Testing at CAL^{*:} An interview with Dr Meg Malone

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Margaret E. Malone (Ph.D., Georgetown University) is Associate Vice President for World Languages and International Programs at the Center for Applied Linguistics. She has more than two decades of experience in language test development, materials development, delivery of professional development and teacher training through both online and face-to-face methods, data collection and survey research, and program evaluation.

DD: Dr. Malone, thank you for meeting me today. To begin, could you please introduce CAL?

MM: CAL is a small not-for-profit located in Washington D.C. We were established in 1959 by Charles Ferguson and the Ford Foundation, and our mission is to improve communication through better understanding of language and culture.

DD: What is your role at CAL?

MM: I work on a variety of testing projects. Right now I'm the associate vice-president for world languages and international programs.

DD: What are typical CAL activities, apart from testing?

MM: We conduct a lot of work with professional development for K-12 English Language teachers, and we also have a small division working with refugee and immigrant services. Back in the 80s we worked with refugees from Vietnam and we had an office in the Philippines at the time.

DD: Could you tell me about a recent project?

MM: One of my favorite recent projects resulted in a publication in *Language Testing*. It was a project to look at language assessment literacy among foreign (or world) language teachers in the United States. Conducting research with foreign language teachers in the US is more difficult than with language learners, simply because you can't get the number you need to have a publishable study.

At CAL we have a directory of foreign language tests, which we started updating again on line in 2005. We conducted focus groups with teachers and administrators to make the directory more useful. We put the search terms in so that individuals could actually find what they were looking for. We changed the name of it because we found that when we called it a *database* users thought they would go in and see a copy of the test. Of course test developers aren't going to leave copies of their test like that because it's a test security breach. The aim of the directory is to describe the test: what it does who it is for, how much it costs, where to get it and so on.

DD: How does the database relate to assessment literacy?

MM: In conducting the focus groups we found that there's a need to educate teachers and administrators about how to select tests. So we developed a tutorial to accompany it. We conducted research with teachers and administrators on what was needed for the tutorial. We also conducted research with the language testers and we found quite a bit of difference between what language testers thought was important and what teachers thought was important.

DD: Can you give a specific example?

MM: There was one question where we were asking about how a page looked. One language testing reviewer explained how this page was not relevant to the current view of a validity argument. So it seems that every question was interpreted as "What does this have to do with the technical aspects of testing?" On the other hand, teachers said "Keep it as short as possible"; they want explanations to be short and to the point.

DD: What happened after this survey?

MM: It was a US federally funded grant, like most of my work, and we made some recommendations to change the tutorial to make it teacher-friendly, but also to make it reflect current research in language testing. We aimed to give teachers accurate and current information, but not so much that you lose them.

DD: Do you know how many teachers are using this tutorial?

MM: There are several thousand "page-hits" a year. So there are several thousand who use the tutorial every year, and even more who use the directory of language tests. Part of the reasons behind the tutorial was to have information available so that teachers and administrators looking for a test could work through and decide what they needed on their own.

I've had calls from someone who says "Can I use this test?" and half way through the conversation I realize that the caller is talking about a test for high school, but they are teaching kindergarteners. So there's a real mismatch. We wanted to make something available all the time that could help people make good decisions about tests to use.

DD: How do people use the system?

MM: The directory and the tutorial go hand in hand. The idea behind the tutorial is that you conduct a needs assessment: What's your population? What language are you looking for? What are you trying to test? Then when you search for a test, you look at the test critically: Maybe this isn't the right one for me? In some languages there are so few tests available that users jump to conclusions. For example if you click on Arabic they may assume that every test is right for them. So, users may mistakenly choose a high school test when they need an Arabic for kindergarteners test.

DD: What's the relation of your tutorial to in-service teacher training?

MM: It's complementary. For example I've been teaching recently at the University of Maryland. I usually have my students conduct a search and write an essay on what they found, whether they think it's appropriate for the population, what's missing and what they think should be available.

DD: Does the tutorial work as a distance learning course in testing literacy?

MM: We have workshops with serving teachers at CAL. We actually tested our directory and tutorial with the course participants, to find out what teachers were looking for. So I think the tutorial is a nice part of this kind of event, but it wouldn't say it would be the whole thing.

DD: Will this site continue in the future?

MM: We hope so. We're applying for more funding to keep it going.

DD: Let's talk about your experience as a Peace Corps language training administrator. The need for quick language training must present special challenges.

MM: All Peace Corps volunteers, both currently and at the time I was there, from 1996 to 2000, have pre-service training: language training, technical training, health and safety training, and cross-cultural training.

DD: How about your role as a linguist?

MM: At the end of training, volunteers take an Oral Proficiency Interview to make sure that they have enough language to survive. For 30 years we've training locals to test the volunteers. My job was to train those testers, and to keep track of the scores that volunteers received. Those volunteers were tested at the end of pre-service training, sometimes after one year of service, and then at the end of service. We want to see if they are maintaining their scores, or going up or down. So I provided training courses for OP testers. I worked with about 60 countries over the four years I was there- about 150 languages.

DD: So, mostly languages you didn't speak yourself?

MM: It's actually very freeing to work with so many languages- you let go.

DD: What was your conclusion about immersion language training. Was it successful?

MM: The motivation for Peace Corps volunteers is very high. The classes are very small- three to five per class. There's a lot of differentiation of instruction, a lot of checking. The tests are aligned very closely with the curriculum. Many of the teachers were also testers, so they understood the goal that volunteers were working toward. They could use that to inform instructional decisions, and move volunteers around from group to group. I worked with one set of sites that achieved high proficiency after 12 weeks of training in a language they had never learned. So I worked with them for a couple of years, and developed a standard for what was a reasonable expectation after twelve weeks. This had an effect on the language training. That was very satisfying.

DD: So these were very special niche tests: ESP speaking only.

MM: We also used an Oral Proficiency Interviews, and the ACTFL guidelines that accompany them. There were small number of each tests, but many sessions. We conducted about 5,000 Language Proficiency Interviews per year.

DD: So you have a fascinating past; how about future projects?

MM: One project that's very important now is Language Resource Centers. There are 15 Centers that are designed to improve teaching and learning of foreign languages. Unfortunately in 2011 we were cut by 50 percent by the US Department of Education, so we're really working to try to maintain services in very tough fiscal times.

DD: What do the centers do specifically?

MM: The one I work on, called the National Capital Resource Center, is focused on language teacher education. For example we have an on-line course in the basics of language assessment literacy. It's not for credit. It's a five module course that teaches the basics of assessment. We also run an annual conference, the East Coast Association of Language Testers, which I and my college Paul Lowinky founded in 2002. In addition we continue to update the database of language tests, and continue to conduct research with teachers on what they need in a language assessment resource. We also work in teacher

training, consulting the professors who train the teachers, to find out what resources they need to help their students.

DD: Could you give me your thoughts on what the language testing community needs to work on in the next five years?

MM: I think we need to continue to encourage language assessment literacy. It's not just about understanding what assessment is, but about understanding what reasonable expectations are for students learning languages. Many administrators and parents have unrealistic expectations, either too high or too low, about what you can attain in a short period of time, and what's needed to get to that level.

One more thing that I'd like to see is a national study of foreign language outcomes. The last one was as long ago as 1965. So we don't know what our language majors have learned, or what K-12 students achieve in world languages. We need a study of what is going on nationally.

DD: What about types of test?

MM: There's definitely more computer-based testing with, for example, Parkin and Smarter Balanced; they are two organizations that are developing national tests in the core areas- reading and math. Then there's *Access,* which is a test used in 30 plus states to show that students are achieving the *no child left behind* goals. CAL is the test developer for that test, and we're offering a computer- based version of it. But it's really important that we also test speaking. We've been using the computer to elicit the language, but it has to be rated by humans.

DD: That must make it an expensive project.

MM: True but it's more economical than sending out examiners to do oral interview tests. Also, it's more reliable, because you're getting responses to the same tasks.

DD: Well, I hope that as a result of your and CAL's efforts in assessment literacy, Language Resource Centers, outcome tests and computer based tests, foreign language teaching improves across the US. Thank you Dr Malone.

Bibliography

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Editors note: At time of publication we are still waiting to hear final confirmation from Dr Malone that this version of the interview contains no factual errors, so the online version may be updated to correct any errors. Any corrections will be footnoted to avoid confustion.