

Language Assessment Matters Issue 5

April 2016

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



In this issue we have the announcement of a new ALTAANZ / PLTA Award, and information about the forthcoming special issue of PLTA. There are also two introductions: Professor Matt Poehner (pictured left), a visiting professor at The University of Melbourne Language Testing Research Centre in the second half of this year and one of the Plenary Speakers at the ALTAANZ conference in Auckland this November and a conversation between our new student representatives.

As always, please do let us know if you would like to contribute an item to the newsletter.

Papers in Language Testing and Assessment (PLTA) Best Article Award

ALTAANZ is pleased to announce a new award, “**The PLTA Best Paper Award**”. The aim of this Award is to recognise language testing and assessment articles published in *Papers in Language Testing and Assessment* that make a significant contribution to the professional field. The award will be presented once every three years. The winner of this Award will receive a certificate and a cheque of AUD\$500. For the 2016 award, all articles published between 2013 and 2015 will be considered. The evaluation committee will use the following criteria:

- The contribution of the work to the field of language testing and assessment, or to the interface between language testing and other areas of enquiry (and in particular the originality of the contribution).
- The persuasiveness of the argument (whether based on the interpretation of empirical data, theoretical rationales, or both).
- The thoroughness of the literature review.
- The clarity of presentation (written expression; the use of figures and tables, where appropriate).
- In the case of empirical studies, the quality of the procedures for data-gathering and analysis.

The winner will be announced in the second half of this year.

Correspondence from Matt Poehner

"I am very excited to have the opportunity to visit both Australia and New Zealand in 2016. I have never visited either country but have wanted to see some of that part of the world ever since I was a child, when we had a close family friend who was living in the States but was originally from Australia. His stories of his homeland, including the Outback with Uluru and the Great Barrier Reef certainly ignited my young imagination. Professionally, I have also followed the terrific L2 research coming out of Australia and New Zealand since I was a graduate student, and I have been fortunate to develop good collegial relationships with scholars at various universities there. That this has led me to the opportunity to visit the University of Melbourne, with its Language Testing Research Centre, and the University of New South Wales during May and June and then to participate in the ALTAANZ conference in Auckland in November is a dream come true!"

Serious Academic Biography – he's a serious Academic ☺

Dr. Matthew E. Poehner is Associate Professor of World Languages Education and Applied Linguistics at The Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Poehner has taught French as a foreign language and English as a second language in U.S. K-12 schools as well as at private institutions and universities. After completing his PhD in Applied Linguistics, he served as a postdoctoral research scientist at the Center for Language Acquisition at The Pennsylvania State University and as a senior lecturer in the Department of Applied Linguistics. Dr. Poehner has also been a visiting faculty member at Juniata College (in Pennsylvania), where he served as coordinator of their Intensive English Program, and at the School of Education and Communication at Jönköping University in Sweden. Dr. Poehner has been in his current position at The Pennsylvania State University since 2008. There, he directs the teacher education program for candidates pursuing certification to teach a world language in the K-12 school system and also contributes to the doctoral programs in Curriculum and Instruction and Applied Linguistics.

Dr. Poehner's research examines the use of Sociocultural Theory, as conceived by Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky, as a basis for second language educational practices, including Dynamic Assessment, Mediated Development, and Systemic-theoretical Instruction. Much of Dr. Poehner's work has focused specifically on Dynamic Assessment as a framework for organizing interactions with learners in order to simultaneously diagnose their abilities and promote their continued development. Dr. Poehner's research has involved partnerships with language teachers, learners, and program directors and has been supported through grant awards. Much of Dr. Poehner's work has been supported through the Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research (CALPER), a Title VI Foreign Language Resource Center housed at The Pennsylvania State University and funded through the U.S. Department of Education. More recently, Dr. Poehner was co-principal investigator

for a project funded by the U.S. Department of Education to develop computerized tests of comprehension in Chinese, French, and Russian using principles of Dynamic Assessment.

Dr. Poehner is widely published in the areas of second and foreign language teaching, language assessment, theories of second language acquisition, and applied linguistics. He is the author, co-author, or editor of four books, including *Sociocultural Theory and the pedagogical imperative in L2 education: Vygotskian praxis and the research/practice divide* (2014), which received the 2015 Kenneth W. Mildener Prize from the Modern Language Association. An earlier book, *Dynamic Assessment: A Vygotskian approach to understanding and promoting second language development* (2008), was a finalist for the Outstanding Book Award through the British Association for Applied Linguistics. Dr. Poehner has published more than thirty scholarly book chapters and journal articles. His work has appeared in venues including *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Teaching Research*, *The Modern Language Journal*, *Language Testing*, and the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*. In 2008, Dr. Poehner received the Pimsleur Award for Outstanding Research Contribution from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

Report from the ALTAANZ 2016 Conference Committee

This conference organising committee was formed last year and has been holding regular meetings since then. It consists of 15 people and is chaired by Professor John Read of the University of Auckland. ALTAANZ committee members also on the conference organising committee are Ute Knoch and Katherine Quigley. Plans are taking shape for our conference to be held in Auckland on 18th – 19th November.

Apart from the dates, the conference theme and plenary speakers have also been decided on. The plenary speakers will present pre-conference workshops on Thursday 17th November. Preliminary publicity has been sent out. The call for papers went onto the website and around the ALTAANZ email list in early February, with a closing date for proposals of April 18th.

The next steps for the organising committee will be to review the proposals when they come in, and to put together a draft programme. Auckland University's Event Services are managing the budget, registration procedures and processing, the welcome reception and the conference dinner. Sponsorship is currently being sought.

ALTAANZ members will be kept updated on progress as the conference nears. All members are warmly invited to attend and present.

Kate Quigley

Conference Committee member, ALTAANZ Secretary

FORTHCOMING SPECIAL ISSUE OF PLTA

Evaluating language assessment programs/projects/frameworks in use

Current approaches to validation in the field of language testing emphasize the importance of considering how tests and assessment schemes operate in their contexts of use. In spite of this emphasis, published evaluations of the effectiveness and limitations of operational assessment schemes are quite sparse. This may be because of the difficulty of gathering relevant data, because those commissioned to undertake such evaluations feel constrained in reporting sensitive findings or because the context of the evaluation is seen (by the evaluators and/or by journal editors) as too local to yield insights worthy of public airing. Sadly this means that important knowledge about language assessments/projects/ frameworks in use remains buried.

The forthcoming special issue of PLTA, scheduled to appear in May 2016, will bring some of this knowledge to light, taking up issues of assessment use in a range of contexts. It presents a series of projects or reviews undertaken by external evaluators or newcomers to the contexts of concern, often in collaboration with local stakeholders. The authors and titles of the papers are as follows:

- Evaluating the achievements and challenges in reforming a national language exam: The reform team's perspective

Carol Spöttl, Benjamin Kremmel, Franz Holzknicht, and J. Charles Alderson

- Defining Assessment Standards for a New National Tertiary-level Qualification

John Read

- An evaluation of an online rater training program for the speaking and writing sub-tests of the Aptis test

Ute Knoch, Judith Fairbairn and Annemiek Huisman

- Using evaluation to promote change in language teacher practice

Rosemary Erlam

- Maintaining the connection between test and context: A language test for university admission

John Pill

- An evaluation of the exit standard of an academic English pathway program

Susie Macqueen, Sally O'Hagan and Ute Knoch

Cathie Elder (Special Issue Editor)

ALTAANZ 2016
THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
17TH TO 19TH OF NOVEMBER



**In the classroom and beyond:
Assessing language ability in different contexts.**

Confirmed plenary speakers are:

Matt Poehner, Pennsylvania State University
Ute Knoch, University of Melbourne
Peter Keegan, University of Auckland

Call for Papers Deadline Extended to 29 April 2016

Student Travel Scholarships Available
Information on www.altanz.org as it comes to hand.



Meet our new Student Representatives... Megan Yucel and Xiaohua Liu



Megan: Hi Xiaohua, congratulations on your new role as one of the student representatives on the ALTAANZ committee!

Xiaohua: Thanks Megan!

Megan: Can you tell me a little bit about your background?

Xiaohua: Sure! I'm a third-year PhD student studying with Prof. John Read at the University of Auckland. My thesis research is about exploring the ways in which reading in English for general academic purposes can be assessed diagnostically or analytically within the context of PELA (post-entry language assessment).

Megan: Sounds interesting! What was the impetus for your research?

Xiaohua: In recent years there has been a growing interest in diagnostic assessment in our field, but the motivation for my PhD research is really rooted in my own lasting interest in the interface between assessment and language programmes. For example, my MA thesis was focused on the washback effect of a large-scale Chinese English test on students' out-of-class learning, and from that research experience I learned how limited the intended effect of a high-stakes test can be, while how uncontrollable the side-effects could become, especially during the period of test preparation. My current research offers me another perspective from which to look at the relationship between assessment and language learning.

Megan: Test impact is also one of my interests. Maybe we can talk more about

it later. Can you share with us your feeling about your new role and your plans or outlook in relation to the student members of ALTAANZ?

Xiaohua: I must confess that I didn't really think seriously about the position at first when the nominations were opened, cause I had already been appointed on the SC (student committee) of the AALA (Asian Association for Language Assessment) then. But I thought it was a great opportunity to engage with students from the Australasian area and now I feel really honoured to represent the student members for one year. I decided to join the ALTAANZ committee also because of the great time I spent with the AALA SC and realised the positive impact such kind of organisation can bring to student researchers, such as a sense of belonging, the opportunities for initiating and organising academic events, a closer touch with established scholars from the field, and even social networking. Under the auspices of the main committee, the AALA SC consists of several student members and is responsible for providing relevant event information to student members, organising student events at the annual conference, interviewing prominent scholars, and liaising with student members from fellow organisations. It has been running very well so far. It's good to know that we are planning to have a teacher committee for ALTAANZ. Perhaps we can also set up a student committee in the future in order to better engage with other student members, something like the AALA SC. This is certainly something we can talk

about with the other ALTAANZ committee members.

Megan: That's a great idea! Yeah we can discuss with other committee members at our next meeting.

Xiaohua: Speaking of the new role, you have also been appointed as a Student Representative on the ALTAANZ Committee for 2016 – congratulations!

Megan: Thanks, Xiaohua! I first became aware of ALTAANZ when I attended the 2014 ALTAANZ conference in Brisbane, at the University of Queensland, where I teach and study. When the opportunity came up to nominate for a position on the Committee, I decided to put my hand up for the role. It's been really interesting so far.

Xiaohua: In what way have you found it interesting?

Megan: Well, I'm doing my PhD part-time, which can be a little lonely, so being involved in a group like ALTAANZ has helped me to make some connections with people with similar research interests. It's also interesting to hear about the Association's engagement with the wider community, too, outside of academia.

Xiaohua: You mentioned that you are a teacher. Tell us about that.

Megan: I'm a TESOL language teacher at the Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education at University of Queensland (ICTE-UQ). I've worked there for about a decade, and before that, I taught overseas; mainly in Turkey.

Xiaohua: Why did you decide to do a PhD?

Megan: I suppose I am a bit of a testing ‘nerd’. I’ve taken on quite a few testing-related roles in my career, such as item-writing and examining, and I also design and teach on test preparation courses, so I made the fateful decision a few years ago to pursue further study in this area.

Xiaohua: So what area or areas are you investigating in your project?

Megan: I am looking at test-taker perspectives in relation to a high-stakes English language test. My study investigates learner beliefs about English language testing. I’ve found some

interesting insights into test impact and the uses of large-scale English language tests in international education and employment.

Xiaohua: And how is your PhD going?

Megan: Well, it’s a fairly slow process, but I’ve recently passed halfway, having completed my mid-candidature review milestone. I’ve presented some work-in-progress papers and I have a publication in the pipeline. Data analysis is still going on, and I’ve also started writing some chapters for my thesis. Speaking of which, I should probably get back to work – see you!

Xiaohua: Bye!

Welcome new ALTAANZ Committee Members and Office Holders for 2016



Katherine Quigley, Secretary



Lynette May, PLTA Co-Editor



Denise Angelo, Treasurer



Amanda Muller, PLTA Book Reviews Editor

Forward Planner: Upcoming Language Assessment Events

European Association for Language Testing and Assessment 2016,

Valencia, Spain May 5-8. www.ealta2016.com

3rd Annual Conference of the Asian Association for Language Assessment,

Sanur, Bali, Indonesia May 19-21. www.alaawebsite.com

Language Testing Research Colloquium 2016,

Palermo, Italy June 20-24. www.iltaonline.com/LTRC/

Enhancing Language Assessment Literacy Symposium,

Lancaster, UK 16-17 September <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/ltrg/symposium/>

4th British Council New Directions in English Language Assessment

Hanoi, Vietnam October 13-14. www.britishcouncil.vn/en/new-directions/call-for-papers

Association of Language Testers in Europe 2016, Helsinki, Finland November 9-11.

www.alte.org

ALTAANZ 2016, Auckland, New Zealand November 17-19. www.altaanz.org

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 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, a description of an assessment task which has worked well for your learners or an assessment-related anecdote that you think our membership would find interesting.

