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Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research



An Interview with Professor Antony Kunnan

Interview by: *Karim Sadeghi*



Background

Antony John Kunnan teaches and does research on language assessment theory, practice, and policy. He is a professor in the Department of English at the University of Macau and Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. His previous positions were at Nanyang Technological University, the University of Hong Kong, Tunghai University (as a Fulbright Professor), and California State University, Los Angeles. His latest book is titled *Evaluating language assessments* (Routledge, 2017). He also published two four-volume edited sets titled *The Companion to Language Assessment* (Wiley, 2014) and *Language Testing and Assessment* (Routledge, 2014). He has also published widely in journals and in edited collections. He was the founding editor of *Language Assessment Quarterly*, past president of the International Language Testing Association and the founding president of the Asian Association for Language Assessment. He also directs the Language Assessment Seminar Research Group at UM (see <https://fah.umac.mo/laser/>). What follows is an interview by Karim Sadeghi (KS) with Prof. Antony Kunnan (AK) on his professional life as well as recent trends in language assessment.

KS: Thank you very much Prof. Kunnan for agreeing to do an interview with *IJLTR* editor despite your busy schedule and start-of-the-semester involvements. Could you please introduce yourself briefly with an eye to your academic and professional life highlighting how and why you decided to shift from English literature as your university major to ELT and then language assessment.

AK: Well, I grew up in the city of Bangalore in southern India and went to St. Germain High School and St. Joseph's College there as well. It was a different time, in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly, in terms of media – I only had books, movies, music and radio; there was no TV to speak of, and of course, it was long before computers and cell phones and all what we have now. So, I read widely mainly in English literature – starting from high school where I read a lot of 18th and 19th century English poetry, Shakespearean plays, American plays and fiction.

Along with this was a weekly dose of American movies (at school it was Westerns, Chaplin, the Three Stooges), in the city, first run movies which would be showing in about 10 English movie theaters that had contracts with many Hollywood studios. I saw some of the finest American, Italian, French, German films that played alongside Hindi, Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam films. At home, I listened to music that included American and English pop music, American jazz and European classical music with an occasional Hindustani or Carnatic music. From the radio, I listened to BBC plays every week, and My Word and My Music (two panel game shows), the VOA Jazz hour and Music USA (two radio programs). I list all of this to show that my life during my high school and college was varied and context rich with the arts generally - literature, film and music. From this it was not difficult to imagine that I could specialize in English literature.

So, during my B.A, English and history were my favorite subjects and I studied English literature for my M.A. in Bangalore University. But when I went to Hyderabad to the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, I switched to linguistics and then chose to study applied linguistics. I did this mainly because I could not find a way (in the 1980s) to bring together my interests in literature, music and film. I thought I can always have these as my secondary interests. I specialized in language assessment and wrote an M.Litt. dissertation on language assessment in the classroom. A few years later I went to ULCA to specialize in language assessment and took courses in this area along with courses in measurement and statistics.

KS: Could you talk more about your scholarly products? Please tell us how many publications you have and what the major focuses of these publications have been. How do you compare your first and last publications in terms of scope and topics covered? Given that almost all your talks and writings have been on language testing/assessment, how is it possible to produce so many ideas/works on the same topic?

AK: As of this interview, I have five authored books, six edited collections, three guest edited special issues of journals, and 68 articles, book chapters and test reviews. My first publications were primarily from my Ph.D. study and dissertation. My focus then was related to test taker characteristics (such as opportunity to learn, attitude and motivation), to learning and performance on EFL tests using modeling techniques to tease out the relationships that were strong and meaningful. As years went by, my focus moved to other areas such as fairness, ethics, and policy in language assessment. My latest publications deal with these important matters. Like in any area of study, when you get going, you will find there are more areas to explore, and then when you feel you have explored that area enough, you will find exploration in a related area is also fruitful, and so on.

KS: You have vast teaching and research experience and more recently your administrative duties have increased. Do you think the latter has prevented you from devoting due time and attention to research and teaching? How compatible do you find these different roles and do you think whether language teachers should get engaged in research and administration as well as teaching? Also, should language teachers and testers know (and practice) some of the sophisticated issues like SEM and DIF that surface in your writings/talks?

AK: I think the most important components of university professorship have to be teaching and research. If you find a good balance between the two, you will enjoy your academic life. When there is too much of either such as in university that require too much teaching (like the Cal State University system in the US where I worked for 21 years!), research work can be severely hampered. Regarding administrative roles, I think while they are really important, it is not difficult to do but can become tiresome if you are interested in teaching and research. It's not for everyone and I suggest take a small dose not too much. It will restrict your time for research for sure.

DIF and SEM are techniques that have shown to be useful for research in the field. And now, research techniques like Bayesian probability are available. Also, there are new techniques Eye-tracking, Key-logging, fMRI – these have yet to have wide appeal and applicability.

KS: Could you please talk more about your editorship roles. You have been the founding editor of a flagship assessment journal (*LAQ*) and served for the journal for almost 10 years. What is the difference in focus between that journal and *Language Testing*? You seemed to retire from journal editorship but then you took up the editorship of *Asia TEFL Journal* a couple of years later. Why did you return to journal editorship again?

AK: I founded LAQ with the help of associate editors (Nick Saville, Carolyn Turner and Fred Davidson) and served as editor for 10 years. My view of an editor may be different from others – I felt an editor has to be active and activist editor – not sit back and wait for manuscripts to come in randomly from readers and authors. So, I introduced commentaries, interviews, practical advice, test reviews in addition to the traditional research articles. I also wanted and encouraged special issues of LAQ devoted to topics such as ethics, Differential Item Functioning, and cognitive diagnostic feedback. Further, having observed that most of the publications and focus of studies were from the US, the UK and Europe, I planned a series of issues on regional issues such as Taiwan, China, and Japan. But after 10 years and having taken LAQ to be among SSCI-indexed journals, I think it was time to leave so that a new leadership can take it forward. Yes, I am currently editor of the Asia TEFL Journal – this is more of a service as the journal needed an editor. I have brought a few new features to the journal already – teaching and research issues. The role of editor appeals to me although it is a lot of work and primarily as a shaper of other people's work not your own. So, you cannot do it all the time; or else you will not have time for your own writing.

KS: Your PhD dissertation at UCLA (*Test taker characteristics and test performance: A structural modeling study*) which was later published by CUP won an ETS award. Could you talk a bit about this project and the reason why you think it won such an outstanding prize?

AK: Well, when I submitted my dissertation in 1991, structural modeling was new to applied linguistics. There were very few explorations but I had a wonderful mentor – Lyle Bachman – who suggested that I work on this area. And, when I explored this topic further and looked to study SEM, I found there were cutting-edge professors in structural equation modeling like Bengt Mutben (inventor of Mplus) and Peter Bentler (inventor of EQS) – who were both available to help supervise my work. I was totally blessed by their generous advice. Lyle too had received a contract from UCLES (now Cambridge Language Assessment) to conduct a comparability study of the TOEFL and the FCE. I used data collected for this project from eight cities around the world for my dissertation study. So, all of these things coming together helped in my dissertation research. In terms of receiving the award, that was a surprise to me although I knew I was on the shortlist. But, you don't do research to win a prize. If a prize comes along, it is welcome.

KS: You have been a past president of *ILTA* and a founding president of *AALA*. Could you talk about the scope of these organizations, their service to assessment specialists as well as how interested scholars may become members in these associations and the benefits they receive after joining?

AK: ILTA was set up in the mid-1990s and soon I served as a treasurer from 1999 to 2002. And, when the opportunity arose, I stood for elections to serve as vice president. And, I served for three years as vice president, president and past president (2003-2005). It was quite a long commitment. The general purpose of the organization is to bring language assessment to the world we live in and are affected by language assessments (in schools, college, universities, workplace, and in the new contexts of immigration, citizenship and asylum). This we traditionally do through the annual conference called LTRC but also after ILTA was formed through small workshops in regional or national centers where a group of teachers, professors and others want to spend a day or two discussing language assessments critical to their context. There are also many awards and prizes for publications, service and for graduate students. So, ILTA has been useful to bring together researchers, students and professionals interested in the field.

The goals of AALA are no different except that the scope of the area of operations are Asia and therefore matters that are important to Asia will take precedence over other areas. AALA is very young – we are five years old and our annual conference has only travelled within East Asia and South East Asia. It certainly needs to be held in South Asia and West Asia/Middle East as well so that more participation and understanding of regional or local issues is possible.

KS: Your first peer-review paper was published in Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics some 30 years ago where you focused on ‘classroom tests’ and more recently the terms ‘test’ and ‘testing’ have been replaced by ‘assessment’ in your works. What is this change for, given that this interview is to be published in IJLTR’s Special Issue on Assessment for Learning/Teaching? Why did you, for instance, choose the title Talking about Language Assessment: The LAQ Interviews rather than Talking about Language Testing for the edited book?

AK: I generally think the term “assessment” seems to be understood as a broader term than “testing.” So, I started using assessment instead of testing in all my writing, editing, and talks.

KS: What do you think are the current hot topics and debates in language testing and assessment that future researchers need to attend to and investigate in their research projects?

AK: My hot topics are: Ethics and fairness in language assessment, Language assessment for immigration, citizenship and asylum, and Language assessment policy. Others may include Automated scoring of speaking and writing or the use of corpora as well.

KS: Are you happy with you being an applied linguist? If you were given a second chance to select your career, would you choose to be an applied linguist and more specifically a language assessor once more? Why?

AK: I have enjoyed my career as an applied linguist and specialist in language assessment. It has given me the opportunity to speak in 35 countries. I have had the privilege of teaching or speaking to large university audiences in Bangalore, Barcelona, Beijing, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Cambridge, Cairo, Chicago, Dubai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Hyderabad, Los Angeles, New Delhi, New York, Macau, Melbourne, Mexico City, San Francisco, Seattle, Seoul, Shanghai, Sharjah, Singapore, Sofia, Taipei, Tampere, Toronto, Tsukuba, and Vancouver.

I have also enjoyed small student and teacher groups in towns like Babu Pabat in southern Malaysia, Modena in Italy, Sanur in Bali, Indonesia, Tunghai in Taiwan and Yerevan in Armenia - understanding issues that are local and context-bound and often difficult to resolve. You can tell that I have loved all this travel, teaching and speaking engagements – so, yes, I would like it as my career again!

KS: Many thanks again Prof. Kunnan for giving us your precious time and sharing with our readers your life-long experience. Is there anything else that you would like us to learn more from?

AK: For people starting out with a career in applied linguistics or language assessment, I encourage you to explore the world of knowledge as widely as possible in intellectual and professional terms.

