



International Language Testing Association

# Code of Ethics

(Adopted at the annual meeting of ILTA held in Vancouver, March 2000)

This, the first Code of Ethics prepared by the International Language Testing Association (ILTA), is a set of principles which draws upon moral philosophy and serves to guide good professional conduct. It is neither a statute nor a regulation and it does not provide guidelines for practice, but it is intended to offer a benchmark of satisfactory ethical behaviour by all language testers. It is associated with a separate Code of Practice (in progress). The Code of Ethics is based on a blend of the principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, a respect for autonomy and for civil society.

This Code of Ethics identifies 9 fundamental principles, each elaborated on by a series of annotations which generally clarify the nature of the principles; they prescribe what ILTA members ought to do or not do, or more generally how they ought to comport themselves or what they, or the profession, ought to aspire to; and they identify the difficulties and exceptions inherent in the application of the principles. The Annotations further elaborate the Code's sanctions, making clear that failure to uphold the Code may have serious penalties, such as withdrawal of ILTA membership on the advice of the ILTA Ethics Committee. Although this Code derives from other similar ethical codes (stretching back into history), it does endeavour to reflect the ever changing balance of societal and cultural values across the world, and for that reason should be interpreted by language testers in conjunction with the associated Code of Practice.

All professional codes should inform professional conscience and judgement. This ILTA Code of Ethics does not release language testers from the obligations and responsibilities laid on them by other Codes to which they have subscribed or from their duties under the legal codes, both national and international, to which they may be subject.

Language testers are independent moral agents and sometimes they may have a personal moral stance which conflicts with participation in certain procedures. They are morally entitled to refuse to participate in procedures which would violate personal moral belief. Language testers accepting employment positions where they foresee they may be called on to be involved in situations at variance with their beliefs have a responsibility to acquaint their employer or prospective employer with this fact. Employers and colleagues have a responsibility to ensure that such language testers are not discriminated against in their workplace.

The Code of Ethics is instantiated by the Code of Practice (currently under preparation by ILTA). While the Code of Ethics focuses on the morals and ideals of the profession, the Code of Practice identifies the minimum requirements for practice in the profession and focuses on the clarification of professional misconduct and unprofessional conduct.



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Both the Code of Ethics and the Code of Practice need to be responsive to the needs and changes within the profession and, in time, these Codes will require revision in response to changes in language testing and in society. The Code of Ethics will be reviewed within five years, or earlier if necessary.

## Principle 1

Language testers shall have respect for the humanity and dignity of each of their test takers. They shall provide them with the best possible professional consideration and shall respect all persons' needs, values and cultures in the provision of their language testing service.

### Annotation

- Language testers shall not discriminate against nor exploit their test takers on grounds of age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language background, creed, political affiliations or religion, nor knowingly impose their own values (for example social, spiritual, political and ideological), to the extent that they are aware of them.
- Language testers shall never exploit their clients nor try to influence them in ways that are not related to the aims of the service they are providing or the investigation they are mounting.
- Sexual relations between language testers and their test takers are always unethical.
- Teaching and researching language testing involving the use of test takers (including students) requires their consent; IT ALSO REQUIRES respect for their dignity and privacy. Those involved should be informed that their refusal to participate will not affect the quality of the language tester's service (in teaching, in research, in development, in administration). THE USE OF all forms of media (paper, electronic, video, audio) involving test takers requires informed consent before being used for secondary purposes.
- Language testers shall endeavour to communicate the information they produce to all relevant stakeholders in as meaningful a way as possible.
- Where possible, test takers should be consulted on all matters concerning their interests.

## Principle 2

Language testers shall hold all information obtained in their professional capacity about their test takers in confidence and they shall use professional judgement in sharing such information.

### Annotation

- In the face of the widespread use of photocopied materials and facsimile, computerized test records and data banks, the increased demand for accountability from various sources and the personal nature of the information obtained from test takers, language testers are obliged to respect test takers' right to confidentiality and to safeguard all information associated with the tester-test taker relationship.



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- Confidentiality cannot be absolute, especially where the records concern students who may be competing for admissions and appointments. A careful balance must be maintained between preserving confidentiality as a fundamental aspect of the language tester's professional duty and the wider responsibility the tester has to society.
- Similarly, in appropriate cases, the language tester's professional colleagues also have a right to access data of test takers other than their own in order to improve the service the profession offers. In such cases, those given access to data should agree to maintain confidentiality.
- Test taker data collected from sources other than the test taker directly (for example from teachers of students under test) are subject to the same principles of confidentiality.
- There may be statutory requirements on disclosure, for example where the language tester is called as an expert witness in a law court or tribunal. In such circumstances, the language tester is released from his/her professional duty to confidentiality.

## Principle 3

Language testers should adhere to all relevant ethical principles embodied in national and international guidelines when undertaking any trial, experiment, treatment or other research activity.

## Annotation

- Language testing progress depends on research, which necessarily involves the participation of human subjects. This research shall conform to generally accepted principles of academic inquiry, be based on a thorough knowledge of the professional literature; and be planned and executed according to the highest standards.
- All research must be justified; that is proposed studies shall be reasonably expected to provide answers to questions posed.
- The human rights of the research subject shall always take precedence over the interests of science or society.
- Where there are likely discomforts or risks to the research subject, the benefits of that research should be taken into account but must not be used in themselves to justify such discomforts or risks. If unforeseeable harmful effects occur, the research should always be stopped or modified.
- An independent Ethics Committee should evaluate all research proposals in order to ensure that studies conform to the highest scientific and ethical standards.
- Relevant information about the aims, methods, risks and discomforts of the research shall be given to the subject in advance. The information shall be conveyed in such a way that it is fully understood. Consent shall be free, without pressure, coercion or duress.
- The subject shall be free to refuse to participate in or to withdraw from, the research at any time prior to publication of research results. Such refusal shall not jeopardise the subject's treatment.



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- Special care shall be taken with regard to obtaining prior consent in the case of subjects who are in dependent relationships (for example, students, the elderly, proficiency challenged learners).
- In the case of a minor, consent shall be obtained from a parent or guardian but also from the child if he is of sufficient maturity and understanding.
- Confidential information obtained in research shall not be used for purposes other than THOSE specified in the approved research protocol.
- Publication of research results shall be truthful and accurate.
- Publication of research reports shall not permit identification of the subjects who have been involved.

## Principle 4

Language testers shall not allow the misuse of their professional knowledge or skills, in so far as they are able.

### Annotation

- Language testers shall not knowingly use their professional knowledge or skills to advance purposes inimical to their test takers' interests. When the progress of the tester's intervention is not directly to the benefit of the test takers( for example when they are asked to act as trial subjects for a proficiency test designed for some other situation), its nature shall be made absolutely clear.
- Non-conformity with a society's prevailing moral, religious etc values, or status as an unwelcome migrant, shall not be the determining factor in assessing language ability.
- Whatever the legal circumstances, language testers shall not participate, either directly or indirectly in the practice of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment

(see Declaration of Tokyo 1975).

## Principle 5

Language testers shall continue to develop their professional knowledge, sharing this knowledge with colleagues and other language professionals.

### Annotation

- Continued learning and advancing one's knowledge are fundamental to the professional role; failure to do so constitutes a disservice to test takers.
- Language testers shall make use of the various methods of continuing education that are available to them. These may involve participation in continuing language testing programmes and professional conferences, and the regular reading of relevant professional publications.



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- Language testers shall take the opportunity to interact with colleagues and other relevant language professionals as an important means of developing their professional knowledge.
- Language testers shall share new knowledge with colleagues by publication in recognized professional journals or at meetings.
- Language testers shall be expected to contribute to the education and professional development of language testers in training and to the drawing up of guidelines for the core requirements of that training.
- Language testers shall be prepared to contribute to the education of students in the WIDER language professions.

## Principle 6

Language testers shall share the responsibility of upholding the integrity of the language testing profession.

### Annotation

- Language testers shall promote and enhance the integrity of their profession by fostering a sense of trust and mutual responsibility among colleagues. In the event of differences of opinion, viewpoints should be expressed with candour and respect rather than by mutual denigration.
- Language testers develop and exercise norms on behalf of society. As such theirs is a privileged position which brings with it an obligation to maintain appropriate personal and moral standards in their professional practice, and in those aspects of their personal life which may reflect upon the integrity of that practice.
- Language testers who become aware of unprofessional conduct by a colleague shall take appropriate action; this may include a report to the relevant authorities.
- Failure to uphold this Code of Ethics will be regarded with the utmost seriousness and could lead to severe penalties including withdrawal of ILTA membership.

## Principle 7

Language testers in their societal roles shall strive to improve the quality of language testing, assessment and teaching services, promote the just allocation of those services and contribute to the education of society regarding language learning and language proficiency.

### Annotation

- Language testers have a particular duty to promote the improvement of language testing provision/services in that many of their test takers are disenfranchised and lack power on account of their non-native speaker status.
- Language testers shall be prepared by virtue of their knowledge and experience to advise those responsible for the provision of language testing services.



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- Language testers shall be prepared to act as advocates and join with others in ensuring that language testing test takers have available to them the best possible language testing service.
- Language testers shall be prepared to work with advisory, statutory, voluntary and commercial bodies that have a role in the provision of language testing services.
- Language testers shall take appropriate action if services, by reason of fiscal restriction or otherwise, fall below minimal standards. Exceptionally, language testers may have to dissociate themselves from such services provided that this is not harmful to their test takers.
- Language testers shall be prepared to interpret and disseminate relevant scientific information and established professional opinions to society. In so doing, language testers shall clarify their status as either spokespersons for a recognised professional body or not. If the views expressed are contrary to those generally held, they shall so indicate.
- It is reasonable for language testers to make scientifically substantiated contributions to public debate on sensitive socio-political issues, such as race, disadvantage and child rearing.
- Language testers shall differentiate between their role as educators based on professional knowledge and their role as citizens.
- In fulfilling their responsibilities under this principle, language testers shall take care to avoid self-promotion and the denigration of colleagues.
- Language testers shall make clear that they do not claim (and are not seen to claim) that they alone possess all the relevant knowledge.

## Principle 8

Language testers shall be mindful of their obligations to the society within which they work, while recognising that those obligations may on occasion conflict with their responsibilities to their test takers and to other stakeholders.

### Annotation

- When test results are obtained on behalf of institutions (government departments, professional bodies, universities, schools, companies) language testers have an obligation to report those results accurately, however unwelcome they may be to the test takers and other stakeholders (families, prospective employers etc).
- As members of the society in which they work, language testers should recognise their obligation to the testing requirements of that society, even when they may not themselves agree with them. Where their disagreement is of sufficient strength to qualify as a conscientious objection, they should have the right to withdraw their professional services.

## Principle 9

Language testers shall regularly consider the potential effects, both short and long term on all stakeholders of their projects, reserving the right to withhold their professional services on the grounds of conscience.



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- As professionals, language testers have the responsibility to evaluate the ethical consequences of the projects submitted to them. While they cannot consider all possible eventualities, they should engage in a thorough evaluation of the likely consequences and, where those consequences are in their view professionally unacceptable, withdraw their services. In such cases, they should as a matter of course consult with fellow language testers to determine how far their view is shared, always reserving the right, where their colleagues take a different view, to make an individual stand on the grounds of conscience.

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