

# Language Assessment Matters

The Newsletter of the Association for Language Testing and Assessment of Australia and New Zealand

Issue One, April 2014



Above, ALTAANZ's Inaugural Conference 2012, Sydney

Conference #2, Brisbane, November, 27-29 2014.

Will you be in the next picture?

See [www.altaanz.org](http://www.altaanz.org) for details. Student Travel funding available.

## **ALTAANZ AGM 2013**

ALTAANZ held its AGM during the ALANZ - ALAA conference and voted in a new secretary Martin East, a Communications Officer, Johanna Motteram and two new student officers, Sharon Yahalom (Melbourne University) and Matthew Book (Victoria University of Wellington). Thanks were extended to Rosemary Erlam (retiring secretary) and Kellie Frost (retiring Communications Officer) for all their hard work for the organization and also to Noriko Iwashita (Treasurer) and Ute Knoch (Vice president) each of whom agreed to stand for a further two- year term of office and were re-elected. The current presidents, Cathie Elder and Peter Gu, will complete their two year term of office at the end of 2014.

## Language Testing alive and well at the 2013 ALAA-ALANZ Conference

In November 2013 ALTAANZ contributed to the organization of a specialist language testing and assessment strand within the combined ALANZ & ALAA Conference held at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

The strand comprised an ALTAANZ sponsored plenary address by Associate Professor John Read of the University of Auckland on the topic of English testing for international aviation purposes, a colloquium on vocabulary testing chaired by Averil Coxhead of Victoria University and 20 individual papers.

The papers spanned a broad range of topics: some presented validation research associated with high stakes standardized tests (IELTS, TOEIC and the Occupational English Test) and others considered the problems with current measures such as the ESL Bandscales when applied to the assessment of indigenous learners for whom English is an additional language and the end-of school examinations

used to assess students of languages other than English in Australian schools.

There were also a number of papers discussing innovative language testing initiatives including a putative test of English as an international language, a new test of pragmatic ability for ESL learners and a peer-to-peer assessment of foreign spoken language proficiency recently introduced in New Zealand secondary schools. Three further papers considered the question of diagnostic assessment following admission to English medium universities.

The status of testing and assessment as a major theme of the conference was obvious to all and it was gratifying to hear presentations from newcomers undertaking doctoral research in the area. All testing papers were well-attended and provoked lively discussion.

It is envisaged that a language testing and assessment strand will be a regular feature at future joint conferences of the two Applied Linguistics Associations, with ALTAANZ holding its own independent conference in every intervening year.

### SAVE THE DATES, PLAN YOUR TRAVEL

## ALTAANZ LANGUAGE TESTING WORKSHOPS IN MELBOURNE, 10 - 12 July 2014

	Thursday, July 10th	Friday, July 11th		Saturday, July 12th	
Morning 9am – 12pm		Diagnostic assessment in the language classroom		Introduction to Rasch measurement	Improving EAL learning outcomes through enhancing teacher assessment literacy
Afternoon 1pm – 4pm		Responding to student writing	Assessing second language pragmatics	Introduction to many-facet Rasch measurement	
Evening 5pm – 7pm	Test analysis for teachers				

See [altaanz.org.au](http://altaanz.org.au) for more details....early bird registration closes 15 May

## **Standard Setting Workshop at the University of Western Australia**

Catherine Elder, University of Melbourne

In early February 2014 a standard-setting workshop was held at the University of Western Australia (UWA) to determine minimum thresholds for undergraduate entry on the internet based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT). The workshop was conducted by representatives of Educational Testing Service (ETS), the Princeton-based US agency responsible for the development and administration of the test. ETS has provided a standard-setting service for a number of universities in the United States but this workshop is, to our knowledge, the first of its kind to be held at an Australian university.

So what is standard-setting? It is a process whereby a group of panelists convene to decide what might be considered a minimally acceptable level of performance on a test designed for a particular purpose. The panelists should be people who have some familiarity with the domain that the test is targeting. So, in the case of a language test for university admission purposes like the TOEFL, the panelists will be academics from different disciplines and professional staff who are familiar with the language needs of first year undergraduates and therefore able to make an informed judgment about how much language proficiency is enough to be able to cope with the language demands of first year study, including interacting with staff and students on campus, understanding lectures and prescribed written materials and completing assignments.

There are various techniques for standard-setting (Cizek and Bunch, 2007) but most require that panelists first discuss and reach consensus about what they consider to be the

critical abilities needed to cope in the relevant domain and then familiarize themselves with the test that has been designed to measure these abilities. They then engage in a review of test items and/or samples of test-taker performance to determine what score on the test will ensure that the test-taker has what it takes to get by. The process takes some time: at UWA the panelists attended a workshop over two full working days. During the first day they reviewed pre-scored test-takers' samples of TOEFL writing and speaking to determine the lowest score that might be considered acceptable for university entrance (the cut-score). On the second day they looked at listening and reading items at various levels of difficulty and decided, following a process of reflection and discussion, which ones a minimally acceptable student should be able to get right. Their combined judgments were tabulated in a report that will be used by the University to inform decisions about what the minimum required score on each TOEFL test component should be.

Why bother with standard-setting given that universities in Australia have already published minimum English requirements for entry? Recent research (e.g., O'Loughlin 2011, Ginther and Elder forthcoming) suggests that many staff are dissatisfied with the language skills of their undergraduate and graduate students but have had no involvement in setting cut-scores for their institution and indeed have little understanding of what the existing cut-scores actually mean. It also appears that policy makers in many institutions are basing their minimum cut-scores on what other universities are doing rather than making decisions in light of their own institutional needs and priorities. Standard-setting serves not only to educate participants in what a test claims to measure and how it does so, but also offers the evidence needed to make

responsible cut-score decisions based on local circumstances.

Should you be interested in doing a TOEFL standard-setting session at your own institution contact Cath Moore (English Language Consultant [cmoore@etsglobal.org](mailto:cmoore@etsglobal.org)). For advice on standard-setting with other tests you are using contact ALTAANZ <[altaanz@gmail.com](mailto:altaanz@gmail.com)>

**References:**

Cizek, G. J., & Bunch, M. B. (2007). *Standard setting: A guide to establishing and evaluating performance standards on tests*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

O'Loughlin, K. (2011). *The interpretation and use of proficiency test scores in University selection: How valid and ethical are they?* *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 8, 146-160.

Ginther, A. & Elder, C. (forthcoming) *A comparative investigation into understandings and uses of TOEFL iBT & IELTS (Academic) and the Pearson Test of English for graduate admissions in U.S. and Australia: A case study of two university contexts*. Princeton, Educational Testing Service.

**ALTAANZ EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS 2014**



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## *Up and Coming Language Testers: John Pill.*

### *Student Pages with Sharon Yahalom and Matthew Book.*



*John Pill recently completed a PhD in Applied Linguistics and is working at the Language Testing Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. He spoke to Sharon Yahalom about his PhD and plans for the future.*

**John's PhD thesis:** John's thesis was one outcome of an ARC-funded study at the University of Melbourne which investigated what health professionals value in interaction between patients and health professionals as a way of reviewing and revalidating assessment criteria used on the Occupational English Test (OET). His thesis focused on what doctors, in particular, value about spoken

consultations between doctors and patients. The project team collected spoken and written data in which experienced doctors and clinical educators gave feedback to both non-native- and native-speaking trainee doctors. John's aim was to develop an understanding of what is important to doctors in order to adapt or expand the criteria used to assess the OET speaking test. He found that language was certainly of importance but it wasn't the main aspect that the doctors were interested in – unsurprisingly, they focused on clinical skills and clinical knowledge and how these were realised in the consultation. An important insight from a language-testing perspective is how much of the work done in a consultation is achieved using language, which therefore indicates how fundamental language skills are to effective performance as a doctor. Based on the findings of the research, John was able to propose two new criteria for the OET Centre to consider which, rather than focusing on the individual test taker only, also involve how the interaction between health professional and patient develops and ways in which the practitioner uses language skills to engage and support the patient. Taking the interactional competence of OET test takers into account in this way expands the scope of

the test, which currently has a more limited view of language proficiency.

*For more information on this research, click on the link below:*

<http://www.occupationalenglishtest.org/Display.aspx?tabid=2607>

**The PhD process:** John enjoyed the freedom of not having a 9-to-5 job. He valued working with interesting people, including his supervisors, the project team, his peers and others at the university. He appreciated having the time to stop and think, and to work out the way he wanted to express his ideas.

John reports that the most challenging aspect of the process was getting the thesis finished. The period when he was still searching for what it was really all about was especially difficult.

**John's advice for PhD students:** John encourages students to keep going and to note down what they've done. He stressed the need to count thinking time as time well spent even though a week might go by with apparently little output; keeping a diary of what was done and how long it took is one way of recognising

effort made. Progress can be hard to see over the three or four years of a PhD, so keeping a record is helpful to the student, supervisors and the university. John found that engaging with other students and attending seminars and talks helped his motivation through exposure to new and unexpected ideas.

**Employment:** John's work at the LTRC involves a variety of projects, including test material development and test analysis for the OET, and an IELTS-funded project on university writing and transition to the workplace. John says he is privileged to be working with such great colleagues and he finds his work stimulating and fun.

**Plans for the future:** John is keen to get an academic post involving language-testing research and teaching. Although language testing is a relatively small field, John is optimistic that opportunities for work and professional development will come up as new challenges emerge, including the need for more research on testing language skills appropriate for professional and academic contexts as a consequence of increasing global mobility.

Language Assessment Matters is the newsletter of ALTAANZ, the Association for Language Testing and Assessment of Australia and New Zealand.

Do you have a Language Testing or Assessment related item you would like to have included in the newsletter? If so, please send your submission to [altaanz@gmail.com](mailto:altaanz@gmail.com) with "newsletter" in the subject line. Possible contributions could include a report on work in progress, a PhD or Master's thesis report, a conference review or report, discussion of a current issue in language testing or assessment or something else you think our membership would find interesting.