

Language Assessment Matters

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

Issue Two, October 2014



Dr Gary Ocky presenting Dr Ute Knoch with her TOEFL Outstanding Young Scholar Award. Please see page 8 for an interview with Ute.



Many thanks to all the well-wishers who congratulated the Association on the first issue of the newsletter. This issue is even bigger with, amongst other items, an interview with Melbourne University's TOEFL Outstanding young scholar award winner, Dr Ute Knoch (page 8), a conference report from the 36th LTRC held in Amsterdam in June (page 6), a report from the LTRC/ALTAANZ workshops in language testing in July 2014 (page 5), and information about a new award for outstanding doctoral theses (page 2).

Advance notice **ALTAANZ AGM 2014**

The ALTAANZ AGM will be held on **Friday 28 November** at the forthcoming ALTAANZ Conference at the University of Queensland in Brisbane. Elections for office-bearers, namely President and Student Representative will be held during the AGM.

The **President** position is for two years. The **Student Representative** Position is for one year. Both positions commence **January 2015**.

Joint nominations for either position are acceptable, especially if they involve an Australian and a New Zealander working in partnership. If you would like to express an interest in either of these positions or if you would like further information about the roles please contact the current ALTAANZ Secretary, Martin East (m.east@auckland.ac.nz).

Penny McKay Memorial Award for Best Thesis in Language Education

Catherine Elder, University of Melbourne

Members of ALTAANZ may be interested in the above award, offered each year for an outstanding doctoral thesis which benefits the teaching and learning of second/additional languages or language varieties in Australian schools. The award honours the late Penny McKay (1948-2009), an inspirational leader in language education both in Australia and internationally, who pioneered an influential approach to assessing school-age learners' development in English as an additional language.

The Penny McKay Memorial Award is offered jointly by the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA) and the Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) and administered by ALAA. The winner of the award receives a prize of \$500.00 as well as free registration at the annual ACTA conference, where the awardee is offered a slot to present a paper on an aspect of the doctoral research.

The Award was offered for the first time in 2014. Two awardees were chosen from a shortlist of six applicants, their doctoral theses being considered equally outstanding: Susan Creagh for "A Foucauldian and quantitative analysis of NAPLaN, the category 'Language Background other than English', and 'English as Second Language Level'" presented at the University of Queensland and Julia Rothwell for "Let's eat the captain! Thinking, feeling, doing: Intercultural language learning through process drama" presented at the Queensland University of Technology.

Dr. Helen Moore, chairperson of the Award Selection Panel, notes that the projects reflect different dimensions of Penny's contribution to language education, namely, language assessment policies and classroom practice. Dr Moore's description of the winning theses, details of which have been posted on the ALAA and ACTA websites, is cited below.

"Sue investigated a burning issue for EALD learners and teachers (including Penny), namely the vexatious relationship between NAPLaN tests, the category "LBOTE" that is used to disaggregate these test results, and a method that actually aims to assess learners' English, namely the Bandscales developed by Penny and her colleagues. Sue starts with a Foucauldian analysis of "language background other than English" in the context of Australian education. She argues that the NAPLaN test and its associated statistical architecture are built upon political rationalities which relate to neoliberalism, monolingualism and a model of education that permits quantification for accountability purposes. The LBOTE category is enmeshed within the assessment and reporting apparatus. Sue then explores the consequences of this category through the voices of school

personnel. Complementing and extending this exploration, she also conducts a statistical analysis of two NAPLaN data sets sourced from the Queensland Education Department, one of which encompassed all students in Years 7 and 9 in Queensland state schools in 2010.

Her findings won't surprise anyone here.

First, performance on NAPLaN is strongly associated with visa category: migrant students on skilled, business and education visas generally perform above average, whereas students on refugee visas achieve very low average results, even lower than Indigenous students. Refugee students also have much lower on-arrival English levels.

Second, NAPLaN test performance is clearly related to English language level. For all students with developing English skills (as assessed on the Bandscales), the NAPLaN test does not test literacy; it tests their English. Consequently, NAPLaN results for these students are invalid.

Sue is to be congratulated for producing rigorous and definitive qualitative and quantitative evidence in support of what ACTA and ESL teachers have been arguing ever since the category "language background other than English" was introduced in Government policy-making.

In complete contrast, Julia's research is firmly classroom-centred. Using action research methodology, she examined the effects of process drama in teaching German to a Grade 8 class (that was not her own) in a state secondary school. Her data consist of classroom video recordings, teacher notes, student interviews and student work. She developed a framework for collecting, analysing and discussing these data based on insights from Bakhtin, Halliday, Kress, Byram, Gee and others. Her exposition of these theorists and their relevance to drama was described by one examiner as "the clearest and fullest" the examiner had ever read. The data analysis was likewise described as "impressive" and "fluent". Interestingly, this analysis included what an examiner described as a "scrupulous" report on the classroom teacher's "ongoing challenges" – in true dialogic spirit, Julia did not treat these challenges defensively but rather added them to the "critical lenses" encompassed by her thesis. Similarly, the concluding chapter embodies Julia's commitment to a dialogic approach. Described by one examiner as "bold" and "technically brilliant", it departed from the normal thesis genre and was instead written as a dramatic dialogue between all the conceptual strands and interests involved in the research.

Julia's achievement lies clearly in the quite brilliant way in which she conducted and wrote up her research. At a practical level, her investigation is particularly significant, because it concerns students at an age and stage when it is (as she says) a constant battle to engage them in language learning. As Julia's supervisor wrote, the thesis shows how drama "tips the balance, because it engages the students' minds and bodies, and they become invested in it, taking risks and 'mushfaking' [Gee's term] their way into and out of situations that are thought not possible for beginners". "

For further information about the Penny McKay Memorial Award, including eligibility rules and application guidelines, see <http://www.tesol.org.au/About-ACTA/PENNY-MCKAY-MEMORIAL-FUND>. The website also outlines procedures for donating for the Award, which requires ongoing maintenance.

ALTAANZ CONFERENCE 2014

***ASSESSING SECOND LANGUAGES:
LINKING THEORY, RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE***
November 27-29, 2014, University of Queensland, Brisbane,
Australia

Keynote speakers:

Professor Micheline Chalhoub-Deville
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Professor Chris Davison
University of NSW

Associate Professor Angela Scarino
University of South Australia

Early Bird Registration extended until 27 October 2014

LTRC / ALTAANZ Workshops – July 2014

The Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC) at the University of Melbourne in collaboration with The Association for Language Testing and Assessment (ALTAANZ) offered a series of workshops in language assessment and testing on the 10th, 11th, and 12th of July 2014 at the University of Melbourne.

The workshops were designed for teachers, graduate students and researchers and ranged from 2 hours to a whole day. The topics and presenters of the workshops and total number of attendants are listed as below.

Date	Time	Topic	Presenter	Nos. of attendants
10th July	5pm - 7pm	Test analysis for teachers	Knoch	20
11th July	9am - 12pm	Diagnostic assessment in the language classroom	Elder / Knoch	33
	1pm - 4pm	Responding to student writing	Macqueen	32
	1pm - 4pm	Assessing second language pragmatics	Roever	19
12th July	9am - 12pm	Introduction to Rasch measurement	Knoch	21
	1pm - 4pm	Introduction to many-facet Rasch measurement	McNamara / Knoch	18

I was delighted to fly to Melbourne from Wellington to attend some of the workshops – Assessing second language pragmatics, Introduction to Rasch measurement, and Introduction to many-facet Rasch measurement.

Assessing second language pragmatics is a new topic, which has not been covered by most of the language tests. I discovered that the topic is very interesting and practical.

One of the reasons I attended two Rasch measurement workshops is that I need to use this analysis in my PhD research. I had no idea what Rasch analysis was before I went to Melbourne. I would like to thank Ute and Tim for giving us a useful topic and I have benefited a lot from the workshops.

Another advantage of attending the workshops is that I was able to meet a lot of academics from Australia and New Zealand. We had opportunities to talk and share our research topics. I am sure I will meet them again in November at our ALTAANZ Conference 2014 in Brisbane.

Matthew Book, Student Representative ALTAANZ



VU University Amsterdam was the conference venue.

Johanna Motteram was fortunate enough to attend LTRC 2014 in Amsterdam in June. With assistance from some of the other ALTAANZ members who attended, namely John Read, Mehdi Riazi, Cathie Elder, Juliette Mendelovits, and John Pill, she has compiled the following conference report.

LTRC 2014

LTRC, the Language Testing Research Colloquium (LTRC), is the annual conference of the International Language Testing Association (ILTA). It was held in early June this year at VU University Amsterdam. There were just under 290 attendees from 38 countries and according to the conference organiser 4% of registrations were from Australia and New Zealand. Although the registrations from Australia and New Zealand were small in percentage, the contingent was big on voice, with nearly all presenting or co-presenting at least one paper and with two papers presented as 'organiser designated plenaries' in the main hall. The conference theme was 'Towards a Universal Framework'.

The atmosphere of the conference has been described as a big family gathering and many attend to catch up with friends and with developments in the field. As with any family

gathering there are crazy great uncles and aunts, factions of cousins, and surprising inclusions in the buffet. At LTRC 2014 the crazy great uncles, in the absence of a stage or a sound system, climbed up a ladder to present the awards at the conference dinner and chilled milk was the beverage of choice at lunch time. Towards the end of any family gathering there are often heated discussions and LTRC 2014 provided these as well, with much recognition within presentations of the inherent difficulties of a universal framework for description of progression in language learning and proficiency (as proposed by the theme and in Professor John De Jong's plenary), given the context dependent nature of language use and the particularities of individual and groups of language learners.

The conference also provided another perspective on the validity wars, with a presentation from Denny Borsboom of the Psychology Department at the University of Amsterdam. Professor Borsboom was invited to present the Samuel J. Messick oration on validity and his realist perspective on validity as being a property of a test (as opposed to current positions on validity including Messick's validity matrix and Kane and others' interpretive argument approach to validity) was met with some resistance. Associate Professor Mehdi Riazi of Macquarie University (see picture below) has written a thoughtful consideration of the plenary which is available on request from altaanz@gmail.com.

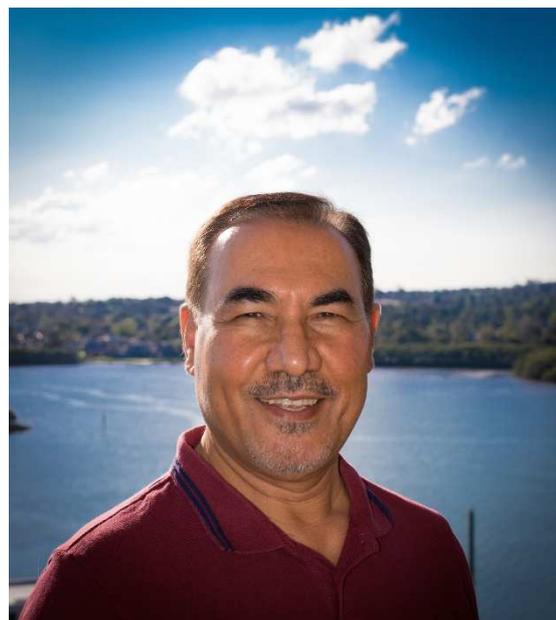
A highlight of the conference for many was Professor Cyril Weir's plenary. Professor Weir, the Powdrill Professor in English Language Acquisition and the Director of the Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment at the University of Bedfordshire, was awarded the ILTA distinguished achievement award and spoke on "Three lessons from the historiography of language testing". Much of the content of his

entertaining and informative presentation can be found in his recent book 'Measured Constructs' (Weir, Vidakovic & Galaczi 2013) but his final comment should be repeated; he implored all new language testing researchers to make sure they were aware of both the history and socio-political location of language testing and in their research to continue to focus on 'construct, construct, construct'.

Emerging themes and developments from the conference include the addition of a symposium on the assessment of sign language, which reminds all that language testing is not only about high stakes tests of English, and interesting research on the testing of listening and the effect of speaker accent on candidate comprehension.

As the field of language testing and assessment has grown over the years, the core membership of the community has aged. Control of the conference, like control of the family Christmas dinner, is beginning to cede to the next generation of language testers. LTRC 2015 will be held in Canada in March. The conference convenor is a second generation community member, a past student of an old timer, and the incoming president of ILTA is also a new generation member. It will be interesting to hear how the transition flows; how the crazy great uncles behave, if there are tantrums about the buffet, and if the reputation of LTRC as the premier language testing conference will survive. I certainly hope it will. My two LTRCs have been major learning opportunities, both about language testing and the language testing community and while the crazy great uncles and aunties and the factions of cousins can be irritating, they are also family.

Weir, C, Vidakovic, I & Galaczi, E 2013, *Measured Constructs: A history of Cambridge English language examinations 1913 - 2013*, Studies in Language Testing, eds M Milanovic & C Weir, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.



Ass. Prof Mehdi Riazi of Macquarie University

Special Issue of Papers in Language Testing and Assessment out soon;

Language Assessment in High Education Settings, guest edited by Kathryn Hill

Please see
<http://www.altanz.org/papers-in-language-testing-and-assessment-plta.html>

Up and Coming Language Testers: Dr Ute Knoch.

Student Pages with Sharon Yahalom and Matthew Book.

Dr Ute Knoch is the Director of the Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC) at the University of Melbourne, the Vice President of the Association of Language Testing and Assessment of Australia and New Zealand (ALTAANZ) and on the Executive Board of the International Language Testing Association (ILTA). She has worked on many test development and validation projects and has published widely.

Ute is the recipient of the 2014 TOEFL Outstanding Young Scholar Award for her exceptional contributions to the field of Language Testing. For more information about the award, see: https://www.ets.org/toefl/grants/outstanding_young_scholar

Below, Ute responds to Sharon Yahalom's questions about her career and plans for the future.

You recently won the 2014 TOEFL Outstanding Young Scholar Award. Congratulations! What does winning the award mean to you?

It means a lot to me, especially as this award is evaluated by people completely independent to those I work with. But I also realise that a lot of the projects I have had the opportunity to work on wouldn't have been possible if I hadn't been employed at the Language Testing Research Centre. We are very fortunate to have so many language testers at the University of Melbourne, including Cathie Elder (who recently retired), Tim McNamara, Carsten Roever and Jill Wigglesworth. It is wonderful to work in an environment where everyone is interested in the same area.

You worked as a physiotherapist before you moved into academia. What prompted the career change? What did you find appealing about the field of language testing?

It was more a practical decision at the time. I enjoyed being a physiotherapist but because I trained in Germany, getting registration in New Zealand, where I wanted to settle, would have been a long and arduous journey. Instead, I started teaching English as a second language, then enrolled in a Master degree at the University of Auckland and became interested in language testing after taking a course with Cathie Elder. She was able to draw on all her experience working at the Language Testing Research Centre here in Melbourne and made the course very practical and interesting.

I think there are many things appealing about language testing. It is a very broad area, as language tests/assessments are used in a wide variety of contexts, e.g. in schools, universities, workplaces; for making all sorts of decisions about people both high- and low-stakes. Many aspects of the field of language testing are highly practical which appeals to me.

Could you please describe the work you do as the Director of the Language Testing Research Centre at The University of Melbourne?

The work is highly varied, which makes it fun. A good proportion of my time is unfortunately spent on negotiating contracts and dealing with legal services and finance. But all other aspects are really interesting. We regularly get approached by individuals and organisations from all sorts of contexts to solve practical real-life problems with assessments, or situations that need assessments. We also work on a number of different research grants, both nationally and internationally, which focus on a wide range of interesting projects. Occasionally I teach into the Masters program and I'm currently supervising seven PhD students and one MA student. Part of our work in the LTRC is also to train up the next generation of language testers, so we often employ students and early career researchers to work on some of our projects. I also represent the Centre on a number of committees, in our school and at university level. And of course, I'm involved on the ALTAANZ committee.

How do you find the time to write journal articles?

Very good question. It's very hard to fit this in, so it is important to occasionally isolate full days and really focus on getting things done. Deadlines help to get things moving. I also really enjoy collaborating with others on the writing, which really helps.

What are your areas of interest in language testing? What other areas would you like to explore?

I'm interested in many areas and am constantly discovering new ones. When I first

started I was interested in rating scale development and rater training but since then I've worked on so many different projects that my areas of interest have really widened. Because we have so much involvement with specific purpose language tests in our Centre, that is always something that is close to my heart. Recently, I have become more interested in standard-setting, policy issues as well as the consequences of language assessments.

What are your plans for the future?

I want to learn more about language assessment, meet more colleagues from other institutions and learn from them. It is hard for me to travel at the moment because I have a young daughter, but I hope that in a few years' time that will become easier again.

What advice do you have for up-and-coming young scholars who would like to have a career in language testing?

I would suggest to them to make the most of their time as students and get involved in as many opportunities during that time as possible. I find that those students who are open to opportunities and really immerse themselves in language assessment are the ones who learn the most. It is a fantastic time to read widely, attend conferences wherever financially feasible, attend seminars whenever possible and meet as many people in the field as possible. If there are other students also interested in language assessment, it is also a good idea to set up a research group to discuss difficult readings or help each other with conference presentation practice or any sticky issues in the respective research projects. It might even be possible to do an internship at a research centre focussing on language assessment or at one of the larger testing organisations.

Papers in Language Testing and Assessment

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Articles

- *Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL): Interpretation of multiple score reports for ESL placement.* Kateryna Kokhan & Chih-Kai (Cary) Lin, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- *The effect of assessment of peer feedback on the quantity and quality of feedback given.* Rachael Ruegg, English for Academic Purposes Department, Akita International University
- *Concepts underpinning innovations to second language proficiency scales inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners: a dynamic process in progress.* Catherine Hudson & Denise Angelo, Australian National University

Book review

- *The Cambridge guide to second language assessment.* C. Coombe, P. Davidson, B. O'Sullivan & S. Stoyhoff. Reviewed by Naoki Ikeda, The University of Melbourne

<http://www.altaanz.org/current-issue.html> Available now.

Congratulations to the ALTAANZ 2014 Conference Student Travel Award winners:

Loc NGUYEN (Victoria University of Wellington) "How do pre-service teachers do language testing and assessment in their practicum?"

Naoki IKEDA (University of Melbourne) "Integrating pragmatic and interactional features of language use into academic language assessment: What discursive features are measurable?"

Chao HAN (Macquarie University) "Development of an authentic interpreter certification performance test striking a balance among validity, reliability and practicality"

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.