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Research in Progress

BAAL/CUP seminars 2007

Language testing and assessment in applied linguistics: Identifying reciprocity in applied linguistic research

Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, UK, 18–19 June 2007

This seminar, organised by Pauline Rea-Dickins, Guoxing Yu and Katie Scott (University of Bristol) and Barry O'Sullivan (Roehampton University), aimed to:

- bring together researchers working at the interface of language testing and assessment research in different areas of applied linguistics;
- critique and evaluate the contributions of language testing and assessment in applied linguistics with reference to current thinking and research;
- contribute to a dialogue between sub-fields within applied linguistics and language assessment theory and practice from both socio-cultural and psycholinguistic perspectives.

The rationale for the seminar was primarily that there are links between language testing and assessment on one hand and applied linguistics on the other which could be mutually beneficial, but are not necessarily perceived as such. Secondly, it was suggested that research in language assessment and applied linguistics have been perceived as distinct, with the roles of language testing and assessment in applied linguistics relatively unexplored, an artificial divide that Bachman & Cohen (1998), for example, argue should be bridged (see also Bachman & Palmer 1996; Shohamy 2001). An additional motivation for proposing this conference was to build on the growing presence of assessment and testing concerns within applied linguistics, not merely to address issues of visibility but, importantly, to contribute to a research agenda between different research communities within our (wider) applied linguistics community. To this end, we asked our keynote speakers and those who submitted abstracts to focus explicitly on reciprocity between the fields.

The keynote speakers were Elana Shohamy from Tel Aviv University, Israel; Constant Leung from King's College London, UK; Rob Schoonen from the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands; and Matthew Poehner from Penn State University, USA. These papers were interspersed with eight presentations from participants who had submitted abstracts, including two from post-graduates. A key aim of the seminar was to provide ample opportunity for discussion and, to this end, the programme included small group discussions and plenary feedback.

The diverse presentations generated discussion in which a number of key themes and arguments emerged, summarised in what follows.

- Language Testing and Assessment (LTA) has moved from the periphery to being more centre stage in Applied Linguistics, taking into account, for example, effects of

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globalisation and migration, increased demands of accountability and the imperative for a socially responsible and ethical positioning in assessment.

- There is a need to challenge the 'tried and tested' constructs in language testing and assessment; for example:
  - much LTA research is narrow: a focus on examination systems and processes, linked to dominant agenda of audit and control; language proficiency referenced to native speaker (NS) performance, benchmarked through monolingual second-language (L2) use against narrowly prescribed levels, unrelated to the multilingual language capacities and social and instructional needs of testees, with much L2 assessment undifferentiated from first-language assessment
  - the construct of language proficiency itself is constrained, inadequately capturing the vast and complex range of language needs and assessment requirements in our global world
- LTA research should:
  - address the specificity and contextual features of SITUATED LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES so as to extend our understandings of fair and equitable educational and social processes
  - develop new insights about language(s) use mediated through diverse socially situated assessment practices and discuss the implications for broadening the constructs that inform valid assessment practices, such as the assessment of multilingual and interactional performance in classrooms, the use of more than one language in school-based examinations, and definitions of language proficiency that go beyond NS norms
- Many questions were raised, including:
  - In what ways can research into discourses of assessment broaden rather than narrow underlying constructs?
  - Does the strong focus on reliability in examination settings deny the value of variability and differences in performance?
  - Is LTA a privilege of the developed world?
  - What does spoken language proficiency mean in different contexts?
  - In instructional settings, can or should content knowledge be assessed through more than one language?

In conclusion, the view of the symposium was that LTA is not peripheral to applied linguistics but is a central means in addressing real world problems, one that takes account of different contexts and needs. The discussion went beyond the identification of 'reciprocities' and the strong view emerging was that future LTA research should be oriented around the purposes and effects of assessment on individuals/groups from real world and holistic perspectives.

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Spoken online learning events

Open University, UK, 22–23 June 2007

BAAL/CUP seminars are designed to allow intensive discussion among about twenty of the most active and innovative researchers in a particular domain, and this objective was fully met. Two features made the seminar unique, however. One was the public access to discussion offered by simultaneous and deferred webcasting, and the possibility of input by simultaneous webchat and e-mail. The other was the use of the latest communication technologies to reflect the topic of the conference. Thus, the first plenary was delivered using the Open University's own enhanced videoconferencing software, FlashMeeting, and encompassed live presentations from Cynthia White at Massey University (Palmerston North, New Zealand) and Yuping Wang (Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia) and live discussion with those present at the Open University.

Spoken interaction is key to successful language learning in both a cognitive-interactionist and a socio-cultural paradigm, and new technologies are beginning to make available robust environments for multi-participant online spoken interactions. The Open University, which has for a decade developed, piloted and researched the new pedagogies appropriate to online language learning at scale, has to some extent set the research agenda. This embraces methods of collection and analysis of the 'fractured' discourse which makes up multimodal corpora (spoken and written text, audio, video, graphic elements, human–computer interface) – not least how to interpret online silences; the social, cognitive, affective and strategic aspects of learner behaviour; teacher and learner beliefs and styles, and the professional development of tutors; and the facilitative and debilitative facets of anonymity, online presence and new identities adopted in virtual learning environments.

White's impressive opening plenary reviewed the theoretical and methodological challenges facing research into the affordances and constraints of online spoken interaction, and suggested research questions, methods and tools which might inform both research and practical pedagogy, including assessment. Wang's discussion of Collaborative Cyber Community emphasised the high demands placed on the teacher by the need to manage multiple audio, video and text resources as well as the learning process. This concern was echoed in other discussions throughout the seminar.

The use of other new digital technologies to bring speaking into the online language class was addressed by Fernando Rosell-Aguilar (Open University), who spoke on podcasts, Gary Motteram and Dhafir Kasassbeh (both of Manchester) on the program Breeze, now Adobe Connect, and Chris Jenks (Newcastle) on Skype. Their papers raised issues such as

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pronunciation, mediation, intercultural competence and social presence in online learning environments. Nese Cabaroglu (Çukurova University, Turkey) reported on a sophisticated language-and-culture project linking trainee teachers of English in Turkey with a native-speaker teacher trainer in the UK.

Primary research findings involving fine-grained analyses of spoken interactions in audiographic environments were presented by Maud Ciekanski and Thierry Chanier (Université de Franche-Comté, France) – collaborative writing tasks), and Carolyn Batstone, Ursula Stickler, Annette Duensing and Barbara Heins (Open University – collaborative speaking tasks), highlighting social presence and the continuous negotiation of the norms of the learning space. Regine Hampel and Ursula Stickler (both of Open University) evaluated a five-week pilot of FlashMeeting in a Moodle-based course: visual contact adds further complexity to earlier studies which have brought out the importance of task design, tutor style, and social and affective factors.

Dorothy Chun, from the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA, was the only keynote speaker who was physically present at the seminar venue. Her presentation examined different ways of using online resources to improve students' oral proficiency. This included using tools on the World Wide Web to improve learner pronunciation and prosody (through speech recognition, for example), and getting learners to communicate with native speakers in telecollaborative projects to improve their communicative and intercultural skills.

Glenn Stockwell joined the seminar from Waseda University, Japan. His closing plenary summarised the conference themes and reviewed the parameters and pedagogies of spoken online learning events in the area of language teaching. He firmly reminded the audience that the learner has to be the focal point, and that technologies and 'gadgets' have to take second place to the objectives of the learning event.

The simultaneous webcast was watched by a global online audience in Europe, North America, Asia and Australasia, who also participated in the live videochat. This enabled questions to be put from the USA or Germany and answered by speakers who were present either physically or virtually. The seminar importantly provided an opportunity for home postgraduates, and the Ph.D. bursar Dong Ye from Southampton University, to participate academically and socially in a high-level conference in an atmosphere less intimidating than larger-scale symposia. Everyone present felt that the unique combination of intimate discussion and global participation offered an environmentally and academically friendly model for future research-based events.

Participants agreed that the extensive discussions helped to redefine the dimensions of research into the spoken elements of virtual language learning, and should be published soon in written form.

In the meantime, the entire seminar can be viewed at http://www.open.ac.uk/baal-cupseminar2007-sole/(accessed 11/12/2007).

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Communicative competence revisited: Multilingual, multicultural and multidisciplinary perspectives

Birkbeck College, University of London, 25 June 2007

This one-day seminar was organized in order to evaluate the concept of Communicative Competence (CC) from a multilingual, multicultural and multidisciplinary perspective, and to explore the relevance and applicability of the concept in an age of globalisation and fast-changing information-communication technology. Methodological issues in the study of CC in applied linguistics and other related disciplines were discussed. The seminar brought researchers from different backgrounds together and allowed the creation of a network for future research projects on CC.

Our two keynote speakers were Professor Mick Perkins (University of Sheffield) and Professor Constant Leung (King's College London). Professor Mick Perkins focussed on communication breakdown in conversational interactions of a monolingual English child. He demonstrated how disparate areas of language such as syntax, lexis and discourse structure are integrally linked, and also dependent on non-linguistic factors such as memory, attention, auditory perception and eye-gaze. He argued against the common assumption that an atypical communicative behaviour is a direct reflection, or symptom, of a specific underlying deficit. Instead, he proposed that compensatory adaptation plays a key role in all communication disorders, and that CC is the complex outcome of interactions between linguistic, cognitive, motor and perceptual processes, both within and between communicating individuals – i.e. it is an 'emergent' phenomenon.

Professor Constant Leung addressed the criticism that despite the original claims that the notion of CC is grounded in the ethnography tradition, in practice it often poses a decontextualized idealization of language use. He proposed a situated theory of CC that supports the notion of an abstracted ideal with a wide range of non-static local manifestations. The constitutive significance of speaker authority/intention, content selection and sociocultural context was examined. He illustrated his argument with references to work on academic discourse, with particular reference to written discourse and English as a lingua franca. Theoretical and pedagogic implications of this pluralist view were explored with reference to language norms, speaker/writer identities and curriculum benchmarks.

Seven other papers were presented. Amelia Church (University of Wales Swansea) explored four-year-old children's CC in the context of spontaneous verbal disputes with peers. Using a conversation analysis approach, she found that adversative discourse shows that markedness is indicative of outcome. Explicitly, preferred or unmarked turns shapes (i.e. turns that are short, direct and produced without delay) elicit continuing opposition in disputes. Mitigation (i.e. markedness) proves essential if disputes are to be brought to a mutually acceptable close.

Yan Jiang (University of Newcastle) and Zhu Hua (Birkbeck) considered the development of intercultural CC among 11-year-old children with different levels of proficiency of their shared language (English) in a multi-cultural summer camp. Children were found to employ a range of communicative strategies (e.g. code-switching, questioning, translation) to understand

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the rules of the activities and negotiate and achieve agreement on action despite the diversity in their linguistic abilities.

The focus of the following papers was on CC in multilingual settings involving adult second-language (L2) learners and users.

Jose Ignacio Aguilar Rio (Université Paris III, Sorbonne nouvelle) found that during EFL lessons in Paris and Glasgow teachers shifted from their role as L2 experts to that of participants, in charge of presenting learners with L2 communicative models. Such shifts lead to momentary tensions in the classroom, which may influence the learning process.

Ping Ping Liu (University of Southampton) argued that CC cannot be achieved without reference to the larger social world in which L2 learners live and use the language for social purposes. She looked at six native-speaker–non-native-speaker (NS–NNS) casual conversations in English and found that the sociocultural knowledge gap between the two groups had influenced the extent to which the Chinese NNS created and responded to the opportunities to achieve conversational involvement.

Christine Raschka (University of East Anglia) asked whether NNSs need to be syntactically competent to be communicatively competent. She considered the case of a highly communicatively competent bilingual Chinese/English speaker who acquired CC not through formal learning but in the context of everyday social interactions. She argued that it is not grammatical knowledge but the way in which it and pragmatic knowledge are used in real situations that matters.

Jean-Marc Dewaele (Birkbeck) investigated the question whether the knowledge of many languages is linked to increased levels of self-perceived CC. Using a database constituted through an on-line questionnaire with open and closed questions, to which of 1,459 multilinguals contributed, he found that pentalinguals, quadrilinguals and trilinguals (in decreasing order) scored significantly higher on perceived CC in all their languages compared to bilinguals.

Penelope Gardner-Chloros (Birkbeck) looked at code-switching through the lens of CC. She pointed out that in plurilingual settings, audience design often means adapting to an interlocutor whose relative competence in the relevant varieties differs from the speaker's. She argued that the relative neglect of the accommodative function of code-switching springs from a broader neglect of intra-individual variation in code-switching.

David Block (Institute of Education) echoed and amplified Leung's paper. He argued that despite the accepted multidimensional view of CC today, it still seems to be bound very strongly to the notion that language and its 'appropriate' use are what communication is by and large about. There is a need to move beyond this language-centric approach to CC, and to reorient the construct of CC so that it can take on board a broader, more multimodal/semiotic view of communication.

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