

A Book Review of “Handbook of Second Language Assessment” By Dina Tsagari and Jayanti Banerjee (2016)

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The handbook of second language assessment is a part of a long-lasting series called handbooks of applied linguistics. It has been published by De Gruyter Mouton since 1990s. Since that time, the field applied linguistics has gone through different ups and downs concerning the essence of the field. A hot debate was started by the experts involving in the field in which they sought the response to the essence of applied linguistics: Is it a disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or multidisciplinary field? The authors of different volumes went through the epistemological concepts of applied linguistics to frame their series. That said, they have established a programmatic perspective toward applied linguistics in which they have searched solutions for the real world’s language and communication problems. This viewpoint can also be seen through the chapters of this handbook of second language assessment.

In their introductory chapter on the handbook of second language assessment Karlfried Knapp and Gert Antos go through the distinction of “pure” and “applied” sciences. They state that due to the critical and reflecting nature of science to solve problems, we deal with the “applied” version of it to answer our world’s problems. However, from the very time we stick to the “applied” science, we encounter the question raised to investigate the role of sciences in a range of problems: from individual to interpersonal and social; moreover, from intercultural to political problems. This conception is the backbone of the current book. The chapter goes with several distinctions such as that of theoretically applied linguistics versus practically applied linguistics. The authors of this chapter, later on, state the objectives of the applied linguistics series; paving the ground for why it is necessary to have a handbook on second language assessment.

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In the first chapter of the handbook of second language assessment, Dina Tsagari and Jayanti Banerjee, as the editors of this volume, narrow down the scopes of the book. After providing an introduction on how this volume is related to the problems existing in language assessment, they gave a concise history of second language assessment. As one important aspect of language in social and political interaction (McNamara & Roever, 2006), the importance of having a handbook on language assessment is well-illustrated. The authors of this chapter state that the main aim of this volume is to review the debates of the research conducted in the field of language assessment during the last 50 years. Given that, this volume addresses issues such as the design, administration, and training involved in language assessment along with political, social, and ethical aspects of language assessment.

The handbook of second language assessment contains four parts. The first part of the handbook contains four chapters. This part which is called “conceptual foundation of second language assessment” provides information on different characteristics of language assessments such as the approaches, frameworks, and purposes. In this part of the volume, some chapters focus on reliability and validity of language assessment. In the second chapter which is the beginning chapter of the first part, Hamp-Lyon discusses the technical assessment terms such as testing, evaluation, assessment, and examination. Moreover, other newer terms such as dynamic assessment, alternative assessment, and learning-oriented language assessment are discussed and well-differentiated. What is illuminating about this chapter is the way Hamp-Lyon describes it. Using a diachronic method, Hamp-Lyon tries to depict language assessment stance regarding the mentioned characteristics. In the conclusion of her chapter, she provides some challenges that are calling for new research in the field.

It is an undeniable fact that the terms such as “standard” and “framework” find their way into assessment matters. In the third chapter of this volume Glenn Fulcher tries to explain these terms under a chapter entitled “Standards and Frameworks”. As a new social phenomenon, Fulcher explores standard-based testing. Moreover, he deals with the relationships existing between the two terms of “standard” and “framework”. He calls upon validation research on the scores obtained from tests and assessment.

Chapter four is the last chapter of Part I whose author is Yasuyo Sawaki. The main focus of the chapter is on “norm-referenced” and “criterion referenced” testing (NRT and CRT). She organizes the chapter by providing the historical development of these frames of references. Next, by providing various examples, Sawaki show different aspects of measurement and its quality. Finally, she draws our attention toward researching related issues of NRT and CRT such as the challenges and future directions.

Part II of the book consisting of eight chapters is called “assessing second language skills/areas”. These chapters concentrate on assessing language skills such as listening, reading

speaking, and writing. Furthermore, in these chapters, we can see new assessment approaches on other language competencies such as pragmatic and intercultural ones. In chapter five, Xiaoming Xi and Larry Davis explore different aspects of test quality such as validity, fairness, and usefulness. Using Kane (2013) argument-based approach to validation, they provide a discussion on the mentioned conceptualization.

The notion of impact in language assessment is discussed in chapter six by Nick Saville and Hanan Khalifa. They have sought different consequences which administrating a test of language may have in the society. To capture the recent trends, they have used several recently published case studies in their chapter. In addition to the notion of impact, the authors of this chapter pay meticulous attention to the notion of washback in language assessment. As like the previous chapters, the authors call for researching the challenges one can see with regard to this aspect of language assessment.

The assessment of listening is the topic of chapter seven of the current volume. In this chapter, Tineke Brunfaut explores different theoretical definitions such as what listening construct is, and describes the different approaches used to measure listening ability. The author, then, describes the factors which can be considered as the barrier to assessing listening ability. These factors are listening task difficulty, affective characteristics, and linguistics characteristics. Doing research on the challenges of assessing listening ability is the recommendation of the author as the concluding part of this chapter.

Assessing reading is the topic of the eighth chapter. Using the studies in the written discourse, Fabiana MacMillan tries to capture a framework for analyzing not only general reading skills but also specific reading skills. She reviews various research on large-scale reading assessment to establish the validity of her framework. She concludes her chapter on reading assessment by indicating that there is a relationship between the type of lexical connection and reading comprehension questions.

Chapter 9 of this volume is devoted to assessing speaking. The author of this chapter is Talia Isaacs who believes that due to the problems existing in matching speaking assessment with the test takers' real world oral communication it is not easy to assess speaking. In this chapter, Isaac emphasizes the construct definition of speaking. One new aspect that can be seen in this chapter is the presence of technology-mediated assessment. The author believes that due to challenging issues existing in human judgments of assessing speaking, technology-mediated assessments can be very conducive.

The conceptual and methodological issues in assessing writing are thoroughly reviewed by Thomas Eckes, Anika Müller-Karabil and Sonja Zimmermann in chapter 10. In this chapter, the authors introduce different writing settings in which different components and concepts are identified. Moreover, special attention is drawn to introducing writing as a multidimensional

construct. Human raters are also considered in the chapter as an important part of scoring writing performance.

Pragmatic competence and the way to assess it is dealt with in chapter 11 by Kirby Grabowski. In this chapter, the author has reviewed the literature to reach how pragmatic competence is conceptualized in L2. Next, Grabowski considers the research conducted on assessing pragmatic competence. Through this chapter one can understand that the author tries to highlight the role of context in the validity of inferences made while assessing L2 pragmatics. Moreover, some instruments have been mentioned in the chapter to assess L2 pragmatics.

In the next chapter of the current volume, Gila Schauer describes intercultural competence and how to assess this competency. After providing definitions for the terms such as culture and intercultural competence, she proposes a model to be used in the assessment of intercultural competence. Moreover, in the concluding part of her chapter, Schauer discusses issues about researching on assessing intercultural competence.

Chapter 13 and 14 are the last chapters of the second part. Chapter 13 is written by Nivja de Jong who focuses on the relationship between the aspects of fluency and language proficiency. In this chapter, the author reviews the literature to examine how L2 researchers assess fluency, suggesting different principles to the researchers for assessing fluency. Chapter 14 is written by June Eyckmans, Philippe Anckaert, and Winibert Segers. These researchers focus on assessing translation and interpretative skills. The authors help learners to understand what the concepts of assessing translation and interpretation originate from. They have also proposed a reliable framework for assessing translation and interpretation.

Chapter 15 is the first chapter of part three. This part is devoted to different assessment subjects such as dynamic assessment and assessment of asylum. Chapter 15 is written by Karmen Pižorn and Ari Huhta on a scheme for national formal and summative language assessment. It is worth mentioning that other large-scales of assessment are discussed in this regard. Moreover, they have a glance on good testing practice and the impact of political issues on language assessment.

Learning-oriented assessment (LOA) in L2 assessment is considered by Carolyn E. Turner and James E. Purpura in chapter 16. Through reading this chapter, one may understand that by proposing LOA the authors try to indicate how and when L2 assessment both in the planned and unplanned manner can contribute to L2 learning. The authors provide a concise history of classroom-based assessment, then, define and propose their new framework: LOA. This framework considers all the stakeholders involving in language assessment.

In the next chapter, Matthew E. Poehner and Paolo Infante explain Dynamic Assessment (DA). The authors define the key elements of DA such as mediation and language development.

Moreover, the theoretical underpinnings of DA have been explained. Reviewing the recent publication in the realm of DA, the authors explain how dialogic mediation is functioning in L2 assessment setting. As the concluding remarks of their chapter, the authors discuss the possibility of implementing DA in the L2 setting.

Chapter 18 is devoted to language assessment in the workplace. Ute Knoch and Susy Macqueen provide a review of the related issues regarding language assessment for the workplace. The authors, then, provide descriptions of different approaches such as professional English exit tests from tertiary institutions used for language assessment in workplace contexts. The authors, later on, discuss different issues existing in developing and validating the test for language assessment in the workplace.

Part III comes to its end in chapter 19. In this chapter, Kerry Ryan goes through developing language assessment approaches to assess the language ability of immigrants, citizenships, and asylums. By providing a historical description of the terms, the author differentiates among the three contexts. Finally, Ryan calls for researching both theoretical and practical aspects of L2 assessment for the mentioned contexts.

Part IV is the final part of this volume exploring various aspects such as technology and language learning, developing new assessment frameworks, new assessment approaches to assess language abilities of L2 learners suffering from disabilities, and teacher' assessment literacy. Chapter 20, the first chapter of part IV, is devoted to the importance of standards and frameworks in language assessment. The chapter, authored by Spiros Papageorgiou, contains sections which recall the readers of aligning curricula. The author explores alignment of tests to the CEFR. The validation process is also considered in this chapter, and argument-based approach is highlighted.

How technology can have a contribution to enhancing language assessment is the topic of chapter 21 authored by Alistair Van Moere and Ryan Downey. The authors provide a review of the current studies done in the realm of technology and language assessment in both writing and speaking skills. Moreover, they explain new technological scoring systems for assessing the mentioned skills. In the conclusion of their chapter, the authors provide implications for the emergence of technology in language assessment.

Yuko Goto Butler in chapter 22 explains the characteristics of young learners and the way language assessment should be conceptualized among them. Through the course of explanation, the author has defined washback and ethical issues in assessing young learners' language ability and how the consequences would be for them. In like manner, Butler calls for conducting research on language assessment of young learners through using computer technology and multimedia.

Lynda Taylor and Natalie Nordby Chen devote their chapter to assessment issues such as equity, ethics, and testing accommodations. The authors focus on the learners with special needs. In this chapter, the authors draw our attention to the extent to which modification should be implemented on standardize tests. Taylor and Chen ask for research in assessment ethics, equity, and measurement challenges while we are concerned with students with disabilities.

In chapter 24, a new term which is introduced by Cecilia Guanfang Zhao: “authorial voice”. The term is used to illustrate the cultural and linguistic differences existing among the learners in their performance of writing. After reviewing the related literature, the author provides a theoretical framework for the concept of authorial voice. Some aspects of L2 writing have been highlighted for doing research by the author as the concluding remarks.

Chapter 25 is the last chapter of part IV and also the last chapter of this volume authored by Luke Harding and Benjamin Kremmel on teachers’ language assessment literacy (LAL). Doing the relevant literature review on the topic, the authors specify the importance of doing LAL research in the realm of L2 assessment research. After describing the programs existing in supporting teacher assessment literacy, Harding and Kremmel present the challenges of these programs.

Owing to the rich theoretical and practical sections and due to addressing the wide array of recent research published in various aspects of L2 assessment, this volume can be an invaluable handbook in language assessment. One very delighting aspect of this volume is that the authors provide the gaps in different subjects, leading the readers to grasp the needs in doing L2 assessment research. In our perspective, the current volume is very much conducive to providing the basic and to some extent the technical knowledge of L2 assessment for readers.

Reference

McNamara, T., & Roever, C. (2006). *Language testing: The social dimension*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd.