assessments systematically, effectively, and productively to curricula, teaching, and learning. These efforts have been evident in almost every language program locally, regionally, and internationally as well as among professional associations

and government agencies responsible for language education. The present chapter builds on and refines ideas about these efforts that I reviewed in Cumming (2009), but here I distinguish and analyse four alternative, competing approaches that have emerged to link assessments to language curricula, teaching, and learning: (a) proficiency tests, (b) curriculum standards, (c) diagnostic and self-assessments, and (c) dynamic assessment. Each of these four approaches offers an alternative conceptual basis, asserting certain kinds of authority, using specific technologies, and with differing values, implications, and limitations.

Everyone working in language education makes use of and experiences all of these approaches routinely because they necessarily combine and interrelate in most pedagogical circumstances, though to greater or lesser extents and with greater or lesser visibility. Indeed, in some situations of language education, assessment practices may develop almost organically and harmoniously from the pedagogical practices of experienced teachers (e.g., Rea-Dickins, 2001), the efforts of exemplary school administrators and staff (Darling-Hammond, Aness & Falk, 1995), or rational processes of curriculum planning (e.g., Brown, 2008). However, in most situations of language education internationally there is a less easy or compatible relationship between assessment, curricula, teaching, and learning—as signaled in recent theories and publications arguing that uses of language assessment need to be justified carefully and evaluated critically (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Fulcher, 2010; Shohamy, 2001). Given the powerful authority that formal tests or curriculum standards can exert over language teaching and learning, I sense that educators need to recognise, distinguish, and sometimes even challenge the respective values, functions, and limitations of each approach to linking assessments with language curricula, teaching and learning so that the guiding logic of each approach is not confused when making decisions about language program policies and practices.

Proficiency Tests

Language proficiency tests have long exerted a primary, often even domineering, influence over language curricula, teaching, and learning, particularly where such tests are used for high-stakes purposes. Such purposes span a wide range of consequential situations internationally, including selection into programs of higher education (Chappelle, Enright & Jamieson, 2008; Weir & Milanovic, 2003), certification for professional

licensure (O'Neil, Buckendahl, Plake, & Taylor, 2007; Coniam & Falvey, 2007), confirmation of qualifications to complete formal schooling (Cheng, 2005; Cheng, Klinger & Zheng, 2007; Huhta, Kalaja, & Pitkanen-Huhta, 2006), and eligibility for educational programs to receive continued funding (Harper, Platt, Naranjo & Boynton, 2007; Rivera & Collum, 2006).

Conceptual Bases, Authority, and Technologies

Common, fundamental principles and conventions of language test design, administration, and use were established progressively over the past century in North America and Europe then adopted and emulated in most other societies internationally such that they now form a core basis for policies in schools and higher education in most countries (Spolsky, 1995). The theoretical and methodological sophistication of research to validate high-stakes language proficiency tests has increased greatly in past decades, particularly for tests such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International Language Testing System), which dominate the international markets for assessing English proficiency for admissions to English-medium university programs (Cumming, 2007, 2013; Stoyhoff, 2009). Similar expectations for test quality and validation research apply, as well, to the many national or state tests of language abilities that are used for selection and certification decisions around the world.

The design, validation, and uses of language proficiency tests follow concepts of psychometrics. Human abilities can be measured through standardised instruments and procedures, upon which the performance of individuals can be charted as a normal distribution on an established scale of relevant abilities (ascertained by prior research, content definitions, and field testing as well as prior administrations of the same test). An individual's score on the test is scaled in relation to all others who have taken the test, assuming that the test is valid in assessing what it claims to assess (and not other, irrelevant factors), and that each version and administration of the test is equivalent. Institutions using information from the test then establish minimum cut-scores on the test to represent the standards of abilities expected for decisions about selection or certification (Cizek, 2001).

The content and tasks on language proficiency tests are intended to be independent of any particular curriculum or educational program. Scores

and scales for proficiency tests are established through research on populations in societies at large (i.e., normal distributions) and pre-testing of items in prior administrations of the test rather than as assessments of achievement through any specific program of study. If proficiency tests were oriented to any specific curriculum, then their results would be biased and unfair (to people who had not experienced that curriculum), and the logic of the test as a representation of language abilities generally would be compromised. For this reason, independent agencies (e.g., Educational Testing Service, Cambridge Examinations Syndicate, or national or state ministries) develop and administer most large-scale language assessments so as to be at arm's length from the providers of educational services.

Implications and Limitations

Assumptions that proficiency tests are valid and are independent from particular curricula make them useful for high-stakes decisions such as admissions to competitive programs or certification to perform certain kinds of work. From an educational perspective, however, the primary implication is that proficiency tests are wholly separate from any curriculum. No links to curricula or teaching are expected. Relationships to learning are presumed to occur “naturally” in society or through personal experience. Moreover, this assumption puts a premium on extensive, high quality research to provide strong justifications and continuing evidence for the validity of language proficiency tests (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Cumming, 2013; Purpura, 2008).

A second implication about the nature of language proficiency tests is that they only provide general information about people's language abilities. Proficiency tests are not sufficiently precise or attuned to provide information about students' achievements in any particular educational program (except perhaps after periods of years rather than months). Indeed, the scores from any test fluctuate slightly (usually about 10% on the best tests) between administrations and versions of a test, as indicated by the SEM (standard error of measurement) reported for each well-established test.

Thirdly, to establish how to interpret and use scores from a language proficiency test, educational institutions are obliged to set (and monitor) their own standards or cut-scores related to their particular educational purpose and context, because these educational interpretations and uses

are not supposed to be associated with the nature of a proficiency test itself (Cizek, 2001; O'Neil, Buckendahl, Plake, & Taylor, 2007). A related complication is that for most decision-making purposes, institutions want proficiency tests to involve comprehensive assessments of language abilities, demonstrating that test takers can read, write, comprehend, and speak a language proficiently, but in practice, decision makers such as university registrars or immigration officers only can reasonably use single scores from proficiency tests. So there is a conflict between the broad extent of information about a person's language abilities elicited on a proficiency test and the limited extent of information that is, ultimately, needed to make decisions from scores on that test.

This conflict about the extent of information on language proficiency tests relates to a fourth implication. Language proficiency tests necessarily provide a minimal sampling of people's abilities—not only for the reason that people can only perform competently without undue fatigue in test contexts for several hours but also for the efficiency of test design and administration in order to help ensure equivalence across different versions of a test as well as to keep the costs of development, administration, and scoring reasonable. Correspondingly, the items and tasks on language proficiency tests are simple, brief, and in highly conventional genres. As a consequence, language proficiency tests tend to under-represent, or at least minimally represent, the constructs that they intend to assess. Proficiency tests administered within a few hours and at reasonable financial costs can never be expected to represent fully the domains of communication that language and human interaction entail nor all those that might be taught or studied in a particular educational program.

Two related implications follow from the minimal representation of language abilities that are feasible on a proficiency test. One is that the types of items, tasks and content tend to be quite general and so are easily coached, leading teachers and students to practice these limited representations rather than to develop a fuller range of language abilities. This consequence is widely disparaged as negative washback on teaching and learning (Bailey, 1996; Hillocks, 2002). The second, related implication is that differing and conflicting cultures and values about assessment have emerged among language educators: One culture, primarily the responsibility of institutional administrators, is concerned with proficiency tests, and the other culture, primarily the responsibility of practicing educators, is concerned with formative assessments in classroom contexts, and there is limited communication or consensus

between the two (Hamp-Lyons, 2007; Leung & Lewkowicz, 2006; Rea-Dickins, 2007).

Curriculum Standards

The recent decades' movement to specify standards for language curricula arose out of increased demands for accountability and standardisation in education generally, first within large educational programs, by stipulating the intended outcomes of language programs with the aims of clarifying these for all stakeholders, and then to evaluate the effectiveness of programs in achieving the intended aims (Brindley, 1998, 2000; Linn, 2000). On a broader scale, the formulation of standard terms, benchmarks, or attainment levels across educational programs and countries has had the purpose of facilitating the international and intra-national mobility of people to seek higher education, employment, or economic opportunities in reference to common standards for accreditation as well as for language professionals to exchange information and resources and to promote desired behaviours in language learning and teaching, such as communicative competence and cross-cultural understanding (Council of Europe, 2001; TESOL, 1998, 2001; Trim, 1998).

Conceptual Bases, Authority, and Technologies

There is general recognition that all stakeholders in education—teachers, learners, program administrators, families, employers, government funders—benefit from increased clarification about the goals and processes of education. To this end, the development of language abilities are, at least in a general sense, somewhat predictable, and experienced language educators can, given resources and opportunities for collaboration, reach a consensus on the conventional progressions of language development as well as criteria to judge that they have been achieved. The development of curriculum standards, both in local jurisdictions and internationally, have thus followed models of consensus building and cooperation among language professionals (Mckay, 2007; McKay, Coppari, Cumming, Graves, Lopriore & Short, 2001). In turn, these frameworks arising from professional consensus have been instantiated into educational policies as curriculum standards by government agencies and by professional associations, and then further by professional training and textbooks.

Implications and Limitations

No doubt educators, students, and other stakeholders benefit from knowing, deliberating, appreciating common goals, expectations, and trajectories for language learning (Cumming, 2001a; Nunan, 2007; Johnstone, 2000; Trim, 1998). Moreover, what has become the conventional nature of curriculum standards—formulated as descriptive criteria about learners’ competencies or performances at increasing levels of language proficiency—can be usefully informed, supported, and complemented by criterion-referenced approaches to assessment (Brown & Hudson, 2002; Lynch & Davidson, 1994; North, 2000).

Nonetheless, numerous limitations have emerged in the implementation of curriculum standards. Foremost is the recognition that frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) are just that: “frameworks” and “common points” of professional reference. They are not assessment instruments nor actual curricula for particular programs, learner populations, or educational purposes. Considerable interpretation, adaptation, and program development are needed to form such frameworks into curricula. Moreover, none of the existing major language proficiency tests have been designed on the basis of particular curriculum standards, nor perhaps should they logically be (as suggested above), nor are they intended to be measures of achievement in reference to particular curricula. So there is inevitably a disjuncture between the norm-referenced constructs informing language proficiency tests and the expectations of local educators and curricula based on principles of criterion-referencing (Council of Europe, 2009; Fulcher, 2009; Lee, 2008; Moore, 2005). Attempting to resolve these disjunctures confront the incommensurability of the consensus-based approach to developing curriculum standards and the empirical, psychometric science of proficiency testing. The validity of curriculum standards is compromised by the lack of empirical research to support their assumptions about sequences or qualities of language learning.

Further, related limitations arise from the general nature of curriculum standards. The terminology, criteria, and sequencing available to distinguish learners’ proficiency levels are inevitably broad and imprecise, producing variations in teachers’ judgments and difficulties in aligning assessments (Brindley, 2000; Cumming, 2001a). Speaking and writing abilities can be observed in classroom tasks, but learners’ reading and listening comprehension are difficult to assess without formal instruments or self-reports. In turn, curriculum standards apply more readily to

educational programs with general rather than specific purposes, thereby reducing curriculum expectations to common or vaguely defined norms (rather than addressing variability systematically or promoting excellence), and students' normative language behaviours and textbook directives tend to become the primary focus for teachers rather than other such fundamental aspects of curricula as the conditions, qualities, or opportunities for learning (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver & Thwaite, 2001; Byrnes, 2007; Canagarajah, 2005, 2006; Cumming, 2001b; Davison, 2004; Gipps & J. Cumming, 2005; Lee, 2008; Hornberger, 2003; Murray, 2008; Wall & Horak, 2008). All of these limitations inherent in curriculum standards have pointed toward the major, continuing investments in teachers' professional development required to implement curriculum standards effectively, as evidenced by major projects in Australia (Brindley, 2000; Murray, 2008), the U.S. (Short, Gomez, Cloud, Katz, Gottlieb & Malone, 2000), and the past few years' focus on "empowering language professionals" in projects organised through the European Centre for Modern Languages (e.g., Piccardo et al., 2012).

Diagnostic and Self-Assessments

Alongside the development of curriculum standards and language proficiency tests in recent decades have been efforts to bolster the responsibilities, teaching approaches, and resources for learners to assume increased responsibilities for and control over their own language learning. From a pedagogical perspective, diagnostic assessments aim to realise, on the one hand, the fundamental pedagogical principle, established long ago by John Dewey, that students have unique, individual needs and capacities and, on the other hand, the findings from research showing that individual differences of various kinds abound in second language acquisition (e.g., Dornyei, 2009). People have unique motivations for learning languages, based on personal and cultural histories, aims, and aspirations. The skill or craft of teaching is to realise, support, and inspire these potentials. From a learning perspective, second languages are obviously one ability that humans can develop effectively outside of formal education, promoting the importance of independent, "good" strategies for language learning (e.g., Oscarson, 1978).

Conceptual Bases, Authority, and Technologies

Alderson (2005) produced an extensive argument for the need to develop increased techniques, methods, and technologies for language assessment to serve diagnostic purposes, pointing out how poorly developed this aspect of language assessment remains. Alderson's analyses were based on his collaborative experiences preparing DIALANG, a web-based self-assessment system for 14 commonly learned European languages in relation to the Common European Framework of Reference (<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/researchenterprise/dialang/about>). This one project stands out as exemplary alongside related curriculum initiatives such as the European language portfolio or passport (Little, 2005).

However, other resources and rationales to support or theorise diagnostic or self-assessment in language educators are distinctly limited and disparate. There are a few edited collections (Ekbatani & Pierson, 2000), research syntheses (Ross, 1998), and exploratory inquiries about classroom practices (Colby-Kelly & Turner, 2007), into cognitive-diagnostic applications from formal tests (Jang, 2009), and initiatives to increase the information value of formal writing tests for teaching purposes (Knoch, 2009). Theories of goal-directed, self-regulated learning offer considerable promise, but likewise remain at a preliminary stage of development for language learning (Cumming, 2006). Inquiry into pedagogical practices for formative responses to students' writing in second languages is perhaps the only area where research has been prolific, but the contextual variables are so enormous as to defy the formulation of general educational principles (Ferris, 2003; Goldstein, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Leki, Cumming & Silva, 2008).

Implications and Limitations

The very idea of diagnostic and self-assessment implies that teaching and learning are individually focused, personally relevant, differentiated, variable, and achievement oriented—rather than uniform as in curriculum standards or proficiency tests. These humanistic values are no doubt cherished and developed by many language teachers around the world, albeit in diverse ways (e.g., as demonstrated by Li, 1996 in reference to teachers of writing in the U.S. and China). Language teachers and learners alike, moreover, vary considerably in their abilities and capacities to

assess learning (Edelenbos & Kubanek-German, 2004). Systems for diagnostic and self-assessments are definitely one area where research and development are sorely needed in language education.

Dynamic Assessment

Like diagnostic and self-assessment, dynamic assessment offers a substantial and compelling challenge to conventions of proficiency testing and curriculum standards in education, but dynamic assessment distinguishes itself by its bases in socio-cultural learning theory. The fundamental premise of dynamic assessment is that learning, teaching, and assessment are integrally and inherently integrated processes, which should not be separated, as is conventionally done by educational institutions and promoted in longstanding models of curriculum organisation (e.g., Tyler, 1949).

Conceptual Bases, Authority, and Technologies

The value of dynamic assessment for language education has been put forward in various publications in recent years, outlining its grounding in Vygotskian, socio-cultural theories of learning (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Leung, 2007; Poehner, 2008; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). Teaching, learning, and assessment necessarily interact in and through the formation of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), representing the difference between what a learner can, and cannot do, with assistance from instructors and more capable learners. These relationships are, according to the theory and case study analyses, how learning occurs: Higher mental functions (such as language and literacy) are internalised through interactions between novices and experts. Importantly, assessment that occurs through the interactions between learners and more capable others in a ZPD is presumed to indicate people's capacities for development better than independent performance because it shows "the [individual's] immediate future and his dynamic developmental state" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 86).

Implications and Limitations

Dynamic assessment makes the radical assertion that teaching, learning, and assessment are fundamentally interrelated, and that their value for language development resides in maintaining and fostering that

continuing, integral interrelationship. Teaching, learning, and assessment are wholly dependent on, and realised through, local contexts and qualities of interactions. Logically, therefore, curricula and tests can only be standardised in a very general sense. Proficiency tests may indicate the results of students' learning but not their capacities or potential for development. Separating assessments into formal tests, teaching into classroom lectures, and learning into individual studying reduces the value of their integrated nature and so may even be counter-productive or misleading.

The challenge that arises for mass education, however, concerns how to organise learning, teaching, and assessment so it is feasible for them to occur together when class sizes are large and demands on teachers' time and resources are many. Observations and analyses of dynamic assessment typically involve case studies of tutoring or other one-on-one interactions between teachers and learners or peer group interactions. That is where a ZPD is most visible. However, if the learning theory is right, then language and literacy learning must occur in large classes as well, as Freedman and Delp (2007) have observed.

Summary and Implications

The purpose of this analysis has been to distinguish four alternative approaches to linking assessment, teaching, and learning in language programs by identifying their respective conceptual bases, values, and limitations. In most educational practices, all four approaches probably occur in tandem, so my intention is not to argue that one is inherently preferable over the other. For example, in assigning final grades to students for language courses, instructors are obliged to consider the proficiency levels of individuals, the fulfillment of curriculum standards, the achievement of individual needs and goals, and the development and efforts made through teaching, learning, and interactions. My intention, however, is that language educators should when using these approaches also recognise and not confuse their respective technologies, values, and authority.