

Panel discussion

“Language tests for immigration purposes”

Participants

Ardeshir Geranpayeh, University of Cambridge ESOL examinations, Head Psychometrics & Data Services, has been involved in discussions with border agencies in UK, Australia, and Canada

Diane Schmitt, Nottingham Trent University, Testing Officer for BALEAP, engaged in supporting users of language tests for university admission purposes, trying to get a dialogue started with the UKBA

Elaine Boyd, Trinity College London, Head of Academic Governance (Language)

Jo Fond Lam, CINOP, The Netherlands, Test developer and psychometrician, has been working for a number of years on language tests in Dutch for immigration purposes

John de Jong, VU University Amsterdam, Language Testing Chair / Pearson, Senior Vice President Global Strategy & Business Development, has also been involved in development of the Dutch immigration test

Moderator

Claudia Harsch, CAL, conference organiser, has been involved in test development and research

Main issues emerging

- Need for more dialogue between policy makers and researchers/ test developers.
- Need for educating the “other side”, i.e., researchers/developers need to educate policy makers and the UKBA on testing issues, and the UKBA and policy makers need to educate test researchers and developers on their issues.

UKBA is in contact with 5 exam boards / test providers (Cambridge ESOL, Trinity College, Pearson, ETS, City & Guilds), but it seems there is no “independent” advisory board – how to handle independence issue?

The UKBA has now approved exams for immigration from the above test providers. It is regarded problematic that when they looked for advice in this process, they appeared to have only consulted one “independent” expert. The process and judgements reached would be more secure or valid if the UKBA was to work with an advisory panel which could better represent the concerns of the testing community.

- Exam boards are not united but in competition with each other (e.g. test equivalence, alignment to CEFR is not coherent across exam boards) – this causes difficulties in communicating with the public.
=> General agreement that differences (and trade secrets) need to be set aside at some level so that a coherent and unified perspective can be presented to UKBA. Although exam boards are in competition with each other, there is a shared benefit for all involved if test users are better informed about good practice in test development and ethical standards for the use of tests. Test users (including the government and universities) would benefit from exam boards being able to set aside competition issues and put forward a coherent and unified perspective on issues such as alignment to the CEFR and ‘equivalencies’ between tests.
- Associated issue: UKBA and policy makers are more likely to engage with exam boards than university academics – hence the importance of presenting a unified perspective. However, if academic advisors could work with the border agency and policy makers at a high level, all involved would be in a better position to ensure informed policy and practice.
- Terminology of policy: Legal definitions of “migrant”, “immigrant”, “temporary migrant” by the government are not always used correctly by the media etc., which may lead to confusion.
Although the UK government currently uses a legal definition of migrant that includes students in this category, they are not required to include temporary migrants in counts of the number of immigrants coming to the UK with the intention to settle permanently.
- Which language requirements are necessary for which group of migrants at which level? Important policy decisions about the level of English proficiency required by different groups of migrants should be evidence-based and underpinned by informed discussion.
- Different test purposes for different groups of migrants should lead to different tests (e.g. Dutch test was developed for a specific group of migrants with a specific purpose; e.g. university entrance language tests serve this purpose – can / should they be used for other purposes?).
Test development or selection needs to be related to context of use, (e.g. in the Dutch situation a new test was developed to meet the specific of purpose of assessing the basic language competency of immigrants hoping to settle in the Netherlands.) However, in situations where immigration requirements and other requirements overlap (e.g. the need for employers or education institutions to assess applicants’ language proficiency) existing tests can often serve both purposes. However, this does not imply that tests designed to assess e.g. a student’s readiness to study at university could or should then become the sole test exam available for general immigration purposes, as the language needs of other migrants may not be in harmony with the needs of students and the use of this test could create barriers to entry.
- During the discussion about the content of the UK citizenship test, an agreement emerged that the Dutch approach (among others basing their citizenship test on practical suggestions from settled immigrants about what they wished they’d known) was much more appropriate than the rather esoteric general knowledge test approach in the UK.