

ESOL Tests and Testing

Author:	Stephen Stoynoff and Carol A. Chapelle (2005)	
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Pp Viii + 206	1931185166	\$29.95 (member \$21.95)



Before getting into the little things of this book, I would like to begin this review with a real anecdote that happened to me not too long ago. Some months ago, while I was in my office, a colleague came in and asked me a couple of questions about language testing, and I must recognize that after 30 minutes of explanations and exemplification, he thanked me for my help and left me unconvinced and wondering. Two days after, later I received this book and went to talk to him and I asked him to read the first chapter. Two days later, he came back to me and said: "Jesús, this is what I needed to know, why didn't you tell me in the beginning?" I wonder how many ESOL, TESOL, and TEFL teachers feel the same way as my colleague. In *ESOL Tests and Testing*, Stoynoff and Chapelle assume the point of view of those ESOL practitioners somehow engaged in language testing (not few times, accidentally) who need to gain "access to principles, methods, and the language of language assessment" (p. V).

There are two books on language testing that I have especially enjoyed: This *ESOL Tests and Testing*, and McNamara's *Language Testing* (2000). While the second is almost exclusively aimed at professionals who devote their work to testing (as testing instructors), this book caught my attention immediately because it is very difficult to find a good introductory book in language testing. A few years after McNamara's *Language Testing* was published, *ESOL Tests and Testing*, along with Burgess and Head's *How to Teach for Exams* (2005) with very different purposes, has probably become the best introductory book for prospective and on-the-job practitioners in language testing. Apart from a great first chapter, in which the writers give a complete and still easy-to-follow introduction to the field of language testing, the book has a collection of well-known names in the field that review the most important high stakes language tests.

In the first chapter, the authors describe the process of language tests and testing practices in detail explaining its implications from language acquisition to washback in a clear and friendly way, probably based on the idea that not all practitioners involved in testing are really familiar with the subject matter. This fact is also clear as the writers

show a number of introductory issues such as distinctions between the role of teachers and testers (p. 2) in language testing, the current educational practices in fashion, educational theory, and some introduction to language research and practice. All these topics are used as initial information for understanding the rest of the chapter, which, as mentioned above, is devoted to lead the reader to understand the complex process of testing and its relation to assessment and evaluation.

The following chapter in the book gives "an overview of useful sources of information on language testing followed by reviews of 20 language tests" (p. 25) by some of the top language testing specialists, including Sari Luoma, Micheline Chalhoub-Deville, Carsten Roever, Keith Morrow, and many others. Reviews are structured as an inventory that includes: test purpose, test methods, and the test use justification. In general each review also provides information of the accredited institution that runs the test, the publication of the first review of each test, the target population to whom it is aimed and the current cost. Additionally, this chapter gives information of online resources (p. 26), where to find the inventories with the labels of different tests distributed all over the world (p. 27), and mentions the *Handbook of English Language Proficiency tests*. Probably, the largest drawback of this chapter is its lack of exhaustive literature review of each test. Of course, a few studies are mentioned, but almost none of the reviewers really shows the current state of the art in any of the tests. There is little question that these descriptions would have made a difference if bibliographical information of each test had been added at the end of each review. Nevertheless, the chapter is well justified and valuable for teachers and trainers of language testing who sometimes may ignore even the existence or format of some of these tests. One other thing that caught my attention was the form to choose the tests for review. As the authors mention, they were selected through "a telephone survey of a random, stratified sample of 160 current TESOL members to learn which commercial language tests were most widely used" (p. 30). Despite this unusual way of choosing the tests, it feels like the ones selected include the most significant ones. However, I find it controversial to omit the complete Cambridge Exams set (including, KETS, First Certificate, CAE, Proficiency).

The following three chapters address practical issues as "Using the test manual to learn more about a test" (Chapter 3, p. 109), "Evaluating the usefulness of tests" (Chapter 4, p. 137) or "Deciding to develop a test" (Chapter 5, p. 153). Of these three, Chapter 3 is the one that seems to provide the least new information. In fact, as I read this chapter, I felt that probably the message that writers were conveying was the importance of really getting to know a test before beginning to use it in your institution. Apart from that, one has the feeling that maybe the book did not need this chapter. But, in my professional career I have also seen that few colleges and public institutions make decisions about the tests they recommend to their students without knowing the implications of the choice. It would also be desirable that test preparation textbooks included this type of information, at least, in the instructor's book.

I found Chapter 4 most interesting. These thirteen pages summarize concisely criteria for evaluating tests and, somehow, propose some specific items that can help prospective educational authorities to choose tests that may be adequate to their needs (p. 150). To achieve their purpose, the writers follow two main approaches: a description of the

Validation Theory application to test manuals (pp. 138-40) and their own approach to evaluate tests usefulness according to features such as reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact, practicality, and test fairness. Two more items are used to demonstrate and summarize their thoughts: a sample of usefulness analysis from the Iowa State University ESL program, and some practical advice for the reader with a very interesting table (p. 150) that will help to form opinions about the validity of a test.

Chapter 5 is practical and enjoyable because it proposes a set of guidelines for creating one's own test, explaining the general failures detected in other tests (pp. 153-5), and identifying the characteristics and actions that can be taken to obtain reliable and objective tests. As they point out: "Our intent is not to give comprehensive instructions for the developing tests but rather to give an overview of key aspects of the process and suggestions on where to obtain additional help" (p. 153).

This excellent book has also three positive aspects that enhance its value for both professionals just beginning in the field and those with more expertise who may have failed to understand fully the world of testing: first, a good annotated bibliography of important books in the field by the most significant researchers; second, a clear bibliography of the references mentioned throughout the book; and third, the topic index. A glossary would be useful, because although the terms are defined in each section in general, at times some key concepts can be difficult to understand. It would also have been advisable to include a comparative table of the levels of the Common European Framework of Languages (Burgess & Head, 2005, p. 157) or the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and their correspondence with the tests under revision.

On the whole, however, *ESOL Tests and Testing* is a valuable reference book of the many issues involved in language testing. Readers starting in testing or specialists in the field will find its simplicity and friendly style useful and informative alike and, thus, will find it worth reading. In just a few words, it is a highly recommended introductory book in the challenging and attractive field of language testing.

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