

Language Teacher Assessment Literacy – scoping the territory

Kathryn Hill (Guest Editor)

La Trobe University, University of Melbourne

The papers making up this special issue represent a range of responses from our field to a growing recognition of the importance of developing teachers' assessment literacy. This has been motivated, partly, by the increasing use of assessment for accountability purposes with the accompanying devolution of responsibility for assessment to classroom language teachers (Malone, 2008). This has prompted, inter alia, a focus on teachers' understandings of standards and criteria as well as on the alignment of high-stakes assessment with other purposes of classroom-based assessment (CBA). The other key impetus has been the shift in emphasis in CBA from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning (Fulcher, 2012). This represents a significant shift from traditional notions of assessment, with its focus on end products, towards an increasing recognition of the importance of assessment processes, of the 'power' of feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and the centrality of the learner's role in the learning process (Andrade, 2010). The success of these reforms crucially depends on teachers not only understanding and embracing the underlying rationale for change but in having the ability to elicit high-quality evidence of learning and to make valid and dependable assessment decisions appropriate to their particular purposes and context. However, many teachers find themselves ill-prepared by their pre- or in-service training to meet these demands.

The research literature on this issue presents diverse views about the knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and competencies comprising language teacher assessment literacy (LTAL). Part of the complexity is that the notion of 'language' encompasses English as a Second or Foreign language (or a hybrid of the two) as well as modern ('foreign') languages. As the papers comprising this issue demonstrate, this situation is further complicated by significant contextual differences found at national, provincial, and even school-level. Xu and Brown, for example, question the appropriateness of applying the same constructs across national contexts. Using psychometric analysis, they investigated the validity of using the widely-used *Teaching Assessment Literacy Questionnaire* (Plake & Impara, 1992) as a measure of the LTAL of Chinese university English teachers and conclude by arguing for more contextually-grounded measures. In another paper, Scarino used data from a study of a range of modern languages in K–12 classrooms to demonstrate how the shift from communicative language

teaching towards an *intercultural* orientation in language learning in Australia has necessitated a rethinking of the constructs, including what is to be assessed, assessment processes and the criteria used for making judgments about learning.

Contextually motivated construct (re)definition is also the theme of Sellan's paper, which presents the findings of a study involving a group of high school teachers working within a distinctive educational policy operating in selective-entry Singaporean schools. The aim of the policy is to reduce the influence of external examinations and promote teacher autonomy to enhance learning. The paper describes how the participating teachers were able to capitalise on the opportunity to expand the constructs of language learning and assessment by, for example, giving greater emphasis to the cultural aspects of language as well as to content knowledge and higher-order thinking.

The papers comprising the special issue also reflect some of the diversity of models and methods used to identify LTAL needs. Tsagari and Vogt, for example, used face-to-face interviews with foreign language school teachers, conducted as part of a large-scale European questionnaire survey, to gauge perceptions of their LTAL levels as well as their professional development needs. The finding that respondents struggled when it came to identifying and prioritising their needs coincides with the rationale for the instrument presented in Hill's paper, which was designed to help teachers gain a deeper understanding of their existing CBA practices as a precursor to thinking about how and where these could be developed. Hill describes the development of a self-assessment resource which combines insights from an observational study of CBA practices with the research on TAL and CBA more generally. In yet another approach, Scarino used 'collaborative dialogues' with the teachers in her study to explore the construct of intercultural language learning. What Scarino and Hill's approaches share in common is a belief in the importance of starting with what teachers actually do and of incorporating their perspectives, interpretations, and 'native' expertise.

The locus of responsibility for developing LTAL has traditionally been seen as the preserve of teacher preparation courses and/or education authorities. However, the papers by Hamp-Lyons and Green explore the potential for using preparation for large-scale tests to promote LTAL. They argue that in the context of expanded views of test validation and test usefulness, testing agencies have an important role to play in this regard, particularly when it comes to encouraging teachers to adopt educationally and ethically defensible test preparation practices. Hamp-Lyons makes empirically-grounded recommendations for the type of learning-oriented behaviours interlocutors can

use when engaging test candidates in interactive speaking test tasks, while Green's paper discusses how testing agencies, supported by language assessment researchers, could provide test preparation resources designed to help teachers (and learners) increase their assessment literacy.

Norris (2014) has warned of the danger of overwhelming teachers (and others) "with more and more models, frameworks, analyses, options, and recommendations for practice". However, given the multiple constructs and diverse contexts involved, this multiplicity of models and approaches seems not only inevitable but necessary. Indeed, I would argue that, in embodying this complexity, the papers comprising this volume stand to make a significant contribution to an ongoing conversation about how best to prepare teachers for their role in assessment in the service of learning.

Acknowledgements

The idea for a collection of papers on language teacher assessment literacy was originally conceived in collaboration with Chris Davison, following a symposium on this subject at AAAL in 2013. Her authority as a researcher in the fields of language assessment and teacher education is beyond question and her contribution has been important both at the conceptual and practical levels.

Acknowledgement is also due to the contributors for their patience and professionalism the process of bringing this special issue to fruition. Finally, I would like to thank Angela Scarino and Tim McNamara for their unfailing support and good counsel.

References

- Andrade, H. (2010). Students as the definitive source of formative assessment: Academic self-assessment and the self-regulation of learning. In H. Andrade & G. J. Cizek (Eds.), *Handbook of formative assessment* (pp.18-40). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fulcher, G. (2012). Assessment literacy for the language classroom. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 9(2), 113–132. DOI: 10.1080/15434303.2011.642041
- Hattie, J. & Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of Feedback, *Review of Educational Research*. 77, 81-112. DOI: 10.3102/003465430298487
- Malone, M. E. (2008). Training in language assessment. In E. Shohamy & N. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (pp. 225-239). Springer US.

- Norris, J. M. (2014). Some reflections on learning-oriented assessment. Presentation at *Roundtable on Learning-Oriented Assessment in Language Classrooms and Large-Scaled Contexts*. (2014, October). Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.
- Plake, B. S. & Impara, J. C. (1992). *Teacher competencies questionnaire description*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.