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Book Review: Assessing English Learners in U.S. Schools

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Farnsworth, T. L., & Malone, M. E. (2014). *Assessing English Learners in U.S. Schools*. Virginia: TESOL International Association.

In the field of language instruction, the roles of teachers and those of learners in the classroom have changed over time, as influenced by the development of teaching and learning approaches, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). A question that is often posed is *what is the most appropriate way to assess learners' language performance?* This question is challenging, having been often raised by teachers and policy makers in response to any newly-proposed teaching approaches.

The book, *Assessing English Learners in U.S. Schools*, authored by Timothy L. Farnsworth and Margaret E. Malone, provides some feasible answers to the above question by introducing a variety of classroom assessment methods and practical procedures to deal with learners' four English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The assessment methods presented in this book are mostly in the form of formative assessments, placing emphasis on the interrelationship between the construct, criteria and tasks as proposed by Bachman and

Palmer (1996), which is also referred to as *Test Usefulness*. *Assessing English Learners in U.S. Schools* is designed for language teachers and those who are interested in English language assessment at local and international schools, where English is used as the instructional medium. The primary goal of the book, as readers will agree with when carefully going through it, is to serve as a rich resource of inspiration for language teachers in assessing their English language learners in effective ways.

The book consists of nine main chapters, which are systematically organized from theory to realistic practice through the lenses of three experienced teachers as illustrative examples. Chapter One, *Language Assessment in Real Classroom: Why We're Writing This Book*, can bring clarity to the readers regarding the essential terminology in English language assessment, such as a) evaluation, assessment, and testing; b) formative and summative assessment; and c) test tasks and test items. The process of assessment through the teaching experience of the three key teachers based on the concept of test validity is exemplified. In Chapter Two, *Approaches to Language Assessment*, the authors provides a way to write test tasks and items for three different test types (selected response, constructed response, and observational approaches), together with illustrating appropriate rubrics and stating the pros and cons of each test type, particularly for the formal assessments of language ability. The difference between standardized assessment and classroom assessment was taken into consideration, with particular reference to the concepts of reliability and authenticity. In Chapter Three, *Checking for Understanding*, the authors aim to present instructional techniques and strategies exploited by the three exemplary teachers in order to informally check their learners' progress in their listening ability in terms of understanding both social and academic language in the classroom.

In Chapter Four, *Assessing Oral Language*, the authors focus mainly on instructional methods, task development, peer assessment, and clear rubrics for assessing English language learners. Chapter Five, *Assessing Literacy in Young Learners*, and Chapter Six, *Assessing Literacy in the Upper Grades*, share certain aspects. That is, the authors pay more attention to class activities under the concept of formative assessment with specific rubrics in assessing reading and writing performance. The difference is that Chapter Five focuses on young learners in early grades with differences in background knowledge, first language and English proficiency levels, while Chapter Six focuses on those who are expected to be at a higher level of reading and writing skills under the policy of *The Common Core State Standards* (CCSS). As usual, the content of both chapters is explained through the lenses of three teachers. In Chapter Seven, *Content Assessment*, the authors demonstrate the way to teach and assess learners in other subjects such as social studies, science, and mathematics, where English is used as the instructional medium. The authors attempt to put their readers at ease by simplifying some of the difficult terms of assessment that emerge in this chapter. In Chapter Eight, *Describing Assessment Results*, the authors emphasize how to appropriately and effectively report the results of both formative and summative assessment to stakeholders who have their own specific purposes in interpreting the results. In the last chapter, *Large-Scale Assessment in Public Schools*, the authors introduce their readers to learning and understanding the state standardized test, considered as a high-stakes test for U.S. schools under the issue of its construction, history, purpose and the dilemmas of classroom teaching processes.

As an EFL teacher, *Assessing English Learners in U.S. Schools* has prepared me to apply various kinds of language assessment to my classroom settings with the hope of success. The use of reader-friendly words in the form of jargon sidebars

and the extra chapter additions in the form of short reflections and chapter activities, together with the clear examples of class assessment, facilitate the understanding of novice teachers, practitioners and the general people who have limited background knowledge in the application of formative assessment in the English classroom.

It is important to keep in mind that one of our important jobs, as language teachers in today, is not only to be a source of knowledge or class facilitator, but also to serve as an effective assessor who can provide useful and meaningful feedback to students. This will in turn enhance our students, whose roles have been shifted from passive to active learners so that the students can meet the expectations of the course and school policies. The feedback that students will receive from us will definitely be useful in informing them of their learning progress as well as their strengths and weaknesses in learning the target language. Should any language teachers aim to engage their students in the process of learning the target language and encourage their students to be more active learners, they should not miss reading *Assessing English Learners in U.S. Schools*.

Reference

Bachman, L.F., & Palmer, A. (1996). *Language testing in practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The Reviewer

Pornchanok Sukpan is a lecturer at Dhurakij Pundit University. She has been teaching English for over 10 years. She was in the position of main coordinator of General English courses and Head of the Multimedia Section in the Self-Access Language Learning Center (SALLC). Her main teaching and research interest is the development of English language assessment in response to the current methods of English teaching in classroom settings.