

Book Review

Bilingualism and Testing: Special Case of Bias. Guadalupe Valdes and Richard A. Figueroa. Norwood, N. J. Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1994. Pp. x + 255.

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In a country where standardized tests are so important that they have become all-purpose instruments to diagnose, place, select, assess, measure, prescribe, reward evaluate, etc., one would expect that they were really based on solid foundations and qualities of good testing. However, they seem to have many flaws and weaknesses. One of these drawbacks is “Test Bias”, which refers to the systematic over or underestimation of scores for a particular group of individuals. *Bilingualism and Testing: A Special Case of Bias* is devoted to the problem of underestimation of scores of a specific minority group: bilingual individuals. Broadly speaking, the book refers to the existing theoretical, research, and practical knowledge of bilingualism and standardized testing in order to provide reasons for the bilingual children’s poor performance on standardized testing. In addition, Valdes and Figueroa aim their book at contributing “to the development of a research knowledge, and theoretical base that can support the testing of bilingual individuals” (p. 3). To accomplish these purposes, the book has been divided into six chapters and an appendix.

Chapter 1 examines the definition of bilinguals and reviews the classification of several kinds of bilinguals. The authors present a good analysis of the meaning of bilingualism and provide an interesting way to classify bilingual individuals along a continuum. However, their own definition of bilingualism, “... bilingualism, can be defined in its broadest terms as a common human condition in which an individual possesses more than one language competence” appears to be too broad and simple. The section about the different types of bilingual individuals shows that bilingualism is really a very complex socio-cultural political, economical, and psycho-linguistic phenomenon. The chapter ends with some critical analysis about the way bilinguals have been studied in the fields of second language acquisition, language assessment of minority children, and educational psychology

Chapter 2 includes a broad discussion of the difficulties associated with the description and measurement of bilingualism. At first, the authors review a number of issues related to the establishment of standards of language ability. On the question of “what does it mean to know a language?”, the authors use the concepts of language provided by such sociolinguists as Labov, Halliday, Hymes, etc., and specialists in applied linguistics and language testing such as Canale and Swain, Savignon, Bachman, etc. Figures 1 and 2 provide a general view of the complexity of language itself, without taking into account the complexity of the cognitive processes which could embed the process of language learning and use. The review of trends in assessing language proficiency is very brief, but clear and useful. The remaining part of this chapter provides a comprehensive view of the tendencies and trends to measure bilingualism. The authors are very analytical and identify the major problems encountered in measuring the language abilities of circumstantial bilinguals. It is certainly true that one cannot have a clear procedure or measure of verbal ability or language proficiency without having a clear view of this type of bilingual involved.

Chapter 3 focuses on the results of research on three areas: (a) cognitive development in bilinguals, (b) neuropsychological work on hemispheric involvement in the learning and processing of first and second languages, and (c) information processing in bilinguals. The general conclusion of this chapter is that bilinguals are cognitively different from monolinguals. However, the problem of the research in the three areas mentioned above is that they are inconclusive, sometimes there are contradictory results, and there are various limitations which are identified by the authors. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that there must be a cognitive difference among the different types of bilinguals and between these bilingual individuals and the monolinguals. This fact supports the need for conducting bilingual norming studies; the authors convincingly affirm that a bilingual factor may be operating when individuals take standardized test. In addition, this factor could contribute to their poor performance in this type of tests.

The authors’ analysis of the research conducted in the area of intelligence testing in Chapter 4 is really impressive. The evidence is clear and supports the concern about the inappropriateness of the measurement of bilingual children. It is really regrettable to know that through many years so many language minority students have been identified as people with low verbal IQ and high nonverbal IQ profile. In addition, it is hard to accept the fact that testing psychology could have promoted the ideas that bilingualism was a “language handicap”, that it retarded intelligence, and handicapped

English language acquisition. Another important issue which is crucial to have in mind when testing bilingual children is the effects of translating a test from one language to another language and applying it to a group of bilinguals or speakers of the other language. As the authors clearly state, this type of translation "... either produces a new sequence of item difficulties or introduces content that is not part of the societal curriculum and hence inappropriate for gauging the 'intelligence' of individuals with no exposure to this knowledge base".

Chapter 5 deals with diagnostic testing and its impact on the placement of minority children in special education programs. The reader would be amazed at the results of the Hispanic representation in special education programs for the mentally retarded, for the learning disabled and for the gifted classes presented in Figure 5. 1. It is clearly shown that most of the Hispanic population of children by 1978 were either educable mentally retarded or trainable mentally retarded. Concerning the court cases about testing minority children, the use of IQ tests with African-American and the special instruction for non-English speakers are very informative. Although their results have not had the impact one would expect due to the convincing arguments presented by the users. Another interesting fact is that most of the cases have concentrated on the type of tests given to minority groups, but nothing is said about other variables which can definitely influence the results of the diagnostic tests. Factors such as, the testers and their background, the conditions under which testing is conducted, the children's disposition for testing, the time, etc. constitute a set of variables that can affect the results of the testing procedure. The conclusions reached from the Handicapped Minority Research Institutes provide additional evidence to restate the existence of bias on the testing procedures used to diagnose and make decisions in special education. Finally, Figueroa's empirical study provides a careful and detailed analysis of the psychometrics used in special education testing to demonstrate clearly that (1) diagnostic decisions made based on tests provide capricious outcomes, and (2) "testing circumstantial trilingual individuals entails an inequitable and unknown degree of error" (p. 121).

In the last twenty five years, standardized tests have been questioned in the U.S. Most of the reasons provided by their critics appear to be convincing, and they favor the need of alternative assessment instrument in every field where they are used. If testing bilinguals is a much more complex process than testing monolinguals, it is a must to stop using standardized tests with bilingual individuals. The evidence provided by Valdes and

Figuroa overwhelmingly convinces us of the fact that this population has not been measured validly and, consequently, a lot of unfairness has been present in the testing of bilingual children for many years. In Chapter 6, the authors present three alternatives to both the testing and the policy communities. They are: (a) to “attempt to minimize the potential harm of using existing tests with bilinguals”, (b) to “temporarily ban all testing of bilinguals until psychometrically valid tests can be developed for this population”, and (c) to design alternative assessment and testing approaches. To be consistent with the main arguments of this book, one would agree with the application of the last two options.

The information provided in the Appendix is very useful for future research. Although, I think the authors should have exploited his information with more depth and rather than including it in an appendix, they could have developed it in a complete chapter. I would also add that despite the fact that the topics and questions included in step 1 are relevant, I do not think there is a need to spend too much time on them, since most of the questions have already been studied. This is demonstrated throughout the book. What is needed is more research which concentrates on the questions addressed in steps 2, 3, and 4.

Apart from the previous comments and the fact that some chapters are difficult to read if one does not have enough background information about bilingualism and testing, this book provides essential information for researchers, teachers, administrators, policy makers, and every person involved in bilingualism, testing, bilingual education, and the education of language minority bilingual children. In addition, *Bilingualism and Testing* can be recommended as an excellent research reference for graduate courses.