

**Introducing a Modular Course on Testing and
Assessment: A Plea for a Reconsideration of the
TEFL Programme**

**Smail BENMOUSSAT & Nawal BENMOSTEFA
University of Tlemcen**

Abstract:

The present paper entitled "Introducing a Modular Course on Testing and Assessment: A Plea for a Reconsideration of the TEFL Programme" is actually a plea for a reconsideration of the TEFL teaching programme which lacks some fundamental concepts relating to testing and assessment. This represents a serious handicap for our would-be-teachers. Worth noting is that most novice EFL teachers do not know what the characteristics of a good language test are and how they are to evaluate language tests; most of the time they have recourse to ready-made tests. In such a situation, it is unfortunate to say that, 'our teachers teach, but others test what they teach'. Our proposal relating to the introduction of a modular course on testing and assessing would hopefully remedy the situation. This initiative represents the crux of the issue in the present paper.

One of the core issues in language teaching/learning, be it second or foreign, has been the general principles and guidelines relating to the different methodologies underlying language testing. A survey of the diachronic development of language teaching clearly shows the fact that language teachers in general have been much more concerned with how much their learners know about a language and how well they use the language. Yet, the learner's linguistic and communicative competences, to mention just these two for the time being, can nowadays be gathered by means of careful measurement in given

situations. Admittedly the what-to-test question and the how-to-test question are both of equal importance; they undeniably constitute the cornerstone of any language testing activity. It is to this end that this paper takes up general considerations of what a teacher needs to know about language testing.

Arguably, researchers in the field of language testing, such as Alderson, Bachman, Spolsky and Skehan, to mention just a few, virtually all admit the fact that language testing has come of age as a discipline in its own right within applied linguistics. The field of language testing has much to offer in terms of theoretical, methodological and practical accomplishments to researchers and practitioners, particularly in language learning and language teaching. An oft-held view of testing is that it is an integral part of the teaching/learning process. According to this view, testing and teaching are closely interrelated. In Flavell's view, '*A test is seen as a natural extension of classroom work, providing teacher and student with useful information that can serve each as a basis for improvement*' (Flavell 1983:1). Some teachers see testing as a necessary evil; as a pedagogical in-class activity it serves many purposes and helps teachers set academic standards for their learners and provide them with feedback about the learning progress in general and teaching process in particular. However, testing is time-consuming and effort-demanding, in the sense that it very often uses up valuable class time.

Making use of the fact that testing is part and parcel of the language teaching/learning process, it logically

follows that the person best prepared to set the test is the teacher. What the teacher actually needs in language testing is to be acquainted with the general guidelines for setting different test-types which will be practical, reliable and valid, and consequently give helpful information to both teachers and learners about successes and failings, to use Flavell's terms. Arguably, the teacher, as a counselor, is in a better position to know which tests are actually appropriate for his class, and in effect cater for his learners needs. According to Flavell (ibid), the appropriateness of a test is largely determined by purpose: why is a test needed at a particular stage in the student's learning and what use will be made of the results? In fact, if testing is adequately prepared and well administered on the basis of 'test-what-you-teach' motto, it checks the effectiveness of the process as a whole.

In this respect, *'Both testing and teaching are so closely interrelated that it is virtually impossible to work in either field without being constantly concerned with the other'* (Heaton 1988:5). From this perspective, one can consider the relationship between testing and teaching as one of partnership in the sense that *'it [testing] should be supportive of good teaching and where necessary, exert a corrective influence on bad teaching'* (Hughes 1989:2). Many teachers believe that writing tests requires some sort of expertise. Yet, it is axiomatic that the teacher is the one who best knows the teaching profession; he is in a better position than anyone to state in precise and clear terms what his learners have been taught and where they have been up to. This is to say that

'it follows that the person best prepared to set the test is the teacher' (Harrison 1983:1).

Regretfully one must admit that still at present, there is not a course on "Testing and Assessment" in our EFL Departments as part of a pre-service teacher training programme. If it exists, the students are given some information about test types, yet, they are not instructed how to design, how to construct and how to administer the tests when assessing language areas and skills. Many teachers and especially novice EFL teachers do not know what the characteristics of a good language test are and how they are to evaluate language tests. They prefer to use ready-made tests made by other testers/teachers or the tests offered in the textbooks.

It is unfortunate to note that the disadvantage of using others' tests is that, as noted by Korsal (2006), we teach but others test what we teach. Some teachers have reported indiscreetly the case of the same classroom tests that have been used without any revision or editing. One can step further by asserting that many teachers are not aware of the nature of the exam and what is really being tested. They may never have received or attended training sessions that would explain the skills language learners need to succeed at various test tasks.

Working on the assumption that testing constitutes an integral part of a foreign language teaching, or rather a key link in the foreign language teaching process, where there is teaching, there should be testing. The objective here is to make a proposal relating to the introduction of

an academic modular course, which would be entitled, "Testing and Assessment". The module in question would be part of the TEFL module or ideally a modular course in its own right. In so doing, the proposed modular course will add, in effect, an important bonus and a valuable asset, so to speak, to the general pedagogical formation and pre-service training of our EFL students or would-be-teachers. However, the aim pursued is not to overweigh testing at the expense of teaching, but to remedy the would-be-teachers' almost lack of knowledge about testing.

There is an urgent need for testing to be brought in line with the current methods and approaches to language teaching. However, the testing approaches have been either overlooked, for example, testing based on the principles of the grammar translation method, or ignored in the main mainstream approach, for example, communicative language testing which does not faithfully mirror its counterpart communicative language teaching in the testing and assessment of the student's learning and performance. To this end, we should note that the proposed outline relating to "Testing and Assessment" is actually a sheer guideline, certainly of interest to teachers in general and novice teachers, in particular, for whom 'knowledge-about-testing' is no familiar ground. The overall aims of the proposed course outline are manifold:

- To look at areas of difficulty in the relationship between teaching and testing and how these difficulties can be overcome.

- To provide students with a substantial knowledge about the main test types that form part of the EFL testing literature.
- To provide students with sound principled guidelines for test preparation and test administration.
- To identify strengths and weaknesses in various approaches to testing.
- To consider how knowledge of the language system, mainly grammar and vocabulary, is best tested and measured and what is the place of grammar/vocabulary in a skill-based approach to teaching and testing.

These general principles can be translated in terms of a general objective: to provide the students with '*a conceptual foundation for answering practical questions regarding the development and use of language tests*' (Bachman 1990: 1). The proposal made concerning the course outline falls under six main headings; it is also accompanied with a selected bibliography:

Course Outline

1. Approaches to Testing

1.2. Testing Defined

1.3. The Pre-Scientific Period

1.3. The Psychometric-Structuralist Period

- 1.4. The Psycholinguistic-Sociolinguistic Period
- 1.5. Communicative Language Testing

2. Requirements of a Good Test

- 2.1. Reliability
- 2.2. Validity
 - 2.3.1. Content Validity
 - 2.3.2. Construct Validity
 - 2.3.3. Criterion-related Validity
 - 2.3.4. Norm-related Validity
 - 2.3.5. Face Validity
 - 2.3.6. Empirical Validity
- 2.4. Practicality
- 2.5. Discrimination
- 2.6. Usefulness

3. Kinds of Tests

- 3.1. Proficiency
- 3.2. Achievement
- 3.3. Aptitude
- 3.4. Diagnostic
- 3.5. Placement
- 3.6. Progress
- 3.7. Cloze
- 3.8. Discrete-Point/Integrative

4. Testing Formats

- 4.1. Multiple-Choice Questions
- 4.2. True/False Statements
- 4.3. Yes/No Questions
- 4.4. Composition
- 4.5. Dictation

4.6. Gap-Filling and Completion

4.7. Matching

5. Testing the Language Skills

5.1. Testing Listening

5.2. Testing Speaking

5.3. Testing Reading

5.4. Testing Writing

6. Testing the Linguistic Components

6.1. Testing Grammar

6.2. Testing Vocabulary

6.3. Testing Pronunciation

6.4. Testing Functional Language

Selected Bibliography

Alderson, J.C. *et al.* (1995) *Language Test Construction and Evaluation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bachman, L. (1990) *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bachman, L. and Palmer, S. (1996) *Language Testing in Practice: Designing and developing Useful language Tests*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Baker, D. (1989) *Language Testing*. London: Edward Arnold.

Brown, H.D. (1994) *Principles of language Learning and Teaching*. 3rd Edition. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.

Carroll, B.J. (1980) *Testing Communicative Performance*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Carroll, B.J. and Hall, P. (1985) *Make Your Own Language Tests*. Oxford: Pergamon.

Davies, A. (1980) *Principles of Language Testing*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hammer, J. (2001) *The Practice of Language Teaching*. London: Longman.

Harrison, A. (1983) *A Language Testing Handbook*. London: MacMillan.

Heaton, J.B. (1975) *Writing English Language Tests*. London: Longman.

Hughes, A. (1989) *Testing for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lado, R. (1961) *Language Testing: The Construction and Use of Foreign Language Tests*. London: Longman.

Spolsky, B. (1978) *Approaches to Language Testing*. Center for Applied Linguistics.

Oller, J.W. (1979) *Language Tests at Schools*. London: Longman.

Ur, P. (1996) *A Course in language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weir, C. (1990) *Communicative Language Testing*. New York: Prentice Hall.

Weir, C. (1993) *Understanding and Developing Language Tests*. New York: Prentice Hall.

Worth noting here is that the bibliography has been selected on the basis of language simplification and ease of understanding and getting the message through, as well as on the pedagogical nature underlying the courses offered by the authors.

Our initiative represents a sheer attempt to provide our EFL students and teachers with a detailed outline in EFL testing, that would serve as a springboard for the development of a substantial knowledge which, as far as we know, has not been fully covered on a sound methodological basis in our EFL Departments and Sections throughout the country. We believe that with the implementation of a testing approach as part of the TEFL module or a modular course in its own right, we are hopefully meeting a real need to bridge the gap between teaching and testing. On the other hand, we should regard tests as mirrors in which both teachers and students can see their reflections clearly. The proposed outlined, though seemingly detailed, is by no means exhaustive.

References

- ALDERSON, J. C. (1991): *Language Testing in the 1990s: How far have we come? How much further have we to go?* In S. Anivan 1991 (Ed.).
- BACHMAN, L.F. (1990) *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford University Press.
- BACHMAN, L.F. (1991) *What Does Language Testing Have to Offer?* TESOL QUARTERLY, Vol.25,N^o4.
- BACHMAN, L.F. and PALMER, A.S. (1996) *Language Testing in Practice: Designing and Developing Useful Language Tests*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BAKER, D. (1989) *Language Testing*. London: Edward Arnold.
- BROWN, H.D. (1994) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. 3rd Edition. New Jersey: Prentice- Hall Inc.
- BROWN, J.D. (1996). *Testing in Language Programs*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- BROWN, J.D. and HUDSON, T. (2002) *Criterion-Referenced Language Testing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- CARROLL, J.B. (1961) *Fundamental Considerations in Testing for English Language Proficiency of Foreign Students'*. Testing. Washington, D.C: Center of Applied Linguistics.
- DAVIES, A. (1977) *The Construction of Language Tests*. The Edinburgh Course In Applied Linguistics Volume 4: Testing and Experimental Methods. Oxford University Press.
- DAVIES, A. (1980) *Principles of Language Testing*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- FLAVEL, R. (1983) *A Language Testing Handbook*. Essential Language Teaching Series. Macmillan Press London
- HARMER, J. (2001) *The Practice of Language Teaching* (3Ed.) Essex: Longman.
- HARRISON, A. (1983) *A Language Testing Handbook*. London: Macmillan.
- HEATON, J.B. (1988) *Writing English Language Tests*. London: Longman.
- HUGHES, A. (1989) *Testing for Language Teachers*. Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- KORSAL, D. (2006) *Assessing Teachers' Testing Skills in ELT and Enhancing Their Professional Development Through Distance Learning on the Net*. Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University Turkey
- SKEHAN, P. (1991) *Progress in Language Testing: the 1990s*. In ALDERSON, J.C. and NORTH, B. (Eds.). *Language Testing in the 1990s*. London: Macmillan.
- SPOLSKY, B. (1975) *Language Testing: Art or Science?* Paper presented at the 4th AILA International Congress. Stuttgart.
- SPOLSKY, B. (1978) *Approaches to Language Testing*. Center for Applied Linguistics.

CV

Mr BENMOUSSAT Smail is currently Professor of Applied Linguistics at the English Language Department of Abou-Bekr BELKAID University, Tlemcen, Algeria. He holds a Master's Degree in Modern English Language and Linguistics from the University of Sheffield (GB) and a 'Doctorat d'Etat' in Applied Linguistics and TEFL. His main research interests include language/culture teaching, assessment and testing and teacher education development.

Miss. BENMOSTEFA Nawal is currently Lecturer at the English Language Department of Abou-Bekr BELKAID University, Tlemcen, Algeria. She holds a Magister in Applied Linguistics and TEFL. Her main fields of research cover linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of ELT in Arab/Islamic settings, testing and assessment and English Studies.