

The Generations: Research and Application at the LTRC

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Three Generations

Usually we understand a generation to refer to an average of 25 years, based on the span of time between the birth of a parent to the birth of a child. In this sense the LTRC, at 30 years, is the watchful parent of an ambulant child who has just started primary school. Around the time global warming is expected to have increased by 1.5% the LTRC-child might also have become a parent. In this sense the LTRC is well into its chronological second generation and has 'survived' its first. Compared to the average life expectancy of humans, the LTRC is middle-aged, but compared to the typical longevity of Australian University research centres, the LTRC looks robust, as though it has been on the full Mediterranean Diet and will soon receive a telegram from the Queen. Of course individual life consists of unique combinations of nature/nurture, so we need to add that LTRC has benefited from good and strong genes, the great minds of academic test experts who have deposited great work and ideas into its functioning, and, the brilliant inheritors of that deposit, who continue its important and influential work today.

That's one conclusion I reach from the articles in this special issue.

A second common meaning of generation is more like a cohort, referring to the collectivity of people all living at the same time and born within a life span they share with each other. Marking this concept of generation are the common conversational referents of shared culture (movies, films, social revolutions, style, transport, travel, values), and the mutually known problems and events we have experienced. Unlike the biological notion of generation above, this notion depicts a demographic generation of the LTRC, suggesting similarly aged people with broadly shared communication experiences of life and therefore making many assumptions together about lived norms.

The third common meaning of generation takes us away from both of these, biology and demography, towards generation as production of ideas. With this sense of generation we an additive and generative quality. The biological and demographic orient us toward origins and current circumstances, generating ideas points us forward to new knowledge, influence, education and shaping new circumstances. Academics of course are tasked by society for the generation of knowledge, and in

supervising research and in teaching they are tasked with the regeneration of knowledge, both producing what we now know and re-producing those who will in the future know. I think this generation notion also applies to the ideas and work of the LTRC in as deep a way as the other two.

With these three senses of 'generation' I want to make remarks about the papers in this special issue, some general comments and specific comments about individual papers. Collectively and individually these four papers reflect a time of turbulence in education and public governance which was only beginning to be felt when LTRC came into existence, and which has 'dogged' its life ever since. I am referring to the ubiquitous practice of neo-liberal governance. In its distinctively Australian history neoliberal governance was born as 'economic rationalism' and became so successful it is now the established public reasoning for nearly all social and economic organisation, deeply impacting education, training, professional life, mobility of populations. Many of its arguments have become normalised assumptions infiltrated into how we see, and imagine, a great deal of our collective life.

Flatness and borders

When Thomas Friedman spoke of the 'flat world' he wasn't advocating that it should come into being, or proposing it as a normative improvement on an actual world that needed fixing. He was announcing its arrival. It was the new reality, he claimed, a pervasive globalisation was around us all and this 'flat world' was not anyone person or state's desideratum; it was the outcome of agentless convergences between business and economics. Friedman wasn't writing for academics or researchers; he was communicating with the lay world to tell it about what the world had become. Look around, he seemed to say, and all you see is either already flat or being rapidly made so. The world of goods and services, both supply and demand, was rapidly being flattened, producing a level-playing field through increasingly unfettered competition, so that individual entrepreneurs, corporations and national economies were generating an interdependent and increasingly uninterrupted global network of supply. A key non-human agent in this historic change was personal computers, especially when personal computers became tied to fibre optic micro cables and gave rise to software that structures work-flows anywhere on earth.

Despite obvious persisting differences of culture, location or national status that function as a kind of obstacle holding back these forces of globalisation, Friedman claimed that this seemingly banal change was a deep historic transformation and that it would lead to a 'capitalist peace'. In effect, this validates a Kantian claim that free trading republics would produce a peace of mutual interests, with Friedman's nuance that peace would prevail through economics, technology and business. Interdependence would reduce the source of most conflicts and new kinds of identity

and attachments would emerge. Friedman's 'flat world' was conceptually injected into the actual world (the far from flat real world) in 2005 and was so popular that it became a 'publishing sensation' with regular updates, refinements, re-releases etc. (Friedman, 2007). Many of the convergences that the 'flat world' depicts, whether in work or education, are undeniably true and linked to software systems, and go hand in hand with neo-liberal logic. Central to flat world thinking is the belief that the affordances of software power are available to non-state actors, individuals, corporations and institutions just as much as they are to government.

Endorsing the reduction of barriers is a staple of border-less theory in commerce and a long-established principle of management gurus who want to create a seamless space for global commerce. An exemplar of this kind of corporate strategy is Kenichi Ohmae (2005), an organisational theorist and management expert, and formerly Academic Dean of Public Affairs at the University of California Los Angeles. Ohmae introduced the philosophy of 'just in time' production (lean manufacturing) to western economies from Toyota's 1930 operating approach sometimes dubbed *The Toyota Way*, a deeply efficiency and cost-lowering, risk reducing form of managing resource inputs and production outcomes. Ohmae's explicit aim is to reduce national obstacles (such as a country's sovereign policy making power) into who produces and sells goods and services and where they sell them. He wants to make the world more efficient for corporations and give rise to a new world order, and he too, like Friedman, construes this as an ethical advance on the contemporary state of things.

Opposing state regulation of commerce, and believing that financial and labour efficiency, sharpened competition and niche positioning of companies are needed in a cutthroat world, have become widespread assumptions for the demographic generation of LTRC. Its researchers, and the agencies that commissioned them to write and research tests and testing, all co-evolved in the shadow of economic rationalism. Universities have adapted to its assumptions and education-specific versions of competitive ideologies have been normalised (Lo Bianco, 2021). Language education and even multilingualism and languages themselves have absorbed forms of 'linguistic entrepreneurship' (De Costa, Park and Wee, 2021), conceiving of individuals as mini economies, investing in themselves to enter competitive markets.

The papers

The theme of this special issue is about negotiating tensions between language assessment policies and practices, with a specific view of the role of the language testing professional. The topic reflects a set of ideas about the traction of tests and testing research in practice and in policy, expressed through a unique corpus of concepts each paper in the special issue has generated.

- Cathie Elder's paper focuses on the LTRC's policy contribution in the 'languages arena' which she discusses as 'policy responsible' language assessment;
- Ute Knoch looks at the dilemma of research/policy as a set of 'challenges of providing expert advice in policy contexts';
- Susy Macqueen, John Pill and Ute Knoch frame the issue and relation of expert and official as a question of the 'trust' that is held for tests, by whom and in what ways;
- Kellie Frost looks at broadly similar dynamics of what I have called 'policy literacy' (Lo Bianco, 2001), and specifically how 'boundaries of responsibility' are negotiated.

The 30 years of the LTRC are evident in the problems of languages teaching and their fluctuating presence in school curriculums, which has been a staple of public policy for decades, as are questions of direct entry programs in education institutions, occupation-related language skills and migration policy, the foci of the other papers. All of these questions carry residues of how our society has come to conceive of education and language in a world of ideas influenced by metaphors and policies that come from theories of entrepreneurial culture, individualism, competition, efficiency and related ideas.

In her framing of the special issue, Cathie Elder notes that language test use has become widespread and continues to grow in Australia and elsewhere and that it is now an expected part of public governance across many institutions. Tests and the idea of testing serve policy goals in education and regulate who is selected and who is rejected in the transition from formal study into employment and in particular sectors of the labour market. She notes the vital and highly influential combination of the technical requirement of test design and execution with explicit attention to fairness and justice in how tests are used. We are all aware that tests and therefore language testers are charged with roles that have serious consequences in the lives, careers and fortunes of many people, including vulnerable groups, and because of this language testers are brought into relationships with public officials, employers, educators and others. This means that they are engaged in 'policy conversations' (Lo Bianco, 2019), which are a special kind of dialogue in which language testers are positioned as experts interacting with officials who are positioned as decision makers. Over the thirty years of its life as an autonomous Centre required to find resources to do research and write tests, the LTRC has necessarily been responsive to the demands of public administration and the policy settings and directions established by government, most of which are devolved to bureaucracy.

While academic testers are mostly interacting with officials in bureaucracies, it would be misleading to think that this is different from interacting with policy settings. The dynamics of relations between academic researchers and public officials bring to mind

the ancient focus of political philosophy on the links between knowledge and power. In effect this is about how experts interact with powerholders, how their stereotypes of each other impinge on their relationships, what they perceive and expect of each other, and what they expect to be legible in each other's behaviour. When a group of experts is aggregated into a centre, such as the staff and associates of the LTRC, these otherwise individual relations assume a collective presence, and this gives rise to the need for training, reflection and professional development to build robust relations with stakeholders.

Elder discusses this dynamic as the negotiation of tensions between policies and practices and rightly identifies dilemmas that flow from this. To possess expertise which is consequential in the lives of others imposes an ethical obligation for the fair and just use of the products that emerge from that expertise. Policy conversations are the main kind of engagement between academic language testers and officials, including politicians. Because these are often informal, not recorded, and fleeting, their importance is missed. Public officials have responsibilities for the distribution of public resources in accordance with constituent needs, governmental policy and the administration of programs. The division between administration of a program and 'policy making' is often fuzzy. Because most policy texts are brief statements of intention, this leaves administrators with ample scope to interpret what is intended, and to adjust action according to the circumstances of individual clients. For this reason, administration officials and policy focused politicians are best thought of as agents of the same overall activity, a continuum of policy formulation and implementation.

Elder's paper discusses the LTRC's policy contribution in the 'languages arena'. This is a reminder that although the majority of test research and most test writing is about certification of English ability for professional and education admission, or for determination of migration status, a large number of consequential tests are also in languages other than English. In the paper there is an impressive list of LTRC writing and research on testing in many languages other than English, a fact sometimes obscured by the large-scale English tests.

In her historical overview of LTRC projects in languages other than English, Elder classifies what the projects were designed to achieve in relation to policy. Some aimed to inform policy, others to enact policy, while others were designed to evaluate policy that was decided and implemented by various institutions. Through a discussion of specific cases and their impact on policy the paper looks at what constitutes a 'policy-responsible' language testing. In her conclusion Cathie Elder makes a key point that 'professional accountability' for language testing has been narrowly conceived as defending instrument validity, when it should be formulated much more widely as "experts contributing to knowledge exchange in the larger policy arena" (Elder, this issue, p. 22). This new framing foregrounds a professional interaction between

language testers and the institutions and bodies making policy which relies on tests. If policies rely on tests to determine or influence important events in the lives of individuals is it ethically appropriate for a tester to be removed totally from the purposes and ways in which their test will be used? . This question deepens and expands what accountability means, moving it away from a defensive position of protecting the integrity of a technical instrument, a test, such as arguing its design validity and specifications, to a more proactive and interactive relation between testers and test designers and various stakeholders.

It is likely that novice language testing academics will need professional induction into what is required in this much more dynamic and complex process of thinking about 'the larger policy arena' as proposed by Elder. In such a understanding of the practice doing language testing, whether research or test writing, becomes more than just pushing knowledge out from an academic setting into the world of policy formulation, implementation and review.

Ute Knoch discusses a similar tension theme as a series of challenges to providing expert advice in policy contexts. She makes the excellent point that expert advice in policy formation or review is not documented systematically, partly because it often occurs in informal meetings or in meetings that are closed and in which participants are required to keep proceedings confidential. Advice is often also required to be provided in confidential documents, which are not available to the public and which can only be released by decision of a government official or committee. The clear ownership and control of information, argumentation, data and other aspects of the knowledge produced by academic language testers is therefore sharply demarcated and so the relation between scholar and decision-making authority is tightly drawn. Because much of this advising is informal, even when it is not expressly confidential, it isn't clear what its status or effects are because decisions are necessarily tracked to particular inputs, and decision makers draw on multiple sources of advice. Knoch documents and describes three instances of LTRC policy advice and considers these against four aspects of the situation:

- (1) How we came to be invited to provide expertise,
- (2) What advice/expertise we were asked to provide,
- (3) What complexities we encountered when providing the advice,
- (4) Whether the advice was taken up.

The first case was commentary on the Australian Citizenship Bill of 2017 when the LTRC advised on the proposed English test and how it would be administered, raising questions of complexity about language performance and use, the intended proficiency level in English (IELTS 6) and making suggestions for alternative and preferable responses to the issue of national citizenship and communication.

The second case involved registration processes for an Australian professional group, in relation to its consideration of access requests by overseas-qualified candidates, and specifically in relation to the requirements for English language skills.

The third case was injecting language testing expertise and research into the administration of a university's response to suspended large-scale English language tests in 2020 because of COVID-19 restrictions. Test centres were closed or operating with reduced capacity, giving rise to validity and even security concerns, and the university was seeking alternative forms of evidence of English proficiency for entry.

The paper is rich with practical evidence of the importance of policy literacy, of pressures and positions that people hold from their different roles in relation to a seemingly shared task, of various interests and how these compete and when they align or collide. Because young language testers have had limited opportunities for training for such complex and ever shifting interactions, the LTRC and other professional language testing centres should systematically prepare graduates for the situations they may encounter in the future, and the constraints they will face that may limit the impact their work may have. This is a valuable observation about professional induction into the world of practicing as a language tester, not merely being technically proficient and skilled, but socially and situationally and ethically prepared for professional life in the field. The chapter serves as an empirically strong demonstration of the need for a kind of policy literacy for language testing professionals, a policy literacy generated out of documented LTRC experience but going to the underlying principles of the relations between knowledge/expertise and power/decision making authority. Because a principles based policy literacy resonates with wider issues of the interaction between knowledge and power, research and practice, and relations between the individuals who interact across these settings and discourses and positions, it is relevant to applied linguistics in general.

Susy Macqueen, John Pill, and Ute Knoch's discussion of 'trust the test' looks at score-user perspectives. The context is the desire for order in the disorderly realm of occupation related regulation of skill, and especially language skill, but these intersect with migration management, control of professional norms by authorised bodies representing particular professions, and labour force planning. The authors want to examine how policy makers conceive of the standards that language tests report and what they expect from the mandates for applicants to pass language tests. Both of these inform language testers in their desire to keep track of how their products (language tests) are used by others.

The authors tap into a recurring theme of the special issue: the segmented roles of various actors. Language testers are commissioned to write tests that are applied into regimes of testing devised by others, sometimes the same authorities commissioning the writing of tests. This means that monitoring for fair use, appropriate application

and just practices is not a role assigned to language testers by any outside body, but one that arises from internal professional ethical procedures and responsibilities. Test commissioning authorities can thwart or outright deny the ability of language testers to monitor the use of tests once they are handed over. We can call this the product transfer model of work. Commissioned work, after all, is purchased, and therefore sold, and owned by the commissioning agency. A claim by language testers to a right to monitor how a commissioned product is used calls for a disruption of the normal way the product transfer model operates, and this can only succeed with negotiating and demonstrating mutual practical or ethical benefits in a shared approach to monitoring use and effects of tests that are no longer owned by academic researchers.

Macqueen, Pill and Knoch explore some processes of how negotiating is done, through interviews with representatives of accountancy, engineering, medicine and nursing professional registration bodies. They also study the information provided about the test standards by those who provide the test and the professional associations involved. They describe how test standards solidify and become entrenched, and this solidity allows them to accumulate a kind of trust and confidence over time, reflecting the desire of those commissioning tests to introduce order into programs they manage, to reduce risk and facilitate more liberalised flow of people into professional workplaces. Certain standards (e.g., 'IELTS 6') gain this solidity as a legible or recognisable reference point in discussions and are then extrapolated to other uses of tests and also to other test standards. This leads to a fascinating discussion of risk and trust in relations between academic experts and officials, the mandate that the latter issues to the former, and the negotiation they engage in to establish the relations to get test writing designed and implemented. The upshot of the concepts of risk and trust in these relations and the examples through which they are discussed promise to build a more engaged and aware future profile of language testers in general, but especially in relation to their interactions in policy settings.

The focus of this discussion is demonstrations of English proficiency in the context of skilled migration applications to enter Australia. Through various 'policy narratives' around tests and test scores the authors provide a rich account of interpretive discussions, and how objectivity warrants function and explain the behaviours and views of various parties, reducing complexity, controlling unpredictability, introducing order (or its appearance) and the various functions these outcomes serve. Tests are then conceived as policy objects attracting a certain quantum of power and presence in the highly politicised agitational space of migration debates.

The final paper is by Kellie Frost who analyses the relations between decision makers and language testing academics as a process of 'boundaries of responsibility', and the relations between the parties involved as a kind of 'negotiation'. These negotiations of frameworks of validation in language testing rely on certain assumptions which do not provide any space for the "lived experiences and subjectivities of test takers"

(Frost, this issue, p. 70). This means, in effect, that the conversations in which responsibilities are negotiated make no room for how those most affected by tests actually experience the tests, and what effects tests and the routines and procedures in which they are enveloped have on their lives.

This exclusion of 'lived experience' from test validation recalls for me a more general principle of language policy implementation theory. I am referring to an understanding of policy as three components, as originally named by Davis (1994). These comprise policy as 'intention', as designed by those authorised to issue policy, policy as 'implementation', because of the common observation that what is actually delivered is often different from what policy intentions declare. The third component refers to how policy is experienced by those whose lives it affects. In Lo Bianco and Aliani (2013) this approach is discussed as three 'moments': the *intended* (the aims that policy statements declare or announce and how the problem they will tackle is named); the *implemented* (policy texts are usually legalistic, administrative and general, only some parts are actually funded for implementation) and the *experienced* policy, effectively what the law, mandate or report 'feels' and 'looks' like when converted into tests, routines of participating in them, activities, resources, frequency, intensity, expectations, etc. All this displaces intention and implementation into subjective accounts of the encounter of those with most at stake with procedures in which they have had no input and often little understanding. The experienced policy is where the main intended recipient of a practice encounters implemented and announced government policy, and experientially knows its economic costs, value and seriousness, cultural and political messages, and personal consequences.

In Frost's analysis, because the experiential realm is 'hidden from view' accounting for ethical implications of language tests and language testing becomes much harder. Her paper reports on immigration based English language testing in Australia to expose the dilemmas and conflicts in decision making and interpretations that result. To shift beyond judgments of language testing that just draw on evaluations of test alignment with test user expectations requires a new kind of 'criticality' derived from the main stakeholder group, whose subjective experiences are obscured.

What is especially valuable for me in this analysis is that Frost is pushing into the space where the "*problems of language and of policy are imagined*" (Frost, this issue, p. 70). The discipline of language testing is therefore called to account for inherent ideas allowed to circulate about idealised communication forms and subjects, a deeply important aspect of a robust notion of policy literacy.

Conclusion

The papers in this special issue reflect the three kinds of generation I posed at the beginning.

First, maturity, because they reveal the reflective, theoretically rich and empirically robust effects of 30 years of sustained effort, a data base of past consultancies and the insights that returning to these offer to today's researchers, and the conversation that is possible with the individuals, Tim McNamara (Roever and Wigglesworth, 2019) and Cathie Elder, and international counterparts. Second, a cohort of shared knowledge, concepts, and interest with common experience of how in contemporary society language competence assessments are involved in the regulation of admissions/exclusions/transitions and now dominate public administration. The third kind of generation is the most powerful. It is present in the depth of thinking and range of analysis, but most importantly for me in all four papers in their depth of critique tempered by realism (Rossi and Sleat, 2014).

Our world is very far from 'flat', and while borders are more porous than in the past they remain regulated, monitored, controlled and surveilled in processes that are both direct and indirect. Language competency assessments are one of the (perhaps surprising in historical terms) ways in which goods and services flow more freely than people.

The papers are all rich accounts that take testing away from technical preoccupations alone, into the realms of application, consequences, policy and the concrete impact tests and testing regimes have on the lives of many groups of people, including some of society's most vulnerable. It is impressive to see the papers wrestling with dynamic and highly original notions of 'policy literacy'. It is even more powerful to see this happen for a particular profession, language testers, allowing the authors to develop very nuanced positions in relation to policy, and how for testing professionals interacting with the policy world is inescapable and so the need for critical awareness to negotiate interactions with officials that allow good work to proceed and yet conserve and give life to an ethical stance.

In recent decades in political philosophy there has been a theoretical aspiration to understand public life as a communicative order (Ercan and Dryzek, 2015), extending even beyond formal democracies. In this effort to identify multiple forms of 'discussion' and 'argument' that form the main normative theory of politics: usually labelled deliberation. Margaret Kohn has called deliberation the "normative basis of democratic theory" (2000, p. 408) and its main objective has been to produce a desired view of public life as a process of "rational consensus engendered through discussion" (p. 408).

Applied linguists, and language testers, can contribute a great deal to making the language idealisations of political philosophers more grounded and concrete. The often poor understandings of language/communication/discourse that lurk in the pages of contemporary theorising of political life would be enhanced by the work of the special issue authors, about ways that communication operates, obstacles and barriers it raises, and forms of exclusion and closure that only tight language analysis reveals. The outstanding work in this special issue is an important instalment towards that kind of realism, and this makes the third notion of generation, productivity of ideas and influence, particularly enduring and important.

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