Book Review

Assessment for Language Teaching
By Aek Phakiti and Constant Leung

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The book "Assessment for Language Teaching" is a part of the "Elements in Language Teaching Series" published by Cambridge University Press, which offers a profound exploration of the principles, practices, and challenges of language assessment in educational setting contexts. This comprehensive book provides theoretical yet practical advice for teachers in carrying out assessment in their language or content-integrated teaching classrooms.

This book consists of eight chapters. Chapter One defines the scope of language assessment, from informal and implicit assessment forms to the formal and explicit ones. To assist teachers in constructing appropriate, effective, and fair assessments for their students, the authors emphasise the importance of Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) among those working in traditional English language classrooms, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), or English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) environments. In addition, this introductory chapter provides an overview of the key features, enabling readers to capture a general understanding of the book's contents.

Chapter Two explores the complex roles, functions, and purposes of assessment in educational settings, providing a thorough explanation of how assessment activities contribute to students' educational pathways and influence classroom priorities. This chapter also examines the impact of external assessments, such as national exams, on the goals and outcomes of language learning environments. Questioning the widely accepted views of high-stakes versus low-stakes assessments, the authors argue that any assessments aiming to measure what students have learnt and how to further enhance their learning should not be considered as low-stakes assessments, as it is crucial to the core purpose of education. Therefore, it is the purpose of assessment that should determine whether the assessment is to be classified as low-stakes or high-stakes assessments.

Broadening the perception of language teachers in language testing and assessment, the third chapter delves into the complex concept of language assessment in educational settings. Specifically, the term evaluation is presented as an umbrella term under which are subsumed assessment and testing. The chapter lives up to its complex concept of language assessment by elaborating on the assessment of the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) and how these are inseparable from language proficiency components (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation). Also discussed in the chapter is the influence of sociocultural environments in shaping an

individual's language use and proficiency and how task types, test conditions, and social interactions could affect an individual's test results of language proficiency. In addition, reflecting the multilingual trend in education, the authors suggest that native speakers' competence in English should not be prioritised at the expense of other varieties, aligning with Kachru (1992), which emphasises the importance of recognising and valuing non-native English varieties as integral to the global diversity of the language.

While the preceding chapters discuss in general the nuts and bolts of assessment, Chapter Four explores two primary types of language assessment in further detail, which are Formative Assessment (FA) and Summative Assessment (SA). These two fundamental approaches within language assessment offer educators a structured guide on implementing assessments, indicating the appropriate context for each and how they complement one another in language education (Burke, 2010). Educators apply FA as an adaptable method to modify their teaching approaches in response to students' current understanding and learning needs. Conversely, SA occurs at the end of the teaching period to assess students' accumulated knowledge and abilities that often serves to measure academic performance. In other words, FA provides ongoing feedback to direct teaching and student progress, while SA evaluates overall achievement at the end of a learning period (Green, 2013). Furthermore, SA involves norm-referenced and criterion-referenced approaches, clarifying how students can be assessed against either a benchmark or their classmates. By grasping these assessment categories, teachers can facilitate a more supportive learning environment that promotes both continuous development and final evaluations, along with enabling teachers in selecting assessment techniques that correspond to their objectives.

Chapter Five shifts the focus towards the underlying theoretical and technical concepts to construct effective language assessments. It begins by introducing the notion of "construct" as an abstract measure of competencies, such as language proficiency, that aids teachers in drawing conclusions about students' abilities through their performance. Classical Test Theory (CTT) is also presented in this chapter as an essential approach to evaluate reliability and validity, though it acknowledges the limitations such as assuming item consistency. Another significant aspect reviewed is the issue of measurement errors, identifying random errors and systematic errors. These errors can significantly impact assessment outcomes and may cause students to pass or fail the assessment inaccurately (Carr, 2011). This chapter overall provides a fundamental reference for comprehending the theoretical framework of assessment, encouraging a holistic approach to designing effective and reliable language assessment.

Chapter Six offers practical tools for educators, facilitating the application of the theoretical insights from the previous chapter in real-world assessment scenarios. It focuses on the structure and application of summative assessment, offering a thorough overview of assessment phases: planning, development, administration, scoring, and result utilisation. It begins with the planning phase, in which teachers identify the purpose of assessment, target construct, and expected students. Later, the chapter delves into various scoring techniques, such as objective, semi-objective, and subjective scoring, each tailored to different kinds of assessment tasks. Moreover, it highlights alternative assessment types, such as portfolio and task-based assessments, that provide practical application of language skills. The authors emphasise the fundamental element of organizing the assessment sequentially (Harirs & McCann, 1994), which could provide meaningful feedback. In addition, it is also crucial for each stage of assessment to correspond to the learning objectives and students needs to preserve the relevance and credibility of assessments. By aligning each stage of the assessment process with clear learning objectives and students' needs, educators can ensure the relevance, credibility, and effectiveness of summative assessments while integrating alternative, practical evaluation methods for a more balanced and comprehensive approach.

Chapter Seven discusses the essential quality aspects of assessment by introducing six interrelated criteria: reliability, validity, practicality, ethics, fairness, and impact. This chapter highlights the importance of incorporating these key criteria to ensure that language assessments are rigorous but also practical and ethical, leading to positive outcomes. This discussion is enriched by highlighting important considerations and challenges that are worth noting in the implementation of these criteria, providing educators with the tools needed to create effective assessments.

Finally, the last chapter emphasises the areas for further developments in language assessments. It mainly consists of three parts: pedagogical practice, research and enquiries in language assessment, and further professional development and reading. The first part presents valuable considerations for effective formative feedback and practical guidelines for improving practices in language classroom assessments, offering insights on how educators can improve the quality of their assessments. Following this, topics and areas for further research with brief discussions are provided to encourage practitioners to explore new academic landscapes to expand their understanding of language assessment. This chapter also provides sources for teachers to further their assessment knowledge by offering a curated list of resources that are integral for professional development.

Overall, this book's discussions will assist teachers working in traditional English language classrooms, CLIL, or EMI environments in designing and executing effective assessment strategies in their classrooms. Alongside its elucidation of limitations in different assessment approaches, this book also discloses detailed illustrations on creating and using varied tools (e.g., rubrics and scoring systems) to perform assessments in classrooms, which can support English teachers to assess their students fairly and objectively.

While this book offers insightful views, there are some cross-reference errors found in certain sections. For example, on page 13, the authors instruct the readers to see section 2.1.1; however, this section does not exist. Additionally, on page 44, readers are directed to 'see Section 5.1.6' when the relevant information is actually referring to Section 6.1.6. Similar errors can be found in other chapters of the book, such as on page 71. These errors can lead to confusion, disrupting the reader's understanding and potentially resulting in misinformation.

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