

Unsettling issues in language assessment: critical sociolinguistic advocacy for equality and social justice

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Despite being in its very essence a practice embedded in social valuations of language(s), of individuals and groups, language assessment has received only limited and sporadic attention and discussion in mainstream sociolinguistics thus far. This lack of engagement between the two fields is especially illustrated by their differing conceptualizations of language. While sociolinguistics has now, through concepts like translanguaging and plurilingualism, generally adopted a view of language(s) as fluid entities whose boundaries are socially constructed, language assessment continues to rely on a monolingual and static construct of language and language competence. In addition, research on language assessment tends to end when test scores are delivered to the various stake holders, while the consequences and uses of tests and their impacts on test takers, who are being categorized, classified, gatekept, punished and disciplined, are ignored. There is an urgent need therefore for a critical sociolinguistic analysis of language assessment practices aimed instigating a paradigm shift toward more fairness, equity and justice, at the level of policy and practice.

This symposium consists of seven papers, each taking a sociolinguistic perspective to the analysis of particular unsettling issues related to language assessment and drawing on current sociolinguistic theories in proposing micro-level reforms which can lead to a macro-level paradigm shift. The first four papers focus on discussing the value of multilingual vis-à-vis monolingual assessment, paying particular attention to the voices of test takers and the manner in which these are suppressed by excessively rigid assessment practices in a variety of contexts. The final three papers contextualize language assessment with reference to broader issues, particularly with regard to how language ideological agendas establish obstacles for multilingual assessment and, in turn, the strategies that may be adopted in order to challenge such constraints.

Individual contributor abstracts

- 1) Unsettling approaches to assessing academic achievements for L2 learners.

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Large paradoxes exist between sociolinguistic theories and language assessment as the latter is based on assumptions of language being a stable and fixed construct while sociolinguistics views language as based on varied contexts and flexible from one person to another, native and non-native, non-standard, multilingual and translanguaged. This is especially manifested

in educational settings where a vast number of students for whom the medium of instruction in school is their L2 are forced to perform academically in their L2 while in reality they continue to rely on their full language repertoire (i.e., their L1) when processing academic content. In this paper I will attempt to resolve this unsettled paradox by demonstrating the academic gap that exists between L1 and L2 learners in favor of the L1s, resulting from inability of the L2 learners to manifest their academic knowledge in that language. I will then report results from multi-method studies (employing focus groups, think-aloud protocols, and interviews) which illustrate the advantages that these L-2 learners gain – cognitive, emotional and academic – when testing strategies get closer to their true way of language processing by incorporating their L1 plus the L2. Yet, these advantages vary based on background and contexts. Multiple conclusions regarding assessment policy and strategies are drawn, among them the need to examine appropriate theories from other fields in relation to the changing reality of languages and their assessment and the significance of these approaches in terms of equality, justice and fairness.

2) Translanguaging for and as assessment in the Canadian education context

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Across Canadian classrooms, particularly in urban centres, students and teachers actively engage a multitude of semiotic resources for communication and meaning making. A translanguaging theory of language is useful to make sense of the sociolinguistic context of this school-based language use, reflecting the strategic, dynamic language practices of bi/multilingual students; however, engaging with multilingualism in education, and assessment in particular, is a complex issue. Whereas students' plural and partial linguistic competences may be a welcome resource for learning, the language of instruction and assessment is generally mandated as official languages (English/French).

Significant research has demonstrated that incorporating students' multilingual competence for cognitive processing and learning new academic knowledge supports student learning in myriad ways. Building on these understandings and insights from practice, teachers are experimenting with multilingual approaches to assessment on an ad-hoc basis; however, empirical research is needed to understand better understand its impact and use, and to develop a systematic approach to multilingual assessment in Canadian education.

Engaging with these considerations, this presentation reports findings from the first phase of research-practice partnership conducted with a local school district to explore approaches to multilingual assessment with teachers and bi/multilingual youth in English as a Second Language (ESL) language and science classes at the secondary level. The study examined teachers' assessment practices and student language and curriculum learning (i.e. events, patterns around multilingual approaches to instruction and assessment; academic performance) documented through a range of methods. Broadly, multilingual approaches recognized the rich linguistic resources of bi/multilingual students, providing them an opportunity to demonstrate academic knowledge and literacy skills using multidiscursive practices. Findings suggest that

the use of multilingual assessments contributed to students' academic performance and more accurately reflected students' knowledge and skills, allowing teachers to make useful inferences about students' teaching and learning needs.

3) Unsettling multilingual assessment: pupils' voices

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Various authors argue that, when multilingual pupils who are not yet sufficiently proficient in the language of schooling take a test which was designed for monolingual pupils on another subject than language, this is considered unfair and invalid, since the pupils will not be able to demonstrate their true abilities (Abedi & Lord, 2010; Li & Suen, 2012; Menken, 2010; Shohamy, 2001). The Educational Testing Service acknowledges that multilingual pupils should be provided with accommodations to overcome unfair challenges they face during the assessment (ETS, 2009). Tied to questions of validity and fairness as it is, the debate on multilingual assessment is also about social justice (Garcia & Leiva, 2014).

In response, especially when it comes to assessment, teachers often raise the question whether it is fair to assess new language learners differently from their (monolingual) peers (Dong, 2004 in Roy, 2016). At the same time, there is little research available about pupils' perspectives on fairness of multilingual assessment. This study seeks to fill a gap in assessment research and it does so by viewing accommodation practices through the insiders' lens of the pupils. Both mono- and multilingual pupils (total n=35) in fifth grade of primary education (age 10-11) were interviewed in a context of a test situation that displayed a range of accommodations. In this presentation, it will be argued that results of the study indicate that the pupils' voices with regard to multilingual accommodations are less unsettling than some of the other school actors.

4) Exploring Unsettled Issues in Learners' Multilingual Self-Assessment

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Within the pertinent issues associated with multilingualism in educational contexts is the unsettled question of the factors predicting success in immigrant students' academic performance. Research suggests that immigrants' performance in an additional language (i.e., second or third) is related to a myriad of factors, e.g., arrival age, exposure, attitudes, motivation, educational and individual factors. Yet, the relationship among these factors remains unsettled. Moreover, little research has examined the effect of these variables on immigrants' multilingual self-assessment (SA), i.e., perceived level of academic functioning in the languages at their disposal. Most research has focused on immigrants' proficiency in second language, utilizing almost exclusively traditional assessment instruments, usually tests which are based on monolingual constructs conceptualizing the multilingual learner's language

knowledge as consisting of separate linguistic systems rather than a holistic integrated entity, the current view of multilingual knowledge.

The study reported in this presentation investigates the relationship between demographic (ethnic identity, arrival age, gender, SES) linguistic (exposure, perceived multilingual functioning), and social psychological (attitude, motivation, parental aspirations) factors and immigrants' multilingual SA. The sample includes 370 immigrant youth with different language backgrounds studying in Israeli schools. Drawing on holistic views of multilingualism, the study utilizes a multilingual 'can-do' instrument for examining students' SA in three languages: (1) their heritage language (2) Hebrew, the school language, and (3) English taught as an international language. Questionnaires were administered to collect information about the participants' background factors.

Results reveal a combination of analogous and language specific demographic, linguistic and social psychological variables differentially predicting SA in each language. The results highlight the role of the sociolinguistic context and the specificity of each language as a source of variation in multilingual learning among immigrant students besides individual characteristics. The results imply that immigrants' perceived plurilingual repertoire along with context specific variables must be taken into account in their assessment.

5) Heteroglossic Approaches to Connecting Assessment and Learning: Breaking the Monoglossic norms in a Public Relations Writing Course in Hong Kong

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In Hong Kong, academic literacy in English is a key indicator of success in tertiary education. To promote discipline-specific academic literacies, Hong Kong teachers and students are expected to follow a monoglossic approach to develop “appropriateness” (Leeman, 2005; Flores, 2013; Flores & Rosa, 2015) in academic literacy comparable to their native English-speaking counterparts working internationally in various targeted academic disciplines, such as Business and Public Relations. In the process of adopting monoglossic teaching, learning and assessment tasks in English, Hong Kong students are often confined by monoglossic ideological practices in educational settings and deprived of their right to use the bi/multilingual and multimodal resources they have picked up in everyday genres and registers to leverage their performance in academic genres and registers (Lin, 2016). The monoglossic approach to discipline-specific academic assessment and learning may account for the frequently reported students' “deficiencies” in producing academic texts comparable to international university academic standards. Drawing on research and critical reviews from international scholars (García, 2009; Garcia, Lin & May, 2016), this paper uses Nexus Analysis (Scollon, 2004; Scollon & Scollon, 2007) to provide an ethnographic account (with field notes, lesson observations, assessment/teaching materials design and reviews, student writing samples, semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussion) of a pilot case study in renovating the curricular and assessment design and practice of a Public Relations Writing

course for 70 bilingual/trilingual tertiary students, exploring how heteroglossic approaches (Bakhtin, 1981) to language and literacy education may support more culturally sustainable assessment, teaching and learning practices through mobilising multilingual and multimodal CLIL resources in the Multimodalities-Entextualisation Cycles (MEC) (Lin, 2015, 2016) and ultimately suggesting feasible ways to liberate more academic achievement opportunities for bilingual students in Hong Kong, in response to social justice and equity concerns in multicultural literacies (Denos, Toohey, Neilson & Waterstone, 2009).

6) Co-constructing social justice through multilingual classroom practices and assessments

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In language education in Mexico, the national curriculum portrays English as the “key to success.” At the same time, Mexico federal policies recognize 364 varieties of Indigenous languages within schools. Although there have been movements working towards multilingual or intercultural education—historically and presently—English has been prioritized over Indigenous languages. The erasure and displacement of the sociolinguistic multilingual realities in Mexico, especially related to Indigenous languages through “English-only” policies in classroom, and specifically assessment practices, contribute to ongoing inequitable education practices that marginalize Indigenous peoples.

Utilizing decolonizing theories (Mignolo, 2002) and critical views of assessment practices and their social consequences (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2017; Schissel, 2019; Shohamy, 2006), we conducted a participatory action research (PAR) project in an English language teaching teacher preparation program in Oaxaca, Mexico—the most culturally and linguistic state in Mexico. Our study examines classroom and assessment practices in a specific educational setting during the 2016-2017 academic year. Following Rawls (2003), social justice in our PAR project is a shared attitude and belief system that disqualifies and looks well beyond colonial values involving race, ethnicity, and linguistic ideologies that supports English superiority to see all people as agentive and equal and their multilingual practices as an asset.

We analyzed the data consisting of classroom observations, debriefing sessions, interviews with students, collection of students’ work samples focusing on the co-creation of assessments designed with multilingual and intercultural approaches. Three main themes emerged through triangulation and iterative analysis: (a) unveiling classroom alienating practices; (b) carving out spaces for multilingualism in the English classroom; and (c) authoring assessments as a way to enact social justice. This paper will speak to people from around the world interested in supporting sociolinguistic practices that favor minoritized languages.

7) Unsettling CEFR: How the framework can be reclaimed to challenge hegemonic monolingualism in language teaching and assessment

Kristof Savski (Prince of Songkla University)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has, since its publication by the Council of Europe in 2001, been adopted as an instrument of language policy by a plethora of actors across a vast array of contexts. While the precise ways in which CEFR is used across these contexts differ, the broad observation can be made that the framework has become most closely associated with the activities of global actors. For supranational organizations like the European Union, CEFR for instance offers relatively clear-cut descriptions of proficiency levels which can be used to stimulate (and regulate) regional migration. CEFR is also attractive for businesses which market language tests and textbooks, since it provides a common basis through which different products can be related to each other. Similarly, governments adopt the framework because it allows for comparisons of performance to be made across different educational systems. What unites these uses of CEFR is that they approach the framework as a rigid standard which provides holistic descriptions of proficiency levels in a single language (e.g. B2 in English), thereby delegitimizing any parts of the linguistic repertoire or any linguistic practices which fall outside the conventional 'monolingual' construct of linguistic competence. In this talk, I will argue that such 'monolingual' uses of CEFR, while dominant at present, represent only one possible way of interpreting the framework and can be challenged in favour of a more open-ended, dynamic, asymmetric, and trans-/pluri-lingual approach to language teaching and assessment. In order to achieve such change, we must turn our attention to engaging grass-roots actors like teachers in a productive dialogue through which the abstract principles underlying such an approach can be translated into context-appropriate teaching and assessment practices.