

TESL/ALT Brown Bag Colloquium Series



Friday, March 13th, 2020

12:00-1:00pm

212 Ross Hall

Validity Argument 2020: Help for Construct Definition in Language Testing?

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Language testers typically rely on a construct (e.g., reading, academic language ability, pragmatic competence) as a basis for score interpretation. However, the origins and nature of constructs underlying different tests vary (Chapelle & Choi, 2019). Some constructs refer to a trait expected to affect performance across multiple unspecified contexts, some refer to the performance itself delineated by the contexts in which it occurs, and others are defined by a combination of both a trait and the context of applicability (Chapelle, 1998; Bachman, 2007). Construct validity research is intended to investigate the defensibility of making the intended construct interpretation from test scores. Therefore, construct validity studies need to be designed in view of the nature of the intended construct interpretation, but seldom are construct definitions and frameworks sufficiently specified to provide precise guidance about the design of validation research. In fact, in many reports of language testing research, the connection between the intended construct interpretation and the research design is not transparent.

Argument-based validity, as presented by Kane (2013), provides the concepts and language for making explicit statements about the inferences involved in test score interpretation, including statements about intended construct interpretation. However, Kane's discussion of validity argument does not detail how the inferences warrants and assumptions can be used to express the different types of constructs that are important in language testing. This paper will show how statements associated with the explanation and extrapolation inferences in a validity argument can be used to express the three types of construct interpretations that appear in language testing research (Chapelle, 2020). Rather than relying on amorphous theories of language constructs, argument-based validity requires statements of warrants and assumptions to be made explicitly and precisely. I argue that the use of statements in a validity argument provides a more promising approach for designing, conducting, and interpreting validity research than does the use of construct labels and frameworks alone.