



A Plea for Developing Language Assessment Literacy among English Foreign Language Teachers

Plaidoyer pour le développement de la littératie de l'évaluation linguistique chez les professeurs d'anglais comme langue étrangère

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to raise teachers' consciousness on the eminence of language assessment literacy in the area of teaching English as a foreign language by probing some definitions of assessment literacy, reviewing miscellaneous studies in the field, analysing some models and alternatives for the evaluation and development of language assessment literacy in English foreign language teaching and, lastly, providing some conclusions and recommendations for the development of language assessment literacy among English foreign language teachers to better serve the demands of their students and their organisations.*

Keywords: *Assessment, Assessment Literacy, English foreign language teachers, English language, teaching*

Résumé : *Le présent article vise à sensibiliser les enseignants sur l'importance de la littératie en matière d'évaluation linguistique dans le domaine de l'enseignement de l'anglais comme langue étrangère tout en examinant certaines définitions de la littératie en matière d'évaluation, en passant en revue diverses études dans ce domaine. L'analyse de certains modèles et solutions de rechange pour l'évaluation et le développement de la littératie linguistique dans l'enseignement des langues étrangères en anglais et enfin, formuler des conclusions et des recommandations pour le développement de l'évaluation des compétences linguistiques des enseignants d'anglais comme langue étrangère afin de mieux répondre aux demandes de leurs étudiants et de leurs organisations.*

Mots-clés : *évaluation, évaluation de la littératie, enseignants d'anglais comme langue étrangère, langue anglaise, enseignants*



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With the growing number of domains and quick advances in this era, it is vital to acquire multiple literacies to hold on with this contemporary flow, such as academic literacy, media literacy, computer literacy and many others. Given this discernible growth of new literacies, it should not come as no surprise that assessment literacy started to appear as an early contribution in the general education literature (Popham, 2009; Taylor, 2009) and in language testing (Davies, 2008) focusing on diagnosing the characteristics of testing knowledge and skills of teachers. Albeit the need to implicate others in language assessment literacy, language teachers remain basic stakeholders whose teaching contexts should be taken into account to, further, define language assessment literacy (Scarino, 2013). English foreign language (EFL) teachers struggled and faced a lot of pressure to find the best ways to assess students' knowledge and skills that will allow learners to reach their full potential (Suah, 2012).

The basic aspects in traditional assessment are certifying reliability and validity in assessment instruments" (Hidri, 2020). These aspects are consistent with the aims of quantifying and measuring learning and gathering information. Since these aspects are the concerns in assessing learners, they establish the final grade as the product of traditional assessment (Brown, 2004). Once learning is characterized as a number, it is of paramount importance that the number be as reliable and valid as possible; otherwise, it has no meaning (Alderson et al., 1995; Alderson and Banerjee, 2001, as cited in Hidri, 2020: 18). This conceptual paper inquires into the development of language assessment literacy in the area of teaching English as a foreign language by probing some definitions of assessment literacy, reviewing miscellaneous studies in the field, analysing some models and alternatives for the evaluation and development of language assessment literacy in English foreign language teaching and, lastly, providing some conclusions and recommendations for the development of language assessment literacy among English foreign language teachers to better serve the demands of their students and their organisations. This paper also aims to raise awareness of the relevance of language assessment literacy in the field of foreign language education.

1. Definition of Assessment Literacy

As a starting point, it is relevant to deal with the definition of assessment. This concept has traditionally played a major role in the process of teaching and learning not only in English language education, but also across most realms of study. It is together with teachers, students, resources and context that contribute to determining the quality of instruction (Yamtim & Wongwanich, 2014). López and Bernal (2009), on their part, believed that there are distinct practices of assessment among language teachers. Whereas those with language assessment training used assessment to enhance teaching and learning, the ones with no training used it as a way to only obtain grades. Therefore, López and Bernal (2009) indicate that teachers without training placed grades and assessment on the same level, which is considered as a limited approach to language assessment.

The success of assessment relates to the way and technique in which it is conducted to learners; yet much more than that depends upon the objectives of assessment and assessor. This becomes even complicated when it is in the area of foreign language teaching and learning, for assessment in language is supposed to measure the related elements in alteration. Thus, it seems evident that assessors need to own understandable assessment

literacy to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the learners through the process (Hidri, 2020).

It is also relevant to consider assessment literacy from a general education perspective as it would aid in understanding its role across various subjects or realms of study encompassing the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language. For example, Fulcher (2012) identified that the first trial to define assessment literacy for teachers was generated by the American Federation of Teachers (1990) and it contained skills in “selecting and developing assessments for the classroom, administering and scoring tests, using scores to aid instructional decisions, communicating results to stakeholders, and being aware of inappropriate and unethical uses of tests” (Fulcher, 2012 : 115). Stiggins (1991) on her part, considered assessment literacy as “having a basic understanding of the meaning of high- and low-quality assessment and being able to apply that knowledge to various measures of student achievement” (p. 535). Following those definitions, we consider that assessment literacy bears upon possessing theoretical and practical knowledge, and overall ability in all facets related to the assessment of students’ learning. Such facets may encompass the design, administration, grading, evaluation, and impact of all types of alternatives for classroom and large-scale assessments.

2. Definition of Language Assessment Literacy

It is commonly agreed that language assessment literacy (LAL) entails knowledge, skills, and principles in language testing (Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012). These three aspects have not changed and remained stable in theoretical and research discussions about LAL. According to Davies (2008), ‘skills’ describe the practical know-how in assessment and construction, and ‘knowledge’ refers to the “relevant background in measurement and language description” (p. 328) Nevertheless, the scope and boundaries of LAL have been debated by different scholars who are wondering what particular knowledge, skills, and principles are required to define it. What seems obvious is that knowledge of language, language use, and language pedagogy distinguish this concept from assessment literacy, the generic term in general education (Popham, 2009). In his review paper, Giraldo (2018: 181) opines that “If language teachers are effectively trained in lal, [...] assessment for formative purposes—that is to enhance teaching and learning [...] can become essential in language education”.

Language assessment literacy is also considered as a collection of skills, knowledge of using assessment methods, and employing relevant tools in an appropriate time that permits someone to comprehend, assess, construct language tests, and analyse test data (Pill and Harding, 2013). “As it is evident in the literature, there has been a shift in developing language assessment literacy from a more componential view (e.g., Brindley, 2001; Davies, 2008; Inbar-Lourie, 2008) to a developmental one” (Coombe, et al, 2020: 2). As an illustration, Fulcher (2012) is of the opinion that language assessment literacy should fall into a classification of (a) practical knowledge, (b) theoretical and procedural knowledge, and (c) socio-historical understanding. Fulcher opined that practical knowledge is the foundation and more significant than all other aspects of language assessment literacy.

Taylor (2013), as cited in Coombe, et al (2020), proposed that LAL necessitates particular levels of knowledge and thus suggested eight levels comprising (1) knowledge of theory, (2) technical skills, (3) principles and concepts, (4) language pedagogy, (5) sociocultural values, (6) local practices, (7) personal beliefs/attitudes, and (8) scores and decision-

making. Nevertheless, Taylor was judicious about labelling this a model; however, her proposition provided a useful commencement and paved the way for further research on more conceptualization of language assessment literacy. In a nutshell, assessment literacy is a skill needed by teachers for their own long-term professional well-being, to benefit their students and programs or institutions in which they work (Popham, 2009).

3. Studies on Language Assessment Literacy in Teacher Education

Given miscellaneous responsibilities teachers encounter in their daily activities, it is not surprising that assessment becomes a strenuous task. Popham (2009) argues that today's teachers know little about educational assessment. For example, competence in accountability assessments is of particular relevance in view of the need for EFL teachers to engage critically with required national and international English curriculum and tests. Fulcher (2012) also claims that accountability tests "are used in political systems to manipulate the behaviour of teachers and hold them accountable for much wider policy goals" (p. 114).

In a study conducted by Fulcher (2012) to wring the assessment training needs of 278 international language teachers, the results led to the construction of a working definition of assessment literacy, which clearly questions other definitions widely used in the existing literature including those mentioned in this paper. These include the knowledge, skills and abilities required to design, develop, maintain or evaluate, large scale standardized and/or classroom based tests, familiarity with test processes, and awareness of principles and concepts that guide and underpin practice, including ethics and codes of practice. The ability to place knowledge, skills, processes, principles and concepts within wider historical, social, political and philosophical frameworks in order to understand why practices have arisen as they have, and to evaluate the role and impact of testing on society, institutions, and individuals (Fulcher, 2012, p. 125).

These definitions lead to a much broader approach to assessment literacy in EFL teaching and learning which integrates knowledge, competencies, and principles in a manner that seeks to adjust both classroom and accountability assessments. Popham (2009) believes that assessment literacy should be an imperative competency for today's teachers and the focus of current and future staff development endeavours. An evenly relevant issue connects to the knowledge base of assessment, that is, the knowledge or specific content and competencies that teachers are supposed to possess as far as assessment is concerned.

4. Assessment Knowledge Base of EFL Teachers

The knowledge base regarding language assessment refers to the body of theoretical and practical knowledge that language teachers -including EFL teachers- demand in relation to dimensions like purpose of assessment, efficacy of the assessment tools being used, testing conditions, interpretation of results, etc. When following an outline proposed by Brindley (2001), InbarLourie (2008) focuses on dimensions like "the reasoning or rationale for assessment (the 'why'), the description of the aspect to be assessed (the 'what'), and the assessment process (the 'how')" (p. 390) as the assessment knowledge traits language teachers require.

Other scholars such as Popham, (2009) and Stiggins, (1999) have tried to define what constitutes the knowledge base of assessment for teachers across different realms

including EFL education. Stiggins (1999) proposes a list of seven content requirements or skills aiming to supply a comprehensive foundation in assessment practices. These entail (a) connecting assessments to clear purposes, (b) clarifying achievement expectations, (c) applying proper assessment methods, (d) developing quality assessment exercises and scoring criteria and sampling appropriately, (e) avoiding bias in assessment, (f) communicating effectively about student achievement, and (g) using assessment as an instructional intervention. Training within these seven skills will certainly yield relevant assets not only to EFL teachers -in the sense that they will have a brighter picture of what students may know (declarative knowledge) and what they can do (procedural knowledge)- but also to their EFL students in the sense that they may be supplied with more trustworthy assessment.

Popham (2009) also dissuades for the insertion of assessment-related content in teacher development programmes. This content may consist of miscellaneous aspects such as the function and reliability of educational assessments, issues of validity to support test-based interpretations of students' learning, the elimination of assessment bias that offends or unfairly penalizes test-takers because of personal traits (e.g. gender, race, cultural or socioeconomic status); the construction and scoring of test items and other types of assessment (e.g., portfolio assessments, peer assessments, etc.), the design and implementation of formative assessment procedures, the preparation of learners for high-stakes tests, the interpretation of their performances on such tests, and the accuracy of accountability tests for evaluating the quality of instruction.

5. Development and Evaluation of EFL Teachers' Language Assessment Literacy

Following Malone's (2008) view (as cited in Herrera and Marcias, 2015), relying on more training solely is unsatisfactory to meet the language assessment's training requirements. It is central that such training "includes the necessary content for language instructors to apply what they have learned in the classroom and understand the available resources to supplement their formal training when they enter the classroom" (Malone, 2008, p. 235). It is of paramount importance to dissuade that EFL teacher education and professional development programmes must furnish instructors with relevant preparation in language assessment literacy. Nevertheless, such primary preparation should be accompanied by continuous training that regularly updates in-service teachers in actual innovations in language assessment literacy and aids their inclusion into their own teaching practices.

For the sake of serving teacher educators- involving government stakeholders -determine EFL teachers' current knowledge and awareness of the many aspects that are involved in LAL, Marcias and Herrera (2015) propose a questionnaire (See Figure 1 below) that may be used to scrutinize the needs in relation to assessment literacy of not only EFL teachers, but language teachers as a whole. They believe that the questionnaire adapted from Fulcher (2012), may help to apprise government agencies about language teachers' needs in assessment.

Figure 1. Questionnaire to determine language teachers' needs in assessment literacy (adapted from Marcias and Herrera, 2015).

Questionnaire for Language Teachers

1. Did you ever take an entire course on language assessment as part of your teacher preparation program?
 Yes ___ No ___
 If so, what aspects or topics did the course emphasize?

2. When you last studied language testing, which parts of your course/module did you think were most relevant to your teaching?

3. Are there any skills that you still need to develop?

4. Please look at the following language testing and assessment related topics, and rate your level of satisfaction with your knowledge of them.

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
History of language testing					
Design of language assessments for speaking and listening					
Design of language assessments for reading and writing					
Deciding what to test					
Writing test specifications/blueprints					
Writing test tasks and items					
Evaluating and critiquing language tests					
Interpreting and analyzing test scores					
Selecting tests for your own use					
Reliability of tests					
Validity of tests					
Analysis of bias in test design					
Authenticity in language assessment					
Use of basic statistics					
Rater training					
Scoring closed-response items					
Scoring open-response test tasks					
Classroom assessment					
Large-scale testing					
Test-taking skills or strategies					
Washback on the classroom					
Test administration and accommodation					
Ethical considerations in testing					
The uses of tests in society					
Principles of educational measurement					
Rubric development					
Alternative performance assessment					
Contrast between summative and formative assessment					
Norm-referenced vs criterion-referenced testing					

5. If you were to take a course in language assessment, what topics should be covered?

6. Which of the following best describes your perception of your overall knowledge and understanding of language assessment?
 ___ Very prepared ___ Somewhat prepared ___ Somewhat unprepared ___ Very unprepared

7. Do you have any other comments that would help to understand your needs in language assessment?

Adapted from Fulcher (2012)

The adapted questionnaire has been proposed as a research instrument to find out EFL language teachers' degree of consciousness or satisfaction with their current knowledge and comprehension of language assessment literacy. Eventually, the results obtained via the adapted questionnaire may strengthen the application of action plans such as lectures, action research projects, workshops and conferences. Those action plans aim to enhance language teachers' assessment literacy. In this line of thought, Boyles (2006) demystifies that in order to foster assessment literacy, foreign language professionals require a toolbox

filled with competences and strategies that will permit them to decipher assessment results, analyse their meaning, respond to what the results reveal, and apply them in teaching and in programme evaluation.

It is, ultimately, not the aim here to advocate the outlook of a unique procedure to explore or find out EFL teachers' expertise in assessment. The adapted questionnaire above establishes just one possible alternative to obtain a primary outlook of language teachers' assessment literacy. Ultimate results of the questionnaire should not be seen as conclusive, for they rely exclusively on teachers' own reports. It is believed that the primary results from the questionnaire could be validated through other data collection tools such as interviews, classroom observation, or focus groups. These other distinct means will contribute to add a portrayal of EFL teachers' language assessment skills and needs.

Stiggins (1999) proposes a list of options through which assessment literacy can be enhanced. For instance, a unit or multiple units on assessment in different courses (e.g. methods courses, educational psychology course, curriculum design, introduction to teaching), a separate course or set of courses on assessment methods, independent study in assessment, a programme of assessment training taught by teachers who model different strategies, and instruction supplied by an assessment-literate master teacher during student teaching.

One would similarly uphold that good practices in EFL assessment should be designed and shaped by teacher educators throughout the programme curriculum, making explicit assessment expertise in the courses. In this way, eventual EFL teachers will recognize the assessment practices teacher educators use and will begin constructing their self-knowledge base of language assessment as informed by their experiences in EFL teacher education programmes and by the content of assessment courses. Nonetheless, EFL teachers need to be cautious about uncritically adopting potentially inaccurate assessment practices since "naïve misuses of assessment serve as models of assessment practice for persons preparing to become teachers, instructors, and professors" (Schafer, 1993 : 123).

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of the present paper has been to enhance EFL teachers' consciousness on the significance of language assessment literacy. The paper has provided some definitions of what assessment literacy means, reviewed miscellaneous studies in the area, analysed some options and models for the evaluation and enhancement of language assessment literacy in English foreign language teaching and supplied a questionnaire (based on Fulcher, 2012) that can be used to scrutinize assessment literacy needs and skills among EFL teachers.

From one's own experience, it has been noticed that most EFL teachers usually focus on the efficacy of the tool (e.g. test, exam) they intend to use to assess students' learning to make sure that the tasks and items convey clear meaning and instructions. Not alarmingly, many EFL teachers, do not seem to realize that this is just a small part of a larger picture in language assessment that teachers must be conscious of in the process of becoming assessment literate. Stiggins (2007) opines that while research depicts that teachers spend as much as one quarter to one-third of their available professional time in assessment-related activities, almost all do so without the benefit of having learned the principles of sound assessment practice. It follows that assessment practices should be given the same

significance that instructional practices usually receive in teacher preparation coursework. In this regard, EFL teachers should be guided and trained to participate in training that can expose them to different classroom assessment techniques. Teachers should also be exposed to the principles of assessment that they can adhere to when making decisions about students' learning and achievement in the classroom.

What seems primordial is that there should be a clear set of aims to ease EFL teachers' acquisition of knowledge, competencies and skills in assessment. Albeit we have bestowed various studies that tackled the issue of language assessment literacy, more research is required not only to figure out EFL teachers' competence of assessment literacy, but also to conceive manners or strategies to help novice and experienced language teachers promote expertise in all aspects of language assessment so that they can better serve the needs of their students and their organisations.

Language teacher education programmes must include options to aid EFL teachers attain a deeper working knowledge of assessment literacy. Following this plot, there is an urgent need for language teachers to have fundamental assessment literacy. Similarly, language-teaching programmes should be more broadly engaged in supplying quality LAL. The impact of what LAL truly means, should be language teachers who exhibit knowledge, skills and principles that are perpetual with language teaching and language learning. In this line of thought, the author agrees that the development of LAL has to be a subject of paramount importance in initial teacher education programmes in foreign languages, a chronic topic at the meetings of professional language teacher associations, and a sustained collaborative effort followed by the implementation of profitable assessment practices and resources in educational institutions.

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