

Importance of Teachers' Assessment Literacy

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Abstract

Assessment of student is one of the most important responsibilities of teachers, because the quality of teaching in classroom is closely associated with the quality of the applied assessment. Hence it is essential for teachers to possess assessment literacy. Assessment literacy is important because it helps teachers to perceive, analyze and use data on student performance to improve teaching. Stakeholders are influenced by language tests, therefore; being assessment literate is more vital for them, because assessment illiteracy results in inaccurate assessment and consequently the purposes of assessment could not be fulfilled. It is necessary for teachers to develop language assessment literacy to prevent serious consequences for teachers and students.

Keywords: assessment literacy, assessment knowledge, teacher assessment literacy, Language assessment, stakeholder

The most important factor which impacts student learning is teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rowe and Hill, 1998; Wright, Horn and Sanders, 1997). Since classroom assessment is one of the learning processes, “good teaching is impossible in the absence of good assessment” (Eckhout et al. 2005, p. 3). Because “the quality of instruction in any ... classroom turns on the quality of the assessments used there” (Stiggins, 1999, p. 20).

Assessment of student performance is one of the most critical responsibilities of classroom teachers because to a great extent it influences everything that teachers do (Mertler, 2009). It is not true that “if an educator is good in teaching a language, he or she is good in assessing the learners as well” (Spolsky, 1978, cited in Jafarpour, 2003). In order to evaluate learners appropriately, it is necessary for teachers to have an adequate level of assessment literacy (Popham, 2006).

“Assessment literacy” is a term which was coined for the first time by Richard Stiggins (1991). He notes that educators with assessment literacy know what they assess, why they assess, how to assess, what the possible problems with assessment are, and how to prevent them from occurring. They also are familiar with the possible negative consequences of poor, inaccurate assessment (Stiggins, 1995).

Assessment literacy refers to educators’ understanding of the principles of sound assessment (Popham, 2004 and Stiggins, 2002) to skillfully develop assessments that transform learning purposes into assessment activities which exactly demonstrate student understanding and achievement (Mertler and Campbell, 2005; Stiggins, 2002). It requires that educators “possess the knowledge about the basic principles of sound assessment practice, including terminology, the development and use of assessment methodologies and techniques, familiarity with standards of quality in assessment...and familiarity with alternative to traditional measurements of learning” (Paterno, 2001).

Davies (2008) believes that language assessment literacy has three basic elements: skills, knowledge, and principles. Fulcher (2012) defines language assessment literacy based on a study designed to explore the assessment training needs of language teachers. He argues that assessment literacy has three aspects. The first one is knowledge, skills and abilities to design, develop, maintain or evaluate large-scale standardized and/or classroom based tests, the second one is familiarity with test processes, and awareness of principles and concepts that guide and underpin practice, including ethics and codes of practice. And the last one is 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.

A model of assessment literacy is presented by Abell and Siegel (2011) and Gottheiner and Siegel (2012) which is composed of three main aspects: view of learning, assessment principles, and four areas of knowledge i.e. knowledge of assessment purposes, knowledge of assessment strategies, knowledge of assessment interpretation and action taking, and knowledge of what to assess.

Language assessment literacy may be understood as indicating a repertoire of competences that enable an individual to understand, evaluate and, in some cases, create language tests and analyze test data (Pill and Harding, 2013).

Newfields (2006) has a different perspective about assessment literacy. What makes his definition of assessment literacy different from others is his different point of views toward assessment literacy. In his categorization assessment literacy is defined differently from the viewpoint of a university student, a high school teacher, and a professional test developer. For students, assessment literacy is the possession of the knowledge to know how to act successfully on exams. For teachers, it is related to grading students ethically and exactly. And finally for professional test developers, every aspect of their work is associated with assessment literacy.

Regarding the stakeholders language assessment literacy refers to their familiarity with measurement processes and the application of this knowledge to classroom practices in general and specifically to assessing language (Taylor, 2009) which “potentially includes the acquisition of a range of skills related to test production, test score interpretation and use, and test evaluation in conjunction with the development of a critical understanding about the roles and functions of assessment within education and society” (O’Loughlin, 2013)

Based on the review different scholars have presented different definitions for assessment literacy which “vary depending on the context of use” Pill and Harding (2013), but “what is common in all these visions is that teachers must recognize different purposes of assessment and use them accordingly” (Volante and Fazio, 2007).

Language assessment literacy in second language education is important (Scarino, 2013) because it helps teachers “to understand, analyze and apply information on student performance to improve instruction” (Falsgraf, 2005). Furthermore Knowledge about a variety of assessment types allows teachers to select the most appropriate and effective instruments to meet their learning objectives (Siegel and Wissehr, 2011).

Teachers’ assessment literacy is viewed as a key link in the connection between assessment quality and student achievement (Mertler, 2002) and teachers need to have an adequate level of assessment literacy (Popham, 2006).

Understanding the advantages and disadvantages of assessment types is a critical skill for teachers to develop (Siegel and Wissehr, 2011), because a teacher with assessment literacy can interpret assessment data, communicate with students about the status of their understanding, and employ this information to set short- and long-term learning goals (Gottheiner and Siegel, 2012). It is clear that advantages and disadvantages of various assessments must be weighed against both teaching methodologies and desired outcomes (Sundberg, 2002).

There may be different reasons for teacher to assess the learners, but it is clear that teachers “approach assessment based on their view of learning and that teachers require the ability to interpret assessment results and adapt instruction” (Abell and Siegel 2011; Siegel and Wissehr, 2011). Newfields (2006) argues that assessment literacy is important due to three

reasons. First, assessment is a common feature of most educational systems, the next one is that it's required to understand much of the educational literature, and finally it gives opportunity to teachers to communicate their own classroom results with others.

One aspect of becoming an effective teacher is developing assessment literacy, or the ability to develop assessments that transform the learning goals into assessment activities that accurately reflect student understanding and achievement (Mertler and Campbell, 2005; Stiggins, 2002). It means that familiarity with a variety of assessment tools helps teachers to select the most relevant and powerful instruments for particular learning goals (Gottheiner and Siegel, 2012). Obviously assessment literate teachers are successful “to integrate assessment with instruction so that they utilize appropriate forms of teaching” (McMillan, 2000).

Since stakeholders such as students, teachers, policy makers, and administrators are impacted by language tests being assessment literate is more vital for them to “know the difference between sound and unsound assessment” Stiggins (1995) to implement actions based on appropriate assessment knowledge (Jeong, 2013). Based on the abovementioned reasons for the importance of assessment literacy “not only do teachers need to understand the conceptual bases of different approaches of assessment; they also need to relate such knowledge to their professional practice in their particular context” (Scarino, 2013).

The effective use of assessment in the classroom is a complex procedure (Mavrommatis, 1997), regardless of the amount of time which is needed to be spent (Plake, 1993, Stiggins, 1999) assessment is contributes to every other teacher function (Brookhart, 1998, 1999). Therefore teachers need to possess an understanding of types of assessment—tools—as well as reasons to use assessment in the classroom—purposes (Siegel and Wissehr, 2011).

Based on the researches unfortunately teachers' assessment skills are generally weak (Brookhart, 2001; Campbell, Murphy and Holt, 2002) and assessment ill-literacy which stems from low levels of assessment literacy among practicing teachers and administrators has resulted in inaccurate assessment of students and consequently preventing them from reaching their full potential (Stiggins, 2001). Beside teachers assessment ill-literacy “they are not proficient at implementing a variety of classroom assessment tasks” (Mertler, 1999; Mertler and Campbell, 2005), hence lack of assessment literacy is potentially a serious risk both for teachers and students.

Scarino (2013) emphasizes on the need for teachers to develop language assessment literacy in ways that enable them to explore and evaluate their own preconceptions, to understand the interpretive nature of the phenomenon of assessment and to become increasingly aware of their own dynamic framework of knowledge, understanding, practices and values, which shape their conceptualizations, interpretations, judgments and decisions in assessment and their students' second language learning. Through these processes, they will gradually develop self-awareness as assessors, an integral part of their language assessment literacy. Developing assessment literacy is a crucial skill (Mertler and Campbell, 2005; Otero, 2006) that needs to be more completely addressed within methods classes so that preservice teachers are better equipped with the skills, beliefs, knowledge, and confidence to apply

appropriate assessment practices to enhance student learning in the classroom (Siegel and Wissehr, 2011).

“A better knowledge of the processes, principles and concepts of language testing would enable university staff to exercise their responsibilities as informed test users, and, hopefully, to become advocates of valid and ethical practice” (O’Loughlin, 2013, p. 378). And it is clear that teachers with assessment literacy can gather information, communicate with students about the status of their understanding, use this information to set immediate and long-term goals, and adjust instruction based upon the results of classroom assessments, and this requires that teachers possess an understanding of types of assessment—tools—as well as reasons to use assessment in the classroom—purposes (Siegel and Wissehr 2011).

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