

Book Review

Introducing Second Language Assessment

Trung Kien Pham

SOLO English Centre, Ha Dong, Hanoi, Vietnam

Corresponding author: trungkienbmhg@gmail.com

Ockey, G. J. (2024). *Introducing second language assessment*. Cambridge University Press.

Language assessment lies at the heart of language teaching and learning. In this book, Ockey (2024) attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice, aiming to help language teachers more effectively assess their students. Although the author claims that this book serves as an introductory textbook, it is found to be accessible and relatable not only to university and master's students but also to experienced practitioners.

The book was divided into five parts, comprising 13 chapters. Regarding Part I, as the aim of the book is introductory, the author begins Chapter 1 with the definition of language assessment and how it is important in supporting students' learning. Additionally, the author provides some examples of ineffective and effective tests, which help teachers understand and thus not demotivate students in learning a language. What I learned in this chapter is the importance of language assessment literacy raised by the author. Chapter 2 discusses types of language assessments used in classrooms and how the misuse of assessments could result in negative consequences. The author draws an analogy of assessment to medical equipment, as both serve a significant impact on patients and students, which is insightful and enhances my understanding of the critical role that assessment plays. **This reinforces the idea that assessment should serve as a nurturer, aiming to aid learning rather than acting as a gatekeeper that simply filters or excludes.**

In Part II, the author offers some insights into the knowledge of assessment principles. Regarding Chapter 3, it is noted that the context is important in language assessment when sociopolitical, cultural, and educational factors also contribute to the success of language assessment. Also, the assessment could have a significant impact on stakeholders. The example of nurses in Bangkok who took part in the assessment illustrates the significance of assessment, indicating that not only test takers and their families can be affected by the assessment, but even those who might not be related to them. Chapter 4 addresses the validity and alignment of assessment. Good use of assessment aims to indicate the correct performance of test takers and could be used for promoting more effective teaching. In other words, assessment should align with the course objectives to ensure positive washback effects. Chapter 5 introduces uniformity and reliability, which ensure consistency in assessment. Various factors need consideration, such as context, administrative procedures, item type, and language input, and the way of scoring to ensure uniform assessment. A new point is that the use of AI could help teachers create and evaluate materials, making it more uniform. Another point is reliability in ensuring the quality of tests. The author introduces a number of approaches to measure the reliability of the test. One key point I take away from this section is that the rationale for choosing the type of reliability should also be reported, rather than just informing the reliability scores only.

Regarding part III, in Chapter 6, the author discusses some commonly used item types, such as multiple choice, true-false, and short answers. These item types are mainly used for assessing receptive skills such as reading and listening skills, as well as grammar and vocabulary. The author argues that instead of making decisions for designing a test based on an international test like IELTS, teachers need to base their decisions on their own context, purpose so that they can appropriately design a test. Chapter 7 aims to answer the questions for teachers: *How did you create the question? How do you know the question is good?* The author introduces some approaches and guidelines for teachers to create and evaluate input and items with the assistance of AI. Additionally, some basic statistics skills were delivered to assess the effectiveness of test items.

Chapter 8 concerns the use of some approaches to evaluate whether the items can differentiate between proficient and non-proficient learners. Chapter 9 deals with criterion-referenced tests in which the author implies that language assessment literacy plays a vital role, and with the lack of it, a teacher could misuse the approach of testing, leading to unreliable results. Some discussions on criterion-referenced assessments are also given.

Part IV focuses on judging test takers' performance. A number of tasks are introduced for teachers to decide on assessing language skills and integrated skills. The author thoroughly discusses both sides of each task, pinpointing the advantages and disadvantages. Delivery of language assessment is provided, namely, human and virtual, and computer. What I learned after reading this chapter is that we teachers need to be critical of the situations and contexts we are teaching, so that we can use the appropriate tasks (interactive or non-interactive/four-skills approach or integrated approach). Chapter 11 deals with scoring performance assessment, in which the author makes a distinction between holistic and analytic scoring and also offers several approaches to creating rating scales. Chapter 12 helps teachers think about the appropriateness of the scores given to their students by considering types of validity evidence and evaluating score consistency.

The final part, which contains only one chapter, is the one in which teachers reflect on their own assessment after reading the book. In this chapter, readers are given a language assessment literacy test to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses in language assessment.

Overall, this book is reader-friendly, with thought-provoking questions at the end of each chapter, encouraging readers to articulate complex concepts in an easier way. A significant contribution of this book is the focus on technology in language assessment. This is a strength of this book, when the application of artificial intelligence in language assessment seems still scarce. As the author claims that the book "offers an accessible approach to statistical data analyses for students/teachers who have little background or training in language

assessment", it is appreciated that he attempts to demonstrate how to perform mathematical calculations in language testing by recording videos included in the additional resources.

However, the book still has its weaknesses. In my opinion, the statistical sections, for instance, may feel demanding for those unfamiliar with data analysis. A more in-depth explanation of how statistical tools inform instructional decisions, beyond procedural calculation, could make the content more approachable and meaningful.

Additionally, while the author contributes to filling in the gaps by the focus on technology in assessment, introducing AI use in creating materials and questions for the tests, it seems to me that the author might over-trust the technology. For example, in a video introducing AI in creating inference questions, the author fails to caution teachers on the final step, namely, evaluating the appropriateness of the questions made by AI. As the author emphasizes the needs analysis and alignment of the test with course objectives, the reliance on AI to generate questions without critically evaluating whether the questions generated by AI could fit the curriculum and students' level, could lead to inaccurate evaluation of students' level. Also, AI could make mistakes, which means that teachers should be reminded to check the accuracy of the questions before using them in the real test. Despite these limitations, the book's strengths, especially its focus on technology and practical examples, make it a noteworthy addition to the field of language teaching and assessment.

About the author

Trung Kien Pham holds an MA in TESOL from the University of Canberra, Australia, and is an instructor at SOLO English Centre (Hanoi, Vietnam), where he specializes in IELTS preparation. His professional interests include translanguaging and creativity in language learning.

Reference:

Ockey, G. J. (2024). *Introducing second language assessment*. Cambridge University Press.