Language Assessment Literacy for Classroom Teachers: assessing Algerian university teachers' language assessment literacy

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Abstract:

The field of foreign language teaching has recently begun to reconsider the significance of the different language teaching practices including classroom assessment. Knowing what and how to assess increases the quality of teaching because being assessment literate helps teachers gain extra control over their classes. That is why assessment learning for language teachers is of a paramount importance in the realization of effective language teaching courses. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to explore the different perspectives of language learning assessment and its implication for language classrooms.

Keywords: language teaching; language assessment; literacy; teacher knowledge.

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1. Introduction:

One of the roles a language teacher plays in his classroom is that of an assessor. Assessment occurs at different levels, in different ways and for different reasons. However, it appears that for most teachers, testing or assessment is not the most enjoyable things they have to do. Brown (2003) stated the following:

> **If you hear the word test in any classroom setting, your thoughts are not likely to be positive, pleasant, or affirming. The anticipation of a test is almost always accompanied by feelings of anxiety and self-doubt – along with a hope that you will come out of it alive. Tests seem as unavoidable as tomorrow's sunrise in virtually every kind of educational setting.**

For these reasons, as stated by Brown (2003), language assessment literacy was abandoned for a long while. However, from the beginning of the 21st century onward, the interests in language assessment has increased significantly. Flucher (2012) pointed out that "Language testing has seen unprecedented expansion during the first part of the 21st century". Therefore, there is an increasing demand for fostering language assessment literacy among teachers, scholars and stakeholders.

Despite its growing significance, language assessment is not a simple task. In other words, a reconsideration of assessment practices has to be taken seriously. Teachers' training in assessment must be given a priority. In other words, language assessment must have measures and principles that make the assessment process more genuine and that can lead to reliable data to help improve the quality of teaching.

This paper, therefore, is designed with the aim of highlighting the perspectives of language assessment literacy (LAL) and its importance for teachers' professional development. It also seeks to explore the methods of language assessment in addition to the guidelines that can help achieve an effective LAL.

1. Literature Review

A glance at the researches investigating the issue of language assessment literacy shows that most of the studies carried out on this matter are unprecedented ones (Davies, 2008; Patterno, 2001; Flucher, 2012; Hidri, 2020) . However, there were some early contributions in the field of language teaching which formed the foundation to the current researches on LAL. Bachman (1990), for instance, published a book entitled "Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing" in which she provided key insights into language testing and its methods. She noted that "language testing almost never takes place in isolation. It is done for a particular purpose and in a specific context." (Bachman 1990, p.2)

Another academic contribution treating the related issues to testing was the one by Bachman and Palmer in 1996: "Language Testing in Practice: Designing and Developing Useful Language Tests". In their work, Bachman and Palmer tried to provide practical ideas about the design and development of tests in addition to the requirements for competence in language testing.

Berry et al. (2019) published an article in which they drew a distinction between "testers" and "assessors". They also shed light on different teachers' attitudes towards language assessment training. The findings of their study revealed that many of the teachers who took part in their study viewed testing and grading negatively which is the common way most teachers and students look at testing. Coombe et al. (2020) stated that in the recent years, the field of language teaching marked a growing interest by stakeholders in teachers' language assessment literacy. They, therefore, stressed the significance of fostering teachers' language assessment literacy among other literacies they need to acquire.

In a review paper, Taylor (2013) insisted on the importance of language assessment literacy and suggested eight different levels of knowledge which she considers necessary in developing assessment literacy: (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. Taylor's suggestion paved the way for more research on language assessment literacy.

In response to Taylor's call for further research on the conceptualization of assessment literacy, Baker and Riches (2017) conducted a study in which they investigated the characterization of language assessment literacy. The sample of their study included 120 Haitian language teachers and based on the findings, they suggested that studies should emphasize teachers' professional LAL development. In a paper that was published in 2019, Giraldo noted that the current studies on LAL are trying to put all stakeholders in the centre (teachers, students, language testers..etc). He further stated that teachers are the ones who should have, more others, effective language assessment literacy:

"The call for teachers to have appropriate levels of LAL is sensible. They are the ones most directly and frequently involved in collecting data about their students' language ability. As commented, they claim they need to increase their LAL across the board, and the call for this to happen is constant. Thus, the need for professional development in LAL is ever present".

2. "Tests" Vs. " Assessment"

Most of people in the language teaching field think of "test" and "assessment" as two synonymous terms. Brown (2003, p.4) made a distinction between these two terms saying that: "Tests are prepared administrative procedures that occur at idenrifiable times in a curriculum when learners master all their fuculties to offer peak performance, knowing that their responses arc being measured and

evaluated. Assessment. on the other hand, is an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain.
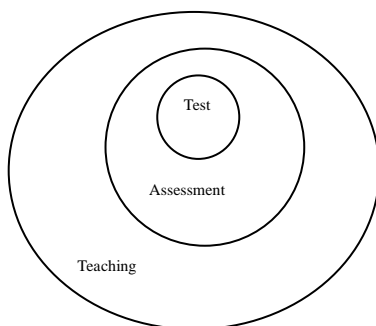
Figure: Tests, Assessment and Teaching (Brown, 2003, p.5)

Brown (2003, p.4) explains the relationship between tests and assessment by saying that tests are considered as tools teachers use in order to assess their learners' progress. However, he noted that assessment does not constantly take place during teacher because learners need to practice language without having to worry about the grade or their level of competence. In other words, learners need to feel that they can use the language they are learning without being judged on their performance.

Clapham (2000), in her influential article "Assessment and Testing" stated that language assessment has become a sub-discipline in applied linguistics. She mentioned that assessment provides significant information to researchers to help them investigate language knowledge and use. In the same article, Clapham (2000) separated between the terms "testers" and "assessors". According to

her, "testers" are those who "concern themselves with requirements of validity and reliability, and 'assessors' for those who are not consciously guided by such constraints". However, Clapham noted that these two terms can be used interchangeably in other articles and publications.

3. Language Assessment Literacy

Hidri (2021, p.5) stated that in order for teachers to be able to know about deal with their students' strengths and weaknesses, they need to have a "comprehensive" assessment literacy. He adds that successful language teaching programs depend to a large extent on teachers' or assessors' assessment literacy. As far as language assessment literacy is concerned, Coombe et al.(2020) stated that: "Given this evident growth of new literacies, it should not come as no surprise that assessment literacy began to appear as an early contribution in the general education literature". Language assessment literacy is, therefore, viewed as a necessity in the contemporary language teaching field.

Early definitions of LAL emphasized on the set of knowledge and skills associated with language assessment. Stiggins (1995) mentioned that assessment literacy allow teachers to know what they assess, why they assess, how to assess and predict the problems with assessment and their possible solutions.

Herrera and Macias (2015) stated that language assessment literacy plays a significant role in teachers' professional development. It does not only benefit teachers but also their learners by dealing with their learning needs. They also noted that: "High LAL competence should enable EFL teachers to design appropriate assessments, select from a wider repertoire of assessment alternatives, critically examine the impact of standardized tests (e.g. TOEFL, IELTS, etc.), and establish a solid connection between their language teaching approaches and assessment practices".

Another scholar who called for fostering teachers' assessment literacy was Popham (2009). He stated that ignoring the significance of LAL for teachers' development resulted in a society of teachers who know little about assessment. He, therefore, noted that: "For some teachers, test is a four-letter word, both literally and figuratively." That is why, there were increasing emphasis among scholars on the urge to integrate language assessment literacy as an important part in teachers' professional development.

4. Dimensions of Language Assessment Literacy

Davies (2008) suggested three basic components of language assessment literacy; skills+ knowledge+ principles. According to him, skills offer training in a "necessary and appropriate methodology, including writing statistics, and test analysis and increasingly software

programmes for test delivery, analysis and reportage". He, therefore, continues to explain the other two components saying that: "Knowledge offers relevant background in measurement and language description as well as in context setting. Principles concern the proper use of language tests, their fairness and impact, including questions of ethics and professionalism" (Davies, 2008). In explaining these three concepts, (Giraldo2018a) stated that knowledge refers to what teachers need to know about applied linguistics, language acquisition and assessment related aspects such as validity and reliability. As far as skills are concerned, Giraldo (2018a) noted that they refer to what teachers need to possess as skills related to designing effective assessments and measurements. Finally, principles refer to the appropriate use of language tests validity and ethical choices. The following figure was suggested by Davies (2008) to illustrate the three core components of LAL:
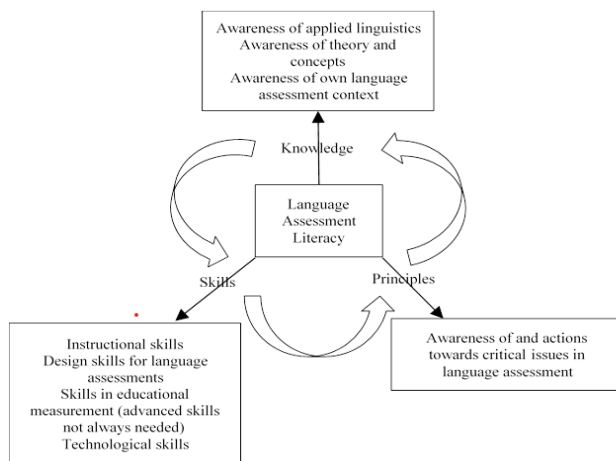
Figure01: A Core List of Language Assessment Literacy Dimensions: Knowledge, Skills, and Principles

Giraldo (2018a) offered further detailed eight dimensions categorized under LAL components of knowledge, skills and principles. He said that there are 5 ways in which the suggested list of LAL dimensions can be used by teachers. According to him, the list can be used by the teachers to evaluate or assess their own level of assessment literacy. Second, teachers can use the descriptors to observe and evaluate the language assessment literacy and performance of their colleagues as well as their own LAL. Third, these LAL descriptors offer teachers chances of improving their professional development through study groups and workshops. Fourth, this list gives insights on the nature of students' language skills teachers need to be aware of when designing tests. Finally,

Giraldo (2018a) claimed that this list gives teachers an overview of language assessment literacy.

Knowledge
Awareness of applied linguistics
1 *Compares* approaches for language teaching and assessment; e.g., communicative language testing; task-based assessment.
2 *Explains* major issues in applied linguistics; e.g., bilingualism, language policy and planning, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, etc.
3 *Analyzes* trends in second language acquisition and their impact on language assessment; e.g., motivation, cross-linguistic influence, learner strategies.
4 *Integrates* theories related to language and language use; e.g., models of language ability, discourse analysis, and grammar teaching.
Awareness of theory and concepts
5 *Illustrates* history of language testing and assessment, and its impact on current practices and society.
6 *Interprets* reliability in language assessment and its implications: dependability, classical test theory, item analysis, threats, calculating reliability of tests and items, inter- and intra-rater reliability, etc.
7 *Interprets* validity in assessment and its implications: construct, content, and criterion validities, construct validity as unitary, Messick's (1989) consequential validity; validity as argument.
8 *Calculates* statistics procedures for investigating validity such as Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC).
9 *Interprets* major qualities for language assessment practices (apart from reliability and validity), and their implications for language assessment: authenticity, practicality, interactiveness, fairness, ethics, and impact (including washback).
10 *Computes basic statistical analyses*: mean, mode, median, range, standard deviation, score distribution, etc.
11 *Differentiates* concepts related to assessment paradigms: traditional versus alternative, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced testing.
12 *Differentiates* major purposes and related decision-making for language testing: placement, achievement, proficiency, etc.
13 *Explains* major steps in developing tests: test purpose, construct definition, content specifications, test specifications, etc.
14 *Examines* the meaning and implications of critical language testing: power, ethics, and fairness.
15 *Judges* the consequences (intended or unintended) stemming from assessments in his/her context.
16 *Evaluates* the kind of washback that assessments can have on learning, teaching, curricula, and institutions.
17 *Contrasts* assessment methods, with their advantages and disadvantages: tests, portfolios, performance assessment, self- and peer-assessment, role-plays, among others.
18 *Articulates* the nature, purpose, and design of scoring rubrics; for example, holistic and analytic.
19 *Recognizes* what feedback implies within a formative assessment paradigm.
Awareness of own language assessment context
20 *Explains* own beliefs, attitudes, context, and needs for assessment.
21 *Evaluates* the test and assessment policies that influence his/her teaching.
22 *Assesses* the existing tensions that influence language assessment in his/her school.
23 *Illustrates* the general guidelines and policies that drive language learning and assessment in his/her context; for example, type of language curriculum.
24 *Criticizes* the kind of washback assessments usually have on his/her teaching context.
Skills
Instructional skills has the ability to:

25	align curriculum objectives, instruction, and assessment.
26	plan, implement, monitor, record, and report student language development.
27	provide feedback on students' assessment performance (norm- and criterion-referenced).
28	collect formal data (e.g., through tests) and informal data (while observing in class) of students' language development.
29	improve instruction based on assessment results and feedback.
30	utilize alternative means for assessment; for example, portfolios.
31	use language assessment methods appropriately: to monitor language learning and nothing else.
32	provide motivating assessment experiences, giving encouraging feedback, or setting up self-assessment scenarios.

Principles

Awareness of and actions towards critical issues in language assessment

57	Clearly informs the inferences and decisions that derive from scores in assessments.
58	Uses assessment results for feedback to influence language learning, not other construct-irrelevant sources (e.g., personal bias towards a student).
59	Treats all students, or users of language assessment, with respect.
60	Uses tests, test processes, and test scores ethically.
61	Provides assessment practices that are fair and non-discriminatory.
62	Critiques the impact and power standardized tests can have and has a stance towards them.
63	Observes guidelines for ethics used at the institution in regard to language assessment.
64	Criticizes external tests based on their quality and impact.
65	Implements transparent language assessment practices; informs students of the what, how, and why of assessment.
66	Implements democratic language assessment practices, by giving students opportunities to share their voices about assessment.

Table 01: Descriptors for Knowledge, Skills, and Principles in Eight Dimensions of LAL for Language Teachers

5. Research questions

In this paper, we aim at finding answer to the following questions:

1. Are Algerian university teachers-assessment literate?
2. What skills do they need to develop to become assessment literate?

6. Methods and Materials

Our aim in this study is to raise teachers' awareness to the significance of language assessment literacy . Now, the purpose of this section is to gauge teachers' knowledge and skills in regard to language assessment literacy. The method used to realize our aim was a questionnaire that was designed and developed by language assessment expert Glenn Flucher (2012) (See appendix 1)

6.1. Sample

The sample chosen for the study is a group of 20 Algerian university teachers from different universities of Algeria. The questionnaire as mentioned earlier was designed by the LAL expert Glenn Flucher (2012) and it contained questions about teachers about teachers' skills in language assessment and the level of satisfaction of their overall knowledge of language assessment.

6.2. Analysis of the Results

The questionnaire used in this paper and which was designed by the LAL expert Glenn Flucher (2012) helped us a lot to gather information about Algerian university teachers' level and knowledge of language assessment aspects and skills. The first question, for example, aimed at finding out whether Algerian university teachers have ever received any kind of courses on language assessment. The findings show that none of the informants ; i.e. the whole sample (20 teachers), received any courses to teach them about language assessment from their teachers' preparation programmes.

In the second question, teachers were asked to refer to the parts of courses or modules on language testing they felt relevant to their teaching. Since all informants answered with « no » in the first question, it was obvious here that not lany teachers are going to provide an answer to this question. However, only one teacher answered that his last study of langauge assessment was relevant to his teaching in terms of distinguishing between types of tests and evaluation.

In the third question, teachers were asked to mention the type of skills they still need to develop. One of the stated still need to learn how to assess the different skills and and also to develop their

knowledge of the different testing strategies suitable for university students. Almost all informants' answers indicated that what Algerian university teachers' still need to develop their knowledge of the different test types and criteria.

After that, the teachers were asked to rate their level of knowledge of assessment related topics. The analysis of the results revealed that, as for the first assessment related topic ; history of language testing as well as the design of language assessments for speaking and listening, all the informants answered that they are satisfied with them. As for the second point which is the design of language assessments for reading and writing, 2 informants answered that they are neutrally satisfied with their knowledge of this particular area while 10 said they are satisfied which the remaining 8 informants said they are very satisfied. Concerning the third language assessment topic from the table " designing what to test", our informants' answers swayed between satisfied and very satisfied with a number of 10 informants for each option.

Concerning test specifications blueprint and test tasks and items, all teachers (20 informants) answered that they are satisfied with their knowledge of these areas. Moving to the analysis and interpretation of test scores, 17 teachers said they were very satisfied with their ability regarding these assessment skills which the remaining three teachers answered that they were satisfied with them.

As for the rest of the language assessment related topics and as expected they all varied between satisfied and very satisfied like for instance washback on the classroom, ethical considerations of testing, and norm-referenced Vs. criterion-referenced testing. These university teachers were also asked to mention the topics related to language assessment they would like to have in courses of language assessment. The majority of them answered that they would like to learn about the

assessment of the different language skills. Others answered that they still needed to know more about the principles of testing and its criteria while others reported that they wanted to learn about washback or the effect of testing on language teaching and curriculum design.

7. Recommendations

Apropos the discussion of the results, we can say that language assessment literacy in an area of language teaching that is neglected to a far extent by those responsible of language curriculum designs especially at the level of universities. **Assessment literacy** is **important** because it helps teachers to perceive, analyze and use data on student performance to improve teaching.

That is why, people in charge of curriculum design should consider the urge of rehabilitating the significance of language assessment at the level of universities. They, therefore, should give teachers in general and those in the beginning of their careers as university teachers the change to enforce their knowledge and skills of language assessment.

Language assessment literacy should be added as a crucial part of university teachers' professional development. Teachers cannot simply progress in their work without the appropriate knowledge of the basics of language assessment including the types of assessments, the needs of assessment in addition the ways of assessing the different language skills and the analysis of students' test scores.

8. Conclusion :

This study was conducted to find out whether algerian unuversity teachers' are assessment literate. The findings revealed that teachers can be considered assessment literate but not to a far extent. In fact, their knwoledge of assessment is somewhat theoritical and superficial. They can ditinguish between criterion-refernced ans norm-referenced types of assessments but that does not seem to be enough for them especially that they are supposed to assess university students language learning progress. Assessment literacy as popularly discussed in literature requires a sophisticated understanding of classroom practice and teaching-learning environment to help learners attain the much-needed outstanding and effective learning. Providing effective feedback and expansive feedforward involves a complex process that requires teachers to provide meaningful advice to students' work to take their learning forward.

Appendix One
Questionnaire for Language Teachers
Dear teachers,

You are kindly requested to answer the following questionnaire through which we aim to reveal valuable insights into Algerian teachers' knowledge of language assessment literacy. To answer, please (√) or provide full answers when necessary.

1. Did you ever take an entire course on language assessment as part of your teachers' 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 or module did you think were most relevant to your teaching?
   …………………………………………………………………………………
   …………………………………………………………………………………

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

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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					
Designing 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 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?

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Adapted from Flucher (2012)

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