

Gebril, A. (Ed.) *Learning-Oriented Language Assessment: Putting Theory into Practice*. Routledge. 2021. Pp. 254.

Alternative assessment, teacher-based assessment, classroom-based assessment, assessment *for* learning, assessment *as* learning, dynamic assessment, student-based assessment – these are just a few of the terms that have been coined in recent years to denote attempts to counterbalance the strong focus on large-scale summative tests in many educational settings. While all these approaches emphasise the close relationship between testing, assessment, teaching, and learning, they differ in the ways they conceptualise the nature and strength of this relationship. Broadly speaking, over time the weight accorded to these areas has shifted from a focus on testing to assessment and teaching and, more recently, to one on learning, a change of focus frequently promoted under the banner of *learning-oriented assessment* (LOA). Considering the wide range of terms, it is not surprising that current discussions may appear confusing at times, with many theoretical distinctions collapsing in real-world application in the classroom. An edited volume on learning-oriented *language* assessment seeking to bridge theory and practice is therefore both welcome and timely.

The book is a fine collection of contributions from a number of international experts in the field. The range of topics covered is impressive, including theoretical heuristics, historical background, language assessment literacy (LAL), policy implementation, feedback, action research, and the role of technology, to name but a few. Viewed from the perspective of Turner and Purpura's (2016) seminal Working Framework for LOA, the volume covers the framework's dimensions to varying degrees, with the focus being on the contextual, elicitation, learning, and instructional dimensions, whereas the interactional, affective, and proficiency dimensions are discussed to a lesser extent. The book provides perspectives from all over the world. Unlike many other volumes, this one includes contexts which are traditionally underrepresented in the assessment literature, for example North Africa, a gap that becomes glaringly obvious in Saville's overview of LOA perspectives from around the world in Chapter 2.

The volume consists of 12 chapters. In Chapter 1, Gebril sets the scene for discussions about LOA by identifying some key issues, such as the need to reconceptualise validity in terms of the extent to which assessment leads to learning, the difficulty of implementing LOA, the significance of teachers' LAL, and the current lack of conceptual clarity around LOA. Given these challenges, the author stresses the importance of a clear

rationale and vision for LOA policy implementation. The following chapters are organised into two parts. While Part I addresses important historical developments, theoretical frameworks, LAL, research methods, and the role of feedback, Part II illustrates how LOA is implemented in different instructional settings. Within this structure, individual chapters are either predominantly theoretical (Chapters 2, 3, 5, 7), empirical (Chapters 4, 8, 9, 10, 11), or more practical in orientation (Chapters 6 and 12).

The theoretical contributions start with Chapter 2 by Saville. With its useful overview of the roots and current models of LOA, this chapter is a must-read for anyone interested in the topic, uninitiated and informed readers alike. It traces the origins and emphases of different learning-oriented approaches and culminates in a systemic model of LOA, first presented in Jones and Saville (2016), which links the macro-level policies with the micro-level settings in which learning takes place. In Chapter 3, Fulcher argues for an extension of current conceptualisations of LAL from the perspective of LOA. Postulating an unbridgeable divide between the validity paradigm of standardised high-stakes tests and that of LOA, the author identifies seven “critical variances” (p. 35), singling out evidence for *change* as the most important validity criterion for LOA. Chapter 5 by Figueras situates LOA within the broader context of efforts over the past 50 years to integrate language learning, teaching, and assessment. This historical perspective, strongly influenced by but not limited to a European point of view, reminds us of the importance of historically informed strategies for educational reform. Gebril in Chapter 7 provides a detailed account of Egyptian assessment policy. The author explains why past attempts to promote formative assessment have failed in a context which is typically associated with summative examinations. Drawing on aspects of change theory, he identifies several areas for improvement, as well as conditions under which a LOA policy can be successful.

Another group of chapters presents original research. In Chapter 4, Banerjee reports on a meta-analysis of LOA studies in L2 contexts, shedding light on researchers’ methodological choices. The results show that, although the surveyed studies target multiple dimensions of LOA, scant attention has been paid to learners and the learning itself. While Chapter 7 offers reflections on the macro-level of government policy in Egypt, Amer in Chapter 8 zooms in on the micro-level of local educational practice in that context, investigating the implementation and perception of LOA in two secondary schools. Chapter 9 by Khan and Hassan is also situated in the context of a top-down assessment reform policy, more specifically in Malaysia. Their washback study investigates the intended effects and stakeholder perceptions of a school-based English language assessment. Similar to Chapter 8, here too the case study approach reveals discrepancies between policy aims and teacher perceptions. Both chapters show how complex the interaction between macro-level policies and micro-level practices is,

suggesting a stronger focus on assessment literacy as a mediating factor. In Chapter 10, Baker, Polikar, and Homayounzadeh examine an assessment activity for post-secondary level language students. In view of the limited potential of traditional feedback comments, an assignment was created in which students take on the role of graders, rating several essays, justifying their ratings, and critically reflecting on the experience. The chapter exemplifies how purposefully blurring the boundaries between formative and summative assessment can help students develop as self-regulated learners. In Chapter 11, Salamoura and Morgan discuss a number of action research projects which illustrate how learning and assessment can be integrated in the classroom. Pointing out that action research and LOA share the goal of identifying and closing learning gaps, the authors emphasise the usefulness of action research as tool for investigating aspects of LOA.

Two chapters are more practical in orientation than the other ones in that they offer helpful guidelines and principles in relation to feedback, materials design, and the use of technology. In Chapter 6, Lam discusses the role of feedback as a key component of LOA in which the onus should be on both the teacher and the learner. In the final chapter, Voss provides a useful account of how technology can support the design of tasks, feedback, and the involvement of learners in the assessment process, rightly emphasising the fact that computers do not have a philosophy of teaching, learning, and assessment, but professionals using technology do.

Taken together, the chapters provide an impressive amount of meta-reflection on what constitutes LOA. Such reflection is necessary and timely if there is to be greater definitional clarity and wider currency in educational settings. There is some overlap between the conceptual parts of individual chapters, which informed readers may find a little repetitive if they choose to read the book in one sitting, but such redundancy can actually be heuristically valuable. The volume contributes to current discussions particularly by foregrounding the ultimate goal of LOA, namely to effect *change* in the form of enhanced learning, thereby rightly placing the learner at the heart of the matter. A back-of-the-envelope keyword analysis of the chapters' expository passages about LOA, which generated a number of keywords associated with this type of change (e.g., *learn, formative, facilitate, enhance, outcome, promote*), confirms this emphasis (for details on keyword analysis see Baker, 2004). Saville (Chapter 2), for example, characterises LOA as a systemic change project to measurably improve learning and as a theory of change which, complemented by a theory of action, aims to implement educational change processes *by design*. Lam (Chapter 6) zooms in on the power of feedback when it comes to creating change, the effect of which can be maximised if learners take ownership of their own change. The chapters in the second part of the book also draw, either directly

or indirectly, on the potential of specific interventions to achieve the desired change. Fulcher (Chapter 3), in turn, provides the most explicit discussion of change as a key feature of LOA. Relating LOA and LAL to validity theory, he considers change to be the most central validity criterion which distinguishes the LOA paradigm from the high-stakes standardised paradigm. In this view, "LOA is valid if, and only if, the learner changes as a result of the assessment" (p. 39). Accordingly, the main concern of LAL for LOA is, in Fulcher's view, for teachers to develop the knowledge and skills required to effect the desired change. While the two paradigms are incompatible from Fulcher's point of view, Saville argues the contrary, advocating a close alignment between learning-oriented tasks and large-scale examinations. Such conflicting views may confuse readers who expect to find an internally consistent representation of LOA, but they also remind us of the complexity of the topic, as well as of the fact that there is no single, unified LOA movement. In view of the different interpretations, the book would surely benefit from a concluding chapter which attempts to synthesise the strands, reflecting on how individual chapters may advance our conceptual understanding and what they imply for the field at large.

Given the important role that *change* plays, I was surprised to learn that none of the chapters focuses primarily on the learning outcomes and on how the learning is actually transformed by the specific assessment interventions. The volume reflects an imbalance that is symptomatic of a general asymmetry within the assessment literature: currently more attention is paid to the *assessment* side of LOA and not yet enough to the *learning* aspect, particularly in the empirical literature. Thus, Banerjee's finding in Chapter 4 that most of the current LOA studies are very much teacher- and assessment-centred holds true for large parts of the book. While Chapter 10 by Baker et al. is a notable exception in that it presents some evidence for students' learning gains as a result of LOA activities, the authors themselves acknowledge that the extent to which these effects result in tangible "learning transformations as represented by improved learning outcomes" (p. 180) needs to be explored in future research. It is hoped that the volume serves as a catalyst for more empirical work on the extent to which LOA practices result in actual learning.

Finally, the subtitle of the volume, *Putting Theory into Practice*, creates an expectation that the book is targeted at practitioners. While the chapters in the second part do provide examples of LOA practices in different instructional contexts, the strong research orientation in this part will probably be more attractive to researchers and graduate students than to practitioners. Although the book is not intended to be a practical guide or resource book for teachers, additional examples and process-oriented descriptions of

successful projects similar to the ones discussed in Chapter 11 would have helped the book to live up to the expectations created by the subtitle.

Overall, the editor is to be commended for this book. Anyone with a keen interest in bridging the gap between theory and practice in language assessment will enjoy this book for its scholarship and stimulation. We can all benefit from such accounts of how LOA is implemented in different local settings. Let us hope that more such collections of local and localised practices will follow and help us draw useful conclusions, especially for LAL, so that we can purposefully cross the boundaries between testing, assessment, teaching, and learning, particularly in contexts where the summative paradigm prevails.

Reviewed by Armin Berger

University of Vienna, Austria

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