BOOK REVIEW

Assessing Language through Computer Technology

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Assessing Language through Computer Technology is the latest addition to the Cambridge Language Assessment Series. The volume opens with an inviting introduction in which authors Carol Chapelle and Dan Douglas discuss the significant role that computer technology can play in language assessment. They argue that the combination of language assessment and technology provides the potential to efficiently strengthen computer-based tasks; these types of assessments are convenient enough to be used in the blink of an eye. The authors also emphasize that the positive role of technology-based language assessment is accompanied by potential concerns such as the limitation of question items that are solely machine-marked. Therefore, Chapelle and Douglas also assert that it essential for test administrators, teachers, and researchers, who are involved in language assessment, to be acquainted with both the potential and the accompanying concerns that come with the process of conducting and constructing language assessment. They note, “Any person involved in language assessment, at whatever educational level, will need to be familiar with the possibilities and limitations that they should consider when deciding whether to construct or use assessment procedures using computer technology” (p. x).

The volume contains six chapters that discuss in-depth the issues of computer-assisted language testing (CALT) challenges, evaluation, and validity from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The first chapter, entitled “The Technology Thread,” focuses on the development of technology-assisted language assessment. In this chapter, the authors present the importance and some implications of CALT for language assessment for the intended readers of this volume such as teachers, test takers, and

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test developers. They note, “[T]eachers, test developers, and language-testing researchers need to add to their professional knowledge by learning about how technology is changing the possibilities and realities for language assessment” (p. 20).

The second chapter, titled “What is the CALT Difference?”, centers on specific differences between technology-based language assessment and previous methods. These include paper-based tests, audio/video, and face-to-face oral interviews, which have been employed by test developers. The chapter examines several examples of the testing techniques supported by CALT such as fast testing, responding, reporting test results, rich contextualized input, variety of response techniques, computer adaptivity, and automated scoring. These characteristics “require careful consideration of the aspects of language the test developer intends to measure” (39). The authors here focus on the positive effects of computer-assisted assessment and how it can be carefully managed to fulfill the purpose of collecting and interpreting relevant and sufficient evidence of the test taker’s performance.

The third chapter, “The Threat of CALT,” examines issues that accompany the utilization of computer-assisted language testing, raising the particular concern of test validity. The authors discuss these threats, raised by students, teachers, test developers and researchers, and propose several approaches to address them. Some of these threats involve different test performance, new task types, limitations due to adaptive item selection, inaccurate automatic response scoring, compromised security, and negative consequences for learners. Each of these issues and their proposed responses are discussed deeply in the chapter.

The fourth chapter, “Implementing CALT,” describes different types of software that can be used to make CALT more efficient. To assist test developers in being aware of the challenges when authoring online tests, Chapelle and Douglas bring focus to software concepts related to language assessment, the challenges test developers may encounter, and various options that test developers might have. The authors illustrate the process with a description of the creation of an online grammar test using a computer.

The fifth chapter, “Evaluating CALT,” addresses the evaluation of CALT based on the recommendations that CALT developers have made, which in turn are drawn from the way that language tests in general are evaluated. The authors start by discussing suggested guidelines to enhance quality during CALT development and evaluation. In the second section, the authors briefly examine research centered on certain features of CALT quality. The third section investigates the types of results gained through the utilization of Bachman and Palmer’s (1996) test usefulness framework. The last section explains the evaluation of CALT based on current views in education measurement (Kane, 2001).

The final chapter, “The Impact of CALT,” focuses on the transformative effect of technology on assessment, debating Bennett’s (1999) optimistic view. The authors indicate that Bennett’s notion of the impact of technology on assessment has not yet taken place despite the fact that progress has been made through many crucial changes in the utilization of technology in second language assessment. The authors also address some implications of advances that could be employed in the field of applied linguistics.

Generally speaking, Chapelle and Douglas have written a well-organized book that is free of technical jargon. The book is a readable overview of employing CALT in assessing language. The rich use of examples and charts throughout the chapters make the book very focused and engaging for readers. In addition, the detailed illustration of the pitfalls and issues that are associated with the use of CALT, discussed in chapter three, paints a clear picture for readers of the ways that these threats can eventually affect test validity. By introducing a set of solutions for dealing with such potential concerns, the authors have provided useful guidelines for teachers, administrators, and researchers. However, one concern not mentioned in the text is the potential distraction resulting from the use of multimedia tasks during assess-
ment. Grgurović and Hegelheimer (2007) have provided evidence that the use of multimedia might be overwhelming to some students. They suggest that test takers may get distracted and confused when having to balance information that is received in both oral and text forms (i.e., following a video and focusing on the information provided to answer the test questions). Expansion on such concerns, in addition to the addition of techniques and approaches on how to overcome them, would provide the readers of this volume with more practical guidelines for employing CALT in language assessment. Finally, the conclusion to this book and the valuable reference section provide a prologue to future publications in this area.

REFERENCES


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