UNANSWERED QUESTIONS FOR ASSESSING WRITING IN HE. WHAT SHOULD BE ASSESSED AND HOW?

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a little history

As Davies (2008) reminds us, between the early 1950s and the early 1960s, the number of speakers of English as a second language coming to Britain for higher education rose five-fold (to 64,000). In 2013 there were 437,000+. In the early years almost all these international students were funded by the British Council as part of the government policy of aid to developing countries.

This is where second language testing in Britain began– with the need to support the increasing numbers of students at HK Higher Education institutions came the need to assess the language of entrants and applicants.

In the 1960s, language support that was provided to international students tended to be on an ad hoc, part-time basis. As problems occurred or developed during studies, some kind of part-time help may have become available, often linked to ELT teacher-training courses in Departments of Education. This sometimes led to the development of short courses, e.g. four weeks at the beginning of the students' studies. Birmingham University appears to have been the first to be seriously concerned about the needs of overseas students with the appointment in 1962 of an adviser for overseas students and to start induction courses. This involved analyzing students' problems, developing some teaching materials as well as teaching part-time, **and trying to devise an analytical test.** (Jordan, 2002, p. 70)

Re-visiting the constructs of EAP:
What should be assessed and how?

What is EAP?

◦ Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) wrote in the first issue of the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*:

The EAP agenda has always been to help learners gain access to ways of communicating that have accrued cultural capital in particular communities, demystifying academic discourses to provide learners with control over the resources that might enhance their career opportunities.

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Can we assess novice 'academic writing' without assessing content as well as language?

Alderson & Urquhart (1985). This test is unfair: I'm not an economist.

Hamp-Lyons (1986). Testing second language writing in academic contexts. (PhD. University of Edinburgh.)

"It is fairly clear from these studies that the constructors of ELTS M2* had no principled basis for the construction of truly EAP writing test tasks." (p.376)

Clapham, C. (1992). The effect of background knowledge on reading test performance. (PhD. University of Lancaster. Revised and published as Clapham, 1996: The development of IELTS: A study of the effect of background knowledge on comprehension.

"The question of which subject areas should be tested in an ESAP test has not yet been satisfactorily answered. It therefore seems advisable not to give academic students subject-specific reading modules but to give them an EGAP reading test instead." (p.199-200)

BUT

How (and should) we identify and assess 'academic' writing among novice academics (such as first-year undergraduates)?

Cumming, Lai & Cho (2016) report an important survey of work to date on students writing from sources for academic purposes. This is **not** an assessment-related paper, but it has much to tell us that is relevant for assessing academic writing.

Seviour, M. (2015). Assessing academic writing on a pre-sessional course: Designing assessment which supports learning. *JEAP 18*: 84-99.

Read, J. (2015). *Assessing English Proficiency for University Study*. Palgrave/Macmillan.

Johns, A. (2015). Moving on from *Genre Analysis*: An update and tasks for the transitional student. *JEAP 19: 113-124.*

- **Useful assessment links**:
- The MASUS Procedure (Bonnano & Jones, University of Sydney; Palmer, L., Levett-Jones, T., Smith, R. & and McMillan, M. (2014).).
- 6+1 Traits (Education Northwest).

Why has assessment research and development not kept pace re. how language works at post-undergraduate levels, for example, the significance of stance and voice in Master's dissertations?

A look at any issue of _JEAP_ shows that a great deal is being learned every year about e.g.:

- Noun phrase complexity (Parkinson & Musgrave (2014)
- Grammatical metaphor (Llardét 2016)
- Formulaic sequences (Peters & Pauwels 2015)
- Stance (Lancaster (2016)
- Automated essay feedback (Peterson & Phakiti 2014)

BUT

Language testing would do well to look a bit further back at Swales 1990 and the vast body of subsequent work; e.g.,

- Akbas (2012). Exploring Metadiscourse in Master's Dissertation Abstracts: Cultural and Linguistic Variations across Postgraduate Writers. IJALEL 1. 1: 12-26.
- Hyland (2011). The presentation of self in scholarly life: Identity and marginalization in academic homepages. _ESP 30:_ 286-297.

Is it possible to 'benchmark' dissertation and thesis quality in applied linguistics and language testing/assessment, nationally and internationally?

There is no (is there any?) corpus of doctoral dissertations set up as a searchable corpus, though there are collections of dissertations in PDF format (e.g., EThOS).

There is no validated system of marking for dissertations.

At doctoral level most examiners examine only 1-3 a year.

There is no video- or audio-recording of doctoral examinations.

Internationally, there is wide variation in the process as well as the standard for examining.

This is an UNASKED as well as UNANSWERED question.

IS THERE A ROLE FOR THE LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT COMMUNITY HERE?

Mentoring, 'language brokers' and the limits of 'support': How can assessment help? How does support confound the fair assessment of apprentice text?

- PRISEAL 3 (Coimbra, Nov 2015)

- Li, Y., & Flowerdew, J. (2007). Shaping Chinese novice scientists' manuscripts for publication. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *16*(2), 100-117.

- Lillis, T., & Curry, M. (2006). Professional academic writing by multilingual scholars: Interactions with literacy brokers in the production of English-medium texts. *Written Communication*, *23*(1), 3-35.

- Westbrook, C. & P. Holt. (2015). Addressing the problem of outside assistance in pre-sessional writing assessments. *JEAP 18*: 78-83.

- Willey, I., & Tanimoto, K. (2013). "Convenience editors" as legitimate participants in the practice of scientific editing: An interview study. *JEAP*, *12*(1), 23-32.

Beyond traditional constructs

Brain matters—but so does the context

Beyond traditional 'constructs'

We've got the money issue--

Hyland & Hamp-Lyons (2002):

EAP is not only a commercial endeavour: for college and university students in many countries, mastering enough English, and the right English, to succeed in learning their subjects through the medium of English in textbooks, lectures, study groups, and so on, is a matter of great urgency. Equally, for countries that are trying to lift themselves into economic prominence, or to remain major players on the world economic stage, producing an annual crop of graduates who can function in employment through English is a major issue.

Personal and cultural context

◦ To repeat a point I've often made: English is a cultural 'good'. And acquiring this 'good' can be life-transforning not only for the person who acquires it but also for their family. This fact demands that EAP professionals and language testing/assessment professionals take their work and the decisions they make very seriously.

◦ This is something we need to think even more deeply about in the present hostile world for people who find themselves' out of context' – international students, refugees, legal and illegal migrants, users of minority languages in a majority culture…

◦ There is an even larger place for EAP programmes, private or volunteer EAP tutors, and for language drop-in centres in church and village halls, where volunteers help new learners of English make their way into the language, and through the language, the society.

◦ It's a long way from the undergraduate EAP classroom—but we should be starting where the need is.

not really a conclusion

◦ Research and knowledge in what the language(s) of higher education look and sound like and how they 'work' linguistically, socially, culturally and interculturally

◦ has run far in advance of

◦ knowledge in the assessment of language(s) in higher education.

While EAP practitioners have guidelines for good practice in assessment in the BALEAP Competency Framework (BALEAP., 2008), language testers have a strong mandate enshrined in the ILTA Code of Ethics to "continue to develop their professional knowledge, sharing this knowledge with colleagues and other language professionals" (ILTA, 2000). Through greater collaboration between the language testing and EAP communities, language testers can enhance their understanding of the wider construct of EAP and share their knowledge of assessment with EAP teachers. Working together both communities are in a better position to use "their societal roles [to] strive to improve the quality of language testing, assessment and teaching services, promote the just allocation of those services and contribute to the education of society regarding language learning and language proficiency" (ILTA, 2000).

◦ Diane Schmitt & Liz Hamp-Lyons (2015).

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6+1 traits model. educationnorthwest.org/traits

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Bonnano, H. & J. Jones (2007). *The MASUS Procedure: Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students A Diagnostic Assessment.* University of Sydney. [https://sydney.edu.au/stuserv/documents/learning_centre/MASUS.pdf]

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