

Examinable English: Reconciling the Cultural–Intercultural in the International Assessment of English

Proficiency in English is an increasingly valued capability of many students in a globalising world. The international assessment of English, across diverse societies and cultures, is challenging our assumptions, principles, and practices of assessment.

Drawing on the experiences of students for whom English is an additional language, this paper explores the interplay of the cultural–intercultural dimension with the construct of interest, that is, language ability in academic English. This paper seeks to understand how students' diverse cultural worlds are acknowledged in the setting and marking processes of assessments; and the extent to which the varieties of English that students bring to the school study of 'examinable English' are valued and accommodated.

Using a case study approach, this paper sketches the practices of an assessment agency, the SACE Board of South Australia, in the assessment of a school subject, English as Second Language Studies, which is offered to students in the final year of their upper secondary education in Australia, in Malaysia, and in China.

A manifestation of globalisation is playing out in the international systems for the assessment of students' achievements. This paper points to some of the challenges that assessment agencies working across societies and cultures face in accounting for the cultural–intercultural dimension in the international assessment of English.

Dr Antonio Mercurio
Executive Manager, Curriculum Services
SACE Board of South Australia
Adelaide, South Australia
September 2009

Introduction

International assessments, across diverse societies and cultures, are challenging our assumptions, principles, and practices of assessment.

To work across diverse cultures within a society is not new for an assessment agency; education systems consist of students from a diversity of social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, and curriculum and assessment designers should take this diversity into account when developing their educational assessments. However, the increasing amount of assessment work that is conducted across borders, through international comparative studies of achievement such as the Trends in the International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and in the international assessments of English for students who wish to enter English-speaking universities, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and the Pearson Test of English Academic (PTE), are placing the spotlight on some fundamental questions about taking into account the cultural–intercultural dimension in assessments (Nardi, (2008); Wiliam, (2008a)).

What is meant by ‘cultural–intercultural dimension’? In this paper it is taken to be the social, linguistic, and cultural make-up of the student; the sociolinguistic–sociocultural self. It affirms that in education, and in particular the learning of an additional language(s), an integral part of the learning process involves the student navigating within and between cultures.

This paper looks at some of the challenges that the international assessment of English of students for whom English is an additional language present for assessment designers. Specifically, this paper points to some of the challenges that assessment agencies working across societies and cultures have in reconciling the cultural–intercultural understandings and experiences of the individual student with those expressed and represented more generally by the assessment agency.

What is meant by the ‘assessment agency’? In this paper it is taken to be the organisation that has the responsibility for the design and conduct of the assessments — the representation of the ‘construct of interest’ (Chalhoub-Deville & Deville 2006; Wiliam, 2008b); and the relationship of the assessments to the construct of interest (through the setting, vetting, judging, and reporting processes). In many cases the assessment agency is an arm of a state or national government (such as the SACE Board of South Australia) working within a state or national social, linguistic, and cultural frame. In other cases the assessment agency is an independent, global organisation (such as Pearson) working across states or nations, but nonetheless operating within its own social, linguistic, and cultural frames, though more generally defined.

Thus this paper focuses on some first principle questions:

- How is *the construct of interest* expressed?
- How is *the cultural–intercultural* taken into account in the curriculum and assessment of school subjects?
- What is the relationship between *the context* and *the construct of interest*?

The discussion of these questions draws on more specific questions:

- To what extent are *the varieties of English* that students bring to their school study of ‘examinable English’ valued and accommodated?
- What other *contextual considerations* should be taken into account in the assessment of the English for students for whom English is an additional language?

Taking a case study approach to shed light on these questions, this paper examines a school subject that the SACE Board of South Australia offers at the upper secondary level of education in South Australia to students for whom English is an additional language. Entitled English as Second Language Studies (ESL), this subject is offered to students in their final year of upper secondary education in South Australia and in the Northern Territory (Australia), and in selected colleges in Malaysia and China.¹ ESL forms part of the upper secondary leaving school credential in South Australia — the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). Students are able to include the subject ESL as part of a five-subject program for the SACE, the results of which, for many students, determine their eligibility for entry into university.

It is useful at this point to consider that we are dealing with the phenomenon of the study of English within a school subject, that is, of ‘examinable English’. We are dealing with the teaching and learning of a language within the envelope of schooling, within the ‘grammar of schooling’ (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), within ‘the cognitive architecture of the school subject’ (Teese, 2000):

... syllabus writers have an implicit view about the ideal student, and the pursuit of this ideal governs their choice of content, the relative stress placed on different tasks, the compression of content and the implied pace of teaching. Whether English or chemistry, mathematics or modern languages, an image is formed of the young intellectual. Exams and other tests require students to project this image: to display an ability to understand principles, to apply rules correctly, to handle novel situations, to manage form and genre, to decipher code, to reason soundly ... These requirements on higher-order growth span the different disciplines and are often formulated in very general language that is not

¹ In 2009, English as Second Language Studies (ESL) is offered in 38 schools in South Australia and 5 schools in the Northern Territory. It is also offered as part of the South Australian Matriculation (SAM) program in five colleges in Malaysia: Taylor’s University College, INTI International University College, Institut Sinaran, Kolej Disted-Stamford, Olympia College, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) International Education Centre (INTEC); and in Jiangsu Province Qianhuang Senior Middle School in the People’s Republic of China. In 2009, there are 2636 students enrolled in this subject, 1841 of whom are enrolled in colleges in Malaysia and China.

easily interpreted pedagogically — the capacity for abstraction, the ability to synthesize, analytical skills, creativity, imagination, the capacity to develop perspective and so on. Teachers aim to cultivate these behaviours but are constrained by the cultural demands implicit in them. (pp. 4–5)

We are reminded that ‘examinable English’, with its attendant teaching in schools and its particular protocols in school examinations (examination halls, papers, scripts, invigilators) may be a particular breed of English and learning of English.

Part 1: Examinable English: Context and Construct

In this first part of the paper the rich diversity of students’ social, linguistic, and cultural contexts are juxtaposed with the representation of the construct of interest: that is, language ability in academic English.

The Context

Chalhoub-Deville & Deville (2006) call upon researchers ‘to investigate the relationship between context and the construct of interest — in our case language ability’. These authors admit that:

Context is a vague and imprecise term, used generically with different meanings ... Conceptualisations of context seem to range from relatively narrow definitions (for example, context as an aspect of task), to broader definitions (for example, context as community, culture, and world view). (p. 527)

Despite the impreciseness of what is meant by context, Chalhoub-Deville & Deville assert that ‘the significant weight of context requires consideration of the role it plays in the measurement of constructs’ (p. 527); that there is an interaction between context and language ability. In this paper the broader definition (context as community, culture, and world view) outlined above is taken, and what follows is some indication of the cultural–intercultural realities in which the ESL students live. The sociolinguistic–sociocultural contexts of three groups of students will be described; those studying ESL in South Australian and Northern Territory schools, those studying in Malaysia, and those studying in China.

Students Studying in South Australia and the Northern Territory

A survey (SSABSA, 2003) of the student cohort studying ESL in South Australia and the Northern Territory (to which 1393 students, approximately 50% of the cohort responded), identified 82 different countries as students’ country of birth. China (384) was the country of birth for the highest number of students, Australia the second highest (295), and Vietnam the third (80). Of those surveyed, 39% were not permanent residents in Australia, and of the 61% permanent residents in Australia, 40% were born outside of

Australia. The survey identified that 81 different languages were spoken, Chinese (including dialects) was spoken by the greatest number of students (443), Vietnamese (145), and Serbian (62). Twenty-five per cent of the cohort spoke two or more languages in addition to English.

Students Studying in Malaysia

ESL is offered as part of the South Australian Matriculation program² in five private colleges in Malaysia, the largest of which is Taylor's University College. A survey (Ng, 2007) of the student cohort studying ESL in Taylor's University College showed that this cohort comprised 916 students of whom 745 (81%) were Chinese Malay, 98 (11%) were Indian Malay, 60 (7%), were Malay, and 13 (1%) were of other backgrounds. Of the 745 Chinese Malay students, 166 attended Chinese independent high schools where the medium of instruction was Mandarin for all subjects, except English and Bahasa Malaysia. These students studied all their 11 years in a Mandarin environment.

These students are always the focus of our attention where curriculum delivery for the SACE is concerned because many of them, though living in urban areas, are still reading, writing, and speaking in Mandarin (or one or more Chinese dialects) and watching and listening to Chinese movies and music. (Ng, 2007; a teacher at Taylor's University College with 28 years of experience in teaching this subject in the SAM program)

The remaining Chinese Malay students were English-literate, speaking English, in the main, at home. Of the Indian Malay students, 98 came from mainstream government schools. Many of these students:

hail from English-speaking families and have parents who are professionals – doctors, lawyers, accountants – whose ardent wish is for their children to follow in their footsteps. (Ng, 2007)

The 60 Malay students attended mainstream government schools where all subjects, with the exception of English, were taught in Bahasa Malaysia. According to Ng (2007):

Both the Malay and Indian students experience some degree of culture-bias as a result of their predominant use of and exposure to their mother tongue (viz. Bahasa Malaysia and the Indian dialects of Tamil, Malayalam, and Telegu, respectively). However, a large majority of these students are from middle-class, urban families who have constant and wide exposure to the English language and western culture through the media, particularly the Internet, television and films/music.

² The South Australian Matriculation (SAM) program, is a 1-year, pre-university preparation program that the SACE Board of SA offers. The program has been offered in Malaysia since 1983. The program is currently offered in Malaysia and China. Students who successfully complete the requirements of this program are awarded the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), a senior secondary qualification that is a part of the Australian Qualifications Framework.

Students Studying in China

The SAM program was first taught in China in Jiangsu Province Qianhuang Senior Middle School, Changzhou (near Shanghai) in 2005. In 2009, ninety-two students between 17 and 19 years of age are studying ESL in this school. For many of these students their exposure to English has been limited to the formal study of the language in the Chinese primary and secondary education system. Typically these students have completed the Chinese Senior Middle 2 Certificate before entering a six-month English language intensive course, followed by the study of ESL as part of the SAM program.

In my experience, when students graduate from Chinese Senior Middle 2, their English competence is around IELTS 3.5 to 4.5. (Wen Lei Huang, personal communication, 2009; principal of the school)

These students board at the school for the duration of their studies. Eighty per cent of the students' families live in the local city, Changzhou, with 20% living in Jiangsu or neighbouring provinces. Students speak Mandarin and other Chinese dialects (Changzhou, Nanjing, Wuxi).

Onto these three sociolinguistic–sociocultural ecologies in Australia, Malaysia, and China is superimposed the study of the school subject ESL. How is the essence of this subject envisaged?

The Construct of Interest

How is the 'construct of interest' (Wiliam, 2008a, p. 269) expressed? What kind of English language is being promoted in this school subject? What claims are being made about students who are successful in this subject? Does the cultural–intercultural dimension have a place in the description of the 'construct of interest' in this school subject?

Assessment agencies usually express the construct of interest through descriptions or representations of the content standards (content specifications) and/or achievement standards (assessment specifications) in a syllabus or course statement. In South Australia the description is found in a curriculum statement (SACE Board of SA, 2009), supported through explication in past examination papers and commentary in chief assessors' reports. It is not possible in this paper to give a detailed description of the construct of interest; however, an idea of the major platforms of this subject will be conveyed in a synopsis of the content and the assessment specifications.

The introduction to the curriculum statement sets the scene for this ESL subject, giving teachers an idea of the kind of English course that is envisaged:

English as Second Language Studies continues the development of students' knowledge and *critical understanding* of what is accurate and appropriate when *using English in*

primarily formal, academic contexts. Students learn to engage with various sources of information *in the community*: expert people in the field, reference and other materials, and electronic and print media. They learn to synthesise this information in *writing extended texts* and to acknowledge their sources, using accepted conventions. Throughout the program the structure, language patterns, and conventions appropriate to *academic writing* are taught and modelled.

Students work *independently on an extended investigation*. They learn how to organise a formal investigation, plan, reference, take notes, and choose and edit material. They learn to use information and communication technologies to find, retrieve, organise, and present information.

Students develop their listening and speaking skills by *discussing issues* with the rest of the class and with the teacher. They learn *to lead and direct an oral discussion* and to respond appropriately to the opinions of other people. (SACE Board of SA, 2009, p. 4, emphasis added).

The content specifications of the subject are elaborated in three sections: Text Study, Text Production, and Investigative Study, within which some of the essential platforms of the construct can be discerned:

- a focus on the development of formal, academic speaking and writing skills;
- the ability to write extended texts in a formal style with a clear structure;
- the ability to respond creatively to written and visual texts;
- the ability to choose language that is appropriate to the roles and interrelationships of writer and reader;
- a focus on analytical and critical literacy skills;
- the exchange of information and opinions in spoken and written forms;
- a focus on social issues as the subject matter;
- the ability to give comprehensive answers to open-ended questions on social issues studied;
- the ability to lead and participate in group discussion on a social issue;
- the development of investigative, research skills;
- the promotion of students as independent learners;
- the ability to access the community as a source of information;
- a familiarisation with a range of information and communication technologies (e.g. the creation of a simple website).

The assessment specifications build on this description of the key platforms of the construct of interest. Assessment in this subject consists of two parts: 50% is school based (the teacher designs and marks the assessment tasks) and 50% is externally assessed (the SACE Board of SA sets and marks the assessment tasks).

School-based Assessment

As part of the school-based assessment students complete an 'Issue Analysis' (students explain and substantiate their opinion of an issue with reference to the texts studied); a 'Text Production' (students write a formal essay and a piece of creative writing), and an 'Investigation' (students undertake an in-depth investigation of a topic and present their findings in a tutorial with their peers).

External Assessment

The external assessment consists of a 3-hour examination divided into two sections:

- Section 1: Listening Comprehension (15%)
- Section 2: Written Paper (35%).

For the Listening Comprehension (which occupies approximately the first hour of the examination), students listen and respond to recorded texts on the same issue or topic. The texts are drawn from oral text types, such as discussions, interviews, and broadcasts. The questions require understanding and interpretation of texts.

The Written Paper comprises two parts. In Part A students read and interpret related texts. The texts contain information, opinions, and experiences. The texts include information in the form of graphs, diagrams, or pictures. Students use the information and opinions in the texts to produce an extended written response of approximately 500 words in answer to a question seeking their opinion on a social issue. The curriculum statement is clear about the expectations of students:

Students ... gain skills in identifying key ideas, recognising connections between ideas, and choosing material for its relevance to the task. It is important that students develop the skills of paraphrasing information from texts and rephrasing in their own words. ... Students should also be taught the writing skills necessary for the construction of a thesis statement, topic sentences, and a conclusion that restates the thesis in light of the evidence presented in the text. ... Students should be shown how to write bibliographies and acknowledge sources from a range of texts, appropriately and consistently. (p. 41)

In Part B students write a formal letter of approximately 200 words in response to a short written (usually an advertisement or extract) or visual text (usually a photograph). Students compose, for example, a letter to the editor, a letter of complaint, or letter requesting information or services.

The key platforms of the construct of interest have been described above. How do these key platforms interact with the cultural–intercultural dimension? What follows is a discussion of the points of view held by some of the teachers of the subject in 2007.

Part 2: Examinable English: In Practice

In 2007 group interviews were conducted with ESL teachers in two different teaching centres in Malaysia to gain an insight into how the cultural–intercultural is understood to come into play in the assessment processes.³ These interviews were conducted at Taylor’s University College (18 teachers) and Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) International Education Centre (INTEC) (15 teachers) in Malaysia. Students at these colleges are taught by a teams of bilingual/pluri-lingual teachers who, together with their students: (a) use ‘English’ as a school-education language for designated communicative contexts with similar others; (b) are aware of English as a pluri-centric language and culture – because they experience its varieties through the available media (at home and school or work) as audiovisual information (printed, electronic, etc.) (Scarino, Papademetre, & Mercurio, 2008). These teachers are specialist teachers of ESL teaching approximately 100 students each.

It is interesting to note which of the key platforms of the construct outlined in Part 1 teachers commented upon, that is, those platforms that the teachers felt did not accommodate the cultural–intercultural dimension well enough.

An important point to note is that the teachers felt that the school-based assessment (50% of the course) allows them to tailor learning and assessment activities that better take into account the cultural–intercultural realities of their students.

As far as content/subject matter is concerned, there is less likelihood of ... bias occurring in the school-based assessment since we teachers have a free hand in the selection of materials to be studied. I invariably look at topics and issues which are within the experience of the average local Malaysian student ... while the students themselves select their own individual topic for the Investigative Study. (Ng, 2007)

However, there were some particular aspects of the external assessment processes that the teachers commented upon.

Listening Comprehension

The first area for comment is the accent of the readers used for the Listening Comprehension section. Although the Australian accent of the readers of the Listening Comprehension passages did not cause a major difficulty for most students, teachers explained that most of their students would be more comfortable with an American accent.

³ These interviews were conducted jointly by the SACE Board of SA and the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures of the University of South Australia.

If the goal is for students to become familiar with a range of English accents, then perhaps it can be argued that ESL students in Malaysia and China should become familiar with a range of accents, including the Australian accent. However, if the students are more at home with an American accent, and the focus of the assessment is on the understanding and interpretation of texts in a specific variety of English, then 'construct-irrelevant variance' (Messick, 1989) could be argued. Why aren't students studying in Australia required to listen to varieties of spoken English?

Part A: Written Examination

The second area of comment was the construction of the essay in Part A of the written examination. This section asks students to read a set of written texts and to interpret a number of visual, graphical texts about a social issue. The texts present different sides to a social issue, and it is the task of the student to interpret and synthesise the ideas in the texts and to write a structured and logically developed argument in the form of an essay

with a clear structure of introduction, body, topic sentences, and conclusion ... to write technically and objectively, avoiding such features of informal writing as personal pronouns, contractions, and colloquialisms ... to understand the use of appropriate connectives and the role of nominalisation in formal academic writing. Students should, where appropriate, include references presented in a recognised, and consistent style (p. 41)

The social issue is a central organising idea of this subject. The syllabus writers hold that this is a legitimate content basis for the preparation for academic study. However, the choice of the social issue can be problematic in an external assessment situation. In an examination that has such high stakes for students, what is needed is a social issue that is equally familiar and relevant to all students in the three different sociolinguistic–sociocultural settings, Australia, Malaysia, and China. In an effort to choose social issues that are pan-cultural, setters of examinations have sometimes played it safe by choosing quasi-scientific topics such as 'climate change' or 'genetically modified foods'. Interestingly, although the teachers in Malaysia did not find the topics culturally inappropriate, when setting their own trial examination papers they tried to imitate the socio-political stance adopted by the Australian examination setters in an effort to give their students the ideal preparation for the examination. They have chosen subject matter that is suitably socially conscious — the eviction of squatters, homelessness, hurricane devastations, and other social disasters! In a sense, the teachers were preparing their students for the socially conscious nature of the subject matter that they were likely to encounter.

Teachers in Malaysia did not find the focus on the development of formal, academic speaking and writing skills or the ability to write extended texts in a formal style with a clear structure culturally inappropriate. Teachers are able to provide students with templates within which students are able to construct essays that follow the required

structure. Teachers are so confident in their success at conveying these skills to students that they are able to discern differences in the approaches to answering this section of the paper from students who study in Malaysia, Australia, and China.

The third student was quite obviously Malaysian
The structure of the extended essay
That is more or less what we teach.
That's the structure that we teach.
It is very structured.
And I think we tend to emphasise that
Because, I don't know, it could be a cultural thing
It is easier for student if they have a structure to follow
We find that when we teach it in a very structured manner
They, yes it is a little rigid, but they tend to follow, they want to follow that structure.

If the social issue does not relate as strongly to one group of students as another, a case could be made for construct-irrelevant variance (Messick, 1989), as some students may not be able to engage with the topic and show their academic literacy skills in the construction of an academic essay. On the other hand, it might be argued that the social issue does not give an advantage to any student, as the focus of assessment is the ability to write a logically structured essay, using only the information provided through the range of texts. Teachers expressed the view, for example, that students with average abilities in the English language can be taught to structure an essay using acceptable templates, to paraphrase selected parts of the source texts, to reference these selections, and obtain a pass for this section of the examination for having control of the form.

Part B: Written Examination

The third area that the teachers commented upon was Part B of the examination. In this section students write a formal letter in response to either a piece of information or a photograph. The student is required to respond, in a formal style, to the issue contained in the information or photograph.

The photograph, in particular, was a catalyst for teachers' discussion. On reflection, it is not surprising that visual representations, photographs in this case, accentuate the cultural-intercultural dialectic. Although it is held that no stimulus (written or visual) is entirely culturally free, it is argued that photographs, perhaps, have a kind of cultural transparency. The thoughts of Sontag on photography (1979, 2003) are informative in this regard. Sontag wrote of an exhibition of photographs taken by the community in New York after the 2001 September 11 bombings:

Whether the photograph is understood as a naïve object or the work of an experienced artificer, its meaning – and the viewer's response – depends on how the picture is identified or misidentified; that is, on words. The organizing idea, the moment, the

place, and the devoted public made this exhibit something of an exception. The crowds of solemn New Yorkers who stood in line for hours on Prince Street every day throughout the fall of 2001 to see *Here is New York* had no need of captions. They had, if anything, a surfeit of understanding of what they were looking at, building by building, street by street – the fires, the detritus, the fear, the exhaustion, the grief. But one day captions will be needed, of course. And the misreadings and the misrememberings, and new ideological uses for the pictures, will make their difference. (Sontag, 2003, pp. 25–6).

The photographs chosen as the basis for an assessment in the ESL examination are not consciously political. However, no photograph is culturally free, devoid of a cultural reality.

Teachers in Malaysia felt that the photograph often presents dilemmas for the student who is not sure how to situate himself or herself within the cultural context captured in the photograph. If, for example, the student believes that the photograph was not taken in his or her own country, does he or she attempt to place himself or herself within the cultural context of the photograph? A photograph that is not within the realms of the student's experiences may cause the student to feel that he or she has not grasped the content or to misunderstand the event that is being portrayed in the photograph. A teenage boy who has fallen off his bicycle and is helped by a policeman was the content of a photograph in the 2007 examination. Teachers in Malaysia placed this photograph within an Australian cultural context. A teacher's anxiety is conveyed in the following:

Sometimes
I think my students
They have a problem of ...
You mentioned about the role that they are supposed to take
They are writing the letter
So when they look at the picture and they know that that the picture is about something
that is happening in
In Australia and you get the people in the picture
The background of the picture
...
My students
I think, I myself, I put myself in my student's shoes
I would be think like
Am I supposed to be
I mean, an Australian, you know?
What, what the role?
...
Should I reflect that I am part of the community?
...
Because I have to answer the question, the picture
I can't assume that it is happening in Malaysia.

It is useful to consider the advice that teachers give students about the way that they should position themselves as writers in the examination. Students are given advice from one teacher, for example, when writing a formal letter of complaint, not to take a Malaysian approach, but rather to take an Australian approach, to 'apply English culture' to the language of complaint:

[The students in Malaysia] are very apologetic
Yah, and very thankful
"Thank you in advance"
"I'm sorry I have to tell you this"

In Malaysia
The protocol is that you must thank them for giving of their time
Taking their time
Because their time is so precious

"Thank you for taking the time to read my letter"
"I would be so grateful if you would read"
"Please consider"
"Your humble", and
"Thank you again"

My advice is
Go straight to the point
Don't say thank you
Apply English culture.

This advice given to the student by this teacher may be explained by the fact that the examination scripts of students who are studying in Malaysia and China are marked in Australia by markers in Australia.

The teachers in Malaysia also explained that to write a formal letter of complaint is not within the acceptable, cultural practices of their students:

They find it difficult to write to an authority
And we are asking them to write to the editor, the municipal council, the mayor
They don't do these things, you know!
They say, 'why?', you know

If the student ignores the content of the photograph or misinterprets the content of the photograph, or sees something within the photograph that other students (or markers) do not see, it could be argued that there is construct-irrelevant variance (Messick, 1989), as what is being assessed is the student's ability to respond in a formal style to the content of the photograph. How do we take into account the situation where a marker

of the formal letter believes that the register is too apologetic, that is, he or she has not understood or is not willing to value this style of formal letter of complaint?

A Question of Validity

The teachers' comments highlight that what is at the core of this discussion is a question of validity. What inferences can we make of the assessments we put in place about the construct of interest, and with what confidence? And how does the cultural–intercultural interplay with the construct of interest?

William invites us to look at our questions through a discussion of the concepts of 'construct-irrelevant variance' and 'construct under-representation', coined by Messick (1989). William (2008a) talks about balancing dilemmas:

Put simply, *construct-irrelevant variance* occurs where the assessment assesses something it shouldn't so that the assessment is in some sense 'too big'. On the other hand, it is just as serious a threat to validity (in other words to the inferences that we can make) if the assessment fails to assess something it should, and is therefore 'too small'. The technical term for this is *construct under-representation* because the assessment outcomes under-represent the construct of interest. (p. 269)

For William, such a discussion would focus our attention, not on the technical aspects of the assessments themselves, but rather on the construct of interest:

The central theme of all the tensions and dilemmas ... is that the debate is not about the technical quality of the assessment, but about the construct to be assessed. In short, *these dilemmas are not about assessment at all*. Rather they are debates about what should be assessed. Many of the debates are therefore conducted at cross-purposes, since the argument is conducted as if it were about assessment, but in fact is about the construct of interest. Such debates are impossible to resolve, because the arguments fly past each other, with neither side accepting the premises of the other. (emphasis in the original, William, 2008a, p. 271)

This is a very important point. It refocuses our attention on the design of the construct of interest. It allows us to place our attention on the concept of the English that is taught in the first place. It allows us to ask whether the cultural–intercultural has a role in the concept of the English that is promoted.

William (2008a) underlines Messick's ideas that in educational assessments the social context in assessment should not and cannot be ignored. The following table interprets the place of the study of ESL within Messick's unitary validity framework. The presence of the cultural–intercultural dimension can be read as interwoven throughout the four cells of the unitary validity framework. Our concept of what it is that we are measuring and the things we prioritise in measurement (cell 1: construct validity, result interpretation), will reflect our values which will be social and cultural in origin (cell 2:

value implications), and the tests will have real effects for students (cell 3: construct validity + result use), in the education and social contexts in which they are used (cell 4: social consequences), and we as curriculum and assessment designers have responsibilities.

<p>Construct Validity (Result interpretation)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic English skills • International English skills • Critical literacy skills • Group/Tutorial discussion skills • Investigative skills • Social issues as a base • 'Examinable English' 	<p>Construct Validity + Result Use</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University entrance • Entry into countries: Study Visa
<p>Value Implications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accuracy, objectivity, technical language • Critical perspective • Reflection • Openness of communication 	<p>Social Consequences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language as gatekeeper • Dominance of International English • English or the varieties of English?

Applied to facets of validity argument after Messick, S. (1989)

Part 4: Concluding Comments

This paper has focused on some of the challenges that international assessments are presenting to assessment agencies.

International assessments have placed the spotlight on some first principle questions: How is the construct of interest represented, and how is the cultural–intercultural dimension accommodated within this representation? The international assessment of English for students whom English is an additional language, by the very fact that it is a study of language, reveals further layers of complex questions. To what extent does the expression and representation of the construct of interest – the ability in academic English – apply equally well in a borderless world, and to what extent are the varieties of English that students bring to their school study valued and accommodated?

The approach taken in this paper is to show, through a case study, the sociolinguistic–sociocultural diversity that exists as assessments are applied across borders, and the importance of taking these cultural–intercultural realities into account when designing assessments. What has become clear is the centrality of the construct of interest, and the need to interrogate all facets of its make up, its underlying assumptions about what knowledge and skills are valued, and its purposes. Our questions about the interplay of the cultural–intercultural can be sheeted home to the concept of the construct of interest.

We have discussed some of the key platforms of the construct of interest for ESL that is offered to students within the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) conducted by the SACE Board of South Australia. We have found a multifaceted construct, some which deal with the conceptualisation of the nature of the English language itself that is promoted (for example, the development of formal, academic speaking and writing skills, the variety(ies) of English that are focussed on in assessment); others that deal with the conceptualisation about learning and the learner more generally (e.g. a focus on analytical and critical literacy skills, the use of the community as a source of information, the development of research skills, the development of independent learners); and others again, that are focussed on the choice of subject matter (e.g. the social issue as a base for learning).

It is argued that the cultural–intercultural is necessarily interwoven across all of these facets of the construct of interest, and that assessment designers should pay closer attention to this aspect of their conceptualisations. The temptation would be to pay attention only to the first of these facets, that which pertains to the conceptualisation of the English language itself – a kind of ‘international, borderless English’ – and to consider how the cultural–intercultural interplays with this. Although this is very important, it is not the only facet for consideration.

References

Chalhoub-Deville, M. & Deville, C. (2006) 'Old, borrowed, and new thoughts in second language testing', in Brennan, R. L. (ed.). *Educational Measurement*, 4th edn., American Council on Education/Praeger, Westport, CT, pp. 517–30.

Messick (1989) 'Validity', in *Educational Measurement*, 3rd edn, ed. R. L. Linn, Oryx Press, Phoenix.

Nardi, E. (2008) 'Cultural biases: a non-Anglophone perspective', in *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, Vol. 15, No. 3, November, pp. 259–67.

Ng, K. N. (2007) A Sociolinguistic Study of Students Undertaking the South Australian Matriculation Program at Taylor's University College, Paper prepared for the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, unpublished.

SACE Board of SA (2009) *Stage 1 and Stage 2 English as a Second Language Curriculum Statements*, www.saceboard.sa.edu.au.

Scarino, A., Papademetre, L., & Mercurio, A. (2008) 'English as a Second Language: Understanding the Intercultural', paper presented to the Intercultural Language Conference, Kuala Lumpur, July, Malaysia.

Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) (2003), paper presented to the SSABSA Board, 'English as a Second Language SACE Student Survey Report', April.

Sontag, S. (1979) *On Photography*, Penguin Books.

Sontag, S. (2003) *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin Books.

Teese, R. (2000) *Academic Success and Social Power*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Tyack, D. & Cuban, L. (1995) *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

William, D. (2008a) 'Balancing dilemmas: traditional theories and new applications' in A. Havnes & L. McDowell (eds) (2008). *Balancing Dilemmas in Assessment and Learning in Contemporary Education*, Routledge, London.

William, D. (2008b) 'International comparisons and sensitivity to instruction', in *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, Vol. 15, No. 3, November 2008, pp. 253–8.