

Learning About Language Assessment

Dilemmas, Decisions, and Directions

Kathleen M. Bailey

Monterey Institute of International Studies

Andy Curtis

Anaheim University



A TeacherSource Book

Donald Freeman

Series Editor



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**Learning About Language Assessment:
Dilemmas, Decisions, and Directions**

Kathleen M. Bailey, Andy Curtis

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What's New in This Edition

1. Many updated concepts about language assessment have been added.
2. Many new “Teachers’ Voices” sections have also been added, featuring the experience of language educators from around the world.
3. New chapters have been added on assessing language for specific purposes and on content-based assessment.
4. New statistical procedures and examples have been added in sections called “Tools of the Trade.”
5. The reference list and glossary have been substantially updated.
6. An index has been included.
7. Expanded suggested readings and helpful websites related to chapter content can be found online at NGL.Cengage.com/learningaboutlanguageassessment.

Dedications

From Kathi: This book is dedicated to my colleagues and students at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. It is also dedicated to my colleagues in the Language Testing Research Colloquium. Although they may not find all of their ideas reflected here, I have learned a great deal from them over the years, and have fond memories of the times we have shared. I’d especially like to offer one more “Rebel Yell” for Michael.

Y también el Capítulo 7 está dedicado a los tres pescadores del barquito, a la gente del pueblito al sur de Puerto Vallarta, al taxista y a la joven doctora, quienes nos ayudaron en aquel día horrible del “aguamala.” Muchísimas gracias, amigos del camino.

From Andy: This book is dedicated to Liying Cheng, who first got me interested in language testing and assessment, when she was doing her PhD in Hong Kong twenty years ago. Since then, all of the language teachers and language learners I have worked with have helped me understand something about the importance and the power of testing and assessment, and I dedicate this book to them too. And to my long-lost families, from Bihar in East India and Guyana in South America, who made those perilous journeys, at the behest of the British Empire, so my generation could live as free men and women, I dedicate this book to you. We have come such a long way—and we’re not there yet.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AS WITH ALL the volumes in the *TeacherSource* series, the touchstone in this book is found in the “Teachers’ Voices” section of each chapter. We are extremely grateful to the teachers who shared with us their dilemmas, their creativity, and their reflections: Claire Ballon, Michelle Bettencourt, Pat Bolger, Beckie Chase, Liying Cheng, Ben Cogswell, Jenny He Cogswell, Lisa Donohoe Luscombe, Melinda Erickson, Ann Glazer, Tim Hacker, John Hedgcock, Peter Hicks, Christine Houba, Stéphanie Loïselle, Ellie Mason, Pete Rogan, Maricel Santos, Peter Shaw, Barbara Snell, and Diane Williams.

The extent to which the manuscript is coherent and readable is largely a function of the work done by our wonderful editorial assistants: Paul Firth, who worked on the first edition, and Melanie Newman Morrow and David Tasker, who worked on the second. We are also very grateful to our distant friend, Liz Henly, who gave us helpful feedback and much-needed encouragement as we slogged through the second edition, cutting, adding, explaining, rethinking, and revising. Her gentle editorial skill is greatly appreciated.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

WHEN THE *TEACHERSOURCE* books were first published almost twenty years ago, they were based on a fairly novel idea. Simply stated, the idea was to offer readers tools to reason with about their teaching, not to just tell them what mattered and how to think about it. In this way, the series essentially proposed a reformulation of authority, of how professional knowledge might be related to classroom teaching. We argued that usual treatments of knowledge of the field were unhelpful to such reasoning because they assumed authority and didn't build it. Usually written in universal terms, using language that disguised the position of the writer and the inherent relativity of the interpretation, most professional titles told teachers what to think. In the *TeacherSource* books, we proposed to broaden the notion of expertise in language teaching.

FRAMEWORK

This new strategy of expressing expertise and authority had three strands. Most centrally, we asked authors to *own* what they wrote. This would happen by using the first person in their writing, including their own direct experiences with the ideas they were writing about, and taking a clear stand about what they felt was important in the professional area they were writing about. We call these ideas “Frameworks,” and we use icons and headers to mark them so the reader recognizes the point of view. In the first edition, I called this process of identifying “Frameworks” (in a phrase from Natalie Goldberg) “setting down the bones” of the author’s ideas. Although much of the content of the “Frameworks” has been updated in the second edition, this basic process of “writing down the bones” of what matters from the authors’ point of view has not changed.

TEACHERS’ VOICES

The second strand involved using “Teachers’ Voices” as integral parts of each book. These “Voices” are accounts of key ideas in the text written by practicing teachers. While the “Voices” are selected and orchestrated by the author, they capture a different kind of on-the-ground authority, what Lee Shulman called “the wisdom of practice.” The idea that classroom teachers would have something of value to say about teaching was not widely accepted when the first edition of the series came out. Nor was the idea that fellow teachers, and those who were learning to teach, might be interested in learning from these accounts. Now, teachers’ personal accounts of their work are a widespread, constant, and expanding part of the professional development literature.

The third strand was perhaps more conventional, but we took a different angle. Including activities for readers to do with the content they were reading was an accepted part of professional titles—usually called tasks or exercises, and generally found at the end of a chapter as applications. In *TeacherSource*, we have “Investigations,” which ask readers to consider the content by bridging the writer’s ideas and point of view with the reader’s experience and background. In this way, the “Investigations” support the creation of a new, hybrid expertise built on a partnership of authority—between the writer, who is proposing ideas, and the reader, who is entertaining them. For this reason, the “Investigations” in *TeacherSource* books are situated throughout the chapter, as the thinking is unfolding, to challenge the writer to think in terms of the reader.

WHY A SECOND EDITION?

These strands, and the ideas underlying them, have survived over the last twenty years. What was novel in 1995 has largely become part of the fabric of professional writing in language teacher education. Now we often see books in which the positions of the individual author are clear. We hear teachers discussing ideas, and their experiences are elaborated in much professional writing. And we find a stance of bridging ideas rather than simply transmitting them in many books. All of which raises the question of why revise the titles in the *TeacherSource* series? If these core ideas are now widely engrained in professional development writing, what does revision offer? I would say that revision brings at least two things: the possibility to update central ideas and the opportunity to improve on the argument. Together, these moves modernize, and more fundamentally reassert, the core premise of authority and expertise, which brought the original series into being.

Kathi Bailey and Andy Curtis have done both updating and improving in this new edition of *Learning About Language Assessment*. Co-authoring this edition is itself new. Bailey and Curtis approach language assessment through the eyes and experiences of practitioners, which firmly grounds their thinking in the work of classroom language teaching. They include new ideas as well as rethinking of old ones. For example, they have added a section called “Tools of the Trade” to help readers understand some of the key analytic procedures used in this part of our field. This new edition is also reorganized to reflect easier use, flow, and accessibility of ideas. These revisions do not alter the basic premise, however. As Bailey and Curtis argue, “assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning, and should be subordinate to both.” This new edition argues for assessment literacy that will develop readers’ understanding and expertise in common practices in classroom testing and thus begin to share authority for when and how teachers may use those practices.

This edition of *Learning About Language Assessment*, like the other books in the *TeacherSource* series, is intended to support teachers in the work of classroom teaching. The books in the series should serve you, the reader, in understanding your work as a language teacher. What you read may lead to

further developing your expertise, to rethinking what you do, and perhaps to taking specific actions in your teaching. The intention in presenting topics and points of view in this fashion is to offer you choices in teaching that you may not have thought about before, which may contribute to greater sharing of authority over classroom teaching decisions. In this way the books are meant to help you to make sense of what you do.

With the second edition, we hope this continues to be the case.

—*Donald Freeman, Series Editor*