

BOOK REVIEW

A. Huhta, C. Harsch, D. Leontjev & L. Nieminen. *The Diagnosis of Writing in a Second or Foreign Language*. Taylor & Francis. 2023. Pp 286.

Charles Alderson (2005) explored something of a conundrum in his foundational work on diagnostic testing of foreign language proficiency; diagnostic assessment of second or foreign languages (SFL) is both everywhere and nowhere. Many assessments provide some degree of diagnostic feedback, yet purely diagnostic tests, bristling with potential utility for learners, are rare. Because they aim to provide fine-grained feedback, they are difficult to construct. And because they lack the consequence of high-stakes tests, they have been overlooked in the literature. Consequently, in the early 21st century, diagnostic SFL assessment was under-researched to the point of being virtually ignored.

Fortunately, this has changed. DIALANG, the diagnostic test system whose development Alderson chronicled in 2005, represents a turning point. It drew on the CEFR and internet technology, both relatively new at the time, to demonstrate what a *pure* diagnostic test of L2 proficiency might look like. Many of the researchers and practitioners involved in the development of DIALANG have remained at the forefront of research in the area and have contributed to some of its more recent advances, including the 2014 sister volume to the work under review here, *The Diagnosis of Reading in a Second or Foreign Language* (Alderson et al., 2014). These researchers include, in addition to Alderson, a team of language assessment researchers based at the University of Jyväskylä, where the first development phase of DIALANG was coordinated.

In *The Diagnosis of Writing in a Second or Foreign Language*, Ari Huhta and Jyväskylä-based colleagues Dmitri Leontjev and Lea Nieminen, along with Claudia Harsch (University of Bremen), explore the current state and future directions of the diagnostic assessment of SFL writing. In some ways, this topic extends naturally from the 2014 volume on reading. Writing, like reading, are both skills which must be explicitly learned,

and this has implications on how we view their development as L2 skills. However, writing, unlike reading, is a much more visible activity that elicits observable processes and tangible outputs. In writing, cognition is, to some extent, on display. Because of this, writing is more widely examined in SFL diagnostic assessment than reading. As a result, there is much to draw from in terms of practices, methods, and theories.

The key aim of this volume is to draw together these theories, methods and practices, explore the literature supporting them, and relate them to the authors' central model of the diagnostic cycle, in which both learners and teachers move through various stages, measuring ability and offering or receiving feedback to further growth. This cycle remains a touchstone throughout the book, and all discussions and themes are explicitly related back to the various stages in this cycle.

The volume is organized into ten chapters. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the diagnostic cycle and the key themes of the book: the *what* (constructs, goals, needs), *who* (agents and stakeholder roles) and *how* (assessment and feedback) of SFL writing diagnoses. Chapter 2 reviews cognitive and socially situated theories and models of the development of writing ability, while Chapter 3 gives more attention to the cognition behind both L1 and SFL writing as an activity. These three chapters together provide a thorough look at how we conceptualize SFL writing and the gaps that remain in our understanding. Of particular interest to SFL teachers and testers may be the overview of SFL writing models and discussion of the interplay of various factors that influence diagnostic assessment of L2 writing: L1 literacy, L2 proficiency, childhood vs adult learning, and potentially, disorders like dyslexia.

Chapters 4 and 5 move the discussion towards the development of diagnostic instruments. These chapters focus on the choices that are made in the initial stages of this process: Should we use direct or indirect assessment? Who will make or interpret the diagnosis, and will they need training? What characteristics will the task have? These are questions that need answering in any language assessment, but all have special considerations if the test is diagnostic in purpose. To illustrate this, Chapter 4 helpfully introduces a range of

different diagnostic tests, which serve as practical examples of different test design choices.

Chapters 6 to 8 focus on diagnosing the writing process and product. Chapter 6 examines the ways in which the writing process can be diagnosed, in both the sense of *process writing*, the approach in which various drafts are submitted for feedback, and *the process of writing* a text in one sitting. The writing process is examined on three levels—planning, generating and reviewing—and various methods for diagnosing each are considered. Chapters 7 and 8 turn to diagnosis of the writing product, the former focusing on human raters, and the latter on automated computer analyses. These chapters reflect on the construct, goals and needs, the first stage in the diagnostic cycle, and address the challenges of different means of assessment: bias in human raters, limitations in computer rating, observing the not-readily accessible writing process, amongst others.

Chapter 9 discusses the important role that diagnostic feedback plays in the diagnostic cycle. This chapter draws on different threads from the previous chapters but conceptualizes them through the eyes of feedback, i.e., the interaction between the assessment and the test taker, a process which often also involves someone, usually a teacher, to communicate and interpret feedback. As in the 2014 sister volume on diagnosing reading, this chapter includes an extended discussion of Hattie and Timperley's (2007) seminal model of feedback and how we can relate it to SFL writing diagnosis. This is followed by a discussion of what the literature shows may work best in terms of practical aspects, for example, timing and delivery, and view of feedback through a sociocultural lens.

Chapter 10 summarizes the diagnostic cycle and the main themes of each chapter, leading to a final discussion on future directions. Here the authors restate the need for caution in, among others, the use of the CEFR and indirect assessment of writing, while holding that these tools have their place in carefully considered diagnostic assessment design. The chapter, and volume, rounds off with a look at areas which future research could further explore: longitudinal diagnosis, diagnosis of the writing process, the use of integrated tasks in diagnostic assessment, and the assessment of academic literacy and writing.

Here at the end, the authors examine some of the large-scale changes pushing the field along: ongoing technological developments in keystroke logging, for example, have made the writing process much more accessible to researchers and test developers, and automated feedback is rapidly developing with machine learning. Additionally, internationalization of higher education continues to grow, highlighting the need for more research in the diagnostic assessment of academic skills in English-medium instruction, and content and language integrated learning.

Throughout the chapters, the authors use a number of diagnostic writing assessments to illustrate the various aspects of the diagnostic cycle. These include, naturally, *DIALANG*, which diagnoses general proficiency, as well as the post-entry *Diagnostic English Language Needs Analysis* (DELNA), both of which will likely be familiar to readers. Other illustrative examples draw on different purposes, and include the automatic academic writing feedback program *Roxify*, the secondary-level EFL writing assessment *VERA8*, the early-education L1/L2 Finnish test *GraphoLearn*, along with an example of a checklist and a portfolio method for writing diagnosis. The wide range of contexts that these assessments represent underlines the flexibility with which the diagnostic cycle can be applied.

The potential reader of this volume will also be drawn from a wide range of contexts. Classroom instructors, researchers and test developers will all find something in this book that they can apply to their craft to better reflect the literature and current theories in their practice. While this book does not aim to act as a manual to guide test development per se, readers approaching the book with the operationalization of diagnostic tests of SFL writing in mind might do well to dive deep into Chapter 9, which discusses the central and key role that feedback has in diagnostic testing; considering what information a proposed test should gather and transmit is a good starting point in narrowing down a construct to be measured by a diagnostic test. For researchers, the first few chapters will be particularly useful. Reading and writing are complex and multidimensional activities. Thus, as with reading, theoretical models of writing are positioned from a range of perspectives and areas of research. Using these in a SFL context means marrying writing models with

models of L2 acquisition and language transfer. The complexity of such a task makes these chapters' syntheses of the various models and evidence a welcome resource.

The volume covers a very broad topic, and as such, it is understandable that some aspects have been omitted or not explored in detail. These include collaborative writing and integrated writing, both of which are increasingly important areas of attention, particularly in academic writing. Helpfully, the authors point the reader towards other useful resources. Another noted absence is discussion of cognitive diagnostic assessment (CDA), which was discussed in some detail in the sister volume on reading (Alderson, et al., 2014), but is only mentioned incidentally in this volume. This is understandable; the utility and practicalities of CDA for the diagnosis of productive skills is not yet clear. However, CDA has been explored as a method for SFL writing diagnosis (He et al., 2021; Xie, 2017; Cho & Park, 2021), a trend that is likely to continue (Mei & Chen, 2022). The reader might have benefitted from a short discussion of the topic and its potential uses and pitfalls.

Like Alderson (2005), *The Diagnosis of Writing in a Second or Foreign Language* will likely long serve as a key reference for researchers and practitioners in diagnostic testing, providing a full picture of where we have been and where we are now, guiding future research and practice in the field.

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