In Conversation

Asian Association for Language Assessment
Student Committee
Inaugural Issue (Spring/Summer 2016)

Contents

- Editors' Note P1
- From a Small Town Boy to a Towering Figure in Language Assessment: An Interview with Professor Antony John Kunnan P1
- Special Feature: Messages from AALA Executive Board Members P6

Editors' Note

The Asian Association for Language Assessment (AALA) Student Committee is delighted to launch the *In Conversation* series, a biannual initiative that aims to better serve and engage our student members and graduate students of the field at large. Through interviewing prominent scholars, we hope to inspire fellow graduate students in their academic endeavors and heighten their understanding on the latest developments in language assessment.

In this inaugural issue, we are excited to present an exclusive interview with Professor Antony John Kunnan, Founding President of AALA. In this interview, Professor Kunnan spoke about his earlier education in Bangalore, his PhD journey at UCLA, his development of the concepts of fairness and justice in language assessment, and his experiences with the founding of *Language Assessment Quarterly* as well as the AALA. He also shared with us his latest academic work and gave our fellow students his precious advice on their academic pursuits.

Additionally, four of our AALA founding members (i.e., Prof. David Qian, Prof. Jessica Wu, Prof. Jin Yan, and Prof. Yasuyo Sawaki) have each written a special message dedicated to our student members to share their professional experiences.

We hope that you would enjoy this inaugural issue. Looking forward to having many more meaningful conversations with you in the days to come!

Thank you!

Best regards,

Rongchan Lin & Xiaohua Liu

From a Small Town Boy to a Towering Figure in Language Assessment:

An Interview with Professor Antony John Kunnan

Interviewed by Rongchan Lin

Professional Background:

You are a prominent and well-respected scholar in the field, and have published widely. I believe many of our readers are curious about your background. For a start, could you share with us how you entered the field of second language (L2) assessment?

Thinking back to my high school days at St. Germain High School in Bangalore, I was quite good in English - thanks to my excellent high school teachers Bernard Mulley and Bruce Suares - but it was during my time at St. Joseph's College in Bangalore that I became interested in English writing by reading fiction and non-fiction, including Shakespeare, Eliot, Dickens, Hardy and the Spectator papers! Later, at Bangalore University I read American writers, specifically, Miller, O'Neill, Fitzgerald, and watched American film classics like *Citizen Kane, Casablanca, Rio Bravo, On the water front, High noon, the Great Gatsby*, *They shoot horses, don't they*, Hitchcock films, and some European films by Fellini, Bergman, Lean, Merchant-Ivory and Indian films by Ray and Sen. All this led to my pursuing an M.A. degree in English and American literature. But, the more I got into it, I found that I did not connect with it as much as I wanted to because I could not combine literature and film. This is possible now but in the late 1970s, it was less obvious.

I then started to take courses in linguistics (mainly phonetics, pedagogic grammar) and applied linguistics (language teaching methods, curriculum design) at the Central Institute of English in Hyderabad. This was new knowledge to me, things that I did not know much about as I was not exposed to the study of language in high school or college like we do with history, geography, and economics, etc. I liked linguistics but I gradually moved to applied linguistics and when I took courses in language assessment with Professor Jacob Tharu, I felt that that was what I wanted to focus on. I then wrote a thesis for my M.Litt. degree in the area of language assessment. So, in summary, my journey wasn't straight-forward but I'm happy that even though it took twists and turns and some time for me to figure out what I wanted to do, I found my field of interest.

"My journey wasn't straight-forward but I'm happy that even though it took twists and turns and some time for me to figure out what I wanted to do, I found my field of interest."

In your opinion, what is the defining moment in your career?

It has to be the Ph.D. program in applied linguistics at UCLA which I entered in 1987. There were outstanding course offerings in different areas – in applied linguistics, we could choose from courses in language teaching, assessment, language policy, pedagogic grammar, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, and neurobiology; in linguistics, there was the usual fare of phonetics and phonology, syntax, semantics, computational linguistics; and in education and psychology, there were courses in psychometrics, statistics, anthropology, sociology you could choose from. Of course, this meant that you could take courses with well-known professors, some of whom were charting new ways of thinking about the field that were central to language learning and assessment. I took courses and seminars from Professors Lyle Bachman, Bengt Muthén, Peter Bentler, Andrew Comrey, and John Schumann, among others. I was also among 25 or so doctoral students who were pursuing different interests but this gave us an exciting environment to hear and learn from each other's interests and pursuits.

Adding to these was my good fortune that Lyle Bachman moved to UCLA from Illinois in 1989 and I was his first Ph.D. student. He was then directing a large project, later known as the TOEFL-Cambridge comparability project, funded by Cambridge English Language Assessment. I was lucky to be hired to be a research assistant for this project for two years analyzing the data that was already collected using exploratory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. I used both these methods in my research and dissertation with outstanding advice from Bachman, Muthén (who later developed *Mplus*) and Bentler (who had developed *EQS*). I submitted my dissertation in 1991 and then went to the University of Michigan as a post-doctoral fellow. My dissertation received the Outstanding Dissertation Research award in language testing from Educational Testing Service, Princeton, in 1994, and it was later published by Cambridge University Press (Kunnan, 1995). So, overall, UCLA was a fantastic experience that changed my career possibilities. It gave me a start that can only be imagined in a dream for someone from a small town like Bangalore.

"UCLA was a fantastic experience that changed my career possibilities. It gave me a start that can only be imagined in a dream for someone from a small town like Bangalore."

How has your research interest evolved over the years?

I started with classroom assessment in my M.Litt. degree days but when I was at UCLA, I started thinking of test bias and test taker characteristics and whether test taker characteristics could have some influence on test performance. My dissertation research focused on test taker characteristics (TTCs) such as first language background, formal and informal instruction, foreign country travel and relating these characteristics to test performances (TPs) on two batteries of tests of English (retired forms of the TOEFL and SPEAK, First Certificate in English from Cambridge, and a created Test of Written English). The dataset of 1444 participants was from eight cities around the world. This research was one of the extensions of the TOEFL-Cambridge comparability study. As this was a large dataset, I used factor analysis and structural modeling to investigation the relationships between TTCs and TPs. This training has given me the confidence to tackle large-scale data research.

In 1996, I presented a paper at LTRC in Finland calling for a link between validation and fairness because I examined 100 research studies on validation and mapped them onto Messick's validation framework and found that very few research studies examined the fairness of assessments. From then on, I have been interested in the concept of how fairness can become an important focus in research on language assessments. Of course, the concept is difficult to define in terms of research but if you survey test takers, they tell us they would want to take only fair assessments. So, it's very critical that assessments are fair.

Many of your works focused on fairness and justice in language assessment. Could you summarize for us how research in this area has matured over the years? Going forward, what more do you think can be done in this area?

I initially argued that assessments ought to be fair; in a way, I was suggesting that there should be no test or item bias. But, I soon realized that test bias looked through the narrow prism of differential item functioning research was only examining one part of fairness. Therefore, in the papers I have written in the last few years, I have argued that fairness has to be broader in terms of opportunity to learn, meaningfulness, consistency, content and tasks, access, accommodations, and consequences. In the last few years, I have added the concept of justice to be conjoined with fairness. I found institutions are the ones that develop, administer, and score assessments and make decisions, and they need to be held accountable in terms of whether they are just institutions. That's how both fairness of assessments for persons and justice of assessment institutions are connected. So, a research agenda that focuses on fairness and justice ought to bring us assessments that are beneficial to society.

"A research agenda that focuses on fairness and justice ought to bring us assessments that are beneficial to society."

You have published extensively throughout your career. In your opinion, which is the most important work that you have written? And why?

In the early years after my dissertation research, I focused on research related to TTCs and TPs as well as research methods I used – factor analysis and structural modeling. After I published a few articles in these areas, I moved to developing an agenda regarding fairness. I have published many papers in this area sharpening my understanding and clarifying my approach in them. I have also tried to add an ethical dimension as background to why fairness and justice are important concepts. I hope these papers on fairness and justice will remain useful for the field. As I have said before, this is a very critical area of research.

If given the chance to rewrite one of your works, which one would it be, and why? How would you rewrite or refine it?

Perhaps, if I had read and understood moral philosophy or ethical theories earlier, theories like utilitarianism (outcomes-based ethics), deontology (duty-based ethics), and virtue-based ethics, I would have been able to buttress my arguments for fairness and justice with more conceptual support and not seem like as though fairness was only a practical or a minority issue.

What are you currently working on?

I am currently writing a book on language assessment evaluation with special focus on fairness and justice issues. I hope to make a coherent argument and a case for fairness and justice using ethical theories.

How did the journal Language Assessment Quarterly (LAQ) come about?

Until the early 2000s, there was only one journal in the field, *Language Testing*. I was appointed Test Reviews editor of Language Testing in 1998, and during my term, I felt there was space for a second journal for many reasons: the main articles in the journal were mainly theoretical; the articles did not connect with teaching and teacher-based assessment; the editors generally waited for manuscripts to be submitted, and the review process and publication were based on submitted manuscripts; the editorial board was small and made up of professors from elite universities; the range of materials in each issue was narrow, there were only main articles with an occasional book or test review; the authors were from a small group of countries, mainly the US, Canada, UK, Germany, and Japan; and there was virtually no coverage of language assessment issues from around the world.

So, I made a proposal for a new journal with the help of a few friends who joined me as associate editors and editorial board members. The plan was to address these problem areas. LAQ was founded with this in mind. We expanded the coverage to include special issues on topics such as ethics, classroom assessment, language acquisition, test bias/differential item functioning, cognitive diagnosis, etc. We also started a series of issues on regions of the world: Taiwan, Australia-New Zealand, etc. These were done in pro-active mode, not waiting for authors to submit manuscript; instead, we commissioned guest editors to work on suggested topics and to bring in authors of their choice. Further, we started an interview series with well-known language assessment researchers and professionals. In the 10 years I was the editor (2003-2013), we had 12 such interviews. And, some articles, which were opinion pieces, were carried under the commentary section so that opinion pieces were not neglected. I hope these indicators will be seen as valuable contributions to the field.

When I left the editorship, LAQ had become a solid journal in the field on par with well-known international journals, doing well in terms of the number and quality of manuscript submissions, its SSCI impact factor, and its overall image among authors and readers world-wide.

About the Asian Association for Language Assessment:

How did AALA come about? What was the impetus for its establishment?

Over the years when I was a faculty member in California State University, we held the annual SCALAR conference for students and faculty at Los Angeles and Fullerton and UCLA in turn. SCALAR was started by two students – Beryl Meiron and Greg Kamei – who felt that such a conference would empower students to do research and then present them in a public forum. I then noticed that students and faculty who would not otherwise present their research at AAAL or LTRC were doing so at SCALAR. Our students and faculty enjoyed many aspects of SCALAR: it was a small intimate conference, students and faculty mingled well and students could converse over the days of the conference; well-known researchers from the US, Canada, and the UK presented their research, conducted workshops, and interacted with students; the receptions and banquets also provided a good environment for students to interact with faculty and the visiting researchers. This model was later followed by MWALT (by Dan Douglas and Micheline Chalhoub-Deville) and ECOLT (by Dorry Kenyon and Meg Malone). These groups hold annual conferences and they provide similar opportunities to local students and faculty that the big conferences cannot.

When I moved to teach at universities in Hong Kong and Singapore, I wanted to start a local organization to enthuse students and faculty in the area of language assessment but found there wasn't a group of faculty from two or three universities in any one geographical area that were interested. I thought that in order to get a viable group, I would have to aim for a larger geographical area – so, I thought why not aim for an Asian association, covering as many regions as we could. I then approached some of the leading figures in Asia – David Qian (Hong Kong), Jessica Wu (Taiwan), Jin Yan and Lianzhen He (China), Yasuyo Sawaki (Japan), Yong-Won Lee and Young-Shik Lee (South Korea). Our first meeting was during LTRC in Amsterdam; we unanimously agreed that an Asian Association would be very useful. Very soon, our first conference was held at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou (China) in 2014, our second was held at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok (Thailand) in 2015, and our third will be hosted by Udayana University in Bali (Indonesia) in 2016. Our plans are to hold the next conferences in different regions such as Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea; and maybe later we can go to Vietnam, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, the United Emirates, and so on. We also have honorary advisors Bernard Spolsky (Israel), Hossein Farhady (Turkey), Rama Mathew (India), Randy Thrasher (Japan) and regional representatives from many countries. The aim is to reach out to all interested students and professionals in the Asia region.

As the founding President of AALA, what do you envisage with regards to AALA's future development?

The general aim is to have an association for the Asian region that can bring together students and faculty to discuss projects, conduct research, and present their works at the annual conference. Hopefully, costs and visas will be less of a concern with the annual conference in Asia, although Asia is a large geographical area. Thus, we hope that AALA will be the go-to conference every year for students and faculty in the Asian area not just for language assessment, but in related areas of teaching, learning, planning, policy, etc.

"We also hope AALA can complement the work done by other associations such as ILTA, ALTE, EALTA, the new Australia-New Zealand one [ALTAANZ]. We hope to contribute along with all the other conferences to bring about a better understanding of language assessment issues. And, overall, to make us responsible language assessors and in doing so, hopefully, our assessments will be beneficial to test takers ."

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Advice for AALA Student Members:

Pursuing a doctoral degree is daunting to many of us given the amount of time and level of commitment required. Looking back at your graduate days, what was one major challenge that you encountered? How did you overcome it?

Pursuing a doctoral program is daunting for sure but if there is a real desire to acquire new knowledge, chase new frontiers in disciplines that were not open before, and wrestle with new challenges, it can be enjoyable too. Looking back, I did have specific challenges which not everyone may have: first, my advisor, Grant Henning, who admitted me to the program and offered me a research assistantship left UCLA for ETS, Princeton, before I started the program. So, I had to wait for two years for an advisor, and that is when Lyle Bachman arrived. But, during those two years, I completed all the required eight courses in

language education and linguistics. So, I was ready to start research when Lyle Bachman arrived. Second, I did not receive funding for all quarters for the first two years and because of this I had to compete with other MA and PhD students for teaching assistantships for one or two quarters each year. This was problematic for me because although I did well on a variety of tests, TOEFL, GRE, the Michigan Test, and the Subject A test at UCLA and had six years of experience teaching English in India in an English-medium school and six years of experience doing teacher-training, I was still considered a non-native speaker of English, and, therefore, not offered an assistantship because of doubts about my English language ability. I had to deal with this by taking on part-time jobs: rating campus students' SPEAK test performances, removing mold off books in the university library (not an easy task), and being generally frugal. But there were enjoyable aspects as well: I helped start a student-run journal *Issues in Applied linguistics* and took part in the Second Language Forum Conference (that was being organized by Patsy Duff and John Schumann). So, my advice would be for students to be engaged with departmental and campus activities. They will enhance understanding of matters and provide an enriching experience.

"Students should be engaged with departmental and campus activities. It will enhance your understanding of matters and give you an excellent experience."

What is one book that you think all graduate students specializing in L2 assessment should read?

For the longest time, the most useful book was Lyle Bachman's *Fundamental considerations in language testing.* The book brought to us Messick's view of test validation and Bachman's view of communicative language testing and statistical procedures for research in language testing. Today, there are many books that cover separate aspects such as the Cambridge Language Assessment series edited by Charles Alderson and Lyle Bachman – Assessing listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, etc.

One of my recent contributions to the field has been two recently edited sets: *The Companion to Language Assessment* (2014, Wiley), a collection of 140 original chapters written by some of the best minds in the field. The other is *Language Testing and Assessment* (2015, Routledge), a collection of 75 previously published papers and chapters that are difficult to get. These papers read together would give students of language assessment views of the field from the past and present.

What advice would you give to our AALA student members with regards to their professional development?

If you aim to do too much, the doctoral program can become a life-long project. Specifically, if you want to read articles and books in new areas such as moral philosophy, computational linguistics, natural language processing, neuroscience, etc., and learn new methodologies such as structural equation and latent growth modeling, multi-level modeling or Bayesian probabilities using EQS, Mplus, or discourse and conversational analysis, and phonetics using PRATT, or coherence and cohesion analysis with Coh-Metrix, or learn to conduct experiments and observations with fMRI and other imaging technology, it is going to be very challenging. So, my advice would be not to try and tackle many of these but to stick to a narrow area and to do it well. After all, a doctoral program is a demonstration of original research but not a demonstration of an entire research agenda that needs several years of data collection and multi-site analyses with multiple research methodologies.

"My advice would be not to try and tackle many of these but to stick to a narrow set of areas to deal with and to do those well. After all, a doctoral program is a demonstration of research not a demonstration of an entire research agenda that needs several years of data collection and multi-site analyses with multiple research methodologies."

Note:

Professor Antony John Kunnan is currently Professor in the Department of English at the University of Macau. For more information on Professor Kunnan, please refer to: www.antonykunnan.com

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Special Feature:

Messages from AALA Executive Board Members

David Qian

Professor of Applied Linguistics,
Department of English,
The Hong Kong Polytechnic
University, Hong Kong

I am very happy to see the establishment and growth of the Student Committee of the Asian Association for Language Assessment. Taking this opportunity, I would like to extend my congratulations to the members of the Student Committee on a job very well done.

I have been involved in English language assessment since the mid-1980s and became interested in language assessment research during the period of my PhD studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, from 1992 to 1997. It was in Toronto I got to know many renowned researchers in applied linguistics and language assessment and was so fortunate to be taught by them. Following my PhD program, I was offered a position as a TOEFL 2000 Postdoctoral Fellow at the Educational Testing Service, where I had an opportunity to get to know a large number of established language assessment professionals and furthered my knowledge on important issues in the field of language assessment. Later on, I joined The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. My sixteen years' career as an academic at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University has enabled me to understand the needs of Hong Kong and the Asian region for language assessment expertise. I am glad that I have been able to contribute my knowledge in language assessment and applied linguistics for the betterment of local society as well as the development of the international professional community of language assessment since I moved back to this side of the world. In addition to publishing on language assessment, I have managed and developed language tests and also consulted for various local and international organizations on matters related to language education and assessment. I have directed over 20 research projects as a Principal Investigator. I am interested in many aspects of language assessment, especially the assessment of writing, speaking and vocabulary. In recent years, I have been exploring the role of corpora in test development and validation and am also involved in research on alternative assessment, especially dynamic assessment.

Jessica Row-Whei Wu

R&D Program Director,
Language Training & Testing
Center (LTTC), Taiwan

The story of how I entered the field of language testing is a long one, given the fact that I began my career at the Language Training and Testing Center (LTTC) in Taipei 27 years ago. I started as an instructor of English at the LTTC immediately after completing my MA in education in the U.S. As an instructor, I considered teaching to be my main duty, regarding testing as merely a 'by-product' of teaching. I must admit that I had not given much serious thought to testing until my transfer to the LTTC's testing development department.

In 1997, I had an opportunity to study language testing for six-months in the UK at the University of Reading. It was my good fortune to meet and study with Prof Cyril Weir there. I also met Prof Jin Yan there when she was working on her doctoral thesis. Since then, she and I have become close friends. As my British sojourn came to an end, Prof. Weir asked if I were interested in undertaking Ph.D. research in language testing. Because I was a full-time employee at the LTTC and the mother of two young children, you can imagine what a tough decision it was for me. After long discussions with my husband, he suggested I accept this chance to advance academically. With his great support, I obtained my Ph.D. in 2005. My thesis investigated semi-direct speaking test task difficulty.

At the LTTC, I currently head the R&D office, where I focus on the validation of the foreign language testing programs conducted by the center, including the GEPT, the largest standardized test of English in Taiwan. My work also requires me to communicate with various stakeholders, including policy makers, school administrators, teachers, and learners. The more I interact with test stakeholders, the greater consideration I give to the societal implications of language testing. Paying closer attention to the issues that arise when language tests are used for high-stakes purposes, e.g., the misuse of test results and the lack of assessment literacy, I recently carried out several research projects that aim to bridge the gap between testing and teaching, ultimately benefitting learning.

Alan Davis put it quite well when he said that testing is not the same as teaching. As language testers, we cannot directly help or encourage learners the way that classroom teachers do, but we can collect the right evidence to assist and encourage learners. In

retrospect, I am glad that I chose to develop my career in language testing, for it empowered me to have just such an impact on English learning in Taiwan.

Yan Jin

Professor of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China; Chair of the National College English Testing Committee, Ministry of Education, China

My career choice as a language tester was made about three decades ago. I started my MA study in the late 1980s specializing in language testing, which was an emerging field in China at the time. The choice was made mainly due to my interest in the College English Test (CET), a large-scale national test designed for Chinese college students by a group of English professors in the mid-1980s and launched in 1987. Upon graduation I was recruited by the CET Committee Office and began my career as a practitioner and researcher in language testing. In the early 1990s, I participated in the CET validation study, a Sino-British cooperative project, and began to understand the social impact of language testing. In 1993, I started my doctoral study on the development and validation of the Advanced English Reading Test (AERT), through which I gained first-hand experience of test design, item writing, test piloting, data analysis, and test-item revision.

Having worked for the CET for 25 years, I have got a better understanding of what it means to be a language tester. In China, learners of all educational levels are required to take English tests for a variety of high-stakes decisions, including, for example, admission to junior or senior high schools, admission to colleges or universities, job applications, and promotions. With the high stakes comes the social responsibility of language testers. The appreciation of the beauty of the science and art of language testing may bring us career satisfaction, but the attention to the social dimension of language testing has become a prerequisite to career success. In the new century, language testing has become a rapidly developing field at the intersection of psycholinguistics and educational measurement, driven by the unprecedented advances in second language acquisition and information technology. And I find my career as a language tester even more challenging and rewarding.

Yasuyo Sawaki

Professor and Chair, Department of English Language and Literature, School of Education, Waseda University, Japan

Hello, AALA student members! I'm Yasuyo Sawaki, Secretary/Treasurer of AALA. I am very thrilled to eye-witness the rapid growth of this exciting community of language testers in Asia over the last few years. I earned my Ph.D. degree in applied linguistics from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2003. Upon graduation, I took a research scientist position at Educational Testing Service in New Jersey, in the U.S. In 2009 I returned to Japan and joined Waseda University in Tokyo. Currently I teach various courses including language assessment, academic writing, and teacher education. I am interested in a wide range of research topics in language assessment ranging from the validation of large-scale international English language assessments to the role of assessment in classroom English language instruction. My current research topic is the relationship between university entrance examinations and English language demands in undergraduate- and graduate-level courses at universities in Japan, where there is growing interest in using English as the medium of instruction.

I would like you to know that one of the most important things for graduate students to do is to build a strong relationship with fellow students with whom you can share academic interests. I was blessed with a wonderful group of colleagues in my graduate program. We used to spend a lot of time together attending classes, arguing about specific language assessment issues, and working on research projects. We used to have hours of dry-runs before giving presentations at conferences. I remember feeling very confident and comfortable presenting after surviving those sessions with the most critical (meaning both important and harsh!) audience. Now, even after more than 10 years from graduation, we still work closely and exchange opinions on various issues with each other.

I would like to congratulate you all on joining AALA. This is where you can meet and develop stimulating relationships with fellow students from various institutions across countries. I hope that every one of you will take full advantage of this excellent opportunity to make an important step forward in becoming professionals in this field. Good luck!

AALA Founding Members (in alphabetical order)

Lianzhen He (Zhejiang University, China)
Yasuhiro Imao (Osaka University, Japan)
Yan Jin (Shanghai Jiao Tong University, China)
Antony John Kunnan (University of Macau, China)
Yong-Won Lee (Seoul National University, South Korea)
Young-Shik Lee (Hannam University, South Korea)
David Qian (Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong)
Yasuyo Sawaki (Waseda University, Japan)
Jessica Row-Whei Wu (Language Training and Testing Center, Taiwan)

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Committee Contact Information

AALA Website:
http://www.aalawebsite.com/

Email: aalastudent@hotmail.com

Facebook Page:
https://www.facebook.com/aalastudentcommittee/

Facebook Group:
https://www.facebook.com/groups/AALAStudentGroup/

LinkedIn:
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