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A Special Interview with Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sun Young Shin about Language Assessment

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In this volume of PASAA, we are very honoured to have an opportunity to interview Associate Professor Dr. Sun Young Shin from Indiana University, Bloomington Campus, USA. Associate Professor Dr. Sun Young Shin is a language teacher with extensive teaching experience in the US and Asia. He has given numerous plenary presentations at regional and international conferences, and published extensively in the area of L2 assessment, English for academic purposes, Language program evaluation, Web-based language teaching and testing. His latest publications include *Does the test work? Evaluating a web-based language placement test* (accepted, *Language Learning & Technology*), *Evaluating standard setting methods in an ESL placement testing context* (2017, in *Language Testing*), and *Examining prewriting strategies in L2 Writing: Do They Really Work?* (2016, in *ASIAN EFL Journal*).

Drawing on his wealth of experience in SLA, second language learning and assessment, Associate Professor Dr. Sun Young Shin shares with us his perspectives on language assessment and language testing, the area that has gained

increasing interest among language practitioners and researchers.

1. Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed for our journal. Before we start, you could perhaps tell us a bit about you and your work.

I was born and raised in South Korea. My hometown is Changwon near Busan, the second largest city in South Korea. I hold a B.A. in English language and literature from Korea University, and an M.A. in English as a Second Language from University of Hawaii, and Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics with a focus on language assessment from University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I am currently working as an Associate Professor in the Department of Second Language Studies at Indiana University in the United States.

My main research interests lie in the field of language assessment, concentrating in particular on the issues in validity of a given language assessment tool. Language tests are used to assess individuals' language ability and to make informed decisions about those individuals in order to arrive at beneficial consequences for various stakeholders including the students, programs, and institutions. For example, we use scores on language tests to help us judge the intelligibility of second language (L2) learners' pronunciation, the breadth and accuracy of their vocabulary, their use of syntactic rules, and the appropriacy of their language use in different contexts. We use then test-based information to select students for admission to universities, to place students into appropriate levels of language courses, or to monitor their progress being made over a course of language study.

The results of language tests are also used to evaluate the effectiveness of language programs, providing formative feedback to teachers and administrators about how to improve a program.

Language tests can thus be useful and beneficial devices for many stakeholders in different educational situations. However, to ensure that a language test fulfills its intended purposes and functions, language testers should be able to demonstrate that the instruments we use are of high quality, test scores are reliable, and the inferences and uses made on the basis of test scores are appropriate. Thus, the central questions in all language assessment research are what, why, and how we are testing. In order to answer these questions, various theoretical models of language abilities, and diverse approaches to language proficiency scale and language test task/rating rubric developments relevant to intended test purposes have been proposed.

Nevertheless, we still do not know much about the nature of underlying knowledge of language and the role of language constructs and context in language assessment. Numerous theoretical debates over the years in the field of language testing have not fully addressed how assessment tasks designed to simulate authentic language-use tasks reveal what language knowledge or skills entail and the extent to which content or topical knowledge affects language performance. The understanding of the interface among language constructs, tasks, and content either in classroom or large-scale language testing context is thus the crux of a language testing research agenda.

As a language testing scholar, I contribute to the accumulation of knowledge in understanding the extent to which various factors affecting performance on language assessments are relevant to and representative of the construct being measured in different contexts. This enables test users to make informed decisions about selecting or developing the right language tests for the purposes they have in mind and interpreting and using the test results appropriately. My research is founded on the notion that test validation is viewed as a

process of arguing for the intended interpretation of test scores and their appropriateness for their proposed use. This process thus calls for theoretical rationale and evidence to support the claims we make for the intended interpretation and use of the test scores.

2. Many teachers in our field of ELT are more familiar with the standard tests, but nowadays more and more researchers are turning to pay attention to formative assessment. How do you find this? Would formative assessment be better for the ESL/EFL students than standardized language assessment?

You're right. Many language teachers are familiar with standardized language proficiency tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) because they have taken these tests by themselves or have taught standardized test preparation courses for their students. However, at the same time, English language teachers know that they have the responsibility of monitoring and reporting student learning for summative or accountability purposes in their own English classrooms.

Oftentimes, they also need to use assessment as a tool to collect information about students' learning progress during the learning, not at the end, to understand what their students know and can do with language and to provide feedback for students and to decide upon their pedagogical resources and teaching strategies. I'd say formative assessment would be more informative to both English language teachers and students in the classroom context because classroom-based formative assessment is aligned with what and how they teach and learn English. But, standardized language tests have their own merits

particularly when they are used to make comparison with students from different schools and countries and to make decisions on their admission into or exit from certain programs.

3. What do you see as the top three challenges currently facing EFL/ESL teachers in language assessment?

It is important to note that language assessment can and should be integrated with language teaching to promote student learning by providing teachers with information about student progress in relation to learning objectives. Foreign language instructors should thus be equipped with sufficient background and knowledge to develop, select, and use language tests and interpret test results. However, due to the technical and nuanced nature of language assessment, many English language teachers have a limited understanding of assessment fundamentals, which has often led to inappropriate uses of language assessment in classrooms. Many ESL/EFL teachers have misconception about language assessment that they should be well versed in math to understand the concepts and practices of language assessment. This is not true. Of course, you have to have some basic arithmetic knowledge such as how to figure percentages, add, subtract, multiply and divide, but any advanced math knowledge is not pre-requisite to language assessment. So, I think ESL/EFL teachers' "math phobia" would be the top challenge that they need to overcome to be trained for language assessment.

Secondly, ESL/EFL teachers themselves should be fluent English speakers because in communicative language teaching, many classroom-based assessment tasks are interactive, so if teachers are not fluent enough to guide and assess students' English performance, their assessment tasks would be very limited resulting in extensive use of non-authentic, selected-response format assessment in classrooms. Thirdly, when

ESL/EFL teachers prepare their English classes, they should be reminded that course objectives, teaching, and assessment are all in sync so that both teachers and students can make informed decisions about their learning based on test results. Otherwise, classroom assessment cannot be integrated into everyday teaching and learning activities, and test results would not be meaningful to teachers and students.

4. As a teacher with many experiences both in the US and in other countries like in Asia, can you please share with us the trends of language assessment and testing?

Used as the world's principal lingua franca of business and scholarly communication, English is now spoken by speakers of more disparate varieties than ever before. So, the ability to cope with different variety of English and to negotiate meaning with speakers of different English varieties is increasingly becoming important to success in English communication. Accordingly, the field of language assessment has acknowledged such change and accepted non-native English speakers as qualified raters in high-stakes writing and speaking English exams. In order to enhance authenticity and to account for the broader listening construct representation, recently the TOEFL and IELTS have implemented different native varieties of English in their listening texts. However, only using native speaker (NS) varieties as legitimate ESL listening comprehension test input can be challenged because English as a Second Language (ESL) listeners are exposed to a wide range of non-native English varieties as well as different native English accents. Recently, a number of language assessment research has been done to see if including non-native listening input might cause some test bias for listeners who speak the same first language with the speakers in the listening input. Most of the current research results on this issue suggest that non-native

listening input does not necessarily create unfair advantages to particular groups of listeners as long as the speakers are too much accented, providing some supporting evidence to include non-native listening input in the high-stakes listening test in the future.

Additionally, there has been the burgeoning interest in developing and assessing ESL/EFL learners' spoken interactional competence. The ability to interact with others has been regarded as equally important as the ability to produce grammatically accurate English utterances with good control of pronunciation. However, many ESL/EFL teachers still find it difficult to elicit interactive language use samples and to evaluate L2 learners' interactional competence using appropriate classroom-based assessment instruments and rubrics. Thus, recently, language testing specialists are doing more and more research to provide useful guidance for how we should define interactional competence at both theoretical and operational levels and for how we can develop and use specific speaking testing tools and scales with a focus on assessing interactional competence.

5. Are there any controversial issues or research gaps in this area that need further research?

Ironically, we are still arguing about the nature of language proficiency. People have not agreed yet what accounts for language proficiency. Some researchers argue that language proficiency is a cognitive, psychological trait, which resides within each language user, whereas others claim that language proficiency is a social trait, co-constructed among language users. Such controversy is rooted in disagreement in the way we explain large variations in language performance across different language tasks in varying contexts. Depending on which perspectives you believe in, the way you design language assessment tasks and interpret and use test scores can be

affected. What makes more complicated in this debate is the widespread use of technology-mediated communication. Many researchers are thus trying to investigate the relationships between the characteristics of test tasks, of scoring rubrics, and of individual learners, and performance on language assessments in online interaction contexts.

Also, thanks to technological advance in natural language processing and speech recognition system, we can now use Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology to score constructed responses enhancing scoring efficiency and reliability. Nevertheless, it is still not clear how automated scoring system can capture different aspects of test takers' written and spoken responses to provide valid, targeted feedback. More research is needed to improve how automated scoring system can assess language proficiency manifested in more spontaneous and less restricted language tasks to expand construct representativeness and reduce construct irrelevant variance.

The Interviewer

Kandaporn Jaroenkitboworn is an assistant professor at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute. She read her BA, MA, and PhD at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. She is currently the editor of PASAA.

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