

# Chapter 4

## Equitable Assessment Practices

**Emmy J. Min**

*University of Southern California, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*The traditional approach to assessment is being reevaluated as a valid and effective language learning assessment tool because it often fails to account for the specific needs, contexts, and backgrounds of language learners. To make assessment processes more equitable, just, and inclusive, this chapter extends the traditional approach to assessment practice by introducing the equity-minded assessment model, which includes six principles for teachers to use as a framework for creating and evaluating assessments: validity, reliability, practicality, authenticity, washback and equity, and justice and inclusion. The author suggests that the model be used to design, administer, and reflect on the effectiveness of the assessment and as a critical reflective framework and not merely as a checklist of items. Thus, this model can serve to make assessments for learning and not just of learning, thereby making the assessment process equitable and inclusive.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter is designed to engage teacher candidates in exploring different theories, issues, and procedures related to assessments for language learners. By introducing relevant theories and current practices in the area of assessment, this chapter is designed to integrate theory and practice to provide readers with both conceptual understanding and practical experience in language assessment.

Through the lens of equity-minded assessment, this chapter will also provide an opportunity for readers to critically reflect on and self-assess themselves and their learners, as well as the context, which will affect how they view and assess others (Keesing-Styles, 2003; Shohamy, 2017.) Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to help readers emerge asking more informed, critical, and incisive questions about the role of assessment in teaching, about how teaching and learning inform assessment (Alderson, et. al., 2017), and about the potential consequences of their choices (McNamara, 2006; Messick, 1989; Shohamy, 2001a,b). In doing so, readers will become more reflective about what assessment strategies they choose, justifying the choices based on their informed knowledge of themselves, of students, and other related factors.

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This chapter first discusses the key concepts that support the suggested assessment practice. Following the discussion, the author will introduce the Equity-minded Assessment Model, (EMAM) which includes the six principles of effective assessment. To deepen the understanding of the model, the author will suggest a set of learning activities that can be used to explore the model. The Portrait of Practice section of the chapter will provide a practical example of how the EMAM can be adapted and used at the classroom level. Finally, the discussion section will explore further considerations when enacting the Equity-minded Assessment Model in practice.

## **CONCEPT**

Educators have different opinions on the type, timing, content, language, and authorship of assessment and feedback (Spolsky, 2017). A critical orientation to assessment incorporates several elements that focus on theory in action, or what Freire (1984) would call praxis. Praxis is defined as a “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1972, p. 52). According to Freire (1972), oppressed people can use praxis to critically reflect on their status, condition, and position, and to take actions to interrogate a system of power. Therefore, using practices such as praxis would be crucial to taking transformative actions. However, according to Barros (2011), traditional assessments have not been successful in “breaking down restrictions in the ways knowledge is constructed precisely because their applications are counterintuitive to the process of education as a continuum” (p. 83). Traditionally, assessments, especially large-scale assessments, have been used to maintain the status quo and serve the interests of the privileged by maintaining the uniformity of their content, procedures, and analysis. Similarly, Shohamy (2017) contended that a social perspective of language assessments views them as a “means for maintaining hierarchies and normalizing judgement” (p. 444). Moreover, traditional English language assessments have imposed a hegemonic version of English by privileging students who use the preferred version and thereby disadvantage those who do not come from the dominant linguistic background or are not multilingual (Gross & Crawford, 2021; May, 2017).

By criticizing the traditional form of assessment, proponents of critical orientation to assessments problematize the notion of “assum[ing] that students can be tested fairly in uniform ways, thus disregarding issues of socioeconomic dominance and cultural subordination that are intrinsically tied to any process of learning” (Barros, 2011, p. 79). Traditional assessment seeks to maintain “uniformity” as it is believed to have been associated with equality, objectivity, and fairness by those who use it. However, having a uniform way to assess and grade students’ learning involves assessing language form and factual content, which usually puts emphasis on accuracy and single right answers. A critical orientation to assessment, in contrast, puts emphasis on inviting diverse perspectives, language varieties, and diverse contents and modes of delivery. In addition to the issues of socioeconomic dominance and cultural subordination tied to the process of assessment, a critical orientation problematizes linguistic hierarchies favoring a language variety familiar to native speakers. For example, in both traditional standardized assessments and in-class error correction, the standard hegemonic language is perceived to be exclusively accurate and accepted regardless of the objective and content of the assessment (Brooks, 2017).

Traditional assessment, while making a significant impact on students’ likelihood of success and thereby contributing to overall (in)justice in society, often serves to marginalize certain groups of students to perpetuate the status quo. By not fully tailoring itself to students’ specific needs, backgrounds, and interests, a standardized assessment or any traditional in-class assessment may “only contradict the

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