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## **Book reviews**

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### **LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT FOR CLASSROOM TEACHERS**

*Lyle Bachman and Barbara Damböck*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017

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Lyle Bachman and Barbara Damböck's book – *Language Assessment for Classroom Teachers* (2017) – presents a practical approach to language assessment which is modelled via both a functional textbook format and a series of activities which encourage readers to engage directly with the theory presented. Bachman has significant experience at the tertiary level in relation to language testing in the USA. In contrast, Damböck's teaching experience heralds from a solid classroom teacher base in both primary and secondary schools, as well as teacher-training, in Germany. Bachman and Damböck's practical approach is essentially an "entirely new way of looking at the way you assess your students" (Bachman & Damböck, 2017, p. 2). Built on the research undertaken in Bachman's previous book *Language assessment in practice* (2010), this text "develop[s] a different approach to language assessment that [is] relevant to the needs of classroom teachers" (2017, p. 4). The intended audience is intentionally very broad including, "classroom language teacher[s] ... [who] want to learn how to better assess [their] students" (p. 5); making their theories universally applicable across all sectors, different cultural and linguistic contexts, and those using varying pedagogical approaches. The book is also suitable for student teachers or those who are undertaking studies in language teaching, applied linguistics and language assessment.

In essence, Bachman and Damböck posit that, "[a]ssessments can have a powerful effect on the way we teach and the way our students learn" (p. 39). The authors seek to "empower" (p. 4) their readers, shifting the way one thinks about "what" and "how" one assesses students' language. The authors describe and suggest an outcomes based approach with the focus on the nexus between

assessment and self-improvement or growth, referred to as “beneficial consequences” (p. 41). By connecting the “how” and the “what” we assess and developing one’s pedagogy, this should in turn not only make one a better educator but also simultaneously improve student outcomes. This overarching idea of the reciprocal role of learning from assessment for both student and teacher is paramount to Backman and Damböck’s theory of language assessment. I believe that this is a well-founded notion and is not only innovative but also necessary in the discourse around language assessment. For, it is essential that gains in assessment should occur not only at the student level but also at the teacher level. This is a much needed and important aspect of assessment that is often neglected. We tend to focus our discourse and planning of assessment on what the student will gain from a set task or series of set tasks; however, Backman and Damböck argue that this “gain” or “benefit” should not be mutually exclusive. This is a welcome transition in language assessment discourse and I believe that teachers of all sectors should take note of the authors’ overarching theory when applying their practical assessment strategy in their classrooms.

The book is divided into four key parts with the bulk of the approach and application contained in parts II and III. A short introduction of two chapters discusses and explains the theory behind Backman and Damböck’s approach. The introduction sets the tone of the book and provides the first activity for readers to conceptualise the theory presented. I found this to be very beneficial for both lecturers and students to activate the theory. Answers are provided at the end of the text, where appropriate, but in most cases students/readers are required to work through the activities breaking them down into their components and connecting assessment tasks with Backman and Damböck’s Assessment Use Argument (AUA) theory. As a result, rather than just reading theory, one is encouraged to apply the theory whilst considering how it could be utilised in the classroom setting. The language employed is also straightforward avoiding overly theoretical academic language; concepts and theories are clearly defined in both written and visual format through tables and flowcharts.

The first two chapters ask readers to contemplate a series of universal questions in relation to language assessment including how and why we make decisions (labelling these low-, medium-, and high-stakes decisions) in relation to assessment and which

modes of classroom assessment we use (implicit vs. explicit). The focus here is on “explicit-based” assessment rather than “implicit” as research undertaken by Backman and Damböck indicated that teachers were more competent in assessing their students “informally” rather than “formally”. This was the first part of the book that illuminated a key, and sometimes unspoken, misconception around assessment for me. The authors note that teachers “intuitively” assess their students in the “implicit mode” yet the development of “explicit” classroom-based assessments rendered many teachers “insecure” (p. 16). This justification by the authors helps to identify the foundation of this ‘new’ approach to assessment yet I felt that I would have preferred more of a balance of both forms of assessment despite the evidence that teachers tend to be more comfortable or competent in the “implicit” mode. Backman and Damböck seek to fill a gap in teacher skill in relation to language assessment yet I believe this approach is somewhat remiss. This is because when we, as educators, apply a theory or new approach to language assessment we should not isolate this theory to only one type or form of assessment. Their theory would perhaps be better applied holistically across all modes of assessment rather than solely in the “explicit” or “formal” mode as a summative type of assessment at the culmination of a unit of work. Despite this, the overarching shift to a more holistic approach to language assessment certainly strikes me as more consistent with current second language acquisition research.

Parts II and III of the book delve into the core of the approach and application of Backman and Damböck’s method of language assessment. The authors seek to change educators’ thinking in relation to assessment from “what” to assess to “why do I need to assess my students?” (p. 37). Again, I feel that this a welcome shift in the mindset of language educators as we can often get side-tracked with assessing content rather than explicitly considering the essence or purpose of the actual assessment. Fairness and “beneficence” (p. 41) of assessment are also paramount in this new approach to language assessment in addition to setting a series of four explicit assessment “claims” which help educators to define the benefits or specific consequences/outcomes of an assessment to all stakeholders. Part III guides the reader in how to apply the AUA approach in the classroom by creating assessment task templates linking in with the AUA and also discusses considerations and procedures for administering classroom-based assessments.

Finally, part V contains nine workable example assessments encouraging readers to apply Backman and Damböck's unique approach to their current teaching situations. All of the examples provided are suitable for both LOTE and ESL/EAL classrooms and cover the breadth of the language modes. The intended target audience of these assessments are clearly identifiable encompassing learners across all levels and ages as well as the specific Target Language Use (TLU). Each task is broken down following the theory and pedagogy presented in Chapters II and III thereby consolidating readers' understanding of Backman and Damböck's approach. In addition, a suggested recording form is also provided for teachers to record students' results.

Discourse around assessment of language learners has historically been confined to looking at student-based outcomes. Bachman and Damböck's method is a welcome shift and I would highly recommend this book to language educators who are searching for an innovative way to assess their students' language whilst simultaneously learning of the reciprocal "beneficence" of classroom-based assessment.

### **References**

Backman, L., & Damböck, B. (2017). *Language Assessment for Classroom Teachers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.