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## **INTER-CULTURAL ISSUES IN TESTING CHINESE STUDENTS' WRITING**

*Gerard Sharpling*

### **Inter-cultural aspects of language testing**

This paper looks at some of the inter-cultural issues involved in testing the writing proficiency of Chinese students applying for undergraduate and graduate programmes at the University of Warwick, UK, and other British universities. An inter-cultural understanding of the language testing experience, though rarely pursued within the language testing literature, is useful for two reasons. Firstly, a better understanding of what learners and teachers of another culture think about English language tests written within English-speaking countries is helpful for those teachers and examiners who are unfamiliar with that culture. Secondly, as a general principle, writing assessors need to become more actively involved in a process of inter-cultural dialogue, so that they better understand the students they are assessing. This involves an exchange of views with a variety of professional people from other cultures, as well as their own.

The importance of inter-cultural dialogue to professional development seems to be self-evident. However, all too often, one can lose sight of the inter-cultural issues of testing, as test writing and assessment becomes reduced to what are essentially statistical, rather than humanistic practices. A central premise of this paper is the urgent requirement to 'engage in otherness in a relationship of equality', and to question the values and suppositions inherent in our own practice (Corbett 2003: 206). This is easier said than done, given that the ethos of British higher education institutions continues to be characterised by meritocratic, rather than inclusive beliefs. Indeed, at first sight, being aware of diversity and difference runs counter to the requirements of many English language examinations, whose prime aims are to classify, segregate and exclude. At the same time, in taking into account the more 'humanistic' dimension of language testing, I do not argue here for a reduction in the rigorous nature of language proficiency testing. At any stage, there will be candidates who demonstrate considerable potential for improvement in their written language skills, but for whom immediate entry to a university would be, at best, misguided.

This paper is predicated on the assumption that language tests are primarily 'tools...deeply embedded in cultural, educational and political arenas, where different

ideological and social forms struggle for dominance' (Shohamy 2001). All too often, as Shohamy remarks, the voice of the test taker is marginalised, yet it should be listened to more closely. Shohamy also argues that in order to assess candidates effectively, there must be some prior understanding, on the part of teachers and testers, of the social context and culture in which the assessment itself takes place. Yet there is surprisingly little reflection, in language testing literature, on these sort of cultural matters. The facts that more and more Chinese students are now taking proficiency tests such as IELTS, TOEFL and WELT, and that the numbers of Chinese students are continuing to increase within English-speaking higher education institutions, have not led, as one might expect, to increased research into the area of Chinese learners's test taking experiences. Some promising theoretical developments have occurred in terms of seeking ways of individualising assessment procedures (de Jong and Stevenson 1990), and in making assessment procedures more democratic (Shohamy 1998, 2001). Yet few publications actively seek to enter the 'mind set' of those students who are increasingly coming to study within English-medium universities. My own paper is, of course, only one small step in a longer journey of discovery about the candidates that I am personally involved in testing.

In this paper, I shall consider how Chinese students, teachers and teacher trainers approach writing proficiency tests in English, and what can be learned from their approaches. The particular model of language teacher development implicit in this paper is that of the 'reflective practitioner', oriented towards a testing perspective. By seeking a better understanding of the cultural background of those who are most involved in the testing process (the students who take the tests; the teachers who prepare the students for the tests, and the trainers who seek to enhance teachers' knowledge), language testers may be able to reflect more appropriately on their own practice, and ultimately have a better understanding of the people that lie behind the scripts. Underpinning the ethos of this investigation is Corbett's (2003:206) view that 'learners and teachers are working in a liberal democracy that upholds values like equality, and the tolerance of difference, and it is the teacher's job to foster these overtly in the classroom, and assess them alongside the four language skills.'

### **Chinese students and writing test performance: the relevance of cultural factors**

In British higher education institutions, Chinese students are highly valued for their disciplined, practical approach to their studies. Educationally speaking, they are perceived as coming from a culture which values diligence and application to studies, and which places strong emphasis on the high status of the teacher, more so than is generally the case in the West. The teacher, within the Chinese education system, is viewed as a source of wisdom and a fount of knowledge, and is held in the highest esteem. In an extract from Lieh Tzu's spiritual meditations, the writer praises, amongst other things, the value of the wise person with white hair, whom he sees as a symbol worthy of respect:

Those in the prime of their beauty are proud; those in the prime of their strength are impetuous. So you cannot talk to people in their prime about the Way. People with no white streaks in their hair have difficulty understanding the Way...If people are proud and impetuous, they are interested only in the acquisition of wealth, power and status. (Van de Weyer 2000: 9/17).

It would be foolish to reduce our understanding of Chinese culture to selective readings from Taoism and Confucianism. However, the comments above show something of the historical dimension of Chinese students' sense of high power distance, and their respect for authority. Nagel (1998), too, stresses the Confucian belief in orderly, paternalistic systems, while she underlines the Taoist praise for the virtues of stillness, sincerity, respect for lofty virtue and the devotion to a worthy teacher. At an educational level, high power distance has been seen as leading to several tendencies, amongst which are the following:

- The tendency to recycle lecture notes;
- The tendency to avoid a critical perspective;
- The tendency to memorise documents that are seen as having high value and prestige;
- The tendency to avoid strong or contentious personal opinions;
- The incorporation of proverbs and sayings that betoken popular wisdom.

All of these strategies, of course, convey a sense of humility and an intrinsic respect for knowledge and experience, though this dimension is not often understood by those

teachers or assessors who see their role more as ‘plagiarism detectives’ than anything else.

In extreme cases, students, as we know, tend to ‘lift’ complete chunks of text which they feel an affinity with, and which express their ideas succinctly. Sometimes entire sections may be learned for a test, and incorporated verbatim, regardless of the relevance of the passage to the task being undertaken. It is this procedure which most seems to anger British academics. Yet it is important to understand some of the reasons, both historical and socio-cultural, that lie behind these tendencies, and, perhaps, to see memorising and lifting as a relatively normal stage of linguistic development which many students pass through in the early stages of their academic careers. John Bryan Starr (2001), for instance, has emphasised the high level of competitiveness within Chinese schools, and the presence of a primarily examination-dominated system, where the classroom curriculum is frequently limited to material that has a high level of transferability to test-based situations. Having survived this kind of system, predicated as it is on learning by rote and testing, students may, Starr (*ibid*: 232) argues, become part of a tertiary institution where ‘the curriculum is unimaginative, and the level of instruction is often disappointingly low’.

At the same time, Starr (*ibid*: 233) also notes that while intellectual freedom has now increased within China, this does not necessarily imply that Chinese people are ‘free from all restrictions with regard to what they write, say or teach’ It often seems to come as a shock to British academics to realise that the pursuit of original thinking, so widely cherished in their own system, is not necessarily shared or valued by other cultures. In any event, the concept of ‘being intellectual’ in China is not, in reality, quite like that of the west, where it is possible to be openly critical and iconoclastic. From this recognition, it seems that there are at least two constraints facing candidates who tackle proficiency tests in writing:

- Academic procedures and practices can shape students’ responses into typecast or predictable patterns of thought.
- There is a relative reticence on the part of the students to express ideas that are imaginative, emotive, and which have individual specificity.

This is not to say, of course, that there are no test takers who adopt a more original approach to their writing.

Vigorous arguments persist within the literature as to whether or not candidates' performances in writing tests are framed by cultural issues. The debate here falls into two broad schools of thought: those that suggest that Chinese students have a particular, 'culture-bound' approach, which shapes and constrains their performance in writing tests, and those that argue that they have the same cognitive abilities, strategies and transferable skills as students from other cultural groups. The first school of thought prefers to see writing as a socially embedded act, which takes place within a specific context, and follows a set of pre-determined guidelines. For adherents to this view, there is no such thing as neutral, disinterested or transparent writing. Rather, writing is the very means by which identities are formed and solidified. Taken to an extreme, writing becomes a socio-political, ideological construct, capable of sustaining or destabilising social harmony. This is where writing has the potential to become a dangerous weapon, as well as a tool of salvation.

Cai (1997) has noted that social harmony in China rests on Confucian thought, whereby the individual adheres to communal, rather than individualistic ideals. This notion of 'collectivism' in Cai's argument echoes Hofstede's (1980) categorisation of Chinese people into those exhibiting high anxiety avoidance, high collectivism and high power distance. It should be remembered, of course, that by 1988 Hofstede had moved away from these categories, changing his view of Chinese culture to one of 'long-term' orientation, in which the qualities most valued are persistence, thrift, a strong awareness of one's own status and a sense of shame and humility. For Cai (1997), knowledge within China tends to reside in collective wisdom and social norms. In this way, no ordinary individual can claim to be the real originator of truth, and academic writing in China, Cai argues, tends to be a mere appendage to the political status quo. Discourse features such as overall organisation, topic choice, paragraph organization, sentence structure and lexical choice are far from arbitrary, but are conditioned as direct consequences of a specific socio-political context.

If this view were wholly accurate, however, the approach by Chinese students to writing tests and the content of the papers they tackle would constitute little more than an ideological mirror of Chinese culture itself (if there is, indeed, such a homogeneous entity as 'Chinese culture'), and the scripts they produce would lack originality, and have a 'sameness' about them. Most assessors of writing scripts will be aware that there is

certain 'sameness' about many of the scripts that come from Chinese candidates. For example, writing scripts often abound with statements such as 'Every coin has two sides', or 'There is no garden without weeds'. Cai's view is a very useful starting point in investigating the culture-bound aspects of academic writing. However, we are nonetheless able to discern among the scripts of Chinese students, as is the case with scripts from any nationality of writer, a large variation of standards, and numerous instances of lexical individualisation. This seems to demonstrate that some candidates have an ability to transcend the immediate cultural context in which they are working, while others do not. One can only speculate as to why this may be the case.

Jian-yi Huang (1997) has corroborated this finding in his extensive study of the learning strategies of Chinese students within the American higher education system. Huang (1997) found that despite their cultural distinctiveness, American and Chinese students in fact have rather similar cognitive profiles. Huang (1997) notes also that Chinese students have an even better ability to categorise information in broad terms than their American counterparts, and in terms of learner styles and preferences, have an equal preference for group work and collaborative learning. Huang and Sisco (1994), meanwhile, observe that Chinese students have a somewhat broader spectrum of learning and thinking styles than is often anticipated, even if Chinese students are sometimes seen as more 'pragmatic' in their approach to their studies.

This debate is, no doubt, insoluble. However, my own argument tends towards the latter viewpoint, namely that there is a need to see Chinese students as a diverse, rather than typecast population, possessing a wide variety of approaches and strategies, rather than as a group of candidates thinking in set patterns. This broadly agrees with Holliday (1994), who warns against 'over-generalising' cultural arguments regarding the difficulties that students have in writing in an appropriate written style. As Holliday (1994) notes, it will be normal for a particular national culture to embody many discourse cultures, not just one, and 'many of these cultures will transcend national cultures' Scientific writing, for instance, will tend to be international, rather than national in nature. Holliday concedes that where students come from will determine the way in which a new culture is approached (in this case, British academic culture), but argues that this 'does not tell the whole story' (1994, 63). Pennycook's viewpoint (1998) follows a similar train of thought. He illustrates that the popular construction of the Chinese learner as a 'passive memorizer' shows as much, if not more about the

widespread cultural constructions of colonialism as it does about individual students themselves.

### **British tests, Chinese voices**

Most assessors of written language proficiency tests in Britain will recognise the degree of difficulty that Chinese students experience in projecting themselves appropriately into the English-speaking culture, with which they lack familiarity. To their credit, though, many candidates do so in a measured way, with meticulous attention to paragraphing and organisational features. They may take heart from Canagarajah (2004), who indicates that even experienced 'non-native' writers in a language go through a process of 'discursive negotiation' before they are able to manipulate discourse effectively. In writing, it generally takes considerable time before one can view the tension between two cultures as productive and advantageous, and it is only after substantial immersion that writers will begin to adopt a critical vantage point with regard to the host culture. At this point, and no earlier, the writer will develop unique insights into their own culture that will help them to develop their writing further.

At the same time, one can say that Chinese students already studying within an English-medium higher education institution appear to be relatively well equipped to 'negotiate' the tensions between two cultures and to exploit them to their advantage. In 2002, 100 students at the University of Warwick following in-session English support courses in English (and who had, by implication, passed through the 'hoop' of the language proficiency test phase) were asked, by questionnaire, whether they perceived the testing process adopted by testing organisations such as IELTS to be fair to Chinese students' abilities. This question was kept purposely vague and it was hoped that it would encourage reflective and critical thinking in terms of the value of the language tests they had undertaken. The quotations below represent a selection of the students' responses. Initially, few students called into question the fairness of recognised English language tests. Indeed, in their comments, they seemed somewhat compliant in their desire to uphold the integrity of the test:

*The test is scientific and fair for every examinee.*

*I think it's represent that my real level of English [sic ]*



*Yes, I think it was a fair test because it includes four parts which can test English ability comprehensively. Moreover it needs speaking with native speakers which make Chinese students put more emphasis on oral English.*

*It's a fair test because we need to pay money to attend IELTS.*

Given that the students questioned here had all undergone a process of 'acculturation' and 'accommodation', it is perhaps unsurprising that they should have positive opinions of the system which had brought them thus far. However, several of the students' observations were more challenging to the status quo:

*It depends how you define 'fair'. In my opinion, IELTS does reflect the English ability I need to survive here. However, my English education system emphasises reading and writing rather than listening and speaking. So people who have experience of staying in UK would obviously get better grades more easily, because they are used to the nouns that Britons usually use.*

*A good result does not necessarily guarantee a smooth study life.*

*I think it is not a good test for English ability. You can do specific exercises for all parts of the test and pass it.*

*It is not fair. It is too concerned with the grammar part and the listening part is too fast and quite hard for non-native speaking students.*

These comments repay closer inspection. In particular, they reflect the view that writing tests seem to have relatively fixed parameters, from the students' perspective: that is, tests are an activity that can be prepared for. There is certainly wide evidence for this in the scripts that Chinese students submit when they take the writing part of WELT. The texts often have rigorous organizational qualities, and a fairly predictable structure. Language accuracy continues to be a major difficulty among some students, but happily, grammar is no longer the be all or end all in judging the value of a piece of writing. The comments made by the students also show that they are clearly able to distinguish between language tests and the more extensive writing that they will be asked to do in their future departments. There is, thus, a sense of pragmatism about the students in terms of their ability to adapt from test-type writing to the dictates of more extensive work.

In a series of classes with MA students on language testing at the University of Warwick, many of the more experienced teachers have made insightful comments regarding the cultural issues in language testing. One teacher, for instance, lamented the lack of writing training in English for Chinese students after senior high school. She noted that there was a disparity between the students' skills in writing in Mandarin at school, under pressure, and the lack of training in writing English under the same sort of time constraints:

*As to the writing part, they are not trained in how to write academically in English, they just learn textbooks, grammar, vocabulary and so on ... the problem is one of language and concept. For senior high school students, they are trained in how to write Chinese passages for different purposes. They have to finish 600 words in one hour, so they are very quick to finish a long passage, and the teacher will tell them how to develop their ideas.*

In probing more deeply into the challenges faced by Chinese students when writing in English under test conditions, this same teacher also commented on the difficulty of students explaining themselves directly in an essay question. When asked how her students would approach writing about a controversial topic, the teacher commented on their sense of hesitation and indirection as follows:

*The problem is not that the subject is taboo, but it is difficult to find the language. They worry about making mistakes, and they don't know how to express themselves correctly. They can't pick up the correct words. The main disadvantage is that they lack training in writing. It is not easy for students to write an essay of 300 words in half an hour because they do not have such training frequently. In Chinese, the task is not difficult for high school students because they have lots of such training, but after graduation, people do not write frequently.*

These comments seem to reiterate the Hofstedian notion that Chinese people have a high level of anxiety avoidance, and thus, they only write what they feel confident writing. There may, thus, be a reduced sense of adventurousness and experimentation within Chinese writers' scripts when compared to students from other nationalities where anxiety avoidance is low: for example, Greece or Brazil. Also implicit in the teacher's comments is the view that academic writing is essentially a 'learned' activity. Another Chinese teacher commented thus:

*In China, we usually teach them how to start the first paragraph – how to write the topic sentence – and how to give examples to support idea. We then teach them how to write a conclusion. We give them the basic skills to pass an exam.*

It is important to emphasise the ultimately positive nature of this kind of preparatory work when candidates are preparing for IELTS, TOEFL or WELT examinations. It should be broadly welcomed by universities. Of all the papers received in WELT over the last year, responses from Chinese students are perhaps the best organised and structured. Even if such patterns are being learned and applied relatively mechanically, and even if the level of the papers is compromised by a range of grammatical errors, the fact that these features are present shows that the process of ‘discursive negotiation’ is well under way, and the candidate is likely to demonstrate potential given appropriate time for development.

### **Chinese tests, Chinese voices**

In the final part of this paper, I shall to turn my attention to what Chinese teachers and teacher trainers have to say about their own tests. This is an area from which many British testers can learn. One of the difficulties inherent in language testing literature, it seems to me, is that there has been a reluctance to elicit views and voices from other cultures. The designing of gate-keeping language proficiency tests within academic institutions in Britain and the wider English-speaking world remains, after all, a primarily white, middle class domain of classifying, labeling and segregating, and of wielding power. Additionally, the ability to write in a grammatically and structurally conformist way is thought to be emblematic of academic intelligence, and to betoken intellectual potential. One could go further, too, to say that white native-English speaking voices in the area of testing tend to be listened to more scrupulously than others, because of implicit power structures always already present within academia, which favour some modes of language (notably the Anglo-American writing model) over others. Voices from other cultures and backgrounds are thus marginalized, and even reduced to silence. We can say, in short, that where language testing is concerned, the paths of applied linguistics and equal opportunities do not often meet. Meanwhile, particular, specialised forms of discourse continue to be upheld as the highest indicators of valued discourse.

To discuss fully the issue of discrimination within applied linguistics, and the power structures which favour some types of research over others, lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, one can note, with some satisfaction, that voices from China are now beginning to be heard. It has, for example, been refreshing to see in recent years that an increasing number of my own MA dissertation supervisees are turning to the question of what teachers in their countries can learn from test takers, and how these findings can improve and empower their own classroom practice. Even teachers within China are increasingly coming to challenge existing paradigms and structures of language testing, especially those within Britain and America, which tend to marginalize, de-individualise and thus devalue candidates from the same culture as them, and they are also starting to comment more vociferously on the value of their own tests as a viable alternative to IELTS and TOEFL.

In a recent series of training seminars with teacher trainers from China, held in October 2003, I was consistently struck by the degree of knowledge, expertise and attention to detail demonstrated by the trainers, many of whom are involved in developing test projects of their own at university level. If such a degree of knowledge is available, it is, at best, unwise for us not to learn from it and draw upon the expertise of non-native speaker language testers. One trainer, for instance, vividly described the elaborate procedures that she had gone through to establish a respectable entry test in spoken language for her university. The infrastructure of this test was complex and detailed, involving listening to a large number of cassettes with spoken texts recorded by individual candidates. Given the need for validity and reliability in testing, this trainer was obliged to listen to all the cassettes herself at some point in the entry process, so that some degree of standardization was possible. One immediately became aware not only of the high level of dedication, but the phenomenal amount of work that would be required in order to accomplish this process successfully. A further trainer commented that she had spent some considerable time during her stay at Warwick designing a schedule for assessing group project work, an area in relation to which even assessors in British universities remain vague and undecided. Many of the trainers, in questionnaires and feedback, commented on their wish to be able to develop tests more 'scientifically', but evidence from our discussions showed that they were already doing so, and their appreciation of statistical techniques often outweighed that of their Western counterparts.

It is also regrettable, perhaps, that British higher education institutions fail to take account of the potential of language tests within China to provide effective markers of candidates' language ability. In particular, the College English Test (CET), either at band 4 or band 6, seems to provide a ready-made language ability score for many candidates within higher education institutions within China who are not English specialists. However, because this test is partly syllabus-based, occurring at the end of a designated course, it has not so far been perceived by tertiary institutions, in Britain at least, as a viable alternative to IELTS, TOEFL or WELT. The CET was first initiated in 1987 as a means of providing a valid test score in English proficiency for college students not studying English as a main subject, as well as bringing about enhancements in English language teaching and learning within colleges. The first paper is primarily in the form of multiple choice, and covers the areas of listening comprehension, vocabulary and reading. The second paper, meanwhile, is a guided writing exercise. Test takers write a short composition in a 30 minute period. In the marking procedure, attention is paid in equal measure to the content and the language.

One of my former MA dissertation students, Zhang Lingxi, has recently reported that since September 1987, when CET was first initiated, numbers taking this test have risen from 100,000 to 4,030,000 in January 2003. As of May 2002, it appears that 41 testing centers were running this test, within 30 provinces, and a total of 71,228 students have attended the CET oral test. These are, by any standards, huge numbers. It seems clear, therefore, that CET has high face validity and commands large respect from the general public. It is a wide-ranging and varied test, set with meticulous attention to reliability and validity. Wide developments in the CET have even necessitated further concentration on the test infrastructure, and have had a strong washback effect on teaching. Schools are currently paying greater attention to language teaching for non-English specialists. Not only does this contrast starkly with the often less than satisfactory approach of British higher education institutions to the teaching of modern foreign languages, but it also suggests that there is much of value in the Chinese testing system that could provide indispensable information to British institutions about Chinese students wishing to apply to follow MA programmes here.

### **Conclusion: testing, cultural diversity and equal opportunities**

Neil Thompson (2003a), in his book *Promoting Equality*, refers to the dangers of the discriminatory practice of de-humanisation. In his insightful account, Thompson

(2003a) comments on the way in which groups of individuals may easily come to be labeled or referred to in a de-humanised way (for example, 'The elderly', 'The disabled', or 'they'). Thompspon's thesis could apply equally well to the situation facing Chinese test takers. It is not uncommon, for instance, to hear groups of learners referred to in staff rooms as 'Chinese students'. This sense of de-humanisation, propagated by the very institutions that should be seeking to eradicate it, 'reflects and constructs powerlessness, undermines self-esteem and discourages acts of personal initiative.' (Thompson 2003:91). As students within China compete for places in English-speaking institutions both in Britain and elsewhere, they are taking tests in ever greater numbers, and doing everything in their power to meet the costs of their studies. Language testers, it seems, hold the balance of power in deciding if a candidate is permitted to step over the revered threshold of British academia. We may be in danger of creating a regime of oppression here which, according to Birt (1997: 206) 'produces rigid, stultifying identities on its victims'. The responsibility can only be seen to lie within testing organizations to use their power wisely, and to re-evaluate from time to time what is, or what should be held up as valuable in academic circles. Through dialogue with students, teachers and trainers, we can, at least, seek to understand why students write what they write, rather than simply considering difference through the distorting lens of a relatively undifferentiated, Anglo-American approach to academic writing.

This paper has sought to investigate some of the inter-cultural issues that need to be taken into consideration when testing students from other backgrounds and cultures. Table 1 now considers aspects of negative assessment practice, and how positive values might be promoted, through a change in emphasis in the approach to marking:

Negative approaches to assessment	Positive approaches to assessment
<p>The testing specialist or organisation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has pre-conceived assumptions and beliefs about test candidates.</li> <li>• ‘typecasts’ candidates crudely according to nationality group.</li> <li>• Ignores the relevance of the students’ cultural background and what this can bring positively to the testing process.</li> <li>• Fails to value aspects of a student’s writing that are not necessarily valued in the Anglo-American tradition.</li> <li>• Unduly penalizes memorized expressions.</li> <li>• Heavily penalizes grammar mistakes.</li> <li>• Sees academic writing as narrow and lacking in creativity.</li> </ul>	<p>The testing specialist or organisation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintains an open mind about students’ abilities (e.g. avoids judging international students solely on the basis of language)..</li> <li>• Shows awareness that there is a wide variety of approaches to academic work within any one given culture.</li> <li>• Shows an awareness of what makes a writer write the way he/she does, and how far this is framed by cultural aspects.</li> <li>• Shows an awareness of what constitutes good academic writing in the candidate’s own culture, and what benefits this might bring about when transferred.</li> <li>• Adopts a more healthy attitude to memorization, in which remembering is seen as inevitable, and sometimes useful.</li> <li>• Attempts to see beyond the grammar mistakes to the full potential of the writer.</li> <li>• Sees academic writing has many variations and styles.</li> </ul>

Table 1: Comparison of negative and positive approaches to assessment

At the same time, this paper has suggested a process of enquiry into Chinese teachers’ and trainers’ approaches to language testing, which can be broadly characterised as follows:

- An increased focus on Chinese, as well as British or American research into language testing;
- An attempt to focus on the experiences of Chinese test takers themselves;
- An attempt to encourage teachers and trainers outside Britain to appreciate the value of their own testing systems;
- An attempt to reduce the sense of deference to Western models of testing;
- An attempt to see the full potential of language tests, such as the CET, designed within the candidates’ own countries;
- Attempts to learn from the testing practices of those of other cultures, and to encourage cross-fertilisation between different kinds of test.

The above areas of work form part of a wider, longer-term strategy that seeks to embrace and celebrate cultural diversity and to take increased account of the cultural

diversity of written scripts. This is a process of action research which, as Carr and Kemmis (1986) note, marks a predictable, but useful series of shifts from the formation of a critical theorem, to a process of enlightenment, to the eventual organization of action. The results of this kind of research will, in all probability, take considerable time to bring to fruition, and this paper can only be seen as a starting point.

I would like to conclude with a general warning note about testing in the twenty-first century, concerning our continued tendency to be pre-occupied with the rational and the scientific, at the expense of the intuitive. At present, testing is seen as a way of maintaining standards, and addressing/redressing, sometimes in draconian fashion, often-heard criticisms that universities education is being watered down. In the future, however, modes of language testing will need to shift and alter to correlate with new and anticipated patterns of learning and study. As Broadfoot (2000: 206) indicates, the language of assessment and testing nowadays is 'a profoundly modernist discourse, the product of an age committed to a belief in the power of science and rationality to lead to social and economic improvement'. To draw an analogy with Broadfoot's comments: just as the structuralist movement in literary theory prided itself on bracketing off anything that lay outside the text (an author's biography, etc.), so language testers often preoccupy themselves uniquely with the writing in front of them, and ignore the cultural circumstances in which such writing is produced, or the person who lies behind the candidate number.

Fashions, however, come and go. For instance, few self-respecting academics would now claim to call themselves 'modernist'. As Broadfoot (2000) notes, what is valued in educational circles is in evolution, and will change, and with this will come the need for changes in assessment practice too:

Existing approaches to assessment are almost exclusively concerned with explicit learning, with measuring what has been consciously learned and reproduced in a formal setting. However, the goals of learning are likely in the future to centre increasingly on the acquisition of attitudes, skills and personal qualities, since the acquisition of knowledge, formerly at the core of the curriculum, is likely to become more and more irrelevant... (212).

It is to be hoped that at some point in the future, in line with the above, there may be different sort of language tests which (in contrast, or as a supplement to existing ones) value what is personal to the students' own cultures, and truly celebrate difference in



a way that is currently lacking. This seems to be one of the challenges of language testing in the new globalised era. However, in writing this piece for the current ELTED journal, it seems that such a time is still rather a long way off.

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