

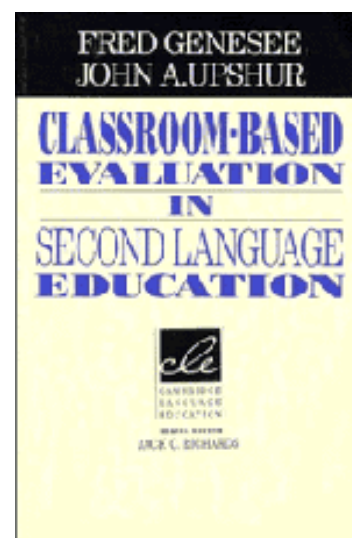
Book Review

Classroom-based evaluation in second language education

by Fred Genesee & John A. Upshur (1996)

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Cambridge University Press Pp. xiv + 268.



This book is very useful for classroom EFL teachers. Its purpose is to inform teachers of the 'how' of ongoing and summative classroom assessment. The authors squarely base this practically oriented book in the classroom. They mostly discuss techniques for collecting and assessing information that can be used for evaluating and assessing students. It also considers evaluating instructional effectiveness, so many of the techniques are also appropriate for classroom-based research. The term 'evaluation' in the title does not simply refer to course evaluations.

The book is extremely easy to read. The authors avoid technical expressions as far as possible without oversimplifying. The book is written in the first- and second-person, so the tone is friendly. Very clear graphs and diagrams help the reader conceptualize and integrate the ideas from the book.

Section 1: Clarifying Contexts

The book is organized into three sections. The first introduces to the context of classroom evaluation. Chapter 1 emphasises that assessment and evaluation are primarily about decision-making - about students, their learning, and instructional outcomes. Chapter 2 focuses on the context of assessment, by considering the instructional objectives and plans, and classroom practices, of the reader. The book consistently links learning objectives and assessment together to provide a holistic approach to teaching. The next chapter provides a practical framework of evaluation, by asking readers to reflect on five questions: who will use the results of the assessment and for what purpose? what will I assess? when will I assess? how will I assess? and how will I record the results of my assessment?

The most theoretical chapter of this book is Chapter 4, which discusses the practicality, reliability, and validity dimensions of testing, in a approachable and non-technical manner. This chapter complements Henning (1987), Hughes (1989), and Brown (1996).

Section 2: Alternative Assessment Methods

The next section, 'Evaluating without Tests', is concerned with alternative assessment methods. It is grouped into three areas: observation; portfolios and conferences; and journals, questionnaires, and interviews. At first glance, this grouping may appear unusual; however, it is an appropriate approach. Observations (Chapter 5) are teacher-centered activities. The authors provide some very practical sample language skills checklists and observation rating scales for different skills, and a sample checklist for the teacher to assess instructional activities and materials.

Portfolios and conferences (Chapter 6) require more collaboration between the learners and teacher. For teachers unclear about how to organize portfolio assessment, this chapter is a clear exposition of its advantages, and the nuts and bolts of establishing guidelines for its use. Practical guidelines for individual conferencing with students are also provided, particularly relating to writing and reading skills. The potentially difficult practical issue of recording assessment information is considered, and practical tips suggested.

Journals, questionnaires and interviews (Chapter 7) all share a similar form & they can be likened to conversations between the students and the teacher. They are also similar in function & the collection of information about students' backgrounds, and about teaching and learning processes. The benefits, and hows and whys of journals, preface a relatively thorough but brief introduction to questionnaire construction, summarized in point form, with sample items.

Section 3: Traditional Assessment Methods

The third section of the book, 'Evaluating with Tests', takes up almost half the book. Chapter 8 has a thorough introduction to testing, and provides a practical classification of second language tests. The main focus in this third section, however, is on objectives-referenced testing. Objectives-referenced testing assesses 'through reference to . . . restricted domains of skills of knowledge such as those delineated in instructional purposes, plans, and practices. . . .The focus in this book is on objectives-referenced tests because of their particular relevance to evaluation in second language classrooms' (p. 159).

Chapter 9 considers the content focus and range of classroom objectives, and the standards of performance that are expected of students. Chapter 10 explores choosing and devising test tasks, and developing practical guidelines for creating open- and close-ended test items. Chapter 11 discusses grading tests, and Chapter 12 interpreting test scores. The usefulness of the third section lies in this consistent and practical linking of assessment with objectives.

Chapter 13 contains a useful discussion of standardized testing, which are becoming more prevalent and widespread in Japan. An unfortunate omission is the failure to introduce the major standardized language tests presently being used; the readings at the end of the chapter also lack references to relevant sources.

The third section ends in Chapter 14 with a neat summary that ties the information from the entire book together. In one table (p. 261-4), all the assessment and evaluation options from the book are linked together in a schema, based upon what kinds of evaluation schemas the teacher needs to make.

Chapter Construction

Each chapter is carefully constructed for ease of reference. There is a short list of chapter contents under the chapter heading. Each chapter begins with a series of quite thoughtful, and thought-provoking, preview questions, about the reader's present classroom practice. The following section provides a basic and sensible short theoretical introduction, explaining contemporary classroom practice. Through each chapter, there are short tasks to complete, to help the reader relate the book to their own context. Each chapter ends with a succinct summary, often in point-form. This is followed by a list of discussion questions that help teachers to reflect about assessment issues, and to discuss them with their colleagues. The list of readings after the discussion questions provides common, accessible texts to supplement each chapter. They are often more technical and theoretical than this book.

Concluding Comments

The very breadth of the readership of the book means that the content is sometimes rather general. However, the authors help the reader adapt the information to their own context by the preview questions, tasks, and discussion questions that are found in each chapter. I have found the book to be particularly appropriate for the Japanese EFL context.

Other reviewers have regretfully noted that the book does not approach language assessment from a four-skills approach, but a general whole-skills approach. Closer reading of the chapters, however, reveals sample assessment information for each of the skills. I feel that not organizing the book according to a four-skills approach is a strength, as the assessment techniques for one skill are not limited to that one skill, but can be applied to all four skills. They are also useful for the general English classes that are often required for first and second year students in Japanese universities. Moreover, material for each of the four-skills is listed in the index at the back of the book.

Fundamentally, the book tends to focus more upon the 'how' of assessment and evaluation, on the techniques for collecting and assessing information. The 'what' of information collection is not prescribed; rather, it is determined by the needs and demands of the teaching context, which the chapters guide the reader to determine for themselves. The book succeeds in empowering teachers in different contexts to create their own objectives-based assessment and evaluation procedures, with a strong practical emphasis upon ongoing assessment. In short, this is an excellent book that should be found on every EFL language teacher's desk.

- Reviewed by Robert Croker

References

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Hughes, A. (1989). *Testing for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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