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Introduction: An Overview of Assessment and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The use of classroom assessments to enhance teaching and learning is an important issue in contemporary language teaching practice. Meaningful assessment activities help learners see what quality academic work is like and foster dialogue to help them engage independently with feedback. This Introduction discusses a number of dimensions to take account of in assessment for teaching, as well as various approaches to assessment, many of which do not involve tests *per se*. The paper also discusses Assessment Literacy, the elements of assessment knowledge and practice that language teachers should be aware of as they work to incorporate assessment into their classroom planning. Finally, the five papers in the Special Issue are introduced.

Keywords: language assessment; evaluation; measurement; test; assessment literacy

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This Special Issue of the *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research* is devoted to an important aspect of language teaching – assessment for teaching. This involves the use of various forms of assessment as input to enhance teaching and learning. An important focus of current thinking about classroom language assessment is that it can be directed at improving teaching and learning. Assessment for teaching is related to such concepts as *Assessment for Learning* (AfL), and as *Learning-Oriented Assessment* (LOA), and involves assessment with a primary focus on promoting productive student learning processes. It involves three inter-related components. First, productive assessment task design when students are assessed on meaningful tasks which require higher order learning outcomes. Second, activities which support students in developing understandings of what quality work looks like: going beyond rubrics and lists of criteria to explore quality academic performance. And third, approaches to feedback processes which focus less on telling and more on entering into different forms of dialogue about student work, so that students are primed to engage with and act on feedback messages.

Preliminary considerations in classroom assessment

Assessment for teaching assumes that the primary goal of assessment in classroom contexts is to further successful learning outcomes, whether this involves formal and planned or even informal and spontaneous assessments embedded in instruction. Turner and Purpura (2015) outlined seven distinct yet closely-related dimensions of classroom assessment which can potentially affect its outcome:

The Contextual Dimension: teacher characteristics, classroom culture, socio-political forces

The Elicitation Dimension: planned and unplanned assessments, teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge

The Proficiency Dimension: the development of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) over time in classroom contexts, individual and group learning progressions with respect to specific domains

The Learning Dimension: the inclusion of resources (e.g., dictionaries) and assistance (e.g., spell checks), self- and peer-assessment in unplanned classroom assessments, feedback and assistance in assessments

The Instructional Dimension: the teacher's understanding of the target learning point and provides assistance in a way that can be understood

The Interactional Dimension: the interactional nature of feedback and assistance in unplanned language assessment

The Affective Dimension: learners' personal characteristics (e.g., self-perceptions, level of persistence), learner agency and engagement in scenario-based assessments

Classroom language teachers can refer to these dimensions as they plan their lessons and assessments for the term. The more dimensions teachers can take into account in their classroom activities, the more likely it will be that they will be able to assess their learners' progress, strengths, and weaknesses, and provide feedback which they and their students can use to enhance learning.

It is important to remember that assessment for language teaching involves students representing a wide range of cognitive and social development, from primary school through university. Teachers planning classroom assessments must consider the level of development of the learners they are targeting. Based on work by Puckett and Black (2000), we expect that younger learners, 5 to 7 years of age, are still at a very basic level of language development. They are still developing a sense of how language works in communication, particularly in reading and writing, and are developing a basic vocabulary of personally important words. Learners in the 7- to 9-year range are beginning to understand and use language differently for different social and academic purposes. Their vocabulary is increasing rapidly with words appropriate to differing contexts, and they are beginning to self-correct errors. Learners are beginning to expand thinking more and more readily through language use, particularly through reading and writing, in the 9 to 11 age range. Their vocabulary is continuing to increase, they are becoming more skilled at self-correction, and they are expanding their reading skills to gather information from a variety of sources. Learners at ages above 11 are continuing to develop vocabulary, adjust language use to specific communicative purposes and audiences, and broaden their interests and academic specializations, and they are beginning to understand that people may interpret the same communication material in different ways. By the time learners are in university, they have pretty much matured in their cognitive and social development and our teaching and assessment programs can be tailored to their academic needs and interests without regard to levels of development, except in terms of their state of progress in the language being studied. The more that teachers can bear in mind the developmental level of their students when planning both instructional and assessment activities, the more appropriate classroom activities will be, and the more accurate assessments can be made.

What is language assessment?

In order to understand the concept of assessment, we need first to distinguish between three related notions: evaluation, measurement, and test. Good language teachers are constantly evaluating their students' learning and language use. After a few weeks into a term, most teachers can say something like "Dina's vocabulary is excellent for a learner in only her second year, but her grammar usage is a bit shaky, particularly in speaking. Her reading skills are the strongest aspect of her English, but she needs more work with writing." Evaluations like this are based on the teacher's observation of the learner in class activities, homework assignments submitted, and perhaps one-on-one conference interactions with the learner. Such evaluations are useful for monitoring each learner's progress in a fairly informal way. However, evaluations like this are based on observations at particular times and contexts, making it difficult to evaluate all of the learners in the same way, with equal opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. It is also difficult in this type of evaluation to hold all students to the same standard, making it problematic to compare learners' progress with one another. Finally, all teachers have their own idiosyncratic preferences, irritations, and even biases, thus making informal evaluation potentially unfair and limited.

One way around this issue is the concept of measurement: assigning a number on a scale or according to some rule to represent a quantity of some trait, such as language knowledge, or some level of performance, such as speaking. The simplest type of measurement is counting: there are 40 words in the previous sentence. In language assessment, we rank our students, based on their performance in class, on homework, and on assigned activities such as oral presentations. We assign letters (A, B, C, etc.) or numbers (90, 85, 73, etc.) to indicate levels of performance. However, such measurements can be criticized on grounds of fairness ("You gave the girls more credit for that homework than you did the boys!"), consistency ("Why did today's activity count for more than it did last week?"), and thoroughness ("You didn't take our work in Chapter Three

into account when you gave us grades!”). It is criticisms like these that cause teachers and educational systems to turn to formal testing as a major form of assessment.

A language test is, simply put, a measuring device, in principle no different from a weighing scale or a ruler (Douglas, 2010). It is an instrument for measuring language knowledge, how much of a language someone possesses. A problem with this view is that language knowledge is very much an abstraction - we can't see it or handle it – so when we say we measure language knowledge, what we mean is that we ask test takers to perform language tasks and then we infer their level of knowledge based on how they perform. Language tests have the advantages of fairness – everyone has the same opportunities to show how well they can perform and their performances are rated using the same criteria; consistency – we can calculate the *reliability* of our tests so we know how much faith to put in the results, and we can revise tests to make them more accurate measures of language knowledge; thoroughness – tests are designed to assess relevant knowledge and skills that learners have been taught and that competent language users are known to possess.

As we will see in the articles that make up this special issue, language tests are pervasive in educational systems, not only for reasons discussed above – fairness, consistency, and thoroughness – but also owing to the desire for stakeholders outside the classroom – school administrators, parents, admissions officers, and prospective employers – to be assured that learners are progressing according to some generally accepted standard and have achieved generally accepted levels of competence for language use, and that learners across an educational system are being held to the same standard. Thus, while tests are not the only means by which teachers can assess language knowledge for learning, most school systems still emphasize tests and so we must make the two approaches complementary and mutually supportive. There are several alternatives in language assessment, some of which are discussed in this special issue. In addition to formal tests, such as multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, or essays, language knowledge can be assessed by the following techniques:

- *conference assessment*, in which learners meet with the teacher to discuss a particular piece of work or an assignment;
- *observational assessments*, where the instructor observes student performances and records, often with a checklist, aspects that are satisfactory or that require intervention;
- *portfolio assessments*, collections of learners' work that chart progress over time;
- *self- and peer-assessments*, in which learners evaluate their own work, or that of their fellow students, again, often with a checklist;
- *task-based and performance assessments*, where learners are given specific tasks to carry out in the target language and are rated on relevant aspects of the performance; and
- *dynamic assessment*, which combines assessment of what learners are able to do at the moment with an assessment of their potential for progressing in the future.

(Abrar-ul-Hassan & Douglas, In press)

All language assessments can be used for two fundamental purposes: formative and summative purposes. Formative assessments provide learners with information about their progress which they can use to guide their continuing learning and provide teachers with information which they can use to guide course development and lesson planning. Formative assessment is most usually

associated with AfL. Summative assessment, on the other hand, is usually carried out at the end of a course of study to measure achievement and is generally associated with formal language tests. As noted above, in classroom language assessment it is important that we try to use summative test results in formative ways by giving learners useful feedback based on their test performance rather than simply providing scores.

Assessment literacy

In order to achieve the advantages associated with AfL, however, classroom language teachers need to be well-versed in the use of language assessments in the classroom, or in other words be *assessment literate*. Assessment literacy, according to Stiggins (1995), is competence in how to assess and what to assess, entailing expertise in generating high quality measurements, full awareness of the potential confounding issues, and ability to be able to respond to potential pitfalls in assessment practice. More specifically, language assessment literacy (LAL) refers to the knowledge, skills and principles that stakeholders involved in assessment activities are required to master to perform language assessment tasks. The need for defining a literacy framework in language assessment has arisen following acknowledgment of teachers' assessment needs (Inbar-Lourie, 2017). There is a real question, however, about the level and type of knowledge classroom language teachers need to carry out their duties with respect to assessment, as indicated in a study by Malone (2013). On the one hand, professional language testers often assert that the knowledge teachers require involves technical testing issues and the theoretical underpinnings of assessment, including the concepts of reliability and validity, the components of communicative language ability, norm- and criterion-referencing, and so on. On the other hand, when asked what aspects of assessment literacy they thought were essential to their work, classroom teachers often focus on classroom assessment practice – the “how-to” aspects (Malone 2013). Clearly, both aspects are important. Fulcher (2012) argues that both measurement knowledge (the theoretical background) and assessment know-how (the “how-to”) need to be integrated within a social perspective of the consequences of language assessment:

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. (p. 125)

This may be a tall order, but as Inbar-Lourie (2013) suggests, this may be an exciting time for classroom language assessment as assessment professionals and classroom teachers work together to create something new: “The diverse characteristics of this new language testers’ community can be viewed as a means to facilitate a dialogue between testing professionals and practitioners on the language assessment literacy components they would find most useful” (p. 306).

In this Special Issue, we attempt to further the dialogue on what is essential for assessment for teaching with five articles representing different aspects of classroom assessment, but which all speak to the interaction between assessment and language teaching.

In the first article, Green overviews the development of assessment for learning (AfL). He discusses positive classroom practices associated with AfL that result in improved learner outcomes. He points out that successes are more likely to occur when both teachers and educational authorities are positive about AfL and work together to bring about improvements.

In the second paper Lam introduces readers to assessment *as* learning (AaL) and argues that it is a useful variation of AfL, particularly in writing classrooms. He focuses on portfolio assessment and offers suggestions to help learners self-monitor their writing to improve independent learning. He points out possible stumbling blocks to the implementation of AaL and portfolio assessment, suggesting ways to ameliorate problems.

Ahmadi Safa and Beheshti explore group dynamic assessment (GDA) in the context of listening comprehension development. They argue that interactive and cooperative approaches to language development, as engendered in GDA, can enhance the accomplishment of pedagogical objectives. In a well-designed research study, they investigate whether interactive and interventionist GDA might have a significant effect on listening comprehension development, and whether there is any significant difference in their respective effectiveness in relation to non-dynamic assessment practices.

Tajeddin, Alemi, and Yasaei, in the fourth article, examine classroom teachers' assessment practices and knowledge in the context of speaking performance. The findings of their semi-structured interviews following data collection revealed the teachers' use of various assessment tasks as well as their knowledge of assessment criteria and their beliefs about the relative value of different assessment methods.

Finally, Farhady and Tavassoli report on the development of a test of language assessment knowledge for use among classroom teachers. Their study included a needs analysis by means of a questionnaire, comparing the topics identified in the questionnaire with those included in standard assessment textbooks. They then developed a scenario-based test with items focusing on six aspects of assessment knowledge: test types and functions, language test design stages, assessment characteristics, key terms and concepts, alternative assessment techniques, and the assessment of components of language knowledge and skills. Based on their research, they make suggestions for how assessment knowledge might be improved among classroom teachers, not only as a function of teacher training, but by engaging all stakeholders in dynamic teacher development.

It is hoped that the articles in this Special Issue will not only enlighten and educate readers on topics related to assessment for teaching, but will encourage the development of assessment principles and methods among stakeholders – teachers, learners, administrators, teacher educators – at all levels of the educational enterprise, fostering cooperation and dialogue as we work together for the benefit of the target of all our teaching efforts, the learners themselves.

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