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Assessing Second Language Writing in Academic Contexts by Liz Hamp-Lyons

Review by: Antony John Kunnan

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# MLJ Reviews

Edited by DIANE W. BIRCKBICHLER  
*Ohio State University*

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The *MLJ* reviews books, monographs, computer software, and materials that: 1) present results of research in—and methods of—second language teaching and learning; 2) are devoted to matters of general interest to members of the profession; 3) are intended primarily for use as textbooks or instructional aids in classrooms where second languages, literatures, and cultures are taught; 4) convey information from other disciplines that relates directly to second language teaching and learning. Reviews not solicited by the *MLJ* can neither be accepted nor returned. Books and materials that are not reviewed in the *MLJ* cannot be returned to the publisher. **The *MLJ* invites written responses to the reviews published here. Responses should be typed with double spacing, signed by their authors, and submitted in duplicate. Address responses to David P. Benseler, Editor, *The Modern Language Journal*, Modern Languages and Literatures, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106.**

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*Assessing Second Language Writing in Academic Contexts*. Ed. Liz Hamp-Lyons. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1991. Pp. xii, 352.

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Liz Hamp-Lyons's edited volume presents a fuller context of second language writing assessment by focusing on six crucial parts: the writer, the task, the reader, relating the assessment to the academic community, scoring and feedback (this title is not in the contents pages), and accountability. The seventeen articles examine writers and their background knowledge, prompts and tasks, responses, and scoring instruments mainly from tests developed and administered by the British Council's English Language Testing Service, California State University, and the University of Michigan.

The five stimulating articles by Hamp-Lyons offer a wide range of critical insights into the writer's problems, issues regarding choices of prompts and tasks, discipline-based expert and non-expert essay ratings, and holistic, primary, and multiple trait scoring procedures. Hamp-Lyons's probing questions and thoughtful writing throughout illustrate her expertise in the field and deep concern for better writing assessment.

Horowitz's discussion of large-scale assessments, which concludes with a plea for cooperative, small-scale, local testing programs; Vaughan's focus on the critical but under-investigated subject of what goes on in the rater's mind; Johns' paper on the criteria for academic tests and test creation; Carlisle and McKenna's study of the effect of errors on scoring; Henning's clear discussion of validity and reliability issues in writing assessment; and Carlson's very political but challenging questions about program evaluation procedures in the political context are other excellent articles.

Ballard and Clanchy's article attempts to show the influence of culture on educational expectations and processes. According to the authors, the Asian student uses a learning style with a reproductive learning approach, learning strategies such as memorization and imitation, and has correctness as the aim, in contrast to the students in Western, Anglo-Saxon institutions who have a speculative learning approach, learning strategies such as searching for possibilities and explanations, and new knowledge and creative originality as the aim. Two thirty-year-old studies about the Chinese scholarship tradition and the learning process in Burma help the authors argue that teaching traditions in these countries also contrast sharply with the West. They then go on to state that in many traditions of Asian scholarship there is "no requirement to argue, to resolve ambiguities or dilemmas, to reach clear-cut conclusions," but "there is, instead, frequently a willingness to tolerate ambiguity, even contradictions, to allow them to sit easily in tension within the same piece of writing" (p. 33). No

wonder Asian students (in Australia), they conclude, cannot argue, resolve ambiguities, reach clear-cut decisions, etc. These sorts of generalizations and over-simplified assumptions and conclusions are simple and easy explanations for the multilayered complex learning styles of Asian students abroad. This article does not probe beyond the stereotypes of the Asian student and, therefore, is ill-suited to be the lead essay.

This volume also has a useful overview with clear explanations of basic concepts (e.g., reliability and validity) and a glossary of relevant terms (e.g., from academic writing and analytic assessment to t-units and washback). In summary, this collection raises some very critical assessment issues for our consideration; although many of them remain somewhat unresolved, it certainly provides lots of food for further thought and research.

ANTONY JOHN KUNNAN  
*California State University, Los Angeles*

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HORVATH, BARBARA M. & PAUL VAUGHAN. *Community Languages: A Handbook*. Adelaide, Australia: Multilingual Matters, 1991. Pp. 276. Paper.

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*Community Languages: A Handbook* contains a preface, an explanatory first chapter, and historical and sociolinguistic profiles of fifty-eight languages selected because they are spoken by communities living in English-speaking countries, especially Australia, where the book was written. The languages are also those used to broadcast to these communities by the Australian Special Broadcasting System. As one would expect, considering the history of Australia, the languages are European (mostly East European) and Asian. The short preface is poorly written; the initial chapter entitled Sociolinguistic Profiles is interesting, informative, and sets the linguistic tone for the rest of the volume.

The profiles themselves, which are succinct, are apparently well-researched, contain much historical and sociolinguistic information, and in some cases are painfully timely. The linguistic history of Serbian and Croatian developed in these profiles are recipes for current events. In fact, linguistics aside, this handbook is almost a modern history manual of colonization, mi-

grations, and the effects of peoples in contact. The sociolinguistic approach is up-to-date and well-balanced. It recognizes that all forms of languages serve their speaking community equally well, while realizing that political and economic factors give certain forms more prestige than others. Each profile is followed by a useful bibliography of reference works written in English. This volume will fit very well into a linguistics library, and is likely to be referred to on many occasions by anyone interested in languages and the people who speak them.

IVAN R. DIHOFF  
*Antioch College*

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*Language Aptitude Reconsidered*. Ed. Thomas S. Parry & Charles W. Stansfield. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990. Pp. 265. \$16.95, paper.

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*Language Aptitude Reconsidered* is one in a series of publications from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics at the Center for Applied Linguistics. Language educators and researchers should find this a useful addition to their professional library. The book contains a collection of papers presented at a 1987 invitational conference on the prediction of adult foreign language learning. The expansion of knowledge in cognitive psychology and in human learning, combined with changes in second language instructional methods, suggested that a review was appropriate for instruments developed over twenty years ago, such as the *Modern Language Aptitude Test* (MLAT) and *Defense Language Aptitude Battery* (DLAB).

Chapters include an update on the MLAT by John Carroll, the test's author, and an analysis of the predictive validity of other selected measures by Thomas Parry and James Child. In the next chapter, Rebecca Oxford analyzes the connections between styles, strategies, and language aptitude, followed by a chapter on personality type by Madeline Ehrman, and one on motivation by Robert Gardner. The work concludes with a chapter by John Lett and Francis O'Mara analyzing the relationships among a number of predictors and second language learning outcomes. This volume's authors point to the need for aptitude assessment at the higher levels of second language proficiency