

Dimova, S., Yan, X. & Ginther, A. *Local Language Testing: Design, Implementation and Development*. Routledge. 2020. Pp. 211.

Given the potential benefits of local language testing, why hasn't more attention been given to the development of local language tests? This question, posed in the introductory chapter of *Local Language Testing: Design, Implementation and Development* (Routledge, 2020), sets the context: local language tests are an underused resource with significant advantages. The answer to the question may lie, in part, in who is best positioned to develop local language tests. A program director, perhaps. A classroom teacher or a level coordinator. In any case, someone whose expertise lies in the local language learning context, though perhaps not in language testing itself. Someone who may recognize the limitations of large-scale commercial tests for diagnostic, placement or achievement testing purposes, but is unsure how, exactly, to go about developing their own test.

Local Language Testing, written by Slobodanka Dimova (University of Copenhagen), Xun Yan (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) and April Ginther (Purdue University), guides the reader, a prospective language test practitioner, through the process of local language test development, delivery, and evaluation. All three authors have not only academic backgrounds in language assessment, but also a wealth of hands-on experience with their own institutions' local language tests, namely (a) the Test of Oral English Proficiency for Academic Staff (TOEPAS), (b) the English Placement Test (EPT), and (c) the Oral English Proficiency Test (OEPT) and the Assessment of College English (Ace-IN), respectively. They draw from this experience to supplement a solid introduction to local test development and delivery with salient on-the-ground examples of the journeys that these particular tests have undergone.

The book covers an enormous amount of ground. As it is aimed at prospective (inexperienced) test developers, its content also covers certain testing fundamentals in addition to the specific features that set local language tests apart. That said, the first few chapters are focused primarily on situating the reader in the specific context of local language tests, and so what follows, while often applicable to a wider range of test types, remains tethered to this specific purpose.

This discussion of local language tests is a worthwhile read even to those who already work in language test development. With so much focus in language assessment on large-scale commercial tests, it is little surprise that the primary feature of a local language test – that it is embedded in a local context – wanders so easily from our minds. When discussing the early days of the OEPT, April Ginther recalls how even though the team was aware of the unique opportunity they had to represent the local context, early first

drafts contained little more than replications of item types from the general proficiency test that the OEPT was meant to replace. "The influence of our long use of and familiarity with [the old test] was considerable" (p. 8). I would imagine that this is true for many practitioners who have spent years teaching to and using scores from tests such as IELTS or TOEFL.

The book is organized into nine chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the benefits of local language tests, which in addition to targeting the local language context, include unfettered access to test data and the ability to continually monitor, evaluate and modify the test. Later chapters acknowledge that local language test development requires resources that the use of large-scale commercial tests don't, and the involvement and approval of managers, budget planners and others outside the development team will most likely be required in most cases. If the reader of Chapter 1 does not require convincing of the benefits of developing a local test, the authors provide strong succinct arguments that can be presented to stakeholders who do.

Chapter 2 delves deeply into the issue of local instructional context. A sketch of the history of language assessment needs in higher education situates the local language test in the overall rise of English as the academic lingua franca through the last fifty years, from the influx of international students to the United States in the 1980s to the increasing implementation of English-medium instruction within non-Anglophone universities. This is followed by a detailed discussion of determining test purpose in the local context.

The following chapters turn more towards the general principles of language test development, beginning in Chapter 3 with an overview of the test development process, including practical considerations like human resources and equipment alongside discussion of test specifications, identifying the construct, and deciding on the format and design of the test.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the test itself, firstly on item or prompt writing and then on decisions surrounding test delivery, with a particular focus on digital delivery options. I found the discussion of digital and online test delivery options in Chapter 5 quite interesting, particularly as the pandemic has accelerated the remote offering of language tests. For test developers, the world of online and digital test delivery can often seem a bit intimidating and complicated, as outside IT help is often needed. This chapter outlines the options, their benefits and their potential problems in a way that will inform other decisions on test design. While some information presented is likely to become less relevant or accurate as time passes, the key concerns about the use of such technology are unlikely to change as fast.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss two important aspects of performance-based tests: designing rating scales and training raters. These chapters are likely to be of particular importance to the target audience. The four tests used as examples are all performance-based, and it is logical to expect that many local language tests will similarly assess the particular skills and abilities suitable for their context by rating test taker performance. That said, the use of scales and the need for well-trained raters can seem much less intuitive than the development and scoring of discrete items, and the guidance provided in these two chapters will be of great benefit to many new test developers.

I also found Chapter 8, which covers data collection, storage and use, to be a useful overview of a range of topics that even those involved in test writing may not be fully aware of. This chapter presents, for example, information on the legal and ethical obligations that test developers have regarding the collection and storage of data. While details are likely to vary from place to place, the overall message is of crucial importance to anyone interested in creating their own test.

As mentioned earlier, the scope of the book is quite wide. The authors recognize that it would be impossible to touch on all aspects of test development, delivery and evaluation while also examining any of these topics in depth. As such, the book is best seen as a springboard to subsequent reading and discovery, particularly for those sections with which the reader is less familiar. Two features of this book help the reader explore the practical applications of each chapter and learn more about the theoretical underpinnings of the key concepts.

Firstly, each chapter includes a handful of concrete and specific examples written by one of the authors about his or her own institution's test. Each is presented in a text box, separate from the main text, but thematically linked. For example, Chapter 2, which covers considerations of purpose, construct and context, contains several of these text boxes to illustrate particular points. One discusses how the TOEPAS was designed with multiple purposes in mind. Another describes how the designers of the OEPT took steps to ensure that test purpose and construct were clearly presented to test takers, who benefit from understanding how the test relates to the specific skills they need for success. A third box outlines how the Ace-IN is embedded in the learning outcomes of the PLaCE program, and how these outcomes fold naturally into the targeted construct of the local test in a way that is not possible with larger-scale tests.

The second feature of the book that makes it a solid jumping off point for a novice language test developer is the suggested reading section that closes each chapter. For example, in Chapter 8, the first of these is *The language tester's statistical toolbox* (Davidson, F., 2000), which can be consulted for a deeper discussion of the software and analyses

commonly used. Earlier chapters recommend, for example, a selection that includes Bachman and Palmer's *Language testing in practice* (1996), extending the readers' understanding of language testing fundamentals.

Local Language Testing will be a useful addition to the library of anyone interested in developing a test for their particular local context. It will also be useful to those who aren't sure whether a local language test is something their institution can benefit from (and the answer is likely 'yes'). A reader with some experience in language testing will find some chapters to be useful reviews. A reader with none will need to draw on the suggested readings or other sources. That said, nearly every consideration around the planning, design, writing, delivery, scoring, and evaluation of a language test is covered at least briefly, providing an excellent 'home base' for the test developer to start from and later return to. All in all, *Local Language Testing* provides an excellent starting point for potential local testing practitioners, and has a lot to offer those already working in test development.

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References

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