

High stakes English language testing

Daniel Xerri shares a teacher research project in Malta.



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The literature identifies a number of advantages to teachers' participation in high stakes test development (Darling-Hammond 2010; Crawford and Crum 2011). Nonetheless, there is a dearth of research on teachers' direct involvement in public examinations.

Partly in recognition of teachers' work on the design and implementation of the Advanced English Speaking Examination, the Department of English at the University of Malta Junior College was awarded the British Council Innovation in Assessment

Prize in 2014. Ongoing research on the AESE is seeking to contribute to a better understanding of the benefits that may arise when teachers are invited to play an instrumental role in developing the policies and practices governing high stakes examinations. Importantly, this research is being carried out by the same teachers who designed the examination.

This article describes their involvement in the examination; provides an overview of their research to better understand the benefits of their involvement; and, while acknowledging that not all teachers' efforts to conduct research are supported by their institutions, it calls for more practitioner research on teacher involvement in high stakes English language testing.

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Getting involved

Available since April 2013, the AESE forms part of second language education and caters for the needs of around 600 prospective university candidates annually. Upon the publication of a sketchy syllabus description of this component in 2010 by the national examination body, a group of teachers of English took the initiative to build on the syllabus guidelines. The aim was to provide their students and other candidates with a

reliable and valid form of assessment. This entailed a lengthy process made up of a number of stages, including structuring the speaking examination, writing and moderating tasks, trialling the tasks, creating an analytical rating scale, and calibrating the scale.

At every stage of the process, the team of teachers

sought to verify what would be most effective for their students and colleagues. For example, they invited students participating in the task trials to provide feedback on how well they were able to complete a specific task within a set time. They also observed colleagues conducting trial mock examinations to determine whether the examination was well-structured. As a result, the team was able to draft a comprehensive list of specifications, procedures and sample test materials that were ultimately adopted as the official examination manual.

The team's work on the AESE was formally acknowledged by the national examination body, which, besides implementing the procedures, rubrics and timing formulated in the manual, also entrusted the teacher-researchers with the task of training prospective examiners. To this end, the team devised an intensive training programme modelled on the training provided to speaking examiners working for international assessment bodies and, at the first sitting of the AESE, some of the team members also acted as examiners.

The involvement of the teacher-researcher team at every stage of this examination played a pivotal role in ensuring a fairer assessment experience for all candidates. For example, this fairness was secured via the teachers' knowledge of the needs of the candidate cohort and the Maltese educational context. Their involvement was extended even further when some of the team members opted to research various issues relating to their own contribution to the examination's design and implementation.

Researching the involvement

Since 2013, a number of studies on teacher involvement in the AESE have been conducted by some of the teachers that took part in its development. Their research has analysed the challenges in terms of policy and technical issues faced by the teachers responsible for the examination's design and implementation. Some of these challenges consisted of writing detailed test specifications while working within the constraints imposed by the syllabus as well as seeking to ensure a valid and reliable test while taking into account practical considerations. In some cases, it was not possible for the teachers to introduce all the measures they would have liked to implement in the examination. For example, while they would have preferred each session to be recorded so as to monitor an examiner's performance and provide a candidate with the opportunity of redress, this was not possible on logistical grounds.

Moreover, the research highlighted the lessons learnt

from the teachers' prolonged involvement in developing a public examination, especially with respect to professional development. For example, the teachers' assessment literacy was enhanced because they were involved at every stage. Their understanding of the theoretical principles governing the design of speaking examinations was consolidated by their hands-on involvement in developing a high stakes examination. For instance, the teachers came to appreciate the importance of providing candidates with as many different tasks as possible and of ensuring that rubrics are carefully scripted.

In addition, the research clarified how a teacher-designed high stakes language examination has a positive washback effect on teaching and learning. A study involving the participation of teachers and students examined the effect of the implementation of the AESE. At classroom level, for instance, a stronger emphasis on the development of speaking skills was observed, notwithstanding the fact that teachers and students operated in an educational system that has traditionally valued reading and writing above oracy. The teaching of English has had to change to accommodate the new component and teachers found themselves maximising student talk time in class and incorporating opportunities for the development of spoken fluency. Attitudes on the part of the various stakeholders towards the examination improved thanks to the speaking component's inclusion and the fact that teachers had designed the component.

Finally, current research by some of the teachers responsible for the design of the AESE is investigating students' preparation for this exam in order to identify how this could be done more effectively. By means of semi-structured interviews, classroom observation and think-aloud protocols, the study aims to identify the strategies that are adopted during class preparation by teachers and students, the strategies students have recourse to immediately before the exam, and the ones they utilise in the preparation stage during the exam. The teachers behind this study aim to develop a better understanding of how preparation for the examination they helped to design can be improved.

Conclusion

Further research on teacher involvement in high stakes English language testing is required in order to form deeper insights into how this can prove beneficial for both teachers and learners. If this research is conducted by the teachers themselves they are much more likely to be empowered to adopt an active role in debates concerning the uses and

effects of tests (Shohamy 2005), militate for change in testing policies (Fulcher 2013), and improve outcomes through testing (Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith 2012).

In Malta, the teacher research conducted on the AESE indicates that this teacher-designed examination has set the benchmark for a valid, reliable and fair form of assessment for all stakeholders. The rigour with which it was designed and implemented is likely to have an impact on the development (or re-design) of other local speaking examinations and on the protocols for training examiners.

Nonetheless, its success was heavily dependent on the fact that the teachers involved teach at an institution affiliated to the University of Malta and hence their research efforts are, to a large extent, supported. As most of the findings of the research on teacher involvement in the AESE underscore the importance of teacher agency in high stakes language testing, it can be argued that teacher involvement should feature more prominently in the assessment of students in the 21st century. In addition, the benefits of such involvement can be maximised even further if teachers research their own part in it.

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The involvement of the teacher-researcher team at every stage of this examination played a pivotal role in ensuring a faire assessment experience for all candidates

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