

Assessment Accommodations for

Diverse Learners

Gavid S. Goh

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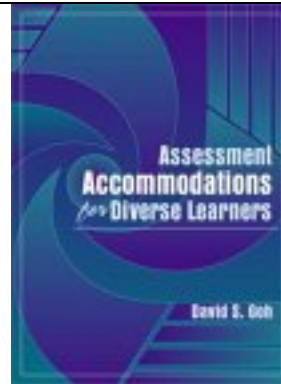
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Assessment Accommodations for Diverse Learners by Gavid S. Goh discusses and justifies the need for accommodations or modifications of standardized tests for two groups of mainstream students in American schools: students suffering from various types of physical and/or mental problems and those whose main language of communication outside the school context is other than English. These groups of students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs) have collectively been called “diverse learners” to emphasise the idea that their educational needs are far different from those of their peers.

Although the exclusion of disabled learners from mainstream education and accommodating them in special education schools clearly signifies their need not only for different types of assessment but also for a varied form of instruction, ELL’s need for a similar testing programme has less often been felt and documented, as the book shows. The need for accommodations in using standardized tests for both groups is justified and the types of accommodation to be provided are discussed. Basic concepts in testing are also reviewed, including standardized testing, psychometric issues, and professional uses of accommodated tests.

In Chapter 1, after introducing the origins psychological and educational tests, the author discusses the different uses to which tests are put, and reviews major trends in American school assessment. Chapter 2 clarifies the notion of “diverse learners,” and notes the differences between teacher-made and standardized tests. Some American laws in favour of using accommodations for disabled students and ELLs are pointed out at the end of the chapter.

In Chapter 3, the writer introduces the purpose of using accommodations and puts forth criteria on how and when to use and not to use accommodations. Testing accommodations are then grouped and discussed in six distinct categories. The chapter ends with a review of the relevant literature on policies and practices of using accommodation in different state schools in America. In Chapter 4, the essential characteristics of a good test, e.g. reliability and validity, are elaborated on, and it is argued that while accommodating a test may affect its reliability adversely, it will eventually lead to a more valid test if accommodation is done properly. The chapter concludes with a discussion on whether it is legally and morally permissible to flag scores obtained from accommodated testing.

The author of Chapters 5 and 6, Laura Menikoff, defines two different types of disorders (sensory and/or physical, and learning, cognitive and behavioural) both in medical and educational terms and suggests standardized tests be modified before being used for students experiencing a disability. Different methods of accommodations usable with both categories of disabled students are then presented.

Chapter 7 elaborates on using accommodations for English Language Learners. Some possible accommodations are exempting the ELL from being tested in English, using an adapted/translated test, using bilingual translators, and/or modifying test administration. The chapter concludes with some recommendations as to the proper use of accommodations for ELLs. The final chapter looks at another assessment option to be used with diverse learners: alternative assessment. Performance assessment, authentic assessment, and portfolio assessment are three main categories of alternative assessment discussed. Some technical and practical concerns are voiced about the development of alternative measurement tools at the end of the book.

The author of the book has done an excellent job of tackling an important but less-known topic in a very detailed manner, shooting two birds with one stone by dealing with accommodations for two different kinds of learners (physically/mentally retarded students and normal American mainstream school students whose L1 is not English) in a single volume. Using an umbrella term, diverse learners, for both groups may, however, lead to a form of unrest among those concerned with ELLs as these latter students, unlike the former, are by no means abnormal, retarded or disabled. Up-to-date references and research literature adds to the vigour of this professional book on educational measurement. However, some aspects of the content and the format of the book are troubling.

One problem is that almost all discussions and literature cited centre around the US education and schools; it would be of greater use if the book included materials related to a more international context.

The argument that accommodations be made for diverse learners on standardized tests seems too narrow since, arguably, accommodations should be provided for those requiring them on all types of tests. Furthermore, the author talks about accommodations for ELLs without clearly distinguishing ELL populations until Chapter 7; readers are left to find their own way out of the ambiguity of the term until then.

One of the points that the author makes about accommodations needed by ELLs is that if they have minimum English proficiency or no language proficiency, they can be exempted from testing (pp. 125-126). Such a statement raises two issues. First of all, if the ELL has no proficiency in English, then the question of what language he has received his school education arises. If the education has been in English, he cannot be considered as having no English proficiency but if the education has been in another language, then the concept of testing such a student *in English* seems faulty from the start. Secondly, why should the ELL be exempted from testing? If it is because of his limited English proficiency, and the purpose of the test is a subject area other than English, there is always a possibility of using some form of accommodated assessment like translated or adapted tests.

The concept of reliability in this book and others (Harris, 1968; Hughes, 1989; Heaton, 1990) is also problematic as it is considered a characteristic of *a test* -- the consistency or stability of test scores (pp. 25 and 79) -- and its magnitude is affected by “examinee characteristics (e.g., anxiety motivation, attention, and fatigue level)” (p. 63). However, a test may be a very good one but the candidate taking it may be in a different mood every time he sits it. In such a case, it can easily be noted that the problem for the inconsistency in test scores is to do with the testee, not with the test. Although the administration of the same test to the same candidate will lead to fluctuated scores in this case, it cannot be argued that *the test* is unreliable. Faulty items and misleading instructions, however, may lead to *test* unreliability. This is something different from the above notion of reliability because this latter type of test, even if it produces consistent scores, will be regarded as unreliable internally.

Similarly, when the author talks about validity, it is claimed that “test scores that are not reliable can never be valid” (p. 63). However, since validity is mainly to do with the test content, it is possible for a valid test to be unreliable if reliability is interpreted as the consistency of scores over repeated administrations on a candidate or groups of candidates. Elaborating on the types of validity evidence (pp. 65-69), the author brings about that the evidence on validity of a test can be based on its internal structure and its relationship to other variables. If validity is defined as “the degree to which a test measures what it purports to measure” (p. 64), it seems that the evidence will yield information about the internal consistency notion of reliability of the test rather than its validity, and as Sadeghi (2004 and forthcoming) claims, empirical or criterion-validation may not give us a true picture of the validity of the newly constructed test which in practice should be able to replace the criterion measure.

In the final chapter, the definition provided for “alternative assessment” is not easily understandable. The author has offered the term as a substitute for standardized tests to be used for diverse learners. Such tests, however, should not be exclusively intended for ELLs and disabled students; they can be used conveniently with all other types of learners. Likewise, in order to be able to be used with diverse learners, alternative assessment also needs to be modified to cater for different needs of individual learners.

In sum, David Goh’s book on accommodated assessment provides a comprehensive and an informative account of the current standing of the issue in the field of educational testing. The easy to understand and clear language is itself an asset, yet the scholarly discussions of the relevant topics supported by up-to-date evidence add to the strength of the book. Making reference to a wider international context, clarifying the technical concepts such as alternative assessment and the relationship between terms such as reliability and validity more accurately, and editing the book more carefully would, however, greatly enhance its scope and effectiveness.

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