

Foreword

The reason for this WoPaLP special issue was a small conference, held at ELTE on 20th of September 2019. As its title shows, “Language Testing and Assessment Conference: New Challenges – Technology and Human Interaction in Language Assessment” focussed on the arrival and expected imminent spread in the use of computerised language testing in the public examination sector. The conference was also organised with a sense of urgency, organised and sponsored by the School of English and American Studies at ELTE and Nyelvtudásmérők Egyesülete [Hungarian Association of Language Examiners and Measurement Specialists]. The urgency sprang from a realisation that after a long period of gestation, the age of computerised or digital language testing had begun with the appearance of a few new digital exams causing a surprise among established exam providers and professionals. This is how the thematic focus of the conference and this special issue was arrived at.

There are four papers in this special issue. They are reports from the conference; what was presented was written up after the conference, but no doubt, authors were influenced by the pandemic that hit the world after the conference.

Dávid’s was originally conceived as an introduction to the conference presentations, hence its general approach, following digital exams as a new medium, or genre, in the field of language testing. He reviews relevant terminology, a number of the ubiquitous acronyms. Then, most importantly, in the second half of the paper, points out how little is actually known about the new medium and follows on with the discussion of the various challenges that the arrival of digital language testing has brought with itself. Most importantly, he reviews how an increasing frequency of exam administrations is likely to challenge the very principle of quantitative measurement.

Szabó’s is another paper of a rather general nature, at least in being focussed on an issue that every examination must tackle: The coming of the digital world should force changes in the construct of foreign language proficiency. The issue of what construct is being measured and what this construct is like underlies the more specific question by Szabó whether the lowering of the word limit in written composition would be justified or not. Szabó is researching whether the 21st century characteristic shortening of texts, observable in the case of more than a single written genre, can be accommodated by making appropriate changes in the tasks of the examination, without undermining the reliability of the measurement and the validity of the results. Szabó uses a range of text features to arrive at an answer.

Next, Soproni gives account of the development and use of a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) for testing admissions purposes at a Hungarian business college, with the way Moodle functions, in the centre of the author’s attention. Further, Soproni wanted to find out whether the computerised mode of delivery affects the performance of applicants, to what extent the results are shaped by familiarity with computerised testing and how applicants view the novel electronic language exam. The author found that Moodle does have a lot to offer in

terms of item-banking -- which she presents in meticulous detail -- but it is unlikely that Moodle was developed with measurement in mind when it was designed.

The last article from the conference, by Kövér, deals with the apparent failure (refusal?) of many test providers to include audio-visual content in their language proficiency examinations. Some professionals would excuse this on grounds that it is not part of the received construct of language proficiency. However, as one might observe, the prevailing construct of foreign language proficiency is that of communicative competence, at least forty years old, and the skills component of the same dates back even further, to the structuralist era. By comparison, as Kövér points out, today's consumers receive input that is overwhelmingly audio-visual, rather than only audio. It follows that there is a potential validity gap emerging between what test-takers are tested on and what they should be tested on. Kövér's research comprises two languages and four levels, according to the CEFR scale.

Hoping you find this very first WoPaLP special issue interesting and useful in understanding better the arrival of computerised language exams in Hungary, I wish to thank all those who helped this volume come about. Special thanks must go to Gyula Tankó in helping to organise the conference.

Wishing you happy reading!

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Editor