

ON THE USES OF AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS*

The present volume deals with the complex area of assessing second language education in the context of the classroom. By authentic assessment the authors understand the use of multiple and varied observation and assessing procedures able not only to truly reflect students' abilities but also adequate to prepare the ways for effective teaching. At the same time, the authors use this term to refer to those forms of assessment which are consistent with classroom objectives, curricula and methodology. In this book, the authors offer a catalogue of authentic assessment techniques from which the teacher can select the most appropriate to try out in their own classes. The use of many of the instruments described in this book foster a collaborative relation between teacher and student and, in some cases, also parents. Through the use of these instruments, students have various opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do, and become aware of their own learning process.

These new trends of authentic evaluation entail a reduction of the traditional methods such as multiple choice exercises and other standardised tests that left room for neither diversity nor originality. In fact, O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce maintain that these so-called objective evaluation procedures end up saying very little about the students' real competence and achievement, do not correspond to good classroom instruction, and what is more, are not valued in the real world by students. This is to say that they are not authentic at all, or rather, they only exist as examination formats, in the academic domain. It is, to some extent, frequent today to find allusions and references to authentic assessment. However, it must be said that this is not only a fashionable area of interest in the current views of language teaching education, but is also a key issue explicitly included in the present Spanish educational reform. The difficulty in the Spanish context is that even though teachers have been informed about the crucial part that evaluation plays in the new curricula, many of them still fail to adapt themselves to new ways simply because they have not been taught how to do so.

In this sense, this book will be useful for foreign language teachers who wish to find effective assessment techniques and instruments that are sensitive to students' needs and ready to be applied to classroom instruction. The authors' research and sources of investigation are based on the American educational system, but it would not be difficult for a teacher to exploit the suggested ideas and materials in this book in any other didactic context, especially in those cases in which the teacher is eager to ensure reliability and validity in evaluation. The book is divided into eight chapters.

The first two present a framework for the application of authentic assessment, describing specific types of authentic assessment and issues regarding design, together with a discussion of the fundamental concepts of “reliability” and “validity.”

The third chapter is entirely dedicated to portfolios. The authors present a detailed overview of portfolio assessment putting emphasis on types, designs, purposes and other questions relevant to the use of portfolios. According to what they state, this form of assessment is very complete and rich in giving wide account of students’ performance, as well as a potentially suitable practice for integrating motivation and authenticity within the traditionally tormenting assessment procedures. We would warmly invite teachers to try this also because it would fit perfectly into the new Spanish syllabus. This chapter, as the rest of the central ones, closes with a series of suggested application activities which are potentially very practical to the teacher who wishes to try them out.

The following chapters, four to seven, are dedicated to instruments for assessing oral language, reading, writing and assessment in content areas respectively, and the last chapter shows examples of the integration of assessment with instructional activities planned by the teacher. The authors also include a useful appendix containing a glossary, a bibliographical section, subject and author indexes and an index of classroom-based assessment techniques. To finish the review of the contents of this book, it must be said that it deserves praise as it includes a large number of pages with the authors’ permission to be photocopied for use in the classroom. These pages contain record sheets, evaluation formats, rubrics, checklists, test models and the like, all of which, illustrated with classroom samples and attractive photographs which enrich their visual appeal, will be very much appreciated by the teaching profession.

As Jim Cummins states (p. v) in his foreword to this book, “the authors of this timely volume have provided a blueprint for how educators can guide English language students to take control of their own learning and become independent thinkers and users of language.” After O’Malley’s untimely death, we can only encourage Ms. Valdez-Pierce to continue working in this line to give teachers more ideas which will help make assessment authentic and effective.

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- * O’Malley, J Michael and Lorraine Valdez-Pierce. *Authentic Assessment for English Language Learners*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. 1996. xii, 268 pp.