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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of a plenary panel entitled "Measuring Outcomes and Setting Standards in Languages Education." "Outcomes" implies what learners take away from their course, while the term "standards" seems commonly to have at least two senses: first it may imply some yardstick or framework against which learner performance, the content of tests and examinations, or the goals of the courses may be measured; second, it implies a "framework of reference." This brief introduction to the panel discussion introduces some of the broad issues touching on such topics as quality and standards in language education, setting goals and objectives, course-based versus general proficiency outcomes, assessing cultural goals and cross cultural attitudes, teacher quality and supply, relevance of vocational language competencies, and exit assessment and reporting. This paper seeks to raise some of the general issues that may be elaborated upon by other panelists and in subsequent discussion. (Contains 10 references.) (KFT)

[Journal Version]

Measuring Outcomes and Setting Standards: A Brief Overview

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Invited paper to the plenary panel *Measuring Outcomes and Setting Standards in Languages Education*, at the Joint National Conference, 1999, of the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association, *Global Citizenship Languages and Literacies*, Adelaide Convention Centre, Adelaide, South Australia, 6 to 9 July, 1999.

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Abstract

This brief introduction to the panel discussion will introduce some of the broad issues touching on such topics as quality and standards in language education, setting goals and objectives, course-based vs. general proficiency outcomes, assessing cultural goals and cross-cultural attitudes, teacher quality and supply, relevance of vocational language competencies, and exit assessment and reporting. This paper will do no more than raise some of the general issues that may be elaborated upon by other panellists and in the subsequent discussion.

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I INTRODUCTION

On the final day of the Joint National Conference, held in Adelaide in July 1999, a plenary panel was devoted to the topic *Measuring Outcomes and Setting Standards in Languages Education*. The session took the form of four short presentations by (in order of presentation) David Ingram, Angela Scarino, Lyle Bachman, and Penny McKay. The presentations were followed by discussions in which the panel responded to questions and comments from the audience. The session seemed to be well received and a considerable number of delegates expressed a wish for the papers to be re-produced in *Babel*. The papers are presented here in the sequence in which they occurred at the conference.

II THE PANELLISTS

The first paper was presented by the present writer. David Ingram is Professor of Applied Linguistics and Director of the Centre for Applied Linguistics and Languages in Griffith University in Brisbane. He was President of AFMLTA for fourteen years from 1982 to 1996. In his presentation, he sought to provide a very brief overview of the topic. The second speaker was Angela Scarino, President of AFMLTA since 1996 and a Head of Department in the University of South Australia. Angela probably first became well known across Australia when, throughout the latter half of the 1980s, she was Director of the Australian Language Levels Project. Angela's paper was entitled "The Concept of Standards" and she discussed the nature of "standards", how standards are set, and the roles of teachers in the process. The third panellist was the eminent, Dr Lyle Bachman from the University of California in Los Angeles. Lyle has filled a world-leading role in language testing. He spoke on "Considerations in Measuring Learner Outcomes of Language Learning Programs" and considered such issues as purposes, interpeting measures used, and the relevance of stakeholders, programs and learners. The final panellist was Dr Penny McKay, a Senior Lecturer in the education faculty of the Queensland University of Technology, and, like Angela, had first become well known for her involvement on the Australian Language Levels Project, giving particular attention to the ESL area. Penny spoke on political aspects of standards setting and the intent of governments in introducing so-called standards, making reference to Australia, Britain and the United States. She also referred to the tension between pedagogic and administrative purposes.

III THE NOTION OF STANDARDS

The plenary panel was entitled *Measuring Outcomes and Setting Standards in Languages Education*. "Outcomes" implies what learners take away from their course; while the term "standards" seems commonly to have at least two senses: first, it may imply some yardstick or framework against which learner performance, the content of tests and examinations, or the goals of courses may be measured. It was used in this sense to refer to the level of an examination in the Council of Europe's 1973 publication on a European unit/credit system for adult modern language learning, of which John Trim said:

> *The multidimensional operational classification provides a framework for the analysis of the content and standard of existing and new examinations and tests and their placement in a system of equivalences.*[Trim 1973: 23]

Later Trim refers to "the hypothetical standard of the examination" in respect of such things as grammatical accuracy, spelling and pronunciation, vocabulary, appropriateness, richness of expression, range of comprehension, and fluency. [cf. Trim 1973: 24]

More recently, the *Common European Framework* [Education Committee, Council for Cultural Cooperation, Council of Europe 1996] seems to avoid the use of the term "standards", speaking of a "framework of reference" and "scaling" to describe a systematic, comprehensive and coherent framework within which, amongst other things,

> *Learners, teachers, course designers, examining bodies and educational administrators* [can] *situate and coordinate their efforts* ... [Education Committee, Council for Cultural Cooperation, Council of Europe 1996: 2]

It is a small but important step from this to the second basic sense in which "standards" is commonly used, where it carries some notion of what students ought to achieve at one level or another or for some purpose. So, for instance, the *Common European Framework* (or the scales within it) becomes a "standard" (or standards) when used to specify what learners should achieve at various levels, what skills are required for entry to, for example, particular professions, or the content to be included in courses or examinations at particular levels. The setting of curriculum parameters and the specification of desired achievement levels inherent in some uses of the term "standards" is well caught in Victoria's newly revised "Curriculum and Standards Framework", where the Framework is described in these terms:

> *The Curriculum and Standards Framework (CSF) is the basis upon which Victorian schools plan and deliver curriculum and monitor student achievements. It describes what students* ***should know and be able to do*** *at various stages during the years Prep to Year 10. It provides sufficient detail for schools and the community to be clear about the major elements of curriculum and the* ***expected*** *outcomes.* [Draft document received from the Victorian Board of Studies, dated 15 June, 1999. Mimeograph. (Present writer's emphases)]

Used in such ways, the term "standards" often acquires some administrative, political, and, at times, even moralistic value, largely dependent on the purposes for which the standards are set.

The notion of a standard is quite defensible and serves valuable purposes if it is set with some rational justification or for some valid purpose such as providing a curriculum framework, assisting in the development of syllabuses and work programmes, or in interpreting and measuring student achievement in some valid, appropriate, and meaningful way. So, for example, a proficiency level may become a "standard" that learners must reach when it is specified for university entry or to meet a professional registration requirement. Such a "standard" may be objectively justifiable if, for instance, the proficiency specified is related to the sort of language behaviour that is required in undertaking study in the particular programme of study the intending student is entering or if it relates to the sort of language behaviour routinely undertaken in carrying out the practical duties of a vocation whose performance "standards" a Vocational Registration Board has been established to regulate; many Australian and British universities, for example, set IELTS 6 or 6.5 as the standard to be reached in English before overseas students will be admitted to their courses and increasing numbers of vocational registration boards in New Zealand, Britain and Australia are acting similarly though with the standard usually being set at IELTS 7 or higher.

However, it is difficult to justify the notion of a "standard" if it is arbitrary, not obviously related to or explicable in terms of real language use requirements, or if it is set as, for example, an arbitrary score on some arbitrarily chosen test to serve some administrative or political expediency. Some frameworks of reference exist as specifications of competencies that claim to be a statement of the micro- and macro-tasks that persons have to carry out in some vocation or in some other activity; in this they may provide a quite reasonable statement of observable language behaviour and language requirements to undertake the activity but they can become quite inappropriate if used as "standards" for purposes for which they were not designed or for which the fundamental requirements are quite different. So, for example, a set of vocational competency specifications that may quite accurately identify the skills and tasks required in the workplace need not be related to how language develops and is quite inappropriate for use in setting levels or "standards" in a sequence of language programmes or for reporting on learning outcomes other than in a flat non-developmental sense to state what vocational tasks the learners can carry out.

In the moralistic or political sense, the term "standards" has frequently been abused. Too often, the term becomes quite empty of "denotative meaning", is used largely emotively with, at best, commonly recognised connotative meanings vaguely related to commonly held values, and is used for largely political purposes relating, at best, to some general notion of what people feel students should be achieving. Cynically, politicians seem to like to speak of "standards" so as to show their supposed concern for education and to make electors believe that they are "doing something" about education or "would do something about education if only they were in power" with little notion of what levels students are actually reaching, what levels it is reasonable to expect them to reach, or, least of all, what resources education requires if it is to be changed or its "quality" raised. In other instances where the use of some notion of "standards" is quite appropriate and is in the interest of learners and of other

stakeholders, the level set as the "standard" may be arbitrary and only vaguely related, if at all, to the nature of language or of the language skills required for some purpose. So, for instance, in the case of university entry by overseas students, standards are too often determined by the gut-feeling of university admissions officers or avaricious marketing persons without consulting with or accepting the advice of anyone with knowledge of the tests used or what their results mean: so what may, in fact, be a perfectly reasonable means of identifying language performance requirements and measuring and stating learner skills loses its reasonableness because the "standards" are set for other reasons such as administrative expediency or greed for overseas student fees irrespective of the students' ability to perform academically. Equally reprehensible misuse of standards setting is seen where instruments appropriately used to set defensible "standards" in one area are used inappropriately in other areas because it is administratively convenient to do so. So, for instance, the recent decision by the Australian Immigration Minister to abandon the ACCESS test, which was designed to measure the social or vocational language skills of applicants for migration to Australia, in favour of the IELTS test, which was designed specifically to measure the English language skills required for academic and training purposes in English-speaking institutions seems to have been made for financial and administrative reasons with no regard to the appropriateness of the tests for setting standards in the respective areas. That practice is, however, marginally less reprehensible (since both tests are designed for and used with spearkers of English as a second language) than the practice of some vocational registration boards overseas which, apparently for reasons of administrative expediency, require IELTS (a test designed for second language learners) as a convenient, even if inappropriate, gatekeeper for overseas-trained native English-speaking applicants.

If used simplistically as a framework of reference against which to evaluate language learning or the worth of other educational programmes, so-called "standards", especially if arbitrarily determined, may over-simplify the educational process, ignore the variety of factors that determine actual learning outcomes, and have a restrictive washback effect on learning and teaching. Thus, apart from their educational irrelevance, one of the overwhelming disadvantages of simplistic standards, especially of the political or moralistic kind, is that they become domineering and take the focus away from issues (such as cross-cultural attitudes and cultural understanding) that are educationally valuable but do not lend themselves to precise specification, to easy or reliable measurement, and hence to ready standards setting. As language teachers know, the frequent outcries of low "standards" in the so-called "basics" of reading, writing and calculation are generally unrelated to any specification of what the desirable "standards" might be or of what students are actually achieving or could achieve but they often have a powerful effect on the curriculum, narrowing it, and, not least, reducing support for other activities such as the teaching and learning of foreign languages, the resources available for them, and the funding available for supporting research and development: the deplorable situation that has occurred in language education in Australia since 1996 well illustrates the dangers of the emotive and political use of so-called "standards".

In brief, the notion of "standards" has both values and inherent dangers: "standards" can be of value when they relate to some meaningful aspect of language or to something inherent in the nature of language learning and its systematic development. In this, they may provide useful frameworks within which needs may be specified for

the purposes of language and language education policy development, and in which curriculum development, learner assessment and programme evaluation may take place. However, they are inappropriate and generally positively harmful if they have little relationship to the nature of language, language behaviour and language learning or if they are set and imposed without being properly matched against desirable purposes.

IV OUTCOMES AND THEIR MEASUREMENT

"Outcomes" refer to what learners take away from the course: they may match the formally stated goals and objectives but generally differ to a greater or lesser degree from them and invariably include things such as attitudes to language teachers that may not be included in goals but which may loom large in determining, for example, whether students continue with language study or not. Outcomes may be expressed in terms of some specified framework of reference such as, for language skills, a proficiency scale or language competencies, i.e., in terms of some set of "standards", but often they are not . Outcomes from a language course are diverse and are not just related to language performance or knowledge of the elements of the language, they are measured in different ways, some lend themselves to being measured but some don't, some arguably should be measured as part of the assessment of student performance but others, even though they might be important as goals, do not lend themselves to formal assessment and are better not included in a formal assessment programme.

In the present writer's views, the three central goals and, hence, the three central outcomes of any language programme (though by no means the only outcomes) are

- the attainment of language proficiency,
- the attainment of cultural knowledge and understanding, and
- the attainment of more favourable cross-cultural attitudes.

Comprehensive frameworks of reference such as the *Common European Framework* attempt to provide very comprehensive, systematic and detailed specifications for such goals and provide sets of criteria against which, potentially, outcomes can be measured. Others, such as the *National Standards for Modern Foreign Languages* of the Languages Lead Body in Britain or the so-called *National Reporting System* in Australia focus on particular aspects of language use and language learning, viz., vocational competencies, essentially the language tasks, knowledge, and attitudes required for the workplace.

In this very brief overview, outcomes related to the three central goals can be seen to fall into four categories:

IV.1 Course-related Outcomes and Measurement: In any course, teachers, learners and funding providers are likely to be interested in the extent to which course content has been assimilated and specified skills and attitudes developed. These may include knowledge of the particular language elements included in the course (the vocabulary, grammar, functions, and so on), ability to perform specified language tasks, or familiarity with the bits of cultural knowledge encountered. The form that

measurement takes will differ according to the nature of those elements but will generally be closely related to the sorts of teaching and learning activities that have gone on through the course. In addition, however, overall course assessment may, legitimately, be concerned with how well the students have performed as students e.g., how much progress they have made, whether they have been attentive and cooperative, whether they have done their homework and got their assignments in on time and with good presentation, and so on.

For some purposes, including, for instance, selection of students for subsequent study, course-related assessment including such things as continuous assessment based on assignments, projects, and in-class performance may be legitimate ways to measure an outcome such as "student performance" but it is important to realise what is being measured here and not to confuse it with, for instance, the students' exit language proficiency, as is done when school grades based on continuous assessment are assumed to indicate students' level of exit language skills. Thus, most end-of-Year 12 and tertiary entry results (under various names such as HSC, OPs, Matriculation, A-Level, and so on) have at least as much to do with measuring and stating performance as a student as they have with stating students' language skills.

In brief, course-based outcomes and measurement are legitimate for certain purposes but one needs to be clear about their nature and purpose and interpret and use the measurement outcomes appropriately.

IV.2 Language Skills: Most language teachers believe that the outcomes they most seek are improved language skills. Traditionally these have been assessed in terms of formal knowledge of elements of the language and many tests, including major international tests, still have a strong focus on knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and other elements of the language. Since the emergence of communicative language teaching, however, the focus has been on learners' ability to carry out communicative language tasks or the more abstract concept of language proficiency. Language proficiency is commonly expressed in terms of language proficiency scales such as the ISLPR [Ingram and Wylie 1979/1995] or the IELTS Bandscales, which attempt to describe the language behaviour observable as learners develop their language from zero proficiency to what some scales term "native-like proficiency". Language proficiency may be described in general terms applicable to a user's performance in a wide variety of situations, i.e. "general proficiency", or it may be described in more specific contexts or for more specific purposes such as academic or specified vocational purposes. So, for instance, the ISLPR exists as scales of general proficiency in a variety of languages but also there are versions in English for Academic Purposes, English for Engineering, a generic version for LOTE teachers, and a version for teachers of Indonesian. One common, even if not inevitable, characteristic of proficiency scales is their developmental nature, i.e., they don't just describe language behaviour but also attempt to show how language develops from one level to another, some from zero proficiency to native-like. This feature enables proficiency scales to be used to specify goals and objectives but also to provide an overall framework within which curricula and a series of syllabuses may be developed.

Language skills have also been described in terms of the micro- and macro-tasks or "competencies" that learners can carry out or that they need for various purposes,

most commonly vocational purposes. So, for instance, the *National Standards for Modern Foreign Languages* developed by the Languages Lead Body in Britain or the *National Reporting System* developed by Sharon Coates and her colleagues in Australia purport to describe the competencies required to use language in the workplace. Clearly such competency specifications are of value in identifying the tasks that language users need for vocational purposes, they can be used to assess whether learners have the skills required for employment in particular activities, they can be used to assist industry to identify and state what skills are required to carry out the tasks for which they wish to recruit people, and they can have useful input to the development of curricula and syllabuses intended to develop vocationally useful language skills. However, vocational competency specifications focus on workplace tasks, they don't need to be developmental in their organisation, nor do they need to take account of the different learning requirements of students in first or second language learning programmes, and hence they are not so appropriate as an overall curriculum framework within which a developmental sequence of language programmes can be developed or learner outcomes developmentally specified.

IV.3 Cultural Knowledge and Understanding: Like language skills, the development of cultural knowledge and understanding has traditionally been seen as one of the essential goals of language teaching. Indeed, since the culture is the meaning system that underlies the language, it is impossible to conceive of meaningful language use and communication-focussed language learning without the development of cultural knowledge and understanding. For these reasons, there has been a strong tendency in recent years, at least in Queensland, for culture not to be taught or assessed separately from language skills. This was, initially, a defensible reaction against the simplistic form of culture teaching that often occurred decades ago when teachers dictated lists of monuments and historical or geographical facts, students memorised them, and "outcomes measurement" took the form of short factual questionnaires. However, a recent survey conducted by the present writer in Brisbane schools [Ingram 1999, 1999a, 1999b] suggests that an equally undesirable consequence of this has been a neglect of culture teaching by many teachers. It is difficult to recommend an easy compromise but, rather than re-introduce to end-of-course assessment questionnaires about culture facts, it is probably better for teachers to ensure that there are many activities throughout a course that lead to development of cultural knowledge and understanding and for the acquisition of that knowledge and understanding to continue to be seen as integral to language performance and to be measured or assessed in conjunction with language performance. In addition, it may be possible to develop scales that describe levels of cultural knowledge and understanding just as there are scales that describe levels of language proficiency but, as yet, there seem not to be any very adequate scales of this sort and some major scales that initially included culture sub-scales have dropped them. Even so comprehensive an instrument as the *Common European Framework* implies cultural competence rather than elaborates on it and, in the one page that discusses cultural competence in a volume of over 200 pages, acknowledges that

> *All aspects of socio-cultural competence are .. very difficult to scale ...*
> [Education Committee, Council for Cultural Cooperation, Council of Europe 1996: 133]

Again, as noted earlier, the fact that it is difficult to measure cultural knowledge and understanding does not invalidate it as a desirable outcome nor does it reduce the importance of including the development of cultural knowledge and understanding in syllabuses, work programmes and teaching activities.

IV.4 Attitudes: The development of more favourable cross-cultural attitudes is a central goal of language teaching and is one of the outcomes that most language teachers hope that learners gain from a course [cf. Ingram 1978, 1999, 1999a, 1999b]. In addition, language teaching and learning, like all other activities in education and beyond, inevitably entail the development of other attitudes: attitudes to the subject, attitudes to language learning, attitudes to the teacher, attitudes to self-directed or teacher dominated learning, attitudes to the school, and so on. By no means all of these are likely to be specified in any statement of goals and objectives for a language course but, specified or not, most of them are inevitably inherent in the educational process and are part of the outcomes from any course. However, the formal measurement of any of these, including even the attainment of more positive cross-cultural attitudes, is difficult, time-consuming and notoriously unreliable. The basic cause of the unreliability, quite apart from the difficulty of devising suitable, valid and reliable measurement instruments, is that learners are likely to respond to questions about attitudes in the way that they expect the teacher or examiner would want them to respond and, indeed, in outcomes measurement for some significant purpose, such as for selection to the next stage of education, they would be foolish to do otherwise.

It may be possible for teachers to observe learners' attitudes throughout a course, to gain an impression of them, and to assess them subjectively over time using continuous assessment. It is also possible for researchers to develop attitude questionnaires that have reasonable levels of validity and reliability [Ingram 1999, 1999a, 1999b] even though the problem of having learners respond as they think the test writer wants them to respond is probably insuperable. However, such tests tend to be long, complex, and difficult to construct and, all in all, it would seem to be neither practical nor appropriate for formal measurement of attitudes, even of cross-cultural attitudes, to be included in formal end-of-course or outcomes measurement but this does not reduce the importance of deliberately including the development of more positive cross-cultural attitudes in the goals and objectives of language courses and of ensuring that the methodology adopted is such as to make the development of more positive attitudes (both cross-cultural and other attitudes) more likely to be achieved.

V CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to provide only a very brief and cursory overview of what is a highly complex and often quite contentious issue, the measurement of outcomes and the identification and setting of standards in language programmes. The other panellists, whose presentations follow, selected a range of different aspects of the issue to discuss.

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