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Penny McKay

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*To Lauren, Dana, Alicia, Tayla, Maddison and Chelsee:
look for the possibilities!*

And to all the family, especially to Andy, Paul and Chris.

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Series editors' preface

Recent years have seen considerable growth in the number of children learning a second or foreign language, as the importance of being able to use a language other than one's first language has become recognized in an increasingly globalized world. In Asia and Europe in particular, there has been a tendency to lower the age at which school children begin to learn a foreign language, since it is believed that the earlier a child starts to learn a foreign language, the greater the ultimate achievement will be. In addition, in many regions of the world, vast numbers of children attend schools in which the language of instruction is not the same as their native or mother tongue. In many African countries, for instance, the language of education is not the same as the language of the home for the majority of children. In many settings, the children of immigrants must not only deal with the same subject matter as their classmates for whom the language of instruction is their native language, but also acquire that language as a second, sometimes as a third, language. Such children are variously referred to as 'bilingual students', 'foreign language (FL) learners', 'second language (SL) learners', 'pupils having English as an additional language (EAL)', 'students of non-English-speaking background (NESB)' or 'English language learners (ELLs)'. In many countries, these 'young language learners' comprise a sizeable proportion of the school-age population. In the USA, for example, it has recently been estimated that well over 3 million children, or nearly 12 per cent of all children in the elementary schools, are young language learners. Furthermore, in many countries, young language learners comprise the most rapidly growing segment of the elementary (primary) school population.

While in some schools there is no extra support to help young language learners acquire the language of instruction, in most countries where there are large numbers of young learners, there is a growing awareness of their special needs. There is therefore a need to identify the needs of young language learners, to determine what level, if any, of proficiency they have in the target language, to diagnose their strengths and areas in need of improvement, and to keep track of their progress in acquiring the language. Language assessment, whether this is informal, classroom-based, or large-scale, thus has a critical role to play in gathering the information needed for these purposes.

The most pressing assessment need in school programmes for young learners is for greater knowledge and expertise in language assessment among classroom teachers. Although high-stakes accountability decisions are often based largely on the results of large-scale, standardized assessments, the formative decisions that help guide student learning and inform teaching are appropriately made on the basis of classroom-based assessments that teachers make. Unfortunately, the vast majority of teachers who work with young language learners have had little or no professional training or education in language assessment. Nevertheless, teachers are involved in assessment on a daily basis, as they monitor their pupils' classroom performance, as they collect work samples or compile portfolios, and as they develop formal classroom assessments.

This book is ideally suited to meet this assessment need of practitioners who are working with young language learners. It includes discussions of the research about the characteristics and special needs of young language learners, along with discussions of the research about the conditions under which these children learn language. The volume also provides practitioners with a wealth of approaches, both informal and formal, to classroom assessment, including the assessment of oral skills, reading and writing, illustrated with numerous examples from actual classrooms and programmes for young language learners.

The author of this volume, Penny McKay, has extensive experience in teaching school-age learners and in developing programmes for these learners, and has conducted considerable research herself in this area. In addition, her long experience as an educator, mentor and teacher trainer has enabled her bring to this volume a wealth of knowledge, and to focus this and present it in a way that is readily accessible to practitioners.

In summary, this book is timely in that it addresses an important and urgent need in language assessment. There are a number of books that provide 'cookbook' examples of assessments for young learners.

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However, no other volume provides both a discussion of the research to help readers better understand these children and how to assess them most appropriately, and a principled discussion of the variety of assessment approaches that are available to practitioners.

J. Charles Alderson
Lyle F. Bachman

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