

B. Marshall. *Testing English: Formative and summative approaches to English assessment.*

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What type of assessment can best promote student learning? This is one question that language teachers are concerned with in the classroom setting. In the field of language testing, it has been acknowledged that examinations, particularly high-stakes ones, often result in teachers teaching to the test, which inevitably restricts what students learn. Bethan Marshall's book *Testing English: Formative and Summative Approaches to English Assessment* addresses this issue by closely examining English assessment practices in the UK and other English-speaking countries in order to seek a form of assessment that can enhance students' learning.

Before starting this book, readers should be aware of two things. First, *Testing English* does not address the assessment of English as a second language. The English discussed in this book refers to the mainstream subject taught in primary and secondary schools in English-speaking countries, especially the UK. Second, the book does not provide ready-made assessment activities language teachers can apply in their classes. In this sense, *Testing English* differs sharply from most books on language testing and practical guides for language teachers.

In Chapter 1, Marshall provides her perspective on the English content that should be taught in class and discusses why it is inappropriate to assess English through formal examinations. In essence, Marshall views English as an art; she states that 'creativity, pleasure and the imagination are central to the English curriculum' (p. 132). This chapter introduces severe criticisms of examinations as a means of measuring the construct of English as an art. She also discusses the issues of negative washback and construct under-representation (Messick, 1996).

Chapters 2 and 3 detail the history of assessment practices followed in the UK, starting after World War II. We can see a huge disparity between the formal examinations controlled by the government and the coursework assessments conducted by teachers. In the postwar era, examinations were employed to measure students' English abilities. English teachers, however, harshly criticized these external examinations because students were only required to provide the 'correct' answers while there is no single answer in English as an art subject. Examinations were thus considered to result in rote learning and to stifle students' creativity. In this context, assessing English through coursework

was proposed, which gave the teachers more freedom to choose what content they wished to assess. However, the major concern about this practice was how to ensure reliability and accountability. Chapters 2 and 3 describe serious conflicts in the UK between the government's decision to hold formal examinations and teachers' preference for coursework-based assessments.

Chapters 4 and 5 introduce some practices of formative assessment: Assessment for Learning (AfL). Chapter 4 discusses the King's Medway Oxfordshire Formative Assessment Project (KMOFAP) established in 1999 and classroom assessment practices attempted by some teacher participants in the project. They employed dialogues (questioning and feedback) and peer assessments, which language testers often view as forms of *alternative assessment* (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Although the chapter does not provide ready-made assessment activities that readers can apply, it does include rationales and principles underpinning such practices. Chapter 5 addresses the Learning How to Learn Project (LHTL) launched in 2002, where the goal was to promote learning autonomy. Marshall describes two approaches to assessment as exhibited by the project participants, namely, the spirit and the letter of formative assessment. Teachers, who emphasized the former, applied assessments that were underpinned by the principle of promoting learner autonomy. In contrast, those who relied on the latter simply employed a formative assessment technique—peer assessments—where students were not given the chance to consider what a good monologue is; this technique focused only on technical errors in peers' texts. Chapter 5 stresses the importance of realizing the principle of promoting learner autonomy and the risks of using assessment methods that disregard the spirit of formative assessment.

Chapter 6 introduces the summative assessment practices followed in the King's Oxfordshire Summative Assessment Project (KOSAP), initiated in 2003. The crux of the project was to determine the plausibility of assessing students' progress through coursework—a portfolio style assessment. The teacher participants in the project who regarded English as an art rather than a set of communication skills preferred the course-based summative assessment approach because it evaluated aspects that formal examinations could not. It was reported that the teachers and students shared an implicit knowledge of what a good composition entails (referred to as *guild knowledge*) through a series of writing assignments.

Chapter 7 describes the course-based assessments practiced in the US, New Zealand, and Australia. It focuses on how teachers in these countries assess their students' English abilities through coursework or portfolios and how teacher assessments are moderated. Some of the moderation practices were

found to be rigorous and successful in ensuring the reliability of teacher assessments; however, portfolio assessment was considered to be extremely subjective and eventually abandoned in the US and New Zealand. Marshall states that 'there were too many fears about the reliability of moderation that mean that testing was brought back in a more traditional form' (p. 128). Even though teachers believed that coursework-based assessment was more authentic and valid when assessing abilities learned in the classroom, governments—in order to make assessment more reliable and accountable—determined to employ external objectively scored examinations that only require students to provide the 'correct' answers.

In Chapter 8, Marshall addresses the growing attention of the general public to practical skills for effective English communication and the UK government's desire to ensure the reliability of English assessment. These phenomena led to the introduction of (a) functional skills tests that focus on language mechanics and (b) the new General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE), which might potentially result in negative washback such as mechanical drills and rote learning. At the same time, Durham University recently started a project entailing a trial for coursework assessment. This will have some useful implications for the practice of course-based assessment. Marshall concludes the chapter by saying, 'What then do we learn from the turbulence that marks out English and assessment. The main thing is hope' (p. 139).

In *Testing English*, Marshall presents a number of criticisms of formal examinations and advocates teachers' course-based assessment to assess English as an art. Language testers who read the book might feel that much of the content is not directly relevant to second language testing. Accordingly, this book is not suitable for those who expect to learn the theory and practice of language testing. However, the book will remind language testers of the importance of seeking a form of assessment that will benefit students themselves and their learning.

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References

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- Messick, S. (1996). Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13(3), 241–256.