Testing for Language Teachers

Second Edition

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Arthur Hughes

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

For Vicky, Meg and Jake

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Preface

The objective of this book is to help language teachers write better tests. It takes the view that test construction is essentially a matter of problem solving, with every teaching situation setting a different testing problem. In order to arrive at the best solution for any particular problem – the most appropriate test or testing system – it is not enough to have at one's disposal a collection of test techniques from which to choose. It is also necessary to understand the principles of testing and how they can be applied in practice.

It is relatively straightforward to introduce and explain the desirable qualities of tests: validity, reliability, practicality, and beneficial back-wash; this last referring to the favourable effects testing can have on teaching and learning. It is much less easy to give realistic advice on how to achieve them in teacher-made tests. One is tempted either to ignore the issue or to present as a model the not always appropriate methods of large-scale testing organisations. In resisting this temptation, I have made recommendations that I hope teachers will find practical but which I have also tried to justify in terms of language testing theory.

Exemplification throughout the book is from the testing of English as a foreign language. This reflects both my own experience in language testing and the fact that English will be the one language known by all readers. I trust that it will not prove too difficult for teachers of other languages to find or construct parallel examples of their own.

Because the objective and general approach of the book remain those of the first edition, much of the text remains. However, I have made changes throughout. These include the inclusion of greater detail in the writing of specifications and the provision of outlines of training pro-grammes for interviewers and raters. In response to the now widespread availability of powerful and relatively inexpensive computers, as well as ready access to the Internet, I have made extensive reference to resources on the Internet and have written a completely new chapter on the statistical treatment of test data, using an inexpensive program which is available to readers via the book's own website www.cambridge.org/elt/tflt.

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Preface

Links to all of the websites mentioned in the book can be found there. The increasing tendency throughout the world for language learning (and testing) to begin at primary school has led me to include a chapter on the testing of young learners. While one might have reservations about such testing (as opposed to other forms of assessment), since testing does take place, it seemed better to offer advice in the area rather than simply ignore the issue.

Perhaps the most striking development in language testing since the publication of the first edition has been the great increase in the number of published articles and books. Many – perhaps most – of the articles have been of a theoretical or technical nature, not directly relevant to the concerns of language teachers. Even where their relevance is clear, in order to keep the text accessible to newcomers to the field, I have usually restricted references to them to the Further reading sections. These sections are intended to act as a guide for those readers who wish to go more deeply into the issues raised in the book, and also to provide an outline of the state of language testing today. They also contain recommendations of a number of recent books which, in an accessible fashion, treat areas of language testing (such as the testing of a particular skill) in greater depth than is possible in the present volume.

I must acknowledge the contributions of others: MA and research students at Reading University, too numerous to mention by name, who have taught me much, usually by asking questions that I found difficult to answer; my friends and colleagues, Paul Fletcher, Michael Garman, Don Porter, Tony Woods, who all read parts of the manuscript of the first edition and made many helpful suggestions; Angela Hasselgren who shared thoughts on the testing of young learners and provided me with copies of the materials used in the Norwegian EVA project; my friends Cyril Weir and Russanne Hozayin, with whom I've collaborated on testing projects in recent years; and finally my wife, who drew the cartoon series on page 209, and whose patience during the writing of this second edition was almost endless.