

Book Review

Language Assessment in Asia: Local, Regional or Global?

Young-in Moon and Bernard Spolsky (Eds.). Asia TEFL, 2010. 157 pp. ISBN: 978-89-92602-08-2-93610.

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There is a well-established body of literature on the negative consequences and limitations of high-stakes testing to which *Language Assessment in Asia: Local, Regional or Global?*, the fourth book in the Asia TEFL series, is a useful, if not flawless, recent addition. It aims to raise awareness of issues in English language assessment in six Asian countries: Japan, South Korea, China, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Israel. This is a worthy endeavour given that these countries test an astounding number of English learners every year. China's College English Test (CET) alone tested 16 million candidates in 2008 (p. 2), a number that far exceeds those tested by international mainstays IELTS and TOEFL. The chapters authored by Rubina Khan and Jihyeon Jeon make insightful contributions from analysis of original data, while those by Fuad Abdul Hamied, Yan Jin, Yoshinori Watanabe and Bernard Spolsky base their knowledgeable discussions on reviews of the scholarly literature. The theoretical linkage across the six chapters in this volume is quite general. However, three broad themes recur which may be of interest to those who need to understand large-scale English language assessment in the region. These themes are 1) the uses of tests, 2) the drive toward sophistication in testing under a climate of globalization and 3) inequality in English language achievement; and are the focus of this review.

The use of tests is covered in many of the chapters. Jin, in Chapter 1, uses a wide-ranging synthesis of Chinese language and international scholarship to describe a significant change in the use of China's CET from promoting English learning when it was not a priority for university students, to modern diverse uses of CET scores which could not have been envisaged by the test's creators. Yet the test provides little positive washback onto the College English programme. Jin's paper will be valuable to practitioners exploring, *inter alia*, what some will term the misuse of tests and their scores. In Chapter 2, Watanabe describes using language testing as a tool for motivating learners in Japan. He makes valid arguments, based on theories of motivation and innovation, against the assumption that using tests for a purpose other than scoring ability is somehow manipulative of learners.

Chapters 4 and 5 describe the use by the national governments of Israel and Indonesia (respectively) of school-leaving exams to monitor and manage delivery of the school curriculum. Spolsky (Chapter 4), in explaining a change in Israel's preferred university entrance assessment, provides a particularly interesting account of conflict and competition between test users and testing systems. Hamied (Chapter 5) on the

other hand, suggests the Indonesian system works well although further analysis of exactly how this is achieved would have been welcome.

The theme of globalization of assessment practices and standards highlights issues in local English tests in some countries. Jeon's analysis of discreet-item, grammar-focused, norm-referenced English achievement tests in Korean secondary education (Chapter 3) presents a clear argument for how these instruments have fallen far behind the relatively sophisticated, high-stakes national and international English proficiency tests that students must take to enter Korean universities or English-medium secondary schools. Khan's small-scale study of teacher-assessor-exam writer perceptions of Bangladesh's secondary school English exams (Chapter 6) is a welcome illustration of the challenges faced by exam administrators in under-resourced, developing countries. Although this explorative study did not involve triangulation of data, it nevertheless supports its broad recommendations regarding development of assessment policies and procedures for these exams.

The theme of inequality revolves around the use of additional, private, exam-focused tuition in Asian education cultures for those who can pay and the consequential inequality that this brings to English language learning and testing. Jeon (Chapter 3) paints a compelling picture of how the gap between Korean school achievement tests and non-school proficiency tests contributes to what is known there as the "English Divide" (p. 61), which is then sustained by family spending on tutoring that aims to bridge that gap. Jeon highlights the importance of further work on the reflexive relationship between private tuition and testing. Though not the focus of her chapter, Khan (Chapter 6) reports on the wide-spread use of tutoring to achieve success on Bangladesh's secondary certificate English exams.

This volume will be useful to those who need to know more about English education and testing in these six countries. However, some chapters would have benefited from further editing to improve language and to remove excessive, overly general description that is of little use to readers interested in critical issues of testing in these countries. Equally, some chapters provide a sense of the issues in high-stakes testing but leave readers wanting further analysis. Readers without time to spare should look to the chapters by Jin (China), Jeon (Korea) and Khan (Bangladesh) for clear, critical perspectives on English language assessment in those particular countries.

About the reviewer

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