

2015 ALAA Conference Plenary abstract

Some concerns about language testing

Bernard Spolsky (Bar Ilan University)

I started to be interested in the history of language testing when I was studying the origins of TOEFL and wondered what had preceded my own entry into the field. I was struck by two major examples, the 2000-year-old Chinese Imperial examination which was aimed at selecting a tiny elite and the medieval Treviso test where local leaders checked what pupils had learnt in school. The Jesuits brought the Chinese examination back to Europe, and used it in their classrooms but with secularization of Christian schools, it became the basis under the French Revolution and Napoleonic centralized rule for mass control of education. In Britain too, it started as an elite selection process for the Indian Civil Service but by the end of the 19th century controlled mass education. This was the model that developed in post-World War I USA, where industrialization took over. Nowadays, testing is big business, and the high status of public standardized exams produces the examination hell and cheating in Asia. In this talk, I will consider these and other problems and the challenges faced in developing fairer tests and in lowering the stakes.