

Book reviews

Language Testing Research Centre, University of Melbourne, Australia. 1997: *Mark my words: assessing second and foreign language skills*. (Six-part video series.) US\$500. ISBN: 0 73 251534 3.

The last decade has not been a clarifying time to be a student of language testing. For test researchers, newer models of communicative language ability have challenged the traditional skills-and-components models; quantitative analysis has had to share the methodological stage with qualitative analysis; Item Response Theory, Generalizability Theory and Structural Equation Modelling have successfully asserted their roles; verbal protocol analysis has become a viable methodology; consequential validity has been added to conventional construct validation exercises; political and social considerations and fairness have balanced arguments made by psychometrics; and ethics and professionalism have added to the new discussions in the field.

For test developers, skill hierarchies have been challenged; portfolio assessment as a panacea has been critically evaluated; discourse variation, rater characteristics and bias in oral assessment have been demonstrated; and the critical though elusive matter of World Englishes has been raised in the context of international English language tests. And, most recently, the promise of computer-adaptive tests such as the Computer-Based TOEFL (ETS) and CommuniCAT (UCLES), as well as automated spoken language tests, have charted different pathways for test development. In all, the decade has been a turning point in testing, giving rise to many foggy paths that require the instructional abilities of a preacher, the unworkable logic of an idealist or the demystifying style of an iconoclast in order to gain a clear view of the discipline.

Mark my words, the six-part video series under review, developed by language assessment researchers at the Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC) in Melbourne, Australia, with Alan Davies as the concept developer, does not attempt to impose coherence on this arguably fragmented field by sorting out what is central to the thought and impulses of the discipline. What it offers is a 'traditional language assessment perspective', through commentary on such topics as Language and Proficiency Assessment (Video 1), the Principles of Test Development (Video 2), Objective and Subjective Assessment (Video 3), Stages of Test Analysis (Video 4), Performance Assessment (Video 5), and Classroom-based Assessment (Video 6). As the authors state in the accompanying booklet, the video series is not 'designed

to cover the entire field' (p. 3). Rather, 'it is meant to introduce and illustrate key issues', and the videos 'should be supplemented with additional readings, samples of tests and assessment tasks' (p. 3). Each video is accompanied by a slim booklet, which presents an overview of the series and provides support materials specific to the topic covered in the particular video. The support materials consist of preview questions and an outline of the video which summarizes the main segments and provides key questions to focus the viewer's attention. A short bibliography is provided for each video; these entries are quite current in contrast to some of the content of the videos themselves. Thus, the series is not a compendium of the discipline's knowledge (like the National Geographic Collector's Videos or the erudite linguistics video *The human language*, edited by Gene Searchinger) nor is it a video workbook with nifty exercises (like a 'Statistics for novices' video). Instead, it supplies information, much like a vitamin supplement that a person would need if his or her knowledge store were in need of replenishment.

The merit of the series lies in the fine quality of the basic introduction to the field it provides for graduate and, perhaps, doctoral students. For example, Video 2, Principles of Test Development, presents 'the four main stages in test development' (the thinking, the writing, the pilot and the implementation stages). The material is presented clearly, if a little too uncritically. However, when the series attempts to introduce a complex matter like Item Response Theory, the topic is too abbreviated. It is presented hurriedly and, therefore, the presentation is rather unmeaningful. Video 5, Performance Assessment, has the most contemporary feel of all the videos, from its modern approach to test development through the presentation of the Occupational English Test.

In using this video series as a supplement to a course, instructors will need to be aware of potential conflicts between the treatment of certain topics in the videos and main course texts. As suggested in the materials, I recently presented the videos to two of my classes as a supplement to the main texts, which were either Bachman's *Fundamental considerations in language testing* or Bachman and Palmer's *Language testing in practice*, and J.D. Brown's *Testing in language programs*. Students raised many important questions regarding ways in which the content and emphases of the videos differed from those of the texts. I found that using the videos to supplement the texts was not always rewarding, especially when the treatments were clearly different. Differences the students found included:

- 1) Video 1 focuses on proficiency and achievement tests while the accompanying text focuses on norm- and criterion-referenced tests.
- 2) Many types of validity are discussed in Video 2, while construct validity is emphasized in the text.
- 3) The stages of test development in Video 4 differed from the ones in the text.
- 4) Generalizability Theory was not mentioned in Video 2 as an approach for estimating reliability, although this approach was given prominence in the text.

A final concern is the use of Australian tests and assessment procedures as the only examples in the videos. There is a clear value in highlighting

current academic and professional work in Australia, and the work there deserves wider recognition. However, relating the content of the videos to include well-known testing activities in the US and Europe, and perhaps even to the newer work underway in Asia and Africa, would have helped make the video series accessible to a wider audience. As it now stands, viewers of the series need to be familiar with the Occupational English Test, the National Australian Bank Language Certificates and the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings to benefit fully from the discussions that feature these tests. The few minutes devoted to the design features and contexts of these tests is insufficient for a full understanding by individuals with no prior familiarity with them.

Production-wise, the videos are engaging. The camera shots of the various commentators are well composed, there is a variety of camera shots, and the camera does not spend too much time on any one person or scene. Also, there is a good mix of 'talking heads' and scenes from various Australian foreign language and subject classes and brief scenes of tour guides and nurse training. On the less positive side, the videos contain no interesting graphics, which could have been used to add interest and variety, emphasize points and aid in recall. Animation, too, could have been used to highlight important principles, summarize information and illustrate significant points. However, these issues may be minor if viewers are not using the material as the main source for their language assessment course.

In summary, this video series does not answer any of the big questions in language testing. Nevertheless, as a supplement, *Mark my words* offers a fine though rather expensive basic introduction to the field. Despite its title, the series is neither preachy nor dogmatic. The researchers at LTRC need to be commended for this fine foray into the uncharted territory of video technology. It is also an innovative instructional tool that other assessment agencies should consider so that instructors can use newer technology to supplement their training programmes.

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