

UNDERSTANDING THE SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PRINCIPLES IN LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

Aishah Amirah Zainal Abidin

Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor

aishahamirah@kuis.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Second language teacher assessment principle has been widely discussed in Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) field. It provided the framework for the teachers to work on and reflect upon in the practice of language assessment. However, the roles of the teacher in building and deciding their own principle as unique individual in the language assessment paradigm is still are overlooked. Teachers were made aware of the crucial roles they played in the language assessment classroom, but discussion on their self-awareness of these critical roles need more understanding. Hence, this study aimed at understanding the second language teachers' assessment principle in the context of tertiary education. It also seeks to see how these language teachers adapted their assessment principle in the existing assessment practices. The teachers reportedly favour the principle of assessment for learning instead of the assessment of learning for their language classes. The teachers also believed in exercising their personal judgement when it comes to interpreting the process and outcome of the assessment. The study concluded with the realisation that the language teachers are required to make informed decisions that needed them to balance the theoretical elements of language assessment and making informed judgement and interpretations of the assessment to satisfy various stakeholders in the education system.

Keywords: *Language Assessment, Language Assessment Literacy, Tertiary education.*

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing interest in the field of Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) in recent years. This is due to the needs to improve the teachers' professionalism and competency in educational assessment and by extension, to the language teachers for language assessment literacy. Research in this field will create opportunities for language teachers for enhancement in their professional development as teachers.

In LAL, despite the ongoing debate as to what constitutes it, remains relevant, not only in the Applied Linguistic sphere, but also in the implications it gives to the teacher-training field. The basic scope of LAL includes three components which are; *knowledge, skills, and principles* in language testing (Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012; Malone, 2013). These components have remained persistent in much of the study on language testing and assessment. The current debate on the LAL rests in the specifics that make up these components; to what extent and depth it covers, and the stakeholders involved (Giraldo, 2018). These discussions of the field of LAL have

opened up the room for further exploration and study on its component. This is crucial in order to shed some light and contribute to the general body of its field.

In the component of *knowledge*, it covers the theoretical considerations of language assessment. Teachers are usually taught the theoretical foundations of language assessment such as validity and reliability of the assessment prepared. Another aspect under the *knowledge* component is the knowledge of major issues in applied linguistics; the trends and changes in how language is assessed. Lastly, as Giraldo (2018) puts it in his study, the elements that build up *knowledge* component is ‘teachers knowledge of their own context for language assessment’. Contextualised knowledge of assessment will help the language teachers make better decision in the assessment process. By having this knowledge component, the language teachers will have a strong background to work on when they become a full-fledged language teacher in practice.

The second component, *skills* in language assessment, as proposed by Giraldo (2018) comprises of five elements, namely; instructions skills, design, measurement skills, quantitative method, and technological skills. These skills sums up the technical ability of the language teachers to properly executed a well-planned assessment. It started in the preparation of the assessment, the implementation of it, and the post-process of the assessment itself. These skills are considered the basics that will guide the language teachers to be a better language assessor. The extent to which of the skills the language teachers required to master vary by positions and institutions.

For the purpose of this study, it will look into the third component of LAL, which is the *principle* in language testing and assessment in detail. Not to undermine the other two components, but for the purpose of this small scale study, a broader perspective on all the components is impossible to be covered by this study alone. Hence, the focus is solely to look into the issue pertaining to the principle in language testing and assessment in LAL. The *principle* component in LAL can be described as ‘awareness of and action towards the critical issues in language assessment’ (Giraldo, 2018). Giraldo first make the distinction and separation of the components in LAL in his meta-analysis study of the literature in language testing and assessment. The study provided the working descriptors of the specifics that fall under each component. The descriptors for the *principle* component in LAL can be seen in table 1 below.

Table 1. Descriptors in the Principle component in LAL

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.

According to Giraldo (2018) the underlying constructs of ethics and fairness, and transparency and democracy were the basis of this component. The descriptors in table 1 highlighted the importance of these constructs as the code of conduct for those involved in language assessment.

The discussion on the component of *principle* in language assessment centred on the self-awareness of the language teachers in their practices of language assessment in the second language classroom. The descriptors pointed out the statements that can start the process of self-reflection and deliberated professional evaluation of what may or may not have been done. Factors that influenced judgements, perceptions, and interpretations of the process of assessment, students undertaking the test, and the circumstances surrounding the assessment should be made aware by the language teachers in order to be more informed and professional in their work.

Scarino (2013) have debated on the needs for the teachers to have assessment literacy, from the perspective of understanding their own principles and interpretations in language assessment. The argument lies in the stake and power that the teachers hold in language assessment, notwithstanding it could be conflicting to their own personal principle, and the harm it will do to students if it was not appropriately used. Scarino (2017) in later study highlighted the challenges in developing the assessment literacy of the teachers and further concluded that the challenges were both conceptual and interpretive. Teachers' account and perspective should be taken into consideration when it comes to designing a standardised assessment, as they will be the one implementing it. But despite this knowledge, teachers' views were still overlooked in the grand scheme of the assessment process.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Assessment principles and beliefs of second and /or foreign language teachers have been studied from many perspectives. It can viewed from the micro perspective of assessment on specific language skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, and grammar (Gabinete, 2017; Guadu & Boersma, 2018; Han & Kaya, 2014), and also from the macro perspectives of the language assessment; the interpretation,

biases, judgements and perceptions on and towards language assessment (Elshawa, Nadzimah Abdullah, & Md Rashid, 2017; Malone, 2013; Mansory, 2016; Mohd Rashid Bin Mohd Saad et al, 2013; Scarino, 2013). The teachers' principles in language assessment, as emphasised by these studies mattered to the overall understanding of language assessment as teachers are viewed as important, if not critical in the success of the assessment. It contributed to the body of knowledge of the LAL field.

All of these studies underscored a significant discussion on the crucial needs for the understanding of the principles of language assessment of the language teachers. Because of its broad perspectives and scope, it is best to note that, despite these studies focusing on teachers' principle, the aspect where teachers are viewed as unique individual in the highly structured assessment system is still lacking in discussion.

In view of the assessment principle of the language teacher, it would be apt to go though the origin of how language is being viewed from the perspectives of learning theories. Traditional assessment has its base in cognitive view of learning as well as psychometric testing (Scarino, 2013). Alternative assessment on the other hand, is in favour of the view of sociocultural learning theory, where language is assessed not in vacuum, but in a contextualised manner. Social interactions and the relationships between the users and the surrounding give effect to how language is being used and assessed.

The former assessment belief tends to see assessment as objective procedure, which normally conducted in a single event, with the performance of the students being assessed in a norm-referenced manner. The stakes are high and the ones monitoring and governing these assessments are usually the authority in the education system. Summative assessment is the most common feature of this assessment belief with standardised final examination, end-of-year assessment, university entrance exam and many other similar assessments. The main interest of these assessments is mainly in the assessment *of* learning.

The later assessment beliefs on the other hand, focuses on the process that the students went through to demonstrate their ability in using and producing the language. It allows for a more holistic and developmental way of learning to see progress made based on the evidences collected throughout the assessment period. The method employed for this assessment belief is usually formative assessment. Students are given projects, tasks, and activity to do in the period of the learning in order to gauge their understanding of the learning process. It is also done to inform the teachers on the ways to improve or intervention needed to help the students progress better in learning. Teachers will mostly be responsible in overseeing these assessments as it usually occurred within the walls of the classroom. The interest of this assessment principle is of assessment *for* learning.

Despite the presumably stark contrast of both these assessment principle, language teachers were in most cases need to conduct both these assessments. They are expected to shift and accommodate the needs of these assessments regardless of their own principle in language assessment. Scarino (2013) noted the challenges these

teachers faced in balancing their own principle and beliefs with the theoretical, practical and institutional needs of the assessment. Mohd Rashid Bin Mohd Saad et al (2013) stressed that teachers' assessment principles were commonly neglected because of the practice of top-down managerial approach to assessment in the education system. This leaves the language teachers to fend for themselves to decide and make the best-informed decision for their students.

Therefore, this study aimed to look into the second language teachers' principle in assessing students in the language classroom. The study was also set out to identify how the second language teachers adapt their language assessment principle into the existing English language assessment in their respective workplaces.

The research questions that this study was set out to answer were seen as:

1. What is the second language teachers' principle in assessing students in the language classroom?
2. How do the second language teachers adapt their principle into the existing assessment practices of their workplace.

The significance of the study can be seen in how the principle of the language teachers fit into the trends of language assessment in general. Their views and principles in language assessment will contribute to the body of knowledge in LAL. By understanding the principles that shaped these teachers, the practice of language assessment can be improved to make it better in the future. It will also be significant in how the theories of language learning can give impact to the classroom teaching and learning.

The scope of the study is the language assessment in the tertiary education setting in Malaysian context. The assessment practice in tertiary education differs slightly to that of the primary and secondary education. Tertiary education practised a mostly formative assessment of language in comparison to lesser portion of formative assessment in primary and secondary education, in favour of the summative assessment of language. The levels of education chosen are diploma and degree level study, excluding the post-graduate level, since there are no compulsory English proficiency courses offered at this level. These levels were chosen as it has similar practice in language assessment, albeit differing in some part such as the difficulty and skills assessed. But generally, the structure and framework were largely the same.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative research design using phenomenology approach in order to understand the principle that shaped the language teachers as they are today. It is considered apt and fitting to explore this topic in this manner, as data collected through interviews with multiple individuals who have experienced the phenomenon will serve a richer context for the understanding the phenomenon that occurred (Creswell, 2018).

The next step in the phenomenology paradigm was to formulate the interview protocol to gather informants' remarks on the issue. A detailed description of the interview protocol can be seen in Appendix A. The main questions and probing questions were designed to obtain responses that give answers to the research

questions. Each of the informants were made aware of the purpose of the interview session and have given their written consent to be interviewed and the data collected used for the purpose of the study. The sample of the consent form can be viewed in Appendix B. The transcripts of the interview session were given to the informants for validating purposes. Only a session each was conducted with the informants and no further follow-up interviews were made. This is in part the limitation that this study faced in terms of the time and resources in order to be able to do as such.

In order to achieve substantial and relevant information, the chosen informants for the data collection were English language teachers. Specifically, these language teachers must have at least a five-year working experience in tertiary education to warrant adequate experiences in teaching and assessing students at this level of education. These informants must also have experience teaching English language proficiency courses in their workplaces.

From the interview transcription, three recurring themes were identified and it can be seen as:

- Assessment for learning
- Assessment of learning
- Exercising personal judgement

Assessment for learning

In the theme of assessment for learning, the categories of codes include the personal relationship with students, conflicting role of teachers, and assessment beliefs. It looked into how and what are the language teachers' responses and preferences when it comes to using the language assessment to promote better teaching and learning activity. It focuses on the ongoing assessment to inform the teachers on ways to improve the process of teaching and learning. Students are viewed as a complex individual highly entwined with context of which they identified their identity and the social interactions they have using the language.

Assessment of learning

The assessment of learning covered the coding of technical knowledge of teachers, and adherence to standards. This theme explained the principle that language assessment is conducted to check the level of learning that has taken place. It also looked into the knowledge of the language teachers in executing the assessment process. The assessment is viewed as highly standardised and structured.

Exercising personal judgement

In this theme, the codings included were personal apprehension and personal judgements. It can be described as the teachers' reflection of their readiness and preparedness in handling responsibilities. It also discusses the personal stand and decision-making process of the teachers with the constraints and boundaries that they still need to adhere to.

The initial coding process of the data and how it was later categorised to arrive to the themes can be seen in Appendix C. The initial codings turned up about 51 codes. These codes were grouped to seven categories. The three final themes were formulated to best represent the coding process and the data collected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Assessment for learning

Both Informant A and B showed strong preference towards the principle of assessment for learning. In a narrow sense, the assessment for learning is akin to formative assessment in learning. Both the informants have experiences teaching proficiency courses with only formative assessment as its main assessment and they believe it is the way to go for these proficiency courses. They have shared the reasons in their preference and it can be further seen in the next paragraphs of this discussion.

Informant A mentioned that the formative assessment allows the teachers to see the effort the students have put into coming up with the end product of the assessment. She also believed that the effort by the students and the progress could be clearly measured and reviewed when it is done formatively. She stressed that amount of effort put will be reflected in the learning of the skills. She related that her previous students from four to five years ago seems to have more effort put into the learning and doing the assessment, in comparison to her students now. A factor she guessed that contributed to this is the rise in technology. Students are more relaxed and have more resources at their fingertip, but even with this much access, it does not translate to more learning and better assessment experiences.

She also emphasised that formative assessment allows for teachers to give their personal touch to the students and encouraged engagement of learning in the classroom. She felt that the rapport that was created with her students has helped them in their ease and readiness to do the assessment given. She reported to have an increased sense of excitement when she can enjoy the small accomplishments of the students in the classroom. She can clearly see how the students made progress throughout the learning period and the assessment have helped her in understanding her students better.

As for Informant B, she described her preference of formative assessment over the summative assessment as partly due to its practicality and ease of handling. She recalled the situation where she feels the formative assessment encouraged more participation and commitment in the language classroom from the students by removing the stress that usually comes with summative assessment, such as final examination. She mentioned that she was able to help her students more when the process of learning and assessment is dynamic. In what she called a non-linear process where certain points of the past assessment can be revisited to be reviewed and improved together with the students. On the part of the students, she believes that they were more informed of the requirements of the assessment given because there was a process of negotiating the needs and demand of the assessment earlier, and they can still consult the teacher to further ask for assistance and help in completing the assessment.

In terms of their judgement of the students, both informants reported to have a slight conflict in their role as both the teacher that promotes learning and the language assessor that made the assessment of learning. External factors such the attitude, personality, and physical challenges of the students have sometimes contributed to biasness in assessing the students. Informant B stated that this is unavoidable in her part as the language teacher and assessor. She argued that it is impossible to separate the sociocultural elements of the situation and to only focus on the language use of the students. This view of hers is consistent with the principle of assessment for learning. These external factors were in fact part of what makes the language assessment whole and highly contextualised. In the context of sociocultural learning, this notion is largely celebrated and encouraged.

Both the informants did have some reservations when it comes to formative assessment. They believed it is best conducted individually to actually see the progress of each individual student. The assessments done in groups will not be as accurate a representative of the students' individual performance.

Notwithstanding, the multi-dimensional and complex perspectives of interpreting the assessment are what drawn the language teachers to this principle of assessment. They have reportedly mentioned:

‘How do you measure *proficiency*? It is abstract skills that can't be quantified whenever we want it to be.’

The nature of language proficiency as ongoing acquired skill makes it all the more difficult to assess. Hence, the language teachers shared their view of assessment as a way to promote more learning, and not to actually measure the amount of learned skills, which in later situation did not create a meaningful learning for the students.

Assessment of learning

From the perspective of assessment of learning, it can also be viewed as summative assessment where it is more objective and standardised in nature. Both the informant agreed on its role in the language classroom, but it should not be only focus in the learning process.

The responses by both the informants were fairly consistent and somewhat almost similar in many aspects. They believed that the marks from the summative assessment did not really represent the students' performance. They mentioned that students could sometimes not perform well in the final assessment despite actually having high competency in the language. Many factors contributed to this situation and in some of the factor, it is beyond the control of the students themselves.

The informants also reported feeling inadequate in their working knowledge of preparing the final assessment. It is common practice in their workplaces to have the teachers prepare the final examination questions themselves. In order to assess the learning, these feeling of inadequacies might cause the issue of validity of the assessment itself. They have said that they received help in preparing and setting the assessment, but even with it, they still feel overwhelmed with the task they need to do to ensure the assessment can assess what the students have learned.

In this theme, the informants felt the pressure to adhere to the standard prepared by the coordinator of the courses. The informants also agreed with the process of creating the assessment and the validity process it went through. In some part of the interview, they agreed that the summative assessment is necessary to see the students' performance, but did not necessarily representing the students performance as a whole.

The language assessment principle of these language teachers is not mutually exclusive of both. It can be said that both the informants were in favour in the principle of assessment for learning. But, this does not discount the fact that they also believe in the assessment of learning, because they still need to implement it in their language classrooms. They understand the need to understand and have working knowledge of both assessments in order to effectively function in the classroom. Believing in the assessment of learning does not change their core principle of language assessment, which is to view it as a highly contextualised process of language used whilst interacting with the many sociocultural elements of the learning.

Exercising personal judgement

The workplace of the informants requires them to observe the rules and requirements in the language assessment. Within this constraint, they still reported a fair amount of freedom in executing the assessment in the language classroom.

Informant A have reported the conflict she felt when given assessment which she seemed (at that moment) unfit to be given to her students because of many reasons. One of it is the level of difficulty of the assessment. The assessment given was originally standardised to be used for that particular english proficiency course, and despite that, she have chosen to not use it because she felt the outcome would not be as valid and representing her students ability. In doing so, she said that she has somewhat go against the standard, but she believed in her own judgement of the situation and context of her students to do so. She later informed that she has voiced her concern of the assessment to the coordinator and after discussing with all the teachers teaching the course, they reached a consensus of its unsuitability to be used to assess that particular language component. The coordinator later prepared a more fitting assessment to replace the earlier one and Informant A mentioned that she finally used the assessment given after satisfactorily reviewed it.

This incident shown how the language teachers have to exercise their own personal judgement in deciding the appropriateness of the assesment. The limit to which, how far, and to what extent the judgment can run differ in each workplace. The key issue here is the ability to stand their ground to do what they feel right based on their personal and professional judgment of the situation.

For the case of Informant B, she informed that she did make adjustments and tweaks to the standardised assesment prepared by the coordinator in ways she see fit to her students level and circumstances. Upon questioning on correctness of the practice to her workplace, she mentioned that she felt that it might not be allowed for teachers to do so, but she did it nonetheless. She did not feel as if she has made any disservice to any party in doing so, but she felt that is was the correct thing to do to be

fair to her students. When further asked if it is a norm for the language teachers to make that adjustment in her workplace, she mentioned that she would not know of it as she did not discuss her actions with her colleagues. This incident raise the issue of transparency and democracy as suggested by Giraldo (2018). The language teacher must decide whether to be transparent in their judgement and provide justification in every decisions made in order to be fair to the students and to the standards it was originally prepared.

In terms of the monitoring made by the workplace of the informants, it was minimal. They stated that there was no formal monitoring to ensure that the assessment have been conducted by the teachers. They are trusted to execute the assessment given in their classroom at their own pace and time, within the period of learning time. By having this sense of freedom, they are not necessarily pressured to have the assessment as perfect as possible, but instead, it was more of a personal struggle to create a balanced and fair assessement to all of their students within the walls of their own understanding of how assessment should and could be conducted. This also allow for the language teachers to have the self-measured ethics and fairness in their judgement of the students. They will need to see the effect of their decision in the short and long term.

CONCLUSION

The language teachers have to operate on a seemingly contrasting paradigm of language assessment principles on a daily basis. But it truth, the differences are not easily distinguished because of the blurred definition of the what both entails these days. Wearing multiple hats and juggling the theory and practice have put the language teachers on their highest professional capacity on a daily basis. By having a strong understanding of their own view, beliefs and principle on language assessment will help make the process smooth and preferably to the extent of being effortless. Much greater discussion and study are needed to help in equipping these teachers with the assessment literacy they needed. This is in return will yield a better teaching, learning, and assessment practices in the second language classroom in the future.

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