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Book Review

Assessment in the language classroom: Teachers supporting student learning

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Language assessment has achieved a great amount of attention of both researchers and practitioners, which is evidenced, among others, by a number of well-known monographs (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010; Coombe, Davidson, O'Sullivan, & Stoyloff, 2012; Gordon & Rajagopalan, 2016; Gottlieb, 2006; Komorowska, 2002; Tsagari & Banerjee, 2016; to name just a few) as well as a proliferation of journals oriented towards language testing and assessment (e.g., *Language Testing*, *Assessing Writing*, *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *International Journal of Language Testing and Assessment*, and *Educational Assessment*). The question might arise, then, whether there is a need for a new publication dealing with the complex nature of language assessment, and if yes, what kind of addressee to aim at, how to bridge the gap between what is available and what might be desired, and how to structure it to respond to the currently changing educational reality.

It is in this context that the current review attempts to evaluate the newly published book by Liyong Cheng (Queen's University, Canada) and Janna Fox

(Carleton University, Canada) *Assessment in the Language Classroom: Teachers Supporting Student Learning* (Applied Linguistics for the Language Classroom series, series editor: Andy Curtis). In particular, the promises made by the subtitle of the book trying to make assessment more usable by practicing teachers to motivate learners and shape the learning process are to be put to a test below.

The book is subdivided into seven chapters, contains a list of figures and tables, the series editor's introduction, acknowledgements, introduction, appendix, glossary, references and index of major concepts. The major part of the book shows an almost perfect division into chapters, each spanning around 30 pages. The question however arises whether the book would not benefit from a concluding section, paralleling the currently existing introduction, in which the authors would indicate the point to which they actually took the readers.

The first glance at the table of contents indicates a new approach to the way language assessment is conceptualized. Rather than deal traditionally with areas for testing and devoting chapters to testing specific language subsystems and language skills, Cheng and Fox decided to structure the book in a different way. Each chapter's title is a question that refers to a particular stage of the assessment process:

1. Why do we assess?
2. What do we assess?
3. How do we assess?
4. How do we develop a high-quality classroom test?
5. Who are we assessing? Placement, needs analysis and diagnostics
6. Who are we assessing? Feedback and motivation
7. When we assess, how can we use assessment to move forward?

This is an interesting way of approaching language assessment holistically, adopting a bird's eye view of the language classroom, regardless of the particular testing purposes that might be needed during a lesson. However, a holistic view like that might make those teachers who seek a range of practical testing solutions for each skill and subsystem unsatisfied. At the same time, it enabled the authors to devote ample attention to the effect of assessment on future learning and to the motivating and instructional value of assessment instruments, or, in other words, to how testing shapes teaching. This seems to be an important asset of the book, well-addressed throughout the whole publication.

Each chapter opens with a series of questions in the "Activate Your Learning" box, where the questions announce the concepts that are going to be covered in the chapter. Each finishes with a section entitled "Looking Back at Chapter X," summing up the discussion in one-two paragraphs, as well as "Suggested Readings" with an annotated bibliography of books and articles relevant to the

theme of the chapter. Each chapter is subdivided into a number of sections (numbered subchapters and subsubchapters as well as unnumbered thematic sections), with headings clearly indicating where the book's addressees actually are at the moment. One minor shortcoming might be the fact that the internal structure of chapters is not reflected in the table of contents, which contains only chapter titles. While it might be understandable that the authors wanted to use the question format for chapter titles and did not want to list subchapters in order to more powerfully express the philosophy of the book also through the table of contents, its readers might benefit from a full table of contents, which would allow them to appreciate the completeness of the approach to language assessment represented in the publication.

As regards the structure, the practical orientation of the book is accomplished through in-text activities, examples, teachers' quotations, classroom problems, sample tasks, and evaluation criteria. Activities are clearly distinguished from the text proper, and each has a brief introduction indicating the assessment concept(s) that it addresses and the practical task to be executed. Given the fact that each chapter features a few such well-developed activities, the book is a perfect combination of theory and practice, suitable for use in graduate teacher training modules. The instructional impact of the book is also achieved through the glossary of the most important concepts used in assessment. The terms are defined in relatively simple language, without excessive use of technical or scientific terms.

Assessment in the Language Classroom concludes with an eight-page appendix listing the most popular classroom assessment tools and test formats, each with a brief explanation and example. Such a section is immensely useful as a practical inventory of testing techniques to be directly used by teachers without necessarily resorting to the text proper. However, one could think about making the list more extensive (the authors themselves claim that it is not exhaustive and there are other alternatives as well) and labeling its items with the skills/subsystems they are useful for.

Chapter One starts with definitions and purposes of assessment. Here, assessing learners is defined, together with features of high-quality assessment. An interesting part of this chapter is the discussion of the concept of *alignment*, or "the degree of agreement between standards, curriculum, tests and classroom instruction" ("Introduction," p. xiv). Out of the features of high-quality assessment (pp. 11-12), alignment takes the first place, indicating the importance of the concept that has not been viewed as fundamental before. Also the feature of fairness is emphasized, alongside such well-known concepts as validity, reliability or practicality. The chapter skillfully leads the reader to reflecting upon and eventually formulating their own philosophy of assessment.

In Chapter Two, Cheng and Fox address the questions of what is worth teaching and what is worth assessing. To answer these, examples of specific curriculum expectations in relation to particular language modalities are given. The concept of alignment introduced in Chapter One is put into use here, and the authors help teachers align their classroom activities and assessments with the learning goals and outcomes. The chapter stresses the importance of contextual understanding, which is, for instance, demonstrated by the provision of a very helpful template for planning a course. Most of the chapter is devoted to the issues of formulating learning outcomes, course planning and design. Within the holistic philosophy adopted by Cheng and Fox, it is inevitable to have a well-grounded awareness of what to teach and why before one starts to think about what to assess and why.

Chapter Three starts by comparing and contrasting large-scale testing with classroom testing. Details of a wide range of assessment tools are given, including alternative assessment methods, such as portfolio, again, with detailed examples. The continuation of the comprehensive approach adopted in the previous chapters finds its reflection here in a separate subchapter devoted to creating a classroom assessment plan, which would bring together different assessment measures such as reflective diaries, in-class tests, portfolios, group posters and presentations into a holistic estimate of learners' proficiency. A great merit of this chapter is an extensive discussion of portfolio as an assessment tool. What is missing, on the other hand, is a more traditional summary of kinds of tests/assessment instruments, such as placement, diagnostic, achievement, proficiency or aptitude tests. This would add to the diversity of purposes that assessment actually serves and would give teachers complete knowledge of how to design and conduct different forms of testing to satisfy diverse assessment purposes.

Chapter Four helps teachers build the knowledge and skills of test design, analysis and evaluation. A detailed overview of the test development process is also presented herein, with test specifications emphasized as a basis for proper test design. It is interesting how Cheng and Fox introduce in this chapter some basics of quantitative analysis of tests, showing the calculations for task facility and item discrimination in a user-friendly way, without introducing statistical terminology or equations. Effective as this may be, the discussion of task facility calculation could be accompanied by a table showing bands for different levels of facility so that teachers find it easy to interpret the facility score. Also, some emphasis on how to score tests to ensure inter-rater and intra-rater reliability would be useful for a complete picture.

Chapter Five looks at *who* we are assessing, in relation to placement, needs analysis and diagnostics. The importance of classroom context is shown in this chapter with a comparison of diagnostic assessment in a conversation class versus diagnostic assessment in an English-for-academic-purposes class. A closer look is taken at specific assessment tools that teachers use to better understand

their students' needs and capabilities, such as placement testing, needs analysis and diagnostic assessment, showing how different data sources might lead to better understanding of learners' proficiency and needs. The approach adopted in the chapter is interesting, also in that few books on assessment actually deal with needs analysis. However, a more systematic coverage of the recommended structure and design of a placement test would be useful, given the serious consequences an incorrectly designed placement test may have.

The penultimate chapter focuses on the test-taker in relation to feedback and motivation. The importance of teacher-student connection and the value of on-going feedback in determining the quality of teaching and learning are discussed, as well as the use of assessment practices to motivate students to learn. Quite interestingly, the chapter evokes some key concepts and distinctions of motivation in order to show how assessment for learning can actually help sustain motivation. The chapter addresses the essential concept of assessment motivation strategies to show how the washback effect can be maximized to support learning.

The last chapter aims at answering the essential question: "When we assess, how can we use assessment to move forward?," thus stressing the formative value of assessment. The chapter serves as a kind of conclusion, showing how complex grading tests can actually be and indicating test preparation (test-wiseness) as an essential area of learner training.

To sum up, the book by Liying Cheng and Janna Fox draws on the practical experiences of the authors to give a coherent picture of how language assessment can support students in foreign language learning. Since, according to the contemporary methodology influenced by learner autonomy, students learn rather than are taught languages, assessment of learners' progress and proficiency should shape learning, support students and motivate them to work, rather than merely provide an objective picture of language ability and use.

In quite an innovative way, the book attempts to guide its readers to formulating their own philosophy of assessment, proceeding from types and features of assessment, through building the theoretical basis of learning, to practical techniques used in the classroom. Perhaps the approach of encouraging teachers to filter assessment through their own experiences will lead to improved assessment skills through increased awareness and understanding. If that is actually the case, the value of the book will be immense, as this kind of "methodology ownership" approach would be transferable to other spheres of teaching as well.

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