Language learning and testing in Australia

An interview with Dr. Cathie Elder, Director of the Language Testing Research Centre, University of Melbourne

The 21st century has been called "The Pacific Century", and Australia is already playing a major role. This interview with the Director of the Language Testing Research Centre, Dr. Cathie Elder of the University of Melbourne, explores the major issues in language teaching and testing in Austraila. In addition, we learn about the specific mission of the centre and, particularly, about the director's current research and publications.

21世紀は「太平洋の世紀」と呼ばれており、オーストラリアはすでに大きな役割を果たしている。メルボルン大学言語テスト研究センター長Cathie Elderとのインタビューでは、オーストラリアの語学教育とテストに関する主な問題を探求する。さらに、センターの具体的な役割について、特に、所長の現在の研究と出版物について聞く。

Daniel Dunkley

Aichi Gakuin University

Daniel Dunkley: How did the Language Testing Research Centre start?

Cathie Elder: The centre is just over twenty years old. It began in the early 1990s under the aegis of what was then called The National Language Institute of Australia, which was formed under the national language policy which was written in 1987 by Professor Joe Lo Bianco. Money was provided to set up a raft of centres around Australia, of which the Language Testing Research Centre was one. So we were initially a nationally-funded center located at Melbourne University. Many of those original centres have now disappeared, but we have gone on from strength to strength.

DD: Why did your centre do so well?

CE: There are two reasons for our success. First of all, we're fairly small. You can see the current staff list on our website <ltrc.unimelb.edu.au/about>. Secondly, we're self-funding. Because of the nature of our work, we've managed to actually generate our own income over the last twenty years. The work we do is all centered around language testing, language test development, language testing research, language program evaluation work, and a certain amount of teaching-training people in other institutions.

DD: Can you give an example of the kind of project you're doing this year?

CE: We're doing multiple projects. One continuing one is known as DELA—Diagnostic English Language Assessment—which was a test developed in the 1990s for international students coming into this university. Students then did an extra post-entry test to determine what their particular needs were as far as academic English is concerned. Now that the test is nearly twenty years old, we're dealing with a much larger population, an interesting shift in the population. We have a lot more non-native speakers of English coming to study here, and they're not all international students. They're immigrants coming via the school system, or alternative entry pathways. We're developing a new form of test that can cater to this rather more diverse population and the larger numbers involved. So we're looking at on-line assessment, a screening tool which will flag people who may be at risk linguistically, at least. That's one of our domestic projects, one of our local projects for the university.

DD: So that's work for Melbourne University. How about tests for other institutions?

CE: To take one example, we're developing a suite of tests for an outside agency. This is for international students applying to enter Australian schools, mainly private schools. There's now quite an industry teaching students from various countries—in Asia, the Middle East or South America for example—who come here for periods ranging from a month or a term to several years. Students enter at various ages, from primary school (ages seven or eight) right through to the end of school-year eleven or twelve. Schools have devised their own procedures for assessing these students, but this agency has commissioned us to develop tests for different age groups. This will be administered offshore, and used together with other kinds of psychological assessment to select students for entry to these schools.

DD: Could we talk about the language situation in Australia? You've published an article about heritage language education (2005). What are heritage languages?

CE: Actually, the term heritage languages is an American-derived term. It's only recently been used in the Australian context, although the issue has been burning for many years in Australia. Heritage languages are languages which are spoken by or used by local communities, immigrant communities in Australia, or which have some role in the identity of local immigrants. They many not be actively used but they're symbolically important as part of their identity. Heritage languages have long been taught in Australian schools. I think one of the unusual things about Australia is that way back in the 60s and 70s there was a strong push to have these immigrant languages or heritage languages taught within the mainstream school system. We have here in Victoria about 36 languages taught in the school system and assessed at the end of secondary schooling which can count towards tertiary selection.

DD: Are these courses normally taken only by people from the immigrant community?

CE: It varies. There are languages, such as Vietnamese, which tend to be studied only by the children of that immigrant community. But it's different with other languages, such as Italian. It was an immigrant language because of a big immigrant influx in the 1950s and 60s. That became a second language as well as a heritage language, so you tend to have a very mixed population of learners studying that language. Chinese is the same. There's a huge population of Chinese immigrants who study Chinese for credit in secondary school. They sometimes study alongside foreign language learners—Anglo or Celtic Australians wanting to study Chinese. You can imagine that this creates enormous challenges for assessment, because of the different levels of these students. They have different levels and different abilities, and they're competing for limited places at universities.

DD: How does the Australian language situation compare with the US?

CE: One big difference is that the US has a very strong Hispanic presence. We don't have an equivalent local community. We have a much more diverse population. Another difference is that bilingual education has been very strong in

the US, although it's a very contentious issue. In Australia, bilingual education has never taken off in the same way. There have been some interesting bilingual initiatives in Aboriginal education. Also, some schools have had bilingual programs for German, Italian, or Greek immigrants. However, these programs are few in number and unusual.

DD: How about the indigenous people of Australia? Are there any parallels with New Zealand and the Maori culture?

CE: We have indigenous languages of course, but the Maori have been much more active in getting their language recognized. It's an official language in New Zealand and there's a huge language revitalization initiative. As for Australia, there have been strong pushes for aboriginal revival and maintenance, but they have been isolated and not particularly well supported by government. On the other hand, in Australia we have supported the teaching of immigrant languages more strongly than in New Zealand. In New Zealand, Maori has occupied that space.

DD: How about your future plans?

CE: Together with John Read of Auckland University, I'm writing a book on post-entry English language assessment. In fact, we have already published on this topic. (Elder, 2003; Read, 2008). As I mentioned earlier, this is based on the issue of diagnosing and attending to the needs of students in English-medium universities. It's a current issue because, increasingly, these students are coming in without adequate academic English.

The book is about our experience in Melbourne and in New Zealand of developing these tests. But it's not only about test design, it's also about test impact and uptake, in fact all the issues that go together with implementing these tests. We'll raise the issue of policy surrounding the tests, and support for students. There are questions of how we diagnose students' needs, what students do when they get their reports, what resources are available, and so on. Finally, in addition to the Australia and New Zealand situation, we're also looking at models in other countries like South Africa.

DD: Do you know the title?

CE: At the moment it's *Diagnostic Assessment at the University*. Diagnostic testing is important now. There's a trend towards testing for learning. The idea is to move away from setting pass rates and from high-stakes gate-keeping to giving individualized information with a view to support for learning.

DD: Thank your Dr. Elder. We look forward to reading this important book and to hearing more of the University of Melbourne Language Teaching Research Centre's work.

References

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Daniel Dunkley is an English Lecturer at Aichi Gakuin University, Nagoya. His research interests include language testing and cultural studies. He holds an M.A. from Surrey University, UK, where his supervisor was the testing specialist Dr. Glenn Fulcher. He is a member of JALT Testing and Evaluation N-SIG and JLTA (Japan Language Testing Association). He has contributed several review and interview articles on testing to *TLT* and to *Shiken*, the JALT Tersting snd Evaluation SIG journal.