

MODERN LANGUAGE TESTING

Rebecca M. Valette

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
Second Edition, 1977

Rebecca Valette's MODERN LANGUAGE TESTING is the 1977, second edition of her HANDBOOK OF MODERN LANGUAGE TESTING, 1967 edition which has for years been a "must" for everyone concerned with language testing. It was such a standard text that when the second edition appeared in 1977 many assumed that it was merely a slightly modified version of the somewhat out-dated first. In fact this is far from the truth. As Alan Davies noted in a conference in Mexico City in December, 1978:

The second edition represents a considerable revision and expansion of the original book. The differences between the two editions is a good indication of the change in language testing in the decade from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies. That change was a major one and reflects the clash of ideas in other parts of the language field... Between 1967 and 1977 Valette's view of language testing changes and (she shows) a greater interest in language in context and with social interaction... these two books are good milestones indicating what differences there have been.

MODERN LANGUAGE TESTING, like its predecessor, is directed to the classroom teacher. Its format is clear and direct, it is well organized and indexed, and gives the teacher not only a score of sample items from which to choose but presents enough theory to form a framework for his testing program. For the teacher who wants to improve his evaluation techniques this book will be most helpful.

Part One, "Principles and Procedures" presents an overview of language testing theory, terms and methodology in the most complete, non-technical and concise manner possible for the classroom teacher. The format makes it easy for a perplexed reader to clarify terms and methods by quickly locating the appropriate section.

Part Two, "Methods of Evaluation", contains practical suggestions for testing listening, speaking, reading and writing each of which is dealt with in a separate chapter. The first sections of these skills chapters give examples which test the elements of the language (skill-getting) while the latter sections suggest ways to test and rate communication (skill-using). For example, the latter part of the section on "the

Listening Test" suggests sample items which will test the student's ability to "get the gist of a message", "to understand a message", "to relay oral messages" and "to test listening comprehension under adverse conditions". Valette notes that often students can understand spoken language when spoken formally or slowly but are unable to deal with rapid telescoped speech. "I'm going to get you at nine" may be comprehensible while "Ahm-ahnah gatchur nine" may not be. She suggests that the students hear a short selection in rapid speech and then hear the tape again one sentence at a time. In the pause they "translate", either in oral or written form, the rapid speech to its clearer form.

The section devoted to "The Speaking Test" is particularly helpful. The first part deals with testing the knowledge of the sound system, vocabulary and grammar and provides a variety of test items which do not vary greatly from the earlier edition but are nevertheless useful. The second part is directed to "speaking for communication" both in directed and free expression. Not only does Valette cover quite thoroughly almost every possible way of testing speaking for communication but she includes most of the scales that have been developed for rating communicative speech in the last few years. Here the reader will find rating scales by Upshur, Jakobovitz and Gordon, Bartz, Schultz and Clark in the Foreign Service Interview.

The sections devoted to reading and writing provide many useful items as well as different scoring possibilities, both teacher- and student-prepared. Particularly interesting are some suggestions to improve the reliability of ratings of free compositions.

New to this edition is the chapter devoted to "Culture Tests". Here again the section is valuable not only for its test item samples but because stimulating teaching techniques can be adapted from some of them. Valette's view that teaching culture and teaching language are intimately related is clear from the subdivisions in this chapter which are: "General Considerations", "Cultural Awareness", and "Analysis of the Target Culture".

Another new addition, "The Literature Test" will provide the teacher interested in this aspect of language teaching with a number of proposals for testing and scoring as well as with instructions for preparing multiple choice items for such tests.

Part Three, "Current Developments" includes two short chapters on "Directions in Language Testing" and "Testing in the ESL and Bilingual Programs" which provide the reader with enough information to give him a taste of the field, and excellent bibliographical references should he wish to delve into the subject more deeply. A brief look at some of the commercial language tests, and excellent selected bibliography, and a carefully prepared index complete this most rewarding volume.

Marjorie L. Jackson