

LTJ_30.3_Assessment_Literacy

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Interviewer: From the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom, this is Glenn Fulcher with another issue of Language Testing Bites. 2013 is the 30th anniversary of the founding of our journal by Arthur Hughes and Don Porter in 1984. Over the last 3 decades, first with Arnold and now with Sage, the journal has published most influential research in the field of language testing. The last anniversary issue was 25.3 in 2008, which focused on the teaching of language testing. It is not coincidental that the current special issue uses a wider lens to look at the whole issue of assessment literacy. Not only for language testing specialists, but for the wider community of stakeholders who use and interpret scores from language tests.

This special issue has been edited by [unintelligible 00:01:00] who is senior lecturer in the School of Education at Tel Aviv University. Thank you for joining us on Language Testing Bites to discuss assessment literacy, and for guest editing this anniversary issue for us.

Respondent: Hi Glenn, it is a pleasure to be here, thanks for inviting me.

Interviewer: Let's start off with some definitional issues for readers who may not be familiar with the concept of assessment literacy or its history. I realise that there is still debate over the definition, and scope of the term assessment literacy but perhaps you could briefly say what it is generally used to refer to, and where the term came from?

Respondent: Assessment literacy is a term that has been used for the last 20 years or so, it was originally coined by Stiggins in 1991, and Stiggins provides in 1998 a definition. Assessment literacy includes the ability to collect dependable information about student achievement, and to use that information to maximise student achievement. We are talking here about teaching, about the classroom, about assessing student's knowledge, student's abilities in the classroom, and the kind of knowledge that teachers who do most of that assessment should have. This is interesting because it actually marks the beginning of interest in classroom assessment, which till then was more negligent in comparison with external standards based assessment. Stiggins here, in using the term literacy, he is referring to knowledge and skills in a particular area. Very much like computer literacy or academic literacy, the knowledge that particular stakeholders should have when making decisions regarding abilities and skills in a certain area. In our case it would be, of course, abilities to use language skills and knowledge, but it is important to note two things. Since then the concept has expanded beyond just the classroom, and it now refers to the ability to make decisions, the knowledge and skills in terms of assessment, not just for teachers but for stakeholders in various situations. Experts and non-experts who need to make decisions based on their knowledge of assessment tools, of assessment data.

The second thing that I'd like to refer to is that assessment literacy does not just refer to the actual assessment actions taken. Decisions taken, skills that the individuals need to have in order to make these decisions. It also refers to principles, to the why, to the underlying theory to why certain decisions are being made, to why certain tools are being used. So if we take this example and try to illustrate it in the area of language testing, when assessing speaking skills it is not enough to know the tools that are used, the current tools that are used for assessing speaking. One needs to understand that underlying construct of what speaking means today. This understanding would lead test designers and planners of the assessment process to pick and choose appropriate tools to model them in accordance with the needs to try and understand what kind of measures one has to take in order to get at the heart of a person's speaking ability. Beyond that, once the data is in, the assessment literate experts would need to know how to interpret that data, how to make decisions based on the data, decisions which are ethical, which take into consideration also the consequences of the assessment decisions taken. Consequences in terms of the individual taking the test, but also what it means in reference to society going back to the teaching end, the underlying theory here refers also to terms that have been used continuously in the past decade.

Terms that relate to theoretical notions about the role of assessment in the teaching and learning process, about formative assessment and assessment for learning. To sum up, I think it would be appropriate to quote Davies here in his 2008 article, where he analysed the contents of testing and assessment textbooks in language testing. He referred to three components which he found in these textbooks. I think this equates pretty much, or describes pretty much assessment literacy. The three components were knowledge in the area, skills, and the principles which underlie this knowledge and skills.

Interviewer: In your guest editorial you make the case that the definition of assessment literacy is designed to, and I quote here, to get at the core knowledge of the profession, of the identity of language testers, and at the *raison d'être* of the field as a discipline in its own right. Do you think that the current interest in assessment literacy is as much about defining ourselves in the educational universe as it is about educating young scholars and stakeholders in ways that are useful to their needs?

Respondent: That is a very interesting question. I'll try to relate to it. I don't think it is an either or, it is either deciding or trying to find out where we are in the educational universe, or trying to think what will be the contents of courses for young scholars, or what knowledge will be imparted to them in the language assessment domain. But definitely there is a connection between the two, because we first need to understand or define our identity, who are we? What are we interested in? What does language assessment comprise of, consist of? And only then can we make decisions, or can we try and put together this knowledge base for future scholars. This is actually dealt with quite extensively in a number of articles, a number of contributions in this special issue, where [unintelligible 00:08:30] sees the language base of assessment, a very strongly influenced by the background knowledge of the people who carry it out, in her case it is teachers.

So what are their perceptions, what are their beliefs about teaching and about assessment, and how that is integrated with the assessment knowledge that they have, or that they are studying about. [Unintelligible 00:08:57] tries to define who would be the ideal person to run the courses for these future young scholars, and she differentiates between people who have traditionally been found most suitable for this purpose, for conducting these courses. These would be the language testing experts, versus others who are in the fields of applied linguistics, but are not necessarily deemed experts in the area of language testing. She calls them non-language testing experts, and actually makes an interesting comparison between these two groups and native and non-native speaking groups. Definitely there are dilemmas here that we need to deal with, these dilemmas are placed within a larger context of the global, or local decision making, and what kind of global knowledge do our language testers need? Can they all speak the same language, or do they need to focus on local assessment needs, in particular institutions and for a variety of purposes and diverse audience. I think what will eventually evolve is that assessment literacy and language assessment literacy will be defined in a localised terminology or be defined as a localised concept. The knowledge that will be imparted to the future experts will comprise of both global knowledge and local knowledge, and then one can see the connection between the two, our conception of assessment literacy and the contents of our future courses for future language testing and assessment experts.

Interviewer: As you know, this is an area that I've been working in over the past few years. But as Taylor points out in this special issue, while I was attempting to provide an extended definition of assessment literacy, I didn't really address the question of which elements of that literacy were most relevant to specific groups of stakeholders. Now many of our listeners will be working in a context where the decisions of university or college admissions officers are of particular interest. Perhaps you could say what we know about how they use test scores and the shape of the assessment literacy that they require?

Respondent: This is a very important issue that is dealt with in an article in this special issue on language assessment literacy. So we have here a high-stake situation where the university or college admission officers are involved in making assessment decisions within a set framework of

cut-off scores that will determine the decision as whether to accept or reject certain candidates, or maybe to require them to take some additional courses prior to being accepted to the study programme. The question is what kind of knowledge they need in order to make ethical, valid decisions, even though they were not considered in the past as [unintelligible 00:12:43] experts, but still here they are involved in testing situation. Therefore they require knowledge in order to make the right decisions, or decisions that will be in terms of their consequences, will be valid. So the idea is that these admission officers need first of all to speak the language, they need to know about ethicality. They need to know about validity, they need to understand that decision making in the area of assessment cannot be based only on one factor, and there should be additional factors taken into consideration. They need to know that test scores can be dependent on, but there is an air of measurement, and their decision cannot be made entirely on those test scores. They need to understand the notion of the responsibility of the language tester in the acceptance procedure. In order to follow up on their decisions they will need at a certain point to see what happens with these students, to what extent were the decisions valid, or the action taken, how can the scores and the information they received, how can it impact the student's future studies to follow up what happens with this particular students and his knowledge of English. Has it hampered his academic studies in any way? Maybe this will influence future decisions regarding other candidates. Maybe this was a border line case, or cases, and one can see that they did quite well in terms of their academic abilities once accepted into the programme. The idea is that they should have tools to scrutinise their decisions, to go back and forth while making the decision and afterwards, and should have the knowledge and skills to do so in terms of their assessment literacy.

Interviewer: And when it comes to teachers and potential future language testers, I'm interested in what you feel is a balance between the language in language testing, and the testing which draws on psychology and educational measurement? I ask this because the editors of this journal face a similar balancing act. Do we consider papers for publication in the journal that really ask psychometric questions in which the use of a language test is incidental, or do we insist that there is a real language testing issue at stake? Do you see what I mean? How we construe this also impacts on what may or may not get published.

Respondent: That's like the billion dollar question. Because on one hand I think we all recognise the importance of the language components and the fact that this field has established itself in the last fifty years or so as a prominent area with its own journals and its own courses, and its own research studies. This is really the reason for why I believe there should be a language assessment literacy, other than just an assessment literacy. And that language experts should be involved in setting language assessment operations as they understand the various features of language learning and language acquisition and language teaching. But this seems to be like a built in contradiction because on one hand we would like to retain the language's specific unique features, and on the other hand we would like to reach out to other populations and help them build their decisions on appropriate language assessment knowledge. So what is the compromise here? How do we keep the unique language features and make sure we don't isolate ourselves as a very small expert community? I think that this has to do with this globalised knowledge that I was referring to before. So if we take, for instance, the university or college admission officers, and look at the decisions that they need to make, we could talk about trying to make sure that they understand the nature of the scores with which they are working and what that score represents. It represents a certain knowledge of academic English, so what is academic English all about? What are its components? What are its features? What typifies it? And within that framework provide the relevant information so as to enable these professionals in other domains to make the relevant decisions. It is important, of course, to be modest and to realise that language assessment and language assessment literacy is very much influenced by general assessment, by current paradigms, by educational research. If you would like if we look at it figuratively I think that language assessment literacy has grown out of the general assessment literacy. If we look at it in terms of a multi-layered kind of entity, with the bottom basic layer

consisting of general assessment literacy components, and building into it the special unique language features. I think that is what language assessment literacy is all about, so we both have the general and the unique and in terms of reaching out to other communities and other professions, I think we should try to retain the general language assessment features but allow these professional to choose and pick which features are relevant for their own situations and their own decision making.

Interviewer: Thanks. This really brings us to the vex question that you raise in your guest editorial. Who decides? While you raise the question, I struggled to find an explicit answer, perhaps you can give us one now?

Respondent: So who decides? Well there is certainly more than one answer. I think in continuation with what was said before about the globalised nature of language assessment knowledge, we need to take into consideration that there has to be some common denominator, but we also need to leave room for the local decisions and for the local considerations. And what I see is not just one definition, or definitions of what language assessment comprises of, but I see this as a more of a collaborative effort of assessment experts, with local experts, with people who come from different professions and have their own needs. And in the form of a dialogue, the mapping out of some sort of a knowledge base, which would have core components, but would also reach out and allow for setting out a wider conceptual framework which can be interpreted locally and can be implemented from making assessment decisions for particular purposes. That framework will also need to be dynamic as the needs will probably evolve as time goes by. For instance, the whole idea of computerised tests and the use of technology, I'm sure will change our perceptions and will require different formulations of some of the assessment basic preconceptions that we have held till now. The idea of who decides and who has really the power to decide comes across very strongly in a number of contributions to the issue. The Malone article, for instance, shows the difference between experts who relay to an evaluate an online course on assessment, and practitioners within the classroom. And you see how the experts are more keen on having the theoretical bases, whilst the practitioners care about what will serve them best in terms of their teaching and assessment needs. And here I think a dialogue would be extremely beneficial in trying to put together the language assessment literacy that would be most suitable for this particular group. The same in the article that talks about parliament members, and decision making with regard to the knowledge that these officials should have when making decisions about language ability of doctors, what should these doctors know, what do their test scores mean, and whether they should be allowed to practise medicine in an English speaking environment, doctors who come from a different language environment, this is the Peele and Harding contribution. So again, there are very specific issues here which need to be understood, what is this test actually testing, how relevant is it for this particular decision making situation, but also there has to be as I said a common denominator of some of the terminology and this runs across all the different cases that are related to, analysed and studied in this particular issue. Indeed, a dialogue, not just one group collaboration between experts, and relating to the constituents rather than deciding on a top-down dos and don't approach.

Interviewer: The anniversary issue has shown that the debates surrounding assessment literacy, its definition, scope and practise, are much more complex than just the transmission of knowledge relevant to each stakeholder group. There are critical ontological questions to be asked, relationships formed, and collaborative pedagogies developed. I was pleased to see in the pages of this issue the recognition of the diversity of the papers published in the journal over the last three decades. Given my earlier comment about the way editors agonise over publication decisions, perhaps this is evidence that the journal has struck the right balance over the years in playing its role in extending assessment literacy. Of course we now hope that this podcast is extending assessment literacy beyond the traditional readers of the journal. We would like to thank you for being with us today to discuss a topic that is going to remain hot for the foreseeable future.

Respondent: I definitely agree, and I'd like to thank all the writers who contributed to this special issue, and I'd also like to thank you Glenn for very intriguing and thought provoking questions. Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you for listening to this issue of Language Testing Bites. Language Testing Bites is a production of the journal Language Testing from Sage publications. You can subscribe to Language Testing Bites through iTunes, or you can download future issues from ltj.sagepub.com, or from languagetesting.info. So until next time we hope you enjoy the current issue of Language Testing.
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