

Understanding Language Testing

Dan Douglas

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156 pages

Reviewed by Kyle Smith, Fusion English Brisbane

In the preface to *Understanding Language Testing*, Douglas states that language testing “has developed a reputation as something of an arcane art, the province of highly trained experts, often far removed from ordinary language classrooms and even from real world language use” (2010: x). This sentiment has been echoed by other experts in the field. Hughes (2003: 1), for example, refers to a “deep mistrust of tests and testers”, while Bachman and Palmer (1996: 3) argue that there is a ‘mystique’ surrounding language testing which creates a “strong affective barrier” for TESOL professionals involved in it.

Douglas’s primary intent in writing *Understanding Language Testing* is to break down this affective barrier and ‘demystify’ the field. In his pursuit of this aim, Douglas has produced a brief (156-page) introduction to language testing which covers the following areas across its six chapters: ethical use of language tests; test usefulness (i.e., validity, reliability and authenticity); the process of test development; alternative forms of language assessment; statistical analyses; and technology.

In presenting the uninitiated reader with such a broad array of concepts and considerations, Douglas certainly runs the risk of overwhelming the reader. However, he manages to achieve a delicate balance of depth and breadth through his obvious enthusiasm for the field and a respect for the reader’s intelligence. Further, he writes with a high degree of both clarity and coherence supported by frequent practical examples of test development and use. These features go a long way towards making the concepts more accessible.

This is most clearly illustrated in the introductory chapter. Here Douglas carefully employs the metaphor of the ‘rubber ruler’ to highlight the inherent challenges of ‘measuring’ language ability: “Imagine a ruler that stretched and contracted as you measured things with it” (4). The issue with this according to Douglas is that it is difficult to judge “the level of accuracy of our measurements and how much confidence we can have in them” and, consequently, “a language test may not be a very good measuring device” (*ibid.*). Encouraging the reader to approach language testing with this level of circumspection is an excellent starting point. Douglas builds from it in subsequent chapters by consistently emphasising that “the object of our measurement is language *ability*, which is manifested through the *skills* of reading, writing, speaking and listening” (19, author’s emphasis).

An additional helpful feature of *Understanding Language Testing* is the inclusion of practice exercises at the end of every chapter. These give the reader an opportunity to apply concepts and principles through short, relevant tasks. For example, following the ‘statistics mini-course’ in chapter five, the reader is asked to calculate the mean, standard deviation, reliability and standard error of measurement of a given set of test scores. Then, at the end of chapter six, ‘Technology and language testing’, the exercises involve using Excel to determine correlation and variance.

Given the discussion above, it is perhaps unfair to criticise Douglas for lack of depth, but there is one key area where an extra page or two of discussion is warranted. Arguably, if TESOL professionals

have any involvement in test development, it most likely to be in the design of selected response and short responses. Yet, in chapter three, 'Test development', the pitfalls of such task types are addressed in little more than a sentence each. In the case of short response tasks, this consists only of the statement that "they require quite a bit of care to develop and determine the range of correct, or partially correct, responses" (51) and advice that the reader seek out Hughes (2003) for more information.

A second weakness of *Understanding Language Testing* is its index. Somewhat inexplicably, terms such as 'valid', 'validity' and 'moderation' are not included, despite the fact that they are all mentioned in the text itself.

Nevertheless, this takes little away from Douglas's achievement. Through his skills as a writer and commitment to the purpose of the book, he humanises the testing field by emphasising that people and communication between them is at the heart of language and therefore also language testing. Crucially, Douglas reminds us of the various human factors that cannot be designed out or ignored when developing or using language tests. For all these reasons, *Understanding Language Testing* is recommended both for 'mystified' TESOL professionals new to the field and those who are more experienced and confident but in need of a 'refresher'.

References

Bachman, L. F. and Palmer, A.S. (1996). *Language Testing in Practice: Designing and Developing Useful Language Tests*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hughes, A. (2003). *Testing for Language Teachers*. Second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.