Interfaces between second language acquisition and language testing research

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Edited by Lyle F. Bachman and Andrew D. Cohen
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Interfaces Between Second Language Acquisition and Language Testing Research *edited by Lyle F. Bachman and Andrew D. Cohen*

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Series editors' preface

Two of the fastest growing, and most technical, areas of applied linguistics are second language acquisition (SLA) and language testing. Perhaps because of the degree of specialization required of those doing research in either one, together with the advent of separate conferences and journals for each, dialogue between practitioners in the two fields has been sporadic at best, and nonexistent in many cases.

This state of affairs is clearly unproductive. Advances in SLA in recent years, for example, have thrown new light on such crucial notions for test developers as "acquisition" and "proficiency," on learnability and teachability, and on the relevant criteria for student placement for the purpose of instruction, leading in some quarters to requests for tests that are "interlanguage-sensitive," or "developmental," and that take the individual learner as the unit of analysis. Yet many test designers remain unaware of such developments and continue to produce ever more sophisticated proficiency measures, of high reliability, but obtained via norm-referenced, group-level statistics, and of questionable validity when used to cluster learners for teaching purposes. Advances in language testing, conversely, are sometimes a closed book for many SLA researchers, whose training too often lacks a sufficiently rigorous grounding in research methods in general, and in measurement in particular. The result can be studies that are theoretically innovative and insightful, but of questionable validity due to inadequate measurement of the variables of interest, including second language abilities and development.

Interfaces between Second Language Acquisition and Language Testing Research is an attempt to begin to remedy the situation. Professors Bachman and Cohen have brought together a group of respected researchers, most of whom are active in both SLA and testing, and have asked them to address specific topics that they feel will benefit from greater contact across subdisciplinary borders. The result is a volume whose contributors draw on a rich base of empirical studies in discussing such problematic issues as construct validity, the operationalization and measurement of variables in SLA studies, interlanguage variation, individual differences, test-taking strategies, rating scales, potentially idiosyncratic psycholinguistic dimensions of context and discourse domain,

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and relationships among traditional notions of data elicitation tasks and language tests. The editors not only provide insightful discussion of those chapters but contribute new work of their own.

This book should be of considerable interest to language teachers, teacher educators, and program administrators, and to faculty and graduate students in applied linguistics. Its treatment of cutting edge issues in contributions that are accountable to empirical findings makes it an appropriate addition to the Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series.

Michael H. Long
Jack C. Richards

Preface

For many years, a relatively small number of applied linguists whose research interests straddle second language acquisition (SLA) and language testing (LT) have incorporated insights from both areas into their own research – if not explicitly, at least in the kinds of research questions they ask, and in the interpretations they offer of their results. These individuals have also employed similar tools in their research, such as interviews, observation, structured elicitations, rating scales, questionnaires, and language tests. More recently, a relatively small number of these individuals have become increasingly concerned with the general lack of recognition among their colleagues of the interfaces between these two areas of applied linguistics research. It was clear to them that the majority of individuals who were in the mainstream of either SLA or LT research were largely ignorant of the other field, both in knowing the major issues and research questions, and in knowing the research approaches and methods commonly used.

It was this concern with the need for a more extensive dialogue between SLA and LT researchers and a deeper understanding and sharing of common research and methodological issues that led to the organizing of a colloquium at the annual meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics in Seattle in 1992. The purpose of this colloquium was to stimulate discussion among SLA and LT researchers by exploring areas of common interest, both substantive and methodological, from a variety of perspectives. Individuals who are at the "cutting edge" of research in various aspects of SLA and LT research were invited to write original papers addressing areas of interface between SLA and LT research from the perspective of their particular area of interest. To provide a common point of departure, these individuals were all asked to read Bachman's article "Language Testing – SLA Interfaces," in Volume 9 of the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics,* which is included as the Appendix to this volume. The colloquium was very well received and generated considerable interest, and thus it was felt that there was a need to make the papers available to a wider audience. In discussing the idea of publishing the papers as a collection, a number of the colloquium par-

ticipants, including the editors, agreed that it would be useful to include additional perspectives in the collection, and three additional papers were subsequently invited.

A variety of issues, both those that prompted the colloquium and those that were of concern to the individual authors, are dealt with in the chapters of this book. In Chapter 1, Bachman and Cohen provide an update of Bachman's 1989 article, outlining a number of issues and questions that continue to be of concern to both SLA and LT researchers, discussing some recent studies that illustrate ways and areas in which these two aspects of applied linguistics can be integrated, and suggesting ways in which SLA and LT researchers can learn from one another.

Chapelle (Chapter 2) deals with the need that SLA researchers have to justify their interpretation of a given test as an indicator of a particular construct. She points out that in order to do so, they must define the construct that the test is intended to measure. Her chapter offers three theoretical perspectives toward construct definition: trait, behaviorist, and interactionalist. Each perspective is illustrated by demonstrating how interlanguage vocabulary might be defined within the perspective and how that perspective is reflected in vocabulary testing. Since current applied linguistic theory favors an interactionalist perspective to construct definition, Chapelle explains the implications of this definition for valid inquiry, including investigation of construct validity and the consequences of testing. Her chapter thus provides an excellent overview of issues related to validity that arise in many of the other chapters.

Tarone raises the issue of interlanguage variation in Chapter 3, calling attention to research indicating that the language production of second language learners varies in grammatical accuracy and fluency (as well as in other language components) in response to contextual changes. She concludes from this that SLA research findings, such as those regarding SLA universals, must be viewed with some skepticism since few studies control carefully for interlanguage variation. Also, given the variable of learner performance, the impact of a given test task will not be identical across learners, suggesting the importance of multiple tasks in order to build profiles of individual learners.

Cohen (Chapter 4) examines the role of test-taking strategy data in validating language tests. The use of verbal report measures to identify test-taking strategies represents an approach to research that has been more commonly used in SLA research than in LT research. The concern is to consider the processes in test taking so as to determine the effects of test input upon the test taker – that is, the processes that the test taker makes use of in order to produce acceptable answers to questions and tasks, and perceptions about tests before, during, and after taking them. Cohen concludes that SLA and LT researchers would be advised to consider validating the testing measures that they use through triangulation,

which would include the collection of test-taking strategy data on sub-samples of respondents, as in the Anderson et al. study (1991).

In Chapter 5, Brindley examines the validity of behavioral rating scales from an SLA perspective. Rather than focusing on the measurement properties of rating scales, he looks more specifically at the nature and status of the verbal descriptors that define different levels of ability. After considering the extent to which behavioral rating scales can be said to characterize SLA, he then utilizes findings from both LT and SLA research to assess the validity of the text, task, and skill hierarchies typically described in such behavioral scales. He concludes with suggestions based on both SLA and LT research for assisting in the construction and validation of such rating scales.

Douglas (Chapter 6) focuses on the discourse domain, which he views as a cognitive construct created by the language learner as a context for interlanguage development. He sees the discourse domain as mediating between the specific context of language use (situation, setting, domain, environment, task, content, topic, schema, frame, script, and background knowledge) and the respondents' language competence. He discusses the need for LT and SLA researchers to design tests that have instructions, contents, genre, and language directed toward specific populations.

Shohamy discusses the interfaces between SLA and LT research in discourse analysis in Chapter 7. She contends that while language testers have contributed to SLA research by defining the construct of language ability and the component of discourse within that construct, they need to expand their repertoire of assessment procedures by experimenting with a variety of elicitation tasks that SLA researchers use.

It is often only by considering our own research interests and approaches in relief that we fully understand and appreciate their potential. Such is the case, we believe, with LT and SLA research. In the process of editing this volume, we have seen the papers evolve in ways that neither we nor the individual authors could have anticipated at the beginning. We have altered our perceptions of our own research and gained greater appreciation of the complementarity of these two fields of applied linguistics. We believe that this book offers a fresh look at ways in which LT and SLA research has been conducted and suggests exciting directions for how it can be integrated. We thus hope that this collection will provide a stimulus for a continuing and expanding dialogue between SLA and LT researchers. If the conversation that has already been generated in the chapters included here is any indication, this hope is already becoming a reality.

Lyle F. Bachman
Andrew D. Cohen

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     study into the construct validity of a reading comprehension test: Triangu-
     lation of data sources. *Language Testing, 8*(1), 41–66.