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Focus on Assessment

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Teacher trainers and testing specialists alike have tended to see teaching and testing as separate worlds, each associated with a distinct research tradition. However, the past few years have seen a shift in thinking, reflected in the increasing use of the term ‘assessment’ rather than ‘testing’ in professional development books for teachers. Departing from the well-trodden path of investigating the technical qualities of formal tests, language assessment researchers have begun venturing into language classrooms. They have looked at the competing demands on teachers from their diverse assessment responsibilities, including the tensions between supporting students to succeed and accounting dispassionately for what they have learnt. Researchers have explored practical ways in which teachers use assessment to gain insights into questions such as what students know, what they are able to do with language, what motivates them and how best to help them to make progress.

The *Oxford Key Concepts for the Language Classroom* series, as Lightbown and Spada explain in their Series Editors’ Preface, is intended to make clear connections between research and practice, filling a gap between methodology books on one hand (advice on methods without links to research) and academic books on the other (which prioritize research rigour over practical implications). With this timely volume, Eunice Jang, an accomplished researcher in this field, offers to help teachers to understand the emerging

evidence on classroom assessment and to use it as an incentive to think critically about their own practices. The book will certainly inform readers about recent research and help them to evaluate language assessment practices, although teachers hoping for off-the-shelf resources to put directly into practice in the classroom will not find them here.

Supporting the professional development and training intent, Spotlight Studies culled from the research literature are used to introduce readers to key concepts in language assessment. There are opportunities for further exploration through concrete examples or Classroom Snapshots (here, these take the form of brief vignettes centring on transcriptions of dialogues between teachers and students). There are also Activities for discussion, consolidating the ideas by connecting concepts to readers' own experiences. The combination of summaries of research studies with genuine examples of interaction in the classroom works well as a means of relating concepts to the daily work of teachers. However, it might be helpful for less experienced readers to be provided with more commentary from the author and expansion of the activities.

With admirable ambition, the book sets out to challenge teachers' preconceptions and to change minds. In the first Activity (1.1 on p. 10), readers are asked to agree or disagree with 15 statements about assessment, including 'students are not capable of assessing their own ability' and 'teachers should treat all students equally by using the same assessment methods for everyone'. In the final chapter, 'Language assessment: what we know now', these statements are revisited. Readers are asked to respond again and then to compare their answers to see how their views have altered. Taking a 'myth-busting' line, Jang then deals with the 15 statements in turn, showing how the research helps to cast light on each.

Chapter 1 presents a 'use-oriented' perspective on assessment, inviting readers to think about the complex relationships between teaching, assessment, and learning. The scope of the chapter ranges from the role of feedback in assessment in the classroom to the influence of large-scale tests on teaching and learning. Particular attention is given to national and international standards used in setting targets for achievement, such as the *TESOL ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students* (TESOL 1997) or the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001). Such schemes aim to track learners' progress towards explicit targets, but Jang observes that individual teachers may each interpret them differently, undermining their value as common benchmarks. Readers are also plunged into the confusing blizzard of acronyms that accompanies these systems of

standards. On page 32 alone we encounter No Child Left Behind (NCLB), CELLA, ELDA, MWA, ACCESS for ELLs®, and WIDA.

Chapter 2 covers theories of language development. Jang emphasizes the need for school-aged learners to develop the academic language proficiency (ALP) that supports formal learning in addition to the interpersonal communication skills they need for social interaction with their peers. She presents a framework for assessment that breaks ALP down into vocabulary, grammar, and discourse knowledge, showing how these relate to the language functions and skills that underpin the complex activities involved in schoolwork, for example reading a text, recounting the information orally, and writing a summary. The ALP framework, Jang argues, offers a basis for reviewing assessments in current use and developing new ones.

The chapter sketches the characteristics of learners at different stages of maturity between the ages of 6 and 18, suggesting possible implications for the assessment of their language abilities. There is a discussion of the time required for English language learners to catch up with their L1 peers. Jang shares the conclusion from her own research in Canada that three years of language immersion seems to be the point at which immigrant students catch up with—and begin to surpass—their L1 classmates in reading comprehension. The chapter concludes by considering the wide range of personal, cultural, educational, and physical factors that can affect performance, underlining the need for collaboration between teachers, parents, and other professionals in correctly identifying learners' needs.

Bringing the reader closer to classroom practice, Chapters 3 and 4 in turn focus on 'young language learners' and 'adolescent learners'. Each is structured around a set of guiding principles for assessing learners in the relevant age group. For young learners these include, 'assessment should provide reliable information about young learners' language proficiency' and for adolescents, 'teachers' assessment competence is key to high quality assessment practice'. Although it would be hard to argue against such principles, it is not clear why they are divided in this way: most of the principles listed in both sets seem relevant to all ages.

In appealing to readers, Jang casts her net wide. She observes that many teachers lack any formal training in assessment and need professional development. As responsibility for assessing language abilities falls on teachers of every school subject, all teachers (not only teachers of second or foreign languages) will benefit from learning about it. In truth,

although this book would certainly help to fill the gap, it may not provide the best introductory step for the uninitiated. Teachers who have not received any prior training may struggle to keep up with the rather terse theoretical discussions of assessment and language learning. Even at the outset, readers seem to be expected to know some technical assessment terminology. Activity 1.1, designed to gauge readers' attitudes before reading, includes terms such as 'formative and summative assessments', 'standards-based assessments', 'accommodations', 'reliability', and 'validity'. These terms do all appear in the helpful glossary at the end of the book, but readers may feel the need to look elsewhere for a gentler introduction to the language assessment landscape, such as Fulcher (2013). Perhaps less knowledgeable readers should be advised to visit some of the links provided on the companion website before tackling each chapter.

Jang makes an effort to draw on a variety of settings, including studies from the Netherlands, Hong Kong, and the Czech Republic, but North American schools, where learners are aiming to 'meet language demands in schoolwork', are clearly her main focus (contributing more than half of the Classroom Snapshots). Teachers working in this and similar contexts will undoubtedly benefit the most, especially from the account of language learning in Chapter 2. Curiously, the implications for assessment of differences between English language learners in American schools and foreign language learners (such as learners of Chinese in American schools or learners of English in Chinese schools) are not explored in any depth. There will still be much that teachers from such settings can take from the book and apply to their own classrooms, but they will not find the examples and activities as accessible.

In sum, this is an engaging and informative book that deftly guides the reader through some complex practical and ethical issues with intelligent use of examples. It should be particularly useful for graduate students and practising teachers, especially those with at least a basic level of familiarity with assessment concepts who are interested in exploring the research base. There are a lot of ideas here and at times it would be nice to see them examined in a little more depth. The presentation of the ALP framework in Chapter 2, for example, is too brief to demonstrate its potential uses as a tool for teachers. On the other hand, the carefully chosen activities make excellent starting points for discussion and even experienced teachers will be challenged to think about assessment in new ways.

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