



European Perspectives on Language Testing

*J. Ignacio Bermejo Larrea interviews Europe's foremost expert on language testing, and the editor of the upcoming book, *The Politics of Language Education*, Professor Charles Alderson*

Illustration of Prof. Charles Alderson by Doug Bale

Language Magazine: Why did you get involved in language testing?

Prof. Alderson: Because when I first started teaching English in Germany in 1969, I arrived in Dusseldorf University and I was told to design a placement test before I started teaching. I arrived, maybe in August, students were going to come in September, I had to put them in four different groups and I had to design a placement test.

LM: So you had to start testing before you started teaching?

Prof. Alderson: Yes, before I'd even seen a student. So, I tried to see what books there were on testing, there was a book in German only and one book in English and that was the book by Robert Lado, so I learnt about testing from Robert Lado.

LM: And then you taught yourself.

Prof. Alderson: Yeah, absolutely, made lots and lots of mistakes. My first test was terrible, and my second test was terrible...

LM: How have language testing research and practice changed in the last 25 years?

Prof. Alderson: Test practice, test development, especially high-stakes proficiency tests, has become much more scientific, much more professional, certainly in this country. In America, testing practices were more professional already because of the greater emphasis on statistics. In Britain there was always an emphasis upon being related to teaching, but they didn't look at reliability at all and they didn't do validation, so it was testing by intuition, a lot of faith in the quality of the test rather than empirical validation, that's changed a lot. In Europe, we've seen similar changes to the ones that happened in Britain very recently over the last 15 years, as a result of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR or "Framework"), people have become more interested in testing and with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the change in the education systems in Central Europe meant radical changes to assessment.

LM: In what way?

Prof. Alderson: Centralized testing instead of school-based testing, standardizing the way in which items were produced, development of projects that were advised by Western universities like Lancaster and testing agencies like CITO in the Netherlands. And I've seen