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Reviews: Background Books

■ **Language Testing in Practice**

Lyle F Bachman & Adrian S Palmer

Oxford University Press 1996

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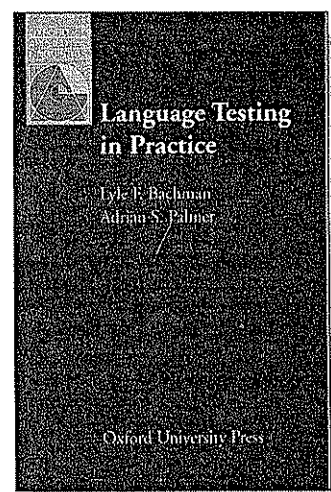
'The primary purpose of this book is to enable the reader to become competent in the design, development and use of language tests.'

My first reaction on reading these words was simple: 'Would that I had come across this book some four or five years ago!' My life might easily have been very different ... or would it? When I read on, I found that I fall into three of the target groups of readers the authors claim to be writing for: I'm 'a (language) teacher who wants to' – is obliged to – 'use tests as part of my classroom teaching'; I'm also 'an applied linguist developing a test for use as a research instrument'; and I'm 'involved in a large-scale language testing program'. What's more, like the authors, I have encountered 'misconceptions about the development and use of language tests' in myself and in colleagues, and have firmly held onto my own 'unrealistic expectations about what language tests can do, and about what they should be like'. Has all of this prevented me 'from becoming competent in language testing'? Certainly the initial contextualisation of the authors' first contact with testing sounded familiar: being untrained testers, with extensive knowledge of the terrain in which they wanted to produce their test(s) and a belief that there could be one 'best' test for the situation. Clearly, I could only read on.

Language Testing in Practice is in three parts, presenting its theoretical base, the practical application of that base, and then 10 'Projects' which exemplify the 'practice' with tests ranging from EAP to adult education for immigrants, and from classroom achievement in German or Korean, to primary EFL. In Parts One and Two, each chapter is completed with a summary, a set of exercises, and a reading list. The exercises, as in all such texts these days, tie together the first two parts of the book with the third.

In Chapter One the authors present 'Our philosophy of language testing':

- 1 *Relate language testing to language teaching and language use.*
- 2 *Design your tests so as to encourage and enable test takers to perform at their highest level of ability.*
- 3 *Build considerations of fairness into test design.*
- 4 *Humanize the testing process: seek ways in which to involve test takers more directly in the testing process; treat test takers as responsible individuals; provide them with as complete information about the entire testing procedure as possible.*
- 5 *Demand accountability for test use: hold yourself, as well as others who use your test, accountable for the way your test is used.*
- 6 *Recognize that decisions based on test scores are fraught with dilemmas, and that there are no universal answers to these.*



On a professional/ethical level, no one could possibly quibble with such noble objectives. Indeed, I am sure that almost everyone involved in communicative language teaching and testing in one way or another, explicitly or not, would subscribe to the same ideals. They are clearly and precisely set out and set the book off on a positive path towards achieving its objectives. Now read on.

So, what have I found in *Language Testing in Practice* for 'a (language) teacher who wants to use tests as part of my classroom teaching'? There is much about the theoretical base of language testing. It is based on Bachman's *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing* (1990), which in some respects it develops further. The issue of test usefulness as a composite quality of a test, evaluating as a whole the seven components – reliability, content validity, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact, and practicality – makes sense, and is a valuable contribution in that it goes some way to distracting testers from the obsessively 'important' questions of reliability and validity, putting them in their place in a greater and more complex whole. The development the authors give to the more student-centred aspects of test design and performance are fully in line with communicative language teaching theory and practice, and so sound comfortably familiar to the classroom teacher/reader.

The most recent publication for those 'involved in a large-scale language testing program' has been *Language Test Construction and Evaluation* (Alderson et al 1995). Writing directly and rather exclusively for this readership, the authors offered the results of a questionnaire sent to twelve UK-based examining boards. Chapter by chapter, they worked through the rationale behind each of their questions, and wrote up the responses received. Alderson et al looked directly at questions of 'what the professionals do'. Bachman & Palmer offer a somewhat different perspective on the matter, dealing with more practical aspects from the large-scale language-testing-program point of view. For instance, Chapter 10 (pp 181-91), 'Preparing effective instructions', presents a question which is always on my mind when writing an examination paper. The authors begin by indicating that test performance is affected by test characteristics, and that instructions are one such characteristic. They suggest that the best possible performance can be achieved by candidates who understand the procedure and task type they're being asked to use, know what response is required of them, and are aware of the manner in which their response is going to be evaluated. These form part of the writer's intentions with regard to the purpose of the test, the target language abilities being tested, and the relative balance of each item or section within the overall test. The authors propose a set of general principles for writing instructions, some essential components, and strategies for effective writing and presentation of instructions. All of which is good, clear common sense of the kind which in my experience few examiners articulate, but all adopt in one way or another. A key point underlying their position is the use of pre-testing and trialling to wean out poor items – and to later adopt these as examples to facilitate candidates' understanding of task types: a practice which I'm sure my colleagues and I use constantly.

The components of effective instructions they propose are purpose, and target abilities. They offer an example of an obscure introduction (p.186) and a revised version:

This test is a measure of your listening comprehension.

versus

This is a test of how well you can understand spoken English in lectures and classroom discussion.

A recommendation they make is that test writers include an explicit statement in which they summarise the parts of the test, task types, number of tasks, and time allocation with a clear indication of the relative value of each. All commendable input, except that professional test producers often have printing overheads to worry about which make this type of extensive instruction writing impossible. It is also frequently criticised by teachers who see it as a further unnecessary reading burden on candidates already under pressure in an examination. The desire of all exam writers is to achieve the best possible results in the circumstances prevailing, and I will certainly change my instruction writing process in the light of these proposals, but I know I'll come up against some opposition it'll be difficult to overcome.

However, once I began reading in depth, the shortcomings of *Language Testing in Practice* became apparent. The book bears many of the hallmarks of a collaborative production which has been produced with minimal editing. A simple example of what I mean, but not the only one, is on page 182, where the authors refer to four 'essential components'. On page 184, they list five. The haste to produce, publish, (and/or be damned), has its downside, too. Much of the content is based on Bachman's work (1990), a milestone publication in the field as it provided a reasoned, procedural base for test specification and design, and test writing, and test use. *Language Testing in Practice* purports to build on that theoretical background, but seems largely to fail to do so. In particular, it offers little to the 'language teacher' target group, in that it fails to resolve down-to-earth issues of how to test which are uppermost in the mind of the day-to-day classroom teacher.

As 'an applied linguist developing a test for use as a research instrument', I'm sorry to say this book was published several years too late to help me. It does lead me to ask serious questions about the design process I undertook in 1992-93. Reading the examples of tests and testing programs in Part Three, I can console myself that much has been produced which adds to the general stock of testing expertise from which we can all learn, albeit by avoiding others' mistakes. How much would I have been influenced by *Language Testing in Practice* had it been available then? I'm sure many potholes would have been evident, and it would have helped me find an effective way around them. Others I would have fallen into regardless, mainly because testing in the real world is a messy business – and because the consequences of test design, test writing, and test administration are much more fraught than many of us are aware. If, through some fuzzy, and poorly edited prose, Bachman & Palmer have contributed to dispelling some of the 'misconceptions about the development and use of language tests' in the minds of their readers, then this volume will have been worthwhile. If not, then it will be up to others to write a more readable, definitive volume, aimed at more narrowly defined target reader groups.

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- Alderson, J. C. et al (1995) *Language Test Construction and Evaluation*, CUP
 Bachman, L. F. (1990) *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*, OUP

||| Bryan Robinson

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