

Chapter 9

Social Justice in Language Assessment: Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Celpe–Bras Exam

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the underlying social justice agenda in the Celpe-Bras exam based on the assessment of the intercultural communicative competence in one of the exam's tasks. The premises are that assessment exerts great power in people's lives, and therefore, language assessment should help diminish social inequalities, not reinforce them. Intercultural communicative competence raises issues of socially constructed and dialogically negotiated identity markers and can therefore be considered one of the pillars of social justice language education. The Celpe-Bras exam is supported by a construct based on language as social practice, meaning it can propose tasks and assessment rubrics with great potential for promoting social justice. As language and culture are taken as inseparable, producing texts (output) in a given language is a movement of mobilizing and articulating cultural background knowledge with the information presented in the source texts (input).

OPENING REMARKS

Language proficiency exams, or language tests, can be considered high stakes when the decisions based on their results greatly affect examinees' lives. Such would be the case of test results required for being

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admitted at university, for applying for and/or receiving a scholarship, for being considered for a job, or even for being awarded citizenship and the right to reside in a country. This is evidence of the great power assessment has on people's lives (Shohamy, 2001).

It is not surprising, then, that the area of language testing and assessment underwent a focus shift, becoming concerned not only with psychometric and test development issues, but also with the consequences of these exams' results to examinees' lives - that is, the impact of these exams in society. This was dubbed "the social turn" (Roever & McNamara, 2006), which implies

[...] epistemological shifts regarding knowledge construction as well as critical views on the role of language tests in society, on the need to democratize assessment and on the responsibility of language testers (Inbar-Lourie, 2008, p.p. 390 - 391).

These "critical views" and the "need to democratize assessment" echo the current agenda of social justice studies in the field of language education (Palmer et al., 2019; Randolph Jr. & Johnson, 2017), which call for more equitable sharing of power and opportunities within society. Therefore, because of the high stakes nature of proficiency exams, it is important to understand their characteristics and washback effect.

This research focuses on the Certificate of Proficiency in Portuguese for Foreigners (Celpe-Bras, for short). A state-of-the art review indicates that there are very few publications in English focusing on this exam. It is important to mention, though, that there is a considerable number of publications in Portuguese¹, which seems to be a natural move, considering the exam's target language. In order to support this statement, the terms adopted during the searches were "Portuguese language", "Brazilian Portuguese exam", and "Celpe-Bras" in three academic databases, namely: Google Scholar, SAGE Journals, and Education Research Information Center. In all of them the same criteria were employed: papers with online access and peer-reviewed, with no restrictions of publication date. SAGE Journals was the only database that required an additional criterion, i.e., the selection of 'education' as the specific field. This search aimed at identifying publications in English about the Celpe-Bras exam so as to advance in this field of investigation.

As far as the findings are concerned, even though all the searches resulted in over 200 references in total, only two of them refer to Celpe-Bras. All the other publications appeared as results because either the term 'language' or 'exam' were mentioned in the papers; then, they were disconsidered, as their discussions would go beyond this book chapter's scope. In relation to the two papers that focused precisely on the exam, Cowles, Oliveira and Wiedemann (2006) summarized Portuguese proficiency exams developed either by organizations or governments in the United States, Brazil, and Europe. A comparison of the exams' structures is later provided. Zhao and Liu (2019) conducted a secondary data analysis of the governmental documents related to the exam, centering on issues of validity, reliability, and authenticity, as it is a large-scale proficiency test. None of the two studies, however, analyzed Celpe-Bras aspects in regard to intercultural communicative competence or the possible underlying social justice agenda, which are key concepts to this book chapter.

Considering that social justice in the language classroom requires that its stakeholders (teachers, students, and others) reflect upon and act towards greater equity in society (Randolph Jr. & Johnson, 2017), and intercultural communicative competence involves a learning process in which students transform and are transformed by interactions with the world around them (Randolph Jr. & Johnson, 2017), the general goal of this research is to identify an underlying social justice agenda on the Celpe-Bras

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