

The Language Teacher

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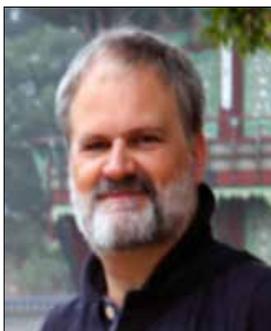
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Britain's new language testing powerhouse: An interview with Professor Anthony Green, University of Bedfordshire

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In this interview Professor Green explains the work of CRELLA (the Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment at the University of Bedfordshire), and its role in the improvement of language testing. The institute contributes to this effort in many ways. For example, in the field of language education they are partners in English Profile (EP: www.englishprofile.org), a collaborative research programme directed towards a graded guide to learner language at different CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) levels, based on the 50 million word Cambridge Learner Corpus. Among other things, the EP has helped to inform the development of the CEFR-J in Japan. In this interview, Professor Green also outlines his own work, especially in the areas of washback and assessment literacy.



DANIEL DUNKLEY (DD): Professor Green, what is CRELLA and what does it do?

ANTHONY GREEN (AG): CRELLA is the Center for Research into English Language Learning and Assessment. We have expertise in all areas of language testing; in addition to myself, we have Professor Cyril Weir who specializes in reading, Lynda Taylor and Fumiya Nakatsuhara in speaking, John Field in listening, Steven Bax in computer-assisted language learning and assessment, and Liz Hamp-Lyons who takes particular interest in writing skills. So we cover a broad range of areas in language assessment and relate them to language learning. In addition we have about 30 PhD students.

DD: What kind of research do you do?

AG: We work on a wide variety of research projects. We routinely produce reports for ministries of education or for examination boards on specific projects. We also help to develop tests. So, for example, I've been involved in developing a test called *Password Knowledge*, which is used mostly for students who are aiming to study at universities, in the UK or the US or Australia, and need to improve their English language skills to get up to a level where they can take a test like IELTS or TOEFL.

DD: What is CRELLA doing for the Japanese STEP (Eiken) tests?

AG: A number of people at CRELLA are working on different aspects. My part focuses particularly on the effect that tests have on the people who are preparing to take them. This is referred to as

washback and is something I have written about in my book *IELTS Washback in Context*. One of the lessons that has come out of the research into washback is that you can't assume that, because a test looks a certain way, you can know what teachers and students are going to do when they prepare for that test. We used to believe that if you design a better test, then teachers and students are all going to learn how to do the things that are tested on that test, and so the teaching will also improve. In fact, teachers often don't really understand what the thinking behind the new test is, and carry on doing what they've always done! So, as part of the strategy that we're developing with colleagues at STEP, we're devising ways of educating teachers about what the thinking is behind the test. We want the teachers to have a better sense of what it is the testers are trying to do and how this connects with longer-term language learning goals. Equally, we want to give the test writers a better sense of what the teachers understand about the test.

DD: What will be the concrete results of your research?

AG: It could be a handbook for teachers about the test, or it could be more educational events for teachers, or more interaction between testers and teachers, to make the system as a whole work in a coherent way.

DD: You're involved in *assessment literacy*; what is it?

AG: It ties in with what I was saying about STEP and trying to help teachers have a better understanding of assessment. I think there's been a realization that in the old days we used to think that teaching and testing should be really separate worlds. The experts would cope with the test and the teachers would get on with the teaching, and the two didn't necessarily have to talk to each other. I think we're seeing a realization that teachers can actually benefit a lot from understanding how assessment works, and they can get a better understanding of what tools they can use every day in the classroom to really find what their students are able or aren't able to do. This knowledge would inform reflection on how they might be able to improve their teaching and the process of learning. So that's one side of it. The other one is that, in spite of what I've said about the limits of washback, tests do have a huge impact on what happens in classrooms; teachers very often work towards a test. The test

is the objective that the students all think about. So we need to consider how to make large scale testing a more effective tool for learning. How can we harness the power of the test in ways that help people to get something really useful out of that process, rather than just trying to "trick the test"? So my feeling is that if we can both educate people about some of the principles of assessment, and also if we can get the people involved in assessment to understand the process of learning better, then the whole system will work more effectively, to the benefit of the people who want to learn the language. Another part of the idea of assessment literacy is trying to educate the broader public, trying to educate policy makers, politicians and administrators, to make them more aware of key testing and assessment concepts like validity and reliability.

DD: Could you describe a specific assessment literacy project?

AG: I'm involved in a very large project at the moment in Russia. We're working with the Russian Ministry of Education and the National Association of Teachers of English and other partners on a project called *Promoting sustainable excellence in testing and assessment of English* (proset-tempus.net). Our objective is to train every secondary school teacher of languages—English to start with—in language testing and assessment principles, and to make that part of their teacher training program. We're developing modules for their preservice teacher training courses, which we'll also use for in-service teachers, informing them about the basics of assessment.

DD: Finally, a general question about testing research. Has language-testing research, like science research, achieved any major breakthroughs? Are we coming close to discovering the perfect test?

AG: Sadly, I'd have to say the answer is no! There are still a lot of problems we have to deal with in terms of getting an accurate picture of how good someone is at using a language. On the other hand, there have been great improvements. For example, we've moved towards a much better understanding of the nature of communicative competence. This has helped us to find ways to test people's ability to use language to accomplish things in the real world, rather than testing the ability to master a system of grammar or learn huge lists of vocabulary. However, there are still some tremendous problems in the level

of accuracy with which we're able to predict how well somebody will use language when they get into a real-world situation. We can't yet make tools that are as precise as we'd like them to be, but a great more can and should be done to improve the tools we do use now. I have brought together a range of suggestions for improving assessment in my book *Exploring Language Assessment and Testing*. The difficulties we have are partly because we don't have as good an understanding of language ability as we'd like to have. We are dealing with something that is very complex and challenging to define.

DD: Professor Green, thank you for your information. We look forward to hearing more of CRELLA's activities.

References

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TLT RESOURCES

MY SHARE

...with Glenn Magee & Jonathan Reingold

To contact the editors:
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We welcome submissions for the My Share column. Submissions should be up to 700 words describing a successful technique or lesson plan you have used which can be replicated by readers, and should conform to the My Share format (see <jalt-publications.org/tlt/departments/myshare/guidelines>).

Please send submissions to <my-share@jalt-publications.org>.

MY SHARE ONLINE: A linked index of My Share articles can be found at:

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Greetings, and welcome to another edition of *My Share*. Autumn is finally upon us, and that means it's time to get back to work (hopefully after a long and restful break). For many English teachers hailing from abroad, early autumn once marked the start of a new school year; a time for buying fresh school supplies, taking on exciting challenges, and making new friends. We at *My Share* hope that you too will recall the spirit of new beginnings and take a moment to think about using some of the innovative classroom activities we've collected for you in this month's publication.

First up, Stephen Asbridge helps students come to a more explicit understanding of countable and uncountable nouns, with a simple rule of thumb explanation aimed at helping them differentiate the two types. Next, Pratheeba Nagendran introduces a method for remembering challenging phrasal verbs through collaborative story telling. Then, Mike Sullivan shows us how to create a lively discussion in the classroom by prompting students to respond to and debate quotes on current cultural and social phenomena. Finally, Jin Ha Woo pro-