

ALTE PARIS 2014

ALTE 5th International Conference

Language Assessment for Multilingualism:
promoting linguistic diversity and intercultural
communication

CONFERENCE REPORT

10 – 11 April 2014



Conference
Co-organiser







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ALTE – the Association of Language Testers in Europe – welcomed over 300 delegates to its international Conference, held in Paris in April 2014 – language assessment for multilingualism – is a topic of global debate, and a response to the rapidly evolving patterns of international mobility and migration which have led to increasingly linguistically diverse societies, further accelerated by technology developments such as social media.

The Conference allowed delegates, from teachers and academics to assessment professionals and policy makers, to examine this issue from many perspectives. The rich and diverse programme comprised more than 100 paper presentations from over 120 speakers, who together represented 30 countries and regions and 92 organisations.

François Perret, Director of Conference co-organiser CIEP (the Centre international d'études pédagogiques) agreed, adding: 'Holding the Conference in Paris reflects the efforts that ALTE members have put into defending languages in Europe and promoting the quality of assessment tools for over 20 years.'

The Conference was opened by Kristina Cunningham of the European Commission, Head of Sector, Multilingualism Policy in the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture. She stated that multilingualism was in 'the DNA of Europe', and that the promotion of multilingualism was seen as one of the routes to recovery from the recent economic crisis. Despite recent austerity measures, the EU's budget for language education had increased, and she looked forward to working with ALTE members in the development of the methodologies and codes of practice required further promote multilingualism and unlock the benefits it can offer.

For Emyr Davis, Chair of the ALTE Executive Committee, the Conference was a serious attempt to raise awareness of the issues relating to multilingualism, issues currently driving language teaching and assessment worldwide. He therefore hoped that delegates, by engaging with the wealth of information provided, would leave the Conference with new perspectives, ready to make their own contribution to this important and dynamic aspect of language assessment.

PRESENTATION SUMMARIES: PLENARIES

The Diverse Cosmopolis. Babel and the Multicultural City

Dr Lid King, Director, The Languages Company, UK



As mega-cities exert an increasingly powerful influence on language development, Dr King contrasted the multilingualism emerging in mega-cities with that envisioned by the CEFR. Developed in the 1990s, the CEFR supported the European Union's view of multilingualism as a tool to overcome prejudice and encourage greater understanding, a philosophy shared with many other European bodies since 1945.

Dr King asked, however, whether this dream is fading as the vision becomes more muddled, and drivers for multilingualism focus more on mobility than on unity. In addition, language learning surveys show little increase in the number of people able to converse in another language (up by only four per cent in 11 years), while research such as SurveyLang reveals striking disparities in linguistic competence of schoolchildren across the EU. Dr King asked if policy makers were no longer asking the right questions, given the new contexts in which language learners work and live, especially given the influence of technology and new types of international mobility.

As part of this, the mega-city, as a focus of mobility and immigration, is now driving language change, prompting theories such as those of De Swaan, in which mega-cities become centres of language 'constellations' supporting hypercentral languages (such as English) and supercentral, enabling languages (such as French). As a result, Dr King proposed a new framework to assess the impact of language learning, one which acknowledges issues such as plurilingual education, language learning beyond schools, and the multilingual use of the internet.

The mega-city also encourages new language forms which often mix languages together. These languages develop beyond policy directives or controls, but due to the internet (once again) and to the mega-city's significant immigrant communities, they have national and international influence.

Such phenomena must be further investigated, argued Dr King, through initiatives such as LUCIDE (Languages in Urban Communities – Integration and Diversity for Europe). This project aims to build a picture of communication in multilingual communities, looking at economic benefits and effects on education, on the public and private spheres, and on urban space. The aim is to provide tools to help the centralised planning of future multilingual communities as currently, multilingual development is primarily local and linked to specific needs (such as the provision of multilingual healthcare information), or commercial. Research could also investigate the social exclusion felt by many who migrate into a mega-city.

The rise of the mega-city seems inevitable, argued Dr King, and will give rise to even greater diversity but also the emergence of more political and economic obstacles such as a limit on funds available for translation. To understand how best to manage multilingual growth in mega-cities we need to understand the language evolving on the street and enabled by the internet, and link this to support for English language learning. If this can be done, then mega-cities could deliver the collaborative approach essential for a truly bilingual society.

Ensuring Quality and Fairness in the Asian EFL Context: Challenges and Opportunities

Dr Jessica Wu, R&D Program Director, The Language Training and Testing Center, Taiwan



Dr Wu gave an Asian perspective on ALTE's goal of fairness and quality. This has become increasingly relevant in Asia given the lack of local standards, but there is also a concern that international standards do not fully reflect local challenges such as the significant numbers of tests taken.

The four most popular and oldest Asian EFL tests are the Japanese EIKEN test (launched in 1963 and taken by 2.3 million candidates a year), Chinese CET (1987, 18 million candidates), Taiwanese GEPT (2000, 0.6 million candidates), and Korean NEAT (2012, 50,000 candidates).

These tests are generally considered to have a positive impact, but there are issues. Most speaking tests are undertaken in language laboratories, for example, rather than face to face, or only by candidates already successful in other tests, skewing any sample analysed. There is also an overuse of multiple choice questions.

It is difficult to undertake a rigorous impact analysis as the limited number of qualified testing professionals is a major constraint, and as a result quality control is an acknowledged issue at all testing stages, with tests results also showing significant variation. Standards are needed which meet the local challenge of significant candidate numbers, and which also link testing to 'real life' language use.

Dr Wu reported on her study of GEPT test quality, which focused on three areas: the use of Weir's socio-cognitive framework to investigate test validity; the relationships between test parameters and real life equivalents; and the value of mapping tests against frameworks such as the CEFR. Such mapping has already been undertaken in Taiwan, and is supporting the global recognition of GEPT by linking the test to an international framework, allowing cross-test comparability, and correlating GEPT scores with real life performance. GEPT test validity research continues, supported by a number of GEPT research grants awarded since 2010.

Dr Wu also argued that in order to deliver a fair test, test developers must recognise the changing context of test use, and the negative consequences that can result when a test becomes 'high stakes' due to improved quality. In Taiwan, such consequences include an increase in cheating, teaching and learning 'to the test', and greater tension among all stakeholders as test scores are widely publicised. Stakeholder scrutiny of testing contexts can also increase, such as a recent national debate regarding the use of air conditioning in exam rooms.

But as Dr Wu explained, these problems have also been seen as opportunities. Test development has acquired an increased level of professionalism, prompting greater collaboration between Asian testing bodies. The closer analysis of GEPT also helps challenge the widespread assumption that language tests developed by native speakers are always superior to local equivalents. Dr Wu's work supports the growing argument that local tests can be more easily adapted to meet specific local needs, and as a result, the Asian English language testing community will continue to contribute their local knowledge to the development of international standards.

Quality Initiative for Assessing Language Skills and International Mobility: The Case of French

Bruno Mègre, Head of the Evaluation and Certification Department, CIEP, France



Since 1985, Centre international d'études pédagogiques (CIEP) has worked on behalf of the French Government to deliver a range of French language tests and certificates. These range from CEFR levels A1 to C2, with additional tests for children, professionals, foreign students, and for citizenship, including in Quebec. Tests are delivered by a network of over 1,200 CIEP exam centres in 174 countries, and CIEP also oversees the training of 30,000 examiners.

CIEP has noted significant changes in the context of exam delivery, including a change in the primary use of test results as a means to enable international mobility rather than to increase linguistic skills. With quality assurance therefore becoming an increasingly important issue, CIEP now has a significant Evaluation and Certification Department employing 44 staff who work with over 150 external experts to deliver a range of services including quality and assessment audits.

Mègre described a recent study into the use of CIEP test results to support international mobility, in the context of issues of quality. A sample of 400,000 was analysed, representing over 150 different nationalities and which showed a close correlation between French competency and mother tongue. Since 2013, ability in French at level B2 has been required for residency with the result that the majority of candidates are originally from francophone countries, with 60 per cent coming from Maghreb countries. Typical test takers in this category are either planning to study in France, are looking to extend their residency (by renewing a visa or meeting the conditions of an employment contract), or want to become French citizens or emigrate to Quebec. They are aged mainly between 23 and 38, with an equal gender split, and with 75 per cent targeting grades between B1 and C1. Test users were a range of public authorities, with Mègre noting that, since the 1980s and the benchmarking of CIEP tests against ALTE standards, the reputation of French tests – in terms of quality – has significantly improved, especially among universities.

Such analyses give organisations such as CIEP the tools required to adapt tests to candidate needs by, for example, increasing the focus on communicative skills, thereby helping maintain test quality and reputation. But these analyses also prompt a number of questions. These include whether test purpose should be more closely linked to candidate age, and the implications for test quality by the fact that 'failure' or 'success' is often determined by bodies external to the testing process. Tests must be both reliable and must also reflect ultimate use, and those bodies using test results should use this information as a guide.

Regarding fairness, Mègre also noted that although some students take the test outside a high stakes context, they still receive the same level of testing quality, reflecting ALTE's goal to deliver the same high standards to all candidates. Underlining this achievement, Mègre reported that CIEP recently gained ISO 9001 accreditation, thereby assuring the quality of its test development and delivery process.



Multilingualism and the Lingua Franca: A Role for Assessment in Redressing the Balance

Anne Gallagher, Associate Dean of Arts, Celtic Studies and Philosophy, and Director of the Language Centre, National University of Ireland, Ireland



For a country such as Ireland with two official languages, mother tongue (MT) can be an emotive concept, meaning either English or Gaelic; Ireland and other countries are therefore also a challenge to European initiatives such as MT+2, which assume that most nations are monolingual, with a natural first language, and a taught second language.

Gallagher argued that this monolingual approach is too simplistic, and that by recognising multilingualism we can promote diversity, avoid uniformity, and also challenge social exclusion, thereby addressing the worrying drift towards English as the European lingua franca. Currently, Europe has never been more multilingual; a 2005 survey in Ireland showed that 200 languages were used every day in a population of only four million, figures supported by the census of 2011. But multilingualism faces many barriers, especially in Anglophone countries, where minority languages of migrant communities are sometimes considered socially divisive, and where foreign languages in general are considered of minor interest; in the USA, for example, only one per cent of US novels on sale are translated, compared to 33 per cent in France. In addition, EU universities increasingly promote their use of English to preserve their league table status.

Gallagher reminded delegates that over 75 per cent of the world does not speak English, nor is it the mother tongue 94 per cent, and just under 50 per cent of EU citizens cannot communicate in a second language. Multiple language skills are therefore good for business and trade, but in Ireland, calls to improve these skills continue to go unanswered, and foreign language lessons are no longer compulsory in schools.

These examples are evidence of the growing speed of English adoption worldwide which is now a real challenge to other languages. To preserve the status of these languages, and to improve language skills in general, Gallagher calls for greater use of quality assessment; this will change the status of those less spoken languages currently suffering a crisis of self-confidence by promoting wider recognition of their value to society.

To do this, the CEFR, for example, could recognise partial competence, motivating students to continue learning, while also defining degree level competence to help language graduates use their skills to gain relevant employment. Gallagher also supported the drive for more local test adaptation, noting that the EU now asks individual states to be responsible for the adherence of local language policies to CEFR standards. More analysis of this is required, however, as adherence has proven to be of variable quality, challenging the CEFR's reputation for reliability.

In conclusion, Gallagher argues that bodies such as ALTE should be supported in their promotion of multilingualism, in order to avoid a future where local languages are only spoken at home, or where English becomes creolised according to location. An emphasis on English – deliberate or otherwise – will lead to a restrictive world view, whereas multilingualism will deliver a richer and more varied environment for us all.

The Changing Status of English in the Pearl River Delta, China

David Graddol, Director, The English Company, UK



Referencing his most recent book (co-published with Cambridge English Language Assessment) David Graddol described a research approach designed to deliver a contextual snapshot rather than a full analysis. This is particularly relevant in China, he argued, where the pace of change is so fast that the standard research approach, based on many years of collected data, becomes irrelevant. Graddol's research into the status of English in the Pearl River Delta is therefore based on personal observation, news reports (which can be wrong and impartial but which reflect the issues of most concern), teacher blogs, and also a number of personal language blogs.

The Pearl River Delta, located close to Hong Kong and Macau, has four languages, three currencies and multiple legal, education and other social systems. Given its historical distance from the Imperial Court, the region has always been unusually innovative, and was the first within China to develop English speaking skills. After many years of low birth rate the percentage of children within the population is rising significantly, placing great demands on primary education, although the population is estimated to contract again by 2100. The population has also become prosperous and highly educated, and bears the typical characteristics of a rural to urban transition, including the growth of both the service sector (especially a knowledge-intensive 'quaternary' sector) and tertiary education.

Decades of industrial change have also led to changing demands for English language skills, with the majority of learners in 2009 achieving level C1, compared to A1 in 1993. This reflects similar trends in other growth economies, where the middle ability band is disappearing, and has implications for the local education system which is focused on achieving level B1. In the Pearl River Delta, significant investment in English language teaching has improved standards significantly and as a result many residents speak better English than those living in Hong Kong, about which Hong Kong is in denial.

When researching such a rapidly changing environment, Graddol noted the value in analysing language landscapes, including features such as sounds, icons and designs, and also the order in which languages are used. The streets of Hong Kong are famously 'semiotically noisy'; they also feature



phenomena such as the weekly transformation of the predominantly English Hong Kong business district by hundreds of Philippino maids who congregate there on Sundays, resulting in signage in three languages – English, Cantonese and Tagalog. Although less dramatic in the Pearl River Delta, the same phenomena are emerging, as shown by small scale studies of signage and supermarket labels.

Such research is easy to undertake, argues Graddol, and should be extended in order to consider in more detail the effect of the multilingual environment on those working and living within it, such as their ability to read the different signage used. Language landscape research is already yielding interesting results, and by making research parameters more specific, it also has the potential to inform language learning strategies and the setting of language learning goals.

Language Assessment for Migration and Integration (LAMI) Forum: Multilingualism in Metropolitan Areas

Introduction

Dr Nick Saville, Cambridge English Language Assessment, UK

Introducing the 2014 LAMI Forum, Dr Saville asked delegates to consider whether, given the rise of multilingualism, plurilingualism, translanguaging and other emerging linguistic phenomena, 'lingualism' was the better term to use when debating language testing and assessment in this context.

Dr Saville noted that the range of assessments from organisations such as Cambridge English Language Assessment can be mapped onto a migrant's journey, from entering a country to citizenship. However, we must accept that this journey is not always linear and can differ significantly within the migrant community which, since the 1980s, has become increasingly mobile and therefore multilingual. The LAMI Forum considers how assessment fits into this new landscape for migration.

Multilingualism in the Context of Globalisation

Piet Van Avermaet, Director, Centre for Diversity and Learning, University of Ghent, Belgium

Globalisation is not a new concept, but it is now the driver of new trends such as the growth of mega-cities, and increased mobility both literally and supported by technology such as the internet and Skype. This has led to the growth of super-diverse communities in which, argued Piet Van Avermaet, language learning and assessment based on the binary L1 / L2 approach has become counter-productive.

The binary approach is also supported by ideologies and policies which are rarely neutral, and are often designed to legitimise and control choice in order to maintain the cohesion of the nation state. A study of Dutch school pupils, for example, showed little support for the teaching of non-Dutch home languages at school, also revealing a significant loss of trust in pupils with poor Dutch speaking skills, leading to low expectations and poor outcomes.

Van Avermaet argued that such monolingual expectations must be challenged as super-diversity becomes the norm, but accepted that poor language ability can exacerbate social and educational inequality. He suggested that we consider instead the concept of functional multilingual learning, in which multilingualism is considered an asset, but which also requires a different learning and assessment model. For example, multilingualism does not necessarily mean full proficiency in any one language, and the hierarchy of languages spoken will also depend on the individual and context.

Current monolingual testing strategies are compartmentalised by language and therefore disfavour minorities and immigrants, but a shift to multilingual assessment still requires much research. We need to define multilingual constructs for example (as evidenced in translanguaging), and consider standardisation and the value of dynamic assessment. As multilingualism is now a lifelong reality, we need to change our perspective in order to understand both the benefits it can bring and the challenges it represents.

CASE STUDY 1:

Unlocking the Gates of Diversity through Multilingualism

Bharti Girjasing, Advisor, International Affairs, City of Utrecht, Holland

Utrecht is the fourth largest city in the Netherlands, and is considered a 'hot spot' for multilingualism; this is within a country already identified by the European Commission as second only to Luxembourg in terms of the number of languages spoken, with 85 per cent of residents speaking three languages, and 50 per cent speaking these languages well. In Utrecht, research in 2011 showed that 95 per cent of residents spoke three languages, primarily as a result of immigration, education (reflecting the large and international university student community) and employment, also demonstrating the positive impact that multilingualism had on the city.

In an initiative designed to unlock the economic and social benefits of Utrecht's multilingualism, Bharti Girjasing described SMUP – the Sustainable Multilingualism Urban Programme. Working with stakeholders in business and education, SMUP supports activities such as language support for skilled immigrants, online meeting points for multilingual job hunters, and cultural activities such as a story telling festival and language café designed to support informal language learning.

Girjasing added that although SMUP has been well received it now needs the support of experts in the field, such as ALTE members, to reach its full potential.

CASE STUDY 2:

The Integration of Migrants in the Metropolitan Area: The Concrete Actions of the Community of Sant'Egidio in Rome

Cecilia Pani, Co-ordinator, Free Language School, Community of Sant'Egidio, Italy

In 2013, the Community of Sant'Egidio, in Rome, was home to over 250,000 non-Italians. For over 30 years the Community has offered free Italian lessons and, as Cecilia Pani reported, as Italian becomes a condition of residence – rather than a tool for integration – demand for tuition is rising significantly. Italian is now essential for employment and economic independence, especially for women, and is therefore key to successful integration.

With the University of Perugia providing assessment and certification, the Sant'Egidio Italian courses initially focus on levels A1-A2, to provide skills for everyday life, while also offering a 'hop on-hop off' approach for those students who migrate repeatedly to find employment.

To effect the transition from verbal to written skills, and to encourage the expression of more complex ideas, Pani also recommended the use of literature to demonstrate how to present thoughts and emotions, while also encouraging an understanding of Italian culture.

Pani concluded that after 30 years, the Sant'Egidio school can identify the key factors underpinning successful language teaching: multi-ethnic classes; face to face teaching which also uses Italian culture and history to support language learning; and a positive approach towards immigrants' own cultures which helps promote even greater integration.

CASE STUDY 3:

An impact study across Europe: The LAMI questionnaire

José Pascoal, Senior Lecturer and Researcher, Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon; Lorenzo Rocca, LAMI SIG Co-ordinator, Portugal

José Pascoal and Lorenzo Rocca reviewed preliminary data generated when the LAMI questionnaire was used with Italian and Portuguese migrants. The study focused on level A2, the most common language target for migrants.

Results showed that migrants learn Italian primarily to communicate better, apart from Chinese migrants who focus on professional language skills. Rocca also reported some interesting contrasts. For example, Moroccan female migrants wanted to communicate better as housewives, whereas Eastern European women – who often work as caregivers and can be quite isolated - wanted Italian in order to access social and broadcast media. Most found the exams taken were 'OK', with some (especially Albanian migrants) finding them too easy.

In Portugal, Pascoal found a greater bias towards A2 certification as this is now a condition of Portuguese citizenship. Migrants also wanted to improve their communication skills, important given that citizenship requires five years' residence, and also felt that language skills earned them more respect. They found the exams to be interesting and relevant and generally fit for purpose.

Pascoal and Rocca also noted the value of comparative analysis which showed that the weakest skill tested in both countries was writing.



PANEL DISCUSSION

Chair:

- Dr Nick Saville, Cambridge English Language Assessment, UK

Panel members:

- Bharti Girjasing, Advisor, International Affairs, City of Utrecht, Holland
- Dr Lid King, Director, The Languages Company, UK
- Bruno Mègre, Head of the Evaluation and Certification Department, CIEP, France
- Cecilia Pani, Co-ordinator, Free Language School, Community of Sant'Egidio, Italy
- José Pascoal, Senior Lecturer and Researcher, Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon, Portugal
- Lorenzo Rocca, LAMI SIG Co-ordinator, Italy
- Philia Thalgott, Language Policy Unit, Council of Europe, France
- Piet Van Avermaet, Director, Centre for Diversity and Learning, University of Ghent, Belgium

Q: How much of the LAMI questionnaire focuses on language testing?

A: José Pascoal and Lorenzo Rocca responded that only one section of the LAMI questionnaire looks at testing as the emphasis is more on the relationship between migrants and their host country and its society and language, and uptake of language courses available. Nick Saville added that the questionnaire reflected an important aim – to treat migrants not as a homogenous group, which is often the case in other contexts.

Bruno Mègre expanded the discussion to note that in many countries there is evidence of political will to raise the threshold of testing for migrants from A1 to A2 to encourage greater integration, with some suggesting this is still not high enough - especially those with better skills themselves. NS asked if this was a case of policy not matching needs and if so, what should be done? In Dr Lid King's experience, language policy development is very arbitrary and non-scientific, with policy areas ranging from the acquisition of skills to the creation of barriers. King noted that the UK Home Office also uses A2 as a target which is, in fact, quite a modest aim and possibly reflects the fact that UK authorities have no idea what this level represents in practice; defining the right testing level has become 'a mess' and as a result, in King's opinion, target levels have become obstacles not benefits.

Saville was also concerned that the good practice adopted by exam boards faces a laissez faire attitude by those using test results, with no acknowledgement or understanding of the learning required to achieve a specific language level. Piet Van Avermaet agreed, adding that most policy makers have very little understanding of relative ability levels, or of the language skills perceived by the majority to be required of a citizen.

Q: How can we reverse the widely held opinion that monolingualism offers most benefit to a society?

A: Lid King referenced research which countered the widely held perception that a migrant's mother tongue can be a hindrance in a monolingual society, by showing that immigrant children performed better in English when also encouraged to improve their first language. King argued that not enough has been done to promote such findings, especially in the more xenophobic media. José Pascoal also quoted a UK study of Portuguese-speaking students taking UK GCSE exams, who performed better when also taking Portuguese language classes. He suggested that it was very important for families to be aware of such findings.

Saville asked how technical specialists such as ALTE members could influence policy in this area, and suggested producing a document in which language learning issues could be discussed, and which would explain how to foster a language friendly environment. Piet Van Avermaet added that the perception of monolingualism as 'common sense' must be challenged from below, and that the Ghent case study shows how this can be done.

Q: How can we encourage significant numbers of immigrants to learn a language?

A: Cecilia Pani referenced the situation in Italy, where many migrants do not have a knowledge of Italian and where studies show that greater recognition of migrants' own cultures can support their learning of Italian, and therefore their integration. Bharti Girjasing added that the strategy in Utrecht has been both top down and bottom up with, for example, funding given only to those events which are considered multilingual and which positively contribute to local culture.

Q: How can we help politicians understand the concept of language levels, given their importance in language policy development?

A: Bharti Girjasing agreed that this was crucial as some policy makers had very little idea of what a 'higher level' represented; for example, she has met policy makers who assume A2 is a relatively high level, and who have little or no knowledge of B1. She asked whether we need new thresholds which are easier to understand.

Philia Thalgott responded that the Council of Europe was working hard to explain relevant language levels in the context of immigration, and has drafted a guide to the CEFR and related issues designed for non-specialists. However, there remains a great deal of communication work to be done in this area, and Thalgott asked for more information to be circulated before trying to develop new initiatives.

Piet Van Avermaet suggested placing the CEFR to one side and instead focusing more on what people need to function effectively within the different domains of society, rather than trying to make immigrants become 'as we are' as quickly as possible.



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Under the auspices of the Secretary
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