CHAPTER 32

THE IMPACT OF TESTING PRACTICES ON TEACHING:

Ideologies and Alternatives

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the current state of classroom assessment of English language proficiency and use, and argues for the existence of two often conflicting assessment cultures, a learning culture and an exam culture. This chapter characterizes the key principles and practices in each culture, and suggests that these two cultures stem from differing ideologies that pose great obstacles to reconciliation between effective selection instruments (usually called tests) and humanistic assessment. The chapter suggests that planned innovation in assessment is unlikely to be successful without vastly improved attention to teacher preparation in relation to assessment. It is further proposed that because the principles and practices of the exam culture reflect the dominant ideology in the discourse of educational economics and politics, this domination can only be altered by paying conscious attention to teachers’ voices, particularly through professional development activities conducted as an integral part of the process of establishing value systems for educational assessment.

Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts

Albert Einstein

INTRODUCTION

The contexts and needs of classrooms and teachers are not the same as those of large scale testing. The large scale needs to discriminate, to separate, to categorize and label. It seeks the general, the common, the group identifier, the scaleable, the replicable, the predictable, the consistent, and the characteristic. The teacher, the classroom, seeks the special, the individual, the changing, the changeable, the surprising, the subtle, the textured, and the unique. Neither is better but they are different. We have only started to realize the extent of the difference in recent years. They grow from different epistemologies and we should not be surprised that they take us to different places, in what Teasdale and Leung (2000) have called seemingly ‘incommensurate discourses’.

This chapter focuses on the classroom assessment of English language proficiency. It argues for the existence of two often conflicting assessment cultures,
a learning culture and an exam culture, and describes the key principles and practices in each culture. It is suggested that these two cultures stem from differing ideologies that pose great obstacles to reconciliation between effective selection instruments (usually called tests) and humanistic assessment. In a learning culture assessment is primarily shaped by considerations of learning and teaching, while in an exam culture classroom assessment is seen as simply preparation for an externally set and assessed examination. The chapter suggests that attempts to introduce innovations toward a greater role for classroom-based assessment are unlikely to be successful without vastly improved attention to teacher preparation in relation to assessment. It further proposes that because the exam culture is the dominant ideology in the discourse of educational economics and politics, conscious attention should be paid to teachers' voices in any assessment innovation, particularly through professional development activities conducted during the process of establishing value systems for educational assessment.

TWO CULTURES: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Learning and exam cultures have some similarities but many more differences, including their focus, their purposes, and the voices they ask us to listen to.

Language or Learner Focus

In the case of classical language testing compared to classroom-based language assessment, perhaps the most striking difference between a learning culture and an exam culture is the particular kind of content that is assessed when we assess language proficiency. Assessing language is not like assessing maths or geography or physics. Language is a construct that is hard to define, although we are surrounded by it and immersed in it, and we know it when we see/hear it. To take the well-known question from many foundation linguistics courses: Is the bees' dance language? If not, why not? How do we distinguish the characteristics of the bees' performance from the performance of a native English speaker who passes in a hallway someone she knows well and replies to the greeting "Hi, how are you?" with "See you"? The successful communication of meaning is a complex process that requires more than words simply strung together; non-verbal and contextual cues also play a critical role.

Because language is difficult to characterize, it follows that proficiency in the language will be difficult to measure. As we see in Nunan's chapter in this section, there has been considerable debate about whether language should be viewed as a body of knowledge, a set of skills or competencies, or a collection of performances viewed within more or less specified parameters. The debate may seem abstract and theoretical, but it is of considerable importance to classroom teachers of language because it impacts not only how learners are assessed, but how they are taught. It is also of considerable importance to the developers of large-scale tests of language proficiency, because they must seek to build tests on a construct of language that not only fits the reality of how language is used, but also, of how it is learned.

Classical language testing, as its name suggests, focuses on the language, and this is a difficult enough problem in testing terms. In contrast, classroom-based or