Trends and Issues in Language Assessment in Canada: A Consideration of Context

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Trends and Issues in Language Assessment in Canada: A Consideration of Context

Why would Language Assessment Quarterly have a special issue on trends in language assessment in Canada? As the articles in this special issue suggest, Canada is a living laboratory for language assessment, whose unique language history, policies, and resulting complexity have provided extraordinarily fertile ground for fundamental considerations of language teaching, learning, and testing.

Historically, Canada was the site of colonial conquest in which intergroup linguistic and cultural rights were often contested and conflictual, and throughout its history, language has been a driving force of social policy in Canada. Some language policies have been decidedly unjust. For example, from 1755 to 1762, French-speaking Acadians were forced from their homes and deported by English-speaking colonial authorities; from the late 19th through the mid-20th century, a government policy of aggressive assimilation forced First Nations and aboriginal children to enrol in residential boarding schools that attempted to erase home languages and cultures.

Arguably, such dark periods in Canada’s history have led to the current heightened awareness of linguistic sensitivities, rights, and freedoms. However, shadows from Canada’s historical past continue to influence current linguistic and cultural policy initiatives, discussion, and debate. Three policy and policy-making areas dominate Canadian language concerns and concomitant research on and practices in language assessment, namely, aboriginal and First Nations affairs or “indigeneity” (Haque & Patrick, 2015, p. 28), bilingualism, and multiculturalism. A consideration of language assessment within the Canadian context requires some background regarding each of these three key language policy fields.

ABORIGINAL AND FIRST NATIONS POLICY

In April 2013 Inuktitut became an official language of Nunavut, sharing equal status with English and French in this northern territory. The significance of this landmark recognition was acknowledged in a press release of the government of Nunavut’s Department of Culture and Heritage, which rightly pointed out that “This level of statutory protection for an aboriginal language is unprecedented in Canada” (Indian Country, 2013, p. 1). Although the education of First Nations and aboriginal children remains a considerable source of concern (e.g., Haque & Patrick, 2015),
with only 36% of First Nations students graduating from high school (Morcom, 2014) and many First Nations and aboriginal languages under threat, the advent of culture-based language immersion programming for indigenous students is showing promise. This programming uses aboriginal and First Nations language as the medium of instruction and incorporates both language and cultural study in the curriculum.

There remains a well-documented gap between government perspectives and those of many First Nations and aboriginal groups in Canada (e.g., Morcom, 2014). Some critical theorists (e.g., Haque & Patrick, 2015) view Canadian language policies regarding bilingualism and multiculturalism as extensions of colonial power structures, which “embed and reinscribe the racial hierarchies at the heart of Canada’s ongoing national project” (p. 39). However, as the designation of Inuktitut as an official language of Nunavut suggests, governments at all levels are promoting initiatives that enhance, protect, and promote aboriginal and First Nations languages—a complete reversal of the assimilation policies of the past. Language assessment practices are central to the success of these initiatives.

BILINGUALISM (FRENCH AND ENGLISH AS OFFICIAL LANGUAGES)

As Shohamy (2007) points out, tests are often used to enforce policy decisions and such was the case in Canada with the enactment of the Official Languages Acts of 1969 and 1988. These acts defined Canada as an officially bilingual country, whereby English- and French-speaking Canadians were offered equal access to federal government services in the language of their choice. As a result, employment opportunities were greatly increased for previously underrepresented French-speaking applicants for federal government positions. However, at the same time, a number of federal government employees lost their jobs, because they were suddenly required to pass a test of bilingual proficiency and many failed. This policy continues to be enforced through tests administered to existing and prospective federal government employees in bilingually imperative positions.

Decades of bilingual policies have resulted in extensive immersion programming at all educational levels and a rich and influential research tradition in bilingual and immersion approaches to language teaching, learning, and assessment (e.g., Burger, Weinberg, & Wesche, 2013; Cummins, 1979, 1980; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Genesee, 1987; Swain, 2000). In an analysis of the state of bilingualism in Canada, Statistics Canada (2011) reported that 17.5% of Canadians (5.8 million people) indicated that they could carry on a conversation in both English and French (an increase of 12.2% since 1961). However, the report also indicated that bilingual proficiency had plateaued in all provinces except Quebec and noted “the lack of growth in bilingualism outside Quebec occurred as the non-Francophone immigrant population was growing and the proportion of students in French-as-a-second-language (FSL) programs was shrinking (p. 1).” While the benefits of bilingual immersion programs have been celebrated in the literature (e.g., Genesee, 1987), it is also known that French immersion classrooms tend to be populated by students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, have fewer boys, and underrepresent the linguistic and cultural diversity of Canadian school-age children and special education students. Testing and assessment within bilingual/immersion contexts continue to be a primary focus of Canadian research on language.
MULTICULTURALISM

Alongside bilingual policy, Canada’s Multiculturalism Act (1988) defined Canada as a multicultural society. Throughout its history, Canada’s growth and development have been sustained by waves of new immigrants and refugees. Multicultural policy has resulted in extraordinary cultural and linguistic diversity amongst school-age populations. It is estimated (see, e.g., the Canadian Council on Learning, 2008) that up to 50% of students in urban Canadian schools speak a language other than English or French as their mother tongue, and Canada is an intensely urban country. Most of Canada’s approximately 35 million residents live within 160 kilometers (100 miles) of the U.S. border; 26% of the total population of Canada live along a 61 km (38 mile) strip between Toronto and Hamilton, Ontario; Toronto is the fourth largest city in North America.

Multicultural policy has been supported in local communities through a network of “home language” programs, either as part of the school curriculum, after school, or on weekends. These programs were developed to validate, invigorate, and extend the first-languages of immigrants, refugees, and their children and have contributed to academic success in school (e.g., Cummins, 1991). However, multiculturalism and the increasing internationalization of education have also given rise to concerns about academic retention and achievement. Much research in language testing and assessment in Canada is informed by the challenges arising from the growing linguistic and cultural diversity of Canadian classrooms.

LANGUAGE POLICY AND LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT: COSTS

Implementation of language policies requires large amounts of funding annually. Canadian governments and, more specifically, Canadian taxpayers, who fill their coffers each year, have paid considerable sums (at times willingly and at times grudgingly) for what has been generally perceived as the greater good. According to one estimate (Vaillancourt & Veldhuis, 2012), “federal and provincial bilingualism requirements cost Canadian taxpayers $2.4 billion annually; and provinces spend $900 million to provide dual-language services” (p. 1). Policies regarding immigration, settlement, and support for multiculturalism are also costly. The 2004 federal budget allocated an additional $20 million a year to expand English language teaching projects when research suggested (Government of Canada Report, 2004) that the percentage of immigrants to Canada who had postsecondary education was higher (60%) than that of Canadian-born adults (43%), but immigrants were earning half as much a year after their arrival in Canada. Furthermore, the report indicated that it took immigrants 10 years on average to earn as much as their Canadian counterparts, and language proficiency was the determining factor in how quickly immigrants were able to integrate into the labour market.

Increasing allocations for language and settlement of newcomers to Canada have continued in the intervening decade, including most recently the Portfolio Based Language Assessment (PBLA) initiative, an assessment-driven approach aimed at implementing policy goals of quality, consistency, and comparability of language instruction for newcomers across Canada (Fox, 2014; Ripley, 2012). According to the Government of Canada’s report on budget allocations for 2012–2013, “Settlement allocations have more than tripled, from less than $200M for 2005–06 to almost $600M for 2012–13 to support newcomers’ settlement needs in provinces and territories outside Québec” (Government of Canada, 2012). The planned amount for the 2012–13 Québec grant was approximately $300M.
Although increased funding does not appear to be having an impact on the ease with which newcomers to Canada are integrating in the Canadian labour market, consistently high levels of investment have produced important dividends in research on language teaching, learning, and assessment over the years. Canadian researchers have made seminal contributions in defining what constitutes language proficiency (Canale & Swain, 1980) and in articulating why the quality of a test is directly related to questions of fairness (e.g., Swain, 1983). Arguably, it is Merrill Swain’s (1983) call to bias for the best in language testing and learning that is the thread that weaves together past and present research on language assessment in Canada. Two of the primary language policy threads, bilingualism and multiculturalism, are well represented in the current Language Assessment Quarterly special issue.

For example, language policies on bilingualism are discussed by Laurier and Baker, who examine high-stakes language proficiency testing of prospective teachers within the complex bilingual context of Québec. They point out that there has been a long-standing tradition in Québec of protecting the French language (see, e.g., Bill 101, Office québécois de la langue française, 2010), coupled with a pervasive public perception (popularized by the media) that teachers across Québec lack sufficient competence to be teaching in French (e.g., Dion-Viens, 2010). In response to these quality and accountability concerns, in 2001 the Québec Government’s ministère de l’Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) and the Association of Québec Deans of Education negotiated a common language policy that requires a language proficiency examination for all prospective teachers being trained for either the French or English language school systems. Laurier and Baker examine the development and validation of the resulting proficiency/minimum competency tests of French and English. They provide evidence of the ways in which policy implementation is significantly influenced by the values at play in sociocultural/sociopolitical contexts, as they demonstrate how the language policy has been differentially operationalized by the French and English proficiency tests. Laurier and Baker raise concerns about validity, suggest critical problems with alignment between the tests and the policy, and discuss issues of fairness and consequence within this highly sensitive linguistic and political Canadian context.

Bilingual policies are also at play in Tan and Turner’s article, which examines the role of communication and collaboration between key stakeholders in increasing the quality of a new high-stakes English as a Second Language (ESL) test, introduced by the Québec Government as part of a curricular reform agenda. Tan and Turner explore the responses of classroom teachers interacting with test developers in the improvement, implementation, and validation of the new test. Their study provides an example of the positive potential of bidirectional washback (Fraser & Fox, 2007) engendered through stakeholder interaction, as the responses of teachers inform refinements to the new writing task and rubric, and responses from the test developers inform teachers’ increased understanding of task demands and criteria for successful task completion. It is argued (e.g., Biggs & Tang, 2011) that increased alignment between curriculum, tests, and teaching will also increase learning. Tan and Turner provide evidence that in this context stakeholder interaction not only enhanced learning by enabling greater alignment between the test and classroom practices but also increased both the assessment literacy of participating teachers and the quality of the new external test.
Language policies regarding multiculturalism and the extraordinary linguistic and cultural diversity of Canadian classrooms form the backdrop for Cheng and Sun’s contribution to the special issue. Applying Kane’s (2006) argument-based validation framework, Cheng and Sun systematically examine the impact of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) on second language (L2) learners in Ontario high schools. They evaluate the strength of the validity arguments for the OSSLT within the complex multilingual and multicultural context of secondary education in Ontario. Again, the sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts within which the test is situated inform their research. Cheng and Sun point out that the OSSLT is aligned with core reading and writing outcomes for the end of Grade 9, and a passing score on the test is a requirement for high school graduation. The test was developed and normed on the basis of the first-language (L1) English-speaking test taker population, although research (e.g., Fox & Cheng, 2007; Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003) suggests that constructs on tests like the OSSLT differ for L1 and second language (L2) test takers. Cheng and Sun take this consideration into account in their comprehensive synthesis of validation evidence regarding the OSSLT within Kane’s (2006) argument-based validation framework.

Three of the remaining studies in this special issue on Canada examine the role that assessment can play, not only in supporting learning but also in expanding our understanding of literacy development over time. Roessingh, Elgie, and Kover explore the potential of increasingly sophisticated lexical profiling tools in investigating Grade 3 children’s literacy development in Alberta. Roessingh and colleagues are critical of assessment practices that overlook or undervalue the key role that vocabulary acquisition plays in children’s developing literacy. Drawing on corpus-based analysis of vocabulary, they argue that it is a child’s exposure to and acquisition of lexically rich vocabulary (e.g., Douglas, 2010; Read, 2000) that most directly influences their achievement outcomes throughout their schooling. They point out that a child’s lexical diversity at Grade 3 (e.g., vocabulary range, coverage, quality) has been identified as a critical factor in the child’s academic learning trajectory over time. It is in Grade 3 that academic literacy demands dramatically increase (Gentry, 2002), and underachievement at Grade 3 leads to the widely recognized “fourth grade slump” (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990, p. 45), which is a strong predictor of further academic challenge and difficulty.

Despite the importance of the Grade 3 year, there is only limited research on early literacy development at this transition point, and according to Roessingh et al., the focus of this research has largely been on reading rather than writing. In their study, Roessingh and her colleagues develop individual lexical profiles for 77 Grade 3 children by concurrently applying a vocabulary profiling tool to the analysis of the lexical diversity of the students’ writing and combining this with analytic rating of the same texts across four proficiency levels. This study provides an example of how a corpus-based approach and increasingly powerful online lexical profiling programs can be used to extend the validity of traditional rating approaches. Early and more effective identification of children at risk through lexical profiling would provide essential feedback to teachers who would, as a result, be better positioned to address their individual student’s needs at critical moments in development. Profiling approaches like the one applied by Roessingh et al. will also contribute to our increased understanding of second language learning and acquisition over time.

The research reported by Jang, Cummins, Wagner, Stille, and Dunlop in this special issue is also leading to increased understanding of second language learning and acquisition. The government of Ontario recently implemented a comprehensive assessment framework, *Steps to English*
Proficiency (STEP), which applies criterion-referenced scale descriptors to the assessment of the language and literacy development of English Language Learners (ELLs), grades K–12. Classroom teachers are using STEP for ongoing assessment, monitoring, and support of their ELL students. Jang et al. situate their discussion of the STEP descriptors within contextual (e.g., the home language environment, the classroom environment) and personal considerations (e.g., a student's goal orientation, attitude), which they argue must be taken into account in the interpretation of the descriptors. They discuss issues arising from the use of developmental descriptors like those provided in STEP, which are defined by proficiency steps that are aligned with curricular outcomes. STEP's alignment-driven descriptors are not supported by empirical evidence of cognitive, behavioural, or performance differences, which have been documented in the second language acquisition research literature. As part of an ongoing program of validation, Jang et al. report on the application of STEP criteria by 42 teachers in defining the language and literacy development of 159 of their students. Their study highlights the necessary complexity of such validation studies and the important role that context is playing in their considerations of validity evidence. Systematic study of developmental criteria like those provided in the STEP assessment framework may help to fill in gaps in our understanding of second language acquisition across grade and proficiency levels from K–12. Like Roessingh et al., Jang and her colleagues highlight the lack of research on early literacy development (specifically at grade 3) as a critical issue.

Doe’s study focuses on adult language learners within the context of an intermediate level, pre-university English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom. She situates her discussion of diagnostic assessment, feedback, and pedagogical interaction within Bachman and Palmer’s (2010) Assessment Use Argument validation framework by examining claims, warrants, and assumptions related to diagnostic assessment procedures and practices during a course. Eliciting data from students’ written reflections and one-on-one interviews at intervals during the course, Doe analyzes how feedback from the diagnostic assessment was viewed by the students and how and why these views did or did not change. Doe explores the complex and subtle factors that influence how students used the feedback over time. As in Jang et al., Doe highlights considerations, both personal (e.g., goals, attitudes, self-assessed purposes for learning) and contextual (e.g., classroom environment, teacher response), that influenced students’ accounts of the diagnostic approach.

As is evident in the discussion above, all of the studies included in this special issue on Canada share the view that assessment is situated and embedded within sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts. It is particularly notable that the final contribution to this special issue is Zumbo, Liu, Wu, Shear, Olvera Astivia, and Ark’s introduction to an ecological model of item responding, which offers a new psychometric approach to differential item functioning (DIF) methodology. The model that Zumbo and his colleagues propose takes into account the testing situation and draws on research and researchers who took an ecologically informed view in their considerations of test scores, item bias, and test performance (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Chalhoub-Deville, 2003; Fox, 2003). Zumbo et al. advance our considerations of DIF, applying the latent class logistic regression method and their innovative ecological model of item responding to address context as testing setting.

This special issue on Canada is in keeping with McNamara’s (2007) recognition that “the greatest challenge facing language testing is the issue of the context in which language testing is carried out, both at the micro and macro level” (p. 131). Increasing concerns about assessment
practices in the Canadian context (at micro/local, and macro/national levels) prompted Canadian researchers attending the 2008 meeting of the Language Testing Research Colloquium (LTRC) in Hangzhou, China, to discuss the necessity of forming a national association of language testers that could respond to assessment issues within the Canadian context, promote research on language testing, and provide a springboard for discussions of ethical practices. The foundational meeting of the Canadian Association of Language Assessment/l’Association canadienne pour l’évaluation des langues (CALA/ACEL) was held in 2009 in Ottawa. In the intervening years, CALA/ACEL has defined its mission and increased its membership (http://www.cala-acel.org/home.html). The themes that are evident in the mission statement of CALA/ACEL are the same as those that define the articles included in this special issue, namely, validity, ethics, fairness, and justice. What is particularly evident is how these themes play out in relation to the particular sociocultural and sociopolitical context of Canada.

Of course, a prevailing question about a special issue that purports to reflect trends in assessment within a particular country is the question of representativeness. Although the call for articles for this special issue was open and widely circulated in 2011, ultimately only seven articles survived the rigorous LAQ editorial review process. The articles were vetted independently, through blind, peer review, as if they were “stand-alone” journal articles, not as representative pieces of a special issue on national/Canadian assessment trends. In the end, although national balance was achieved in authorship, with articles in this special issue prepared by researchers from regions across Canada (Maritime, Central, Prairie, and Pacific), a number of articles were withdrawn over the intervening years. As a result, one of the dominant concerns of Canadian language policy and a critical focus of language assessment research is missing here, namely, research on assessment of First Nations and aboriginal languages. This is a serious omission that was unavoidable, given procedures defined for the development of this special issue. However, what is impressive, given the randomness of the review process, is the continuity of focus here. All of these research articles share an abiding concern for the quality and validity of assessment practices in the Canadian context. In the end, this special issue provides a collective Canadian affirmation of Swain’s call to “bias for the best” in language testing.

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REFERENCES


