
REVIEW

A Practical Guide to Assessing English Language Learners, by Christine Coombe, Keith Folse, and Nancy Hubley, Michigan, USA, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2007, xxx + 202 pp., \$28.50 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-472-03201-3

A Practical Guide to Assessing English Language Learners starts with a preface and acknowledgements section, and then lays the ground effectively with quite a motivating pretest section prior to the major discussion, "Are You Testwise?" to check the practicing teachers' knowledge of the status quo. It is then followed by "Introduction to Issues in Language Assessment and Terminology". The volume contains 10 chapters and an appendix. It is a guidebook, intended for classroom teachers, to help them "find their way more easily in the world of language assessment" that has "its own culture, traditions, and special language" (iiv). Throughout the book, the experienced Ms Wright and her less-experienced colleague Mr Knott respectively visualize some ways they deal with assessment. They represent composites of many teachers, though rather implying a feministic use of the language.

In the introduction section, while distinguishing between evaluation, assessment, and testing, Coombe, Folse, and Hubley, first categorize assessments by type, purpose, and timing, and then concisely focus on the nine guiding principles governing good test design, development, and analysis: usefulness, validity, reliability, practicality, washback, authenticity, transparency, and security.

Chapter 1, "The Process of Developing Assessment", provides a guide to the assessment development process. It presents the six major steps in this process, including planning, development, administration, analysis, feedback, and reflection as well as their associated component steps. In Chapter 2, "Techniques for Testing", test items and tasks are classified into subjective versus objective. Advantages and disadvantages, and then tips and practical points are offered on writing some commonly-used objective test items, namely multiple choice questions, True/False, matching format as well as common subjective items such as cloze/gap fill items, short answer items, and essay questions.

The next four chapters cover the assessment of the four skills. Chapter 3, "Assessing Reading," refers to constructs of reading and then explores techniques for reading assessment, highlighting that it is appropriate to start with the target skills the students need to develop. The washback associated with it would be good reading and test-taking skills. "Assessing Writing", Chapter 4, explores the practical issues teachers face when evaluating the written work of their students. Pointing to the basic elements of good writing assessment, i.e. rubric, prompt, expected response, and post-task evaluation, the fourth chapter then refers to free and guided writing, peer assessment, and portfolio. Finally, two main writing scales, i.e. holistic and analytic, are discussed, with the chapter mentioning one example scale for each. Considering listening assessment as the least understood and developed of the language skills, "Assessing Listening", Chapter 5, identifies bottom-up and top-down models of listening, mentions three major approaches to listening assessment, and differentiates between general and academic listening. Chapter 5 then refers to some considerations in designing listening tasks, emphasizing that background knowledge should be taken into account for its significance in comprehension and that the test items should be on meaning rather than on form. Several techniques for assessing listening skills are finally provided, including phonemic discrimination, paraphrase recognition, objective formats, short answer questions, cloze, dictation, information transfer tasks, and note-taking. In Chapter 6, "Assessing Speaking," the authors state that the skill is too complex to allow reliable analysis. Thus, due to many challenges, "many teachers do not even attempt to assess speaking" (p. 112). The authors briefly relate Canale and Swain's (1980) competencies (grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic) underlying speaking ability, Weir's (1993) speaking and improvisational skills, and differences between writing and speaking though both are subjective in grading. Coombe et al. also draw attention to some factors, prior to designing speaking assessments, e.g. fluency and accuracy, procedures for grading, and speaking samples to collect. Then, a variety of techniques are explained on formal speaking assessment and classroom speaking assessment. The former includes formats like oral interview with different tasks while the latter has formats like oral presentations, a debate, retelling stories, reading aloud, verbal essays, and extemporaneous speaking. Some general rubrics and administrative issues for speaking assessment are also recommended at the end. It is worth noting that

the emphasis on course objectives to be reflected in assessment content runs throughout the book as the authors state repeatedly, "Whatever the teaching focus, valid assessment should reflect the course objectives" (p. 112).

Chapter 7, "Student Test-taking Strategies," provides suggestions for long-term successful learning techniques and test-taking strategies. They include making a semester study plan, attending class regularly, using good review techniques, organizing pre-exam hours wisely, becoming familiar with instructions and formats, using strategies appropriate to the skill area, strategizing exam plans, learning from each exam experience, and building learner autonomy through self-assessment. Chapter 8 draws the attention of readers to a careful consideration of the factors, such as considerations prior to and during test administration, grading, etc. that might affect test results.

Chapter 9, "Using Assessment," introduces basic analysis concepts and feedback techniques to help teachers interpret test results with more confidence. Teachers need to understand the average group performance and the individual variation of their students. However, the authors do not go into the details of measures of central tendency and dispersion to clarify this point. Only the measure of standard deviation is discussed for the latter since it is the most frequently used measure of dispersion. The section, "Histograms," on page 162 would have been more helpful had it appeared after the section on "Standard Deviation," but with an illuminating example.

Chapter 10 is intended for K-12 teachers to better serve their English language learners. K-12 teachers teach content such as science, reading, or mathematics to learners whose English ability is limited. Providing a couple of the most common question types on math and science tests, the authors describe the example of math and science as well as the types of problems associated with assessing the content of each. They also provide some solutions for the betterment of the assessment of these content areas in dealing with English language learners.

A Practical Guide to Assessing English Language Learners enjoys some strong points. For one thing, providing a general quiz or a pretest at the beginning of this volume serves well in creating a mindset about the current conceptual and practical issues in language assessment.

The section “Ten Things to Remember” summing up the content of the chapters gives another chance to the readers to fix the materials worked on in their minds while “Extension Activity” analyzing Mr Knott’s problems might helpfully give a critical outlook to the users of the book. What is more, the authors walk the readers through the practice of language assessment, and describe all the problems along the way in assessment vividly.

Finally, the techniques or items listed for assessing language skills are presented systematically in the sense that the authors first present low-level processing items and then gradually move to high-level processing ones. In other words, prescribing test items for assessing language skills, they stick to their own suggestion of including items that start from easy and go to more difficult ones.

Nonetheless, the volume has some limitations as well. Firstly, the authors would have served the readers well in recommending them to read another concise and reader-friendly volume on the theoretical aspects of language assessment, before picking up this guidebook, since the short introduction section might leave a lot to be desired for some readers in the area of conceptual aspects of language assessment.

Secondly, there is not a separate section or chapter devoted to assessing vocabulary despite the fact that there is a revival in vocabulary research which points to the significance of vocabulary knowledge in language learning and teaching, and specially language assessment (Akbarian, 2010; Read, 2000). Recently, special issues on second language vocabulary in several scholarly journals has highlighted the position of vocabulary in language learning. Of course, vocabulary assessment is discussed in this volume in passing within the chapters on reading and listening. Nevertheless, irrespective of whether vocabulary is assessed separately or within the skills, it would have been much better if the authors had assigned a separate chapter on assessing vocabulary, if not grammar as another language component, since language learners carry along dictionaries not grammar books. Within this separate chapter, they could have talked of vocabulary assessment within each skill.

Thirdly, the authors introduce some user-friendly software programs for determining the vocabulary profile of texts in chapter 5 on

assessing listening. However, they do not recommend it for texts used in reading assessment and do not explain why it is not related to the earlier chapter on assessing reading. This software is equally relevant to and significant in reading assessment too.

Next, it appears that the readers would have been helped further had the authors allocated a separate chapter to discussing alternative assessment within which its different types, especially self-assessment, had been dealt with properly, rather than discussing it partially in different chapters. Particularly, the discussion on self-assessment on pages 141-43 does not seem to belong since the chapter is concerned with test-taking strategies. The chapter then ends with discussing the rationale for self-assessment and the techniques associated with it without properly justifying the ground, referring to only what Oscarson (1989) says about self-assessment. Like the other issues as discussed in the text, self-assessment has its own cons and pros. In this respect, Ross (1998) is worth referring to.

Finally, Chapter 10 would have suited a different volume on language assessment in content areas, not this short volume on assessing English language learners. Assessing English language learners and assessing content learners in English language, whose mother tongue is not English, are two completely different things. If this chapter is accepted as fitting under the title of the volume, then why not add other chapters, say, assessing young language learners, assessing English for vocational purposes, etc.

To conclude, this volume does what its title claims to do. It provides language teachers with a lamp to illuminate the path of assessing English language learners by taking the proper and systematic steps. I think this book is worthy of being bought by language teachers for its practicality, clarity, elegance of writing and presentation of materials, conciseness, and clear organization, irrespective of whether the teachers teach English in a foreign or a second language context.

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Is'haaq Akbarian

Department of English Language and Literature
University of Qom