

BOOK REVIEWS

WRITING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTS

J.B.Heaton

Longman 1975

Brian Heaton's book is a useful addition to the slowly growing number of books on the subject of language testing, and is in danger of becoming as revered and as often referred-to as the textbooks by Lado, Valette and Harris, to which inevitable acknowledgement is made by the author.

As the subtitle of the book suggests ('A Practical Guide for Teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language'), the main body of the text is primarily concerned with advice to classroom teachers on how to construct their own tests, or how to improve them. Although it concentrates on testing techniques, the book is not at all technical, and no English teacher need be afraid of approaching it.

Following traditional practice, the book divides language testing into six areas, each of which forms a separate chapter: grammar and usage, vocabulary, listening comprehension, oral production, reading comprehension and writing skills. An impressive variety of examples of techniques appropriate to each area is given. Although many of the techniques offered are familiar from previous books on testing, Heaton does manage to include several which have been developed in the past few years; the teacher should find many ideas for the improvement of his own tests. A positive feature of the book is the inclusion of visual stimuli into testing techniques. Given that the nature of a language test depends on its function (as Heaton rightly points out) it would have been helpful to have had an indication of how some of the techniques might best be used for particular purposes. Although many testing techniques are presented, the reader is not given the criteria on the basis of which he might choose one technique rather than another. Yet Heaton is not reluctant to offer prescriptive advice to teachers on how to write questions. The word 'should' appears very frequently in the section on techniques, sometimes unjustifiably. There is a certain

tendency to present as established fact what in reality is Heaton's own opinion about technique.

Nevertheless, the book contains much good advice and common sense, which the reader would be well advised to take note of. Heaton correctly points out the importance of clear instructions and example for the students, and of careful administration, without which the best test is useless. The teacher/tester is cautioned to ensure that some other person reads the first version of his test to avoid obscurities, ambiguities or a poor balance of items. As Heaton points out: "It is simply impossible for any single individual to construct good test items without help from another person." This quotation should hang over the bed of anyone who writes language tests.

The chapter on the interpretation of test scores is particularly useful for its detailed discussion of item analysis, and his explanation of the consequences of such analysis with sample test items. Perhaps more could have been done to counteract the negative reaction of many teachers to numbers, and to get rid of prevalent superstitions that some magic figure like 70% should be a pass mark, regardless of the nature and function of the test.

A very positive feature of this book is the final section entitled "Practical Work", which presents a series of exercises related to the themes of each chapter, and gives extensive practice both in analysing and criticising test items and in constructing items. This section could be used in the testing section of a teacher-training course, or as part of an in-service course for practising teachers.

Although the book appears to be a manual of testing techniques, it is much more than that. Hidden away in different parts of the text are many sensible comments about testing. For example:

"There is a constant danger of concentrating too much on testing those areas and skills which most easily lend themselves to being tested."

Another example is the observation that the only difference between subjective and objective testing lies in the scoring of the responses, since the selection of items for inclusion in the test is, of necessity, subjective. Unfortunately, many of these remarks are easily overlooked by the reader since they are never emphasised.

Although the book does contain such questions as "What is correct English?" or "Should foreign language learners be measured against native speakers?", no answers are suggested and the topics are rarely discussed, so that the reader is left with the impression that in testing all is cut and dried: that there is a right way and a wrong way to test. This is unfortunate, first of all because it is not true, and secondly because teachers may not feel they know enough about testing and so leave it to those they consider experts instead of accepting it as an important integral part of teaching.

Heaton shows a curiously old-fashioned desire to ensure that one item tests one language item or skill, when it is now becoming acknowledged that this is an unrealistic ideal (which is what common sense has suggested for longer than many want to admit).

Similarly, his division of language into phonology, grammar, and vocabulary is somewhat outdated, ignoring more recent pre-occupations with pragmatics, discourse analysis and semantic relations other than the purely lexical.

He points out the important contribution testing can make to teaching and to the development of our knowledge about language and language teaching, and quite rightly mentions the backwash effect of testing on teaching (that if something is not tested, then it will not be taught, and if something is tested - for example, translation - then it probably will be taught). Yet important latter-day pre-occupations - such as the testing of communicative competence and the use of testing in the teaching of English for Special Purposes - are almost entirely ignored. This is a pity since a person of Brian Heaton's experience in both teaching and testing could have an important contribution to make in such areas.

Urgently needed in the field of testing (perhaps as a sister volume to this?) is an extensive discussion of the implications of modern developments in linguistics and applied linguistics for language testing, as well as a full exploration of issues which are occasionally raised, but rarely discussed by Heaton.

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