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Review: Focus On Assessment

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Focus on Assessment is aimed at providing its readers with a foundation for a better understanding of language assessment and applicable practices through extensive discussions of current assessment issues and testing approaches, as well as concrete examples, and practical activities.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides a basis for language assessment – the characteristics of language learners, the multiple roles of teachers in assessments, and the key concepts of assessments – and the uses of language assessment in and outside the classroom context. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical frameworks and the key features of language learning that school-aged learners are expected to develop. Chapter 3 and 4 investigate some of the assessment principles for young language learners and adolescent language learners, respectively. Chapter 5 serves as the conclusion of the book, summing up what the readers have learnt about language assessments from the first four chapters. This chapter also gives a number of useful suggestions and the answers to the questions posed in the previous chapters.

The chapters are well-planned and carefully designed to help the readers connect all of the concepts and ideas, which unfolds smoothly from chapter to chapter. At the beginning of each chapter, there is a preview, which functions as an introductory part. However, the author also plays her second role as a teacher trainer here by providing some topics for discussion and some tasks for the readers to elicit self-reflection before exploring the content of the chapter. This stimulating approach keeps the readers active.

From chapter two onwards, a brief review of the previous chapter is also given so that the readers can look back at what they have learnt and understood. They can then connect this understanding to the new knowledge in the present chapter. Regarding the presentation of the content in the chapter, each specific issue is presented in small sections. The heading and its explanation in each section are clearly articulated and easy to understand. However, when there are some subtle concepts to be explained or discussed, such as how to map different types of assessments on the continua in Chapter 3 (p. 75), or how to map out assessment principles in the ecological assessment system in Chapter 4 (p. 151), the author includes additional graphic images to clarify the ideas.

Obviously, this book is well illustrated with tables, charts, graphs, excerpts, and empirical data to support the readers' interpretation of the discussions. Some of the empirical data that are presented in the book are from the author's research and her own hands-on teaching experiences. At the end of each chapter, there is a summary, providing the readers with a clear picture of what has been learnt and discussed. Very often, the information is itemized so that the readers can read quickly and be prepared to move on to the next chapter.

According to the author, of all the stakeholders involved in language assessment, the teacher is the most important for

assessment development and evaluation. Therefore, the focus of the book is on the teachers, especially those who teach school-aged learners. The author places a special emphasis on the teachers' use of language assessments. With the use-oriented approach, the author attempts to activate and strengthen the readers' assessment competence and confidence in designing, using, and evaluating specific assessments in and outside the classrooms. Throughout the book, the readers are frequently encouraged or even challenged to complete a task in a classroom snapshot or an activity section before or after the discussions. It seems that these stimulating tasks are designed to engage them to keep exploring their own knowledge, opinions, and experience while learning more from the book.

I would like to recommend this book to language teachers who have had some experiences in classroom instruction and developing language assessments because these experiences are fundamental basis for understanding and interacting with all of the activities in the book. One aspect that is noticeable throughout the book is the way that the author facilitates her readers' critical thinking. There are a wide range of questions posed at intervals in every chapter. She keeps inviting her readers to interact with her as if they were participating in a teacher training course. This questioning technique is quite remarkable and creates the atmosphere of a workshop instead of a textbook reading. Another aspect that makes the presentation of the information in this book more convivial is the way in which she "talks" with her readers through the use of "I" and "you." This feature reinforces the feeling that the readers are attending a training course delivered by an author who is an experienced trainer.

I particularly like the author's inquiry approach. This makes the book interesting and challenging. After reading this book, I have not only broadened my scope of knowledge and my perception of key issues on what and how to assess, but also have

begun to look into my own beliefs and my former practices of language assessment.

The Reviewer

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