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Exploring the Idea of “Assessment with Learners” in Discussing Language Assessment Literacy

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Abstract

Inspired by Fulcher’s (2012) data-driven approach to language assessment literacy (LAL), I introduce learners’ voices as a way to better understand teachers’ LAL. I also incorporate learnings from recent literature on child development regarding research with children to suggest that we consider *assessment with learners* in LAL and language assessment studies more generally. Assessment with learners offers a new perspective on discussions of LAL as well as a new means of assisting learners to enhance their own understanding of how assessment works. Drawing from examples in my own work on LAL, I address a few potential benefits of incorporating learners’ voices in LAL discussions. With an emphasis on “by doing” and “learner-centered” elements, assessment with learners can resonate well with Fulcher’s apprenticeship content approach to LAL.

Keywords: *Language Assessment Literacy, Research with Children, Data-driven Approach*

Introduction

Among the many admirable achievements of Professor Glenn Fulcher, one that has been particularly inspiring to me is his paper “Assessment Literacy for the Language Classroom,” published in *Language Assessment Quarterly* (Fulcher, 2012), as well as his successive works on Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) (Fulcher, 2020, 2021). LAL is generally understood as the knowledge and skills needed to practice language assessment and use its results. However, there is little consensus among researchers on what, exactly, language assessment literacy entails (Fulcher, 2012), despite the potential implications of LAL for practice, including curriculum and material development for teacher education. As both a teacher educator who teaches a language

assessment course for language teachers and an applied linguistics researcher, I have long been interested in LAL and its implications for practice. I was first drawn to Fulcher's (2012) approach to LAL because, unlike theory-driven definitions of language assessment literacy often proposed at that time, Fulcher sought a more comprehensive, data-driven understanding of LAL. His continuous efforts to combine philosophical and theoretical discussions of LAL with practical applications for instruction and material development inspired me to think about how teachers can be supported in developing their LAL and, eventually, led me to realize the important role that learners can play in teachers' LAL development. In this essay, I explore the idea of *assessment with learners* in relation to LAL, while reflecting on how Fulcher's work, as well as the work of others, inspired my research on this topic. Given the reflective nature of this essay, I use examples from my previously published work as well.

Language Assessment Literacy

LAL has three major elements: (a) *knowledge* of assessment theories and concepts, (b) *skills* needed to develop and administer assessments as well as to interpret and use the results, and (c) the pedagogical and ethical *principles* of appropriately using assessment and the consequences of that use (Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012; Giraldo, 2018). Despite widespread agreement among researchers on these three elements, however, there is no agreed-on understanding of exactly what they entail. Researchers also disagree on the interrelationship (e.g., whether there are hierarchical relations) and comparative importance of these three elements (Fulcher, 2012, 2020; Harding & Kremmel, 2016; Inbar-Lourie, 2013; Lee & Butler, 2020). LAL was originally developed in a theory-driven fashion (Taylor, 2021). After empirically investigating language teachers' needs, Fulcher (2012) offered a comprehensive and broader definition of LAL, reflecting teachers' practical experiences with assessment:

The knowledge, skills and abilities required to design, develop, maintain or evaluate, large-scale standardized and/or classroom based tests, familiarity with test processes, and awareness of principles and concepts that guide and underpin practice, including ethics and codes of practice. 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. (Fulcher, 2012, p. 125)

In his conception of LAL, Fulcher acknowledged the value of practitioners' experiences when developing professional training courses and course materials on language assessment while stressing the importance of placing the assessment content in a larger social, cultural, and historical context, going beyond the immediate classroom context. For example, teachers can discuss the pros and cons of creating a life-long personal test result database, as Fulcher suggested in a sample task for their professional development (Fulcher, 2020, p. 17). At the same time, Fulcher (2012), expressed concern about postmodern views of LAL such as those advocated by Inbar-Lourie (2008), who argued for conceptualizing LAL as "the subject of social

construction” (Inbar-Lourie, 2008, p. 387). Fulcher (2012) stated that “if reality or knowledge is what we perceive and may temporarily construct with others, there can be no reality or knowledge at all, and no criteria by which to evaluate the appropriacy of competing validity (or ethical) arguments” (p. 117). He also warned that the postmodernist conceptualization of LAL can lead to misunderstanding of LAL among teachers.

Researchers also disagree about whether LAL should apply not only to testing specialists but also to other stakeholders, while allowing for differentiated assessment knowledge according to various stakeholders’ needs (Inbar-Lourie, 2013). Although some researchers defined LAL exclusively for teachers, as in Malone’s (2013) definition (“language instructors’ familiarity with testing definitions and the application of this knowledge to classroom practice in general and specifically to issues related to assessing language” [p. 329]), Taylor (2013) proposed differentiated LAL profiles according to a stakeholder’s degree of involvement in assessment; for example, test makers and researchers belong to the “assessment core” group, language teachers and course instructors are at the “intermediary level,” and the general public is at the “peripheral level” (p. 408). Taylor argued that “not everybody needs to know or be able to do everything to the same level” (p. 409) and proposed multiple LAL profiles for different stakeholders based on eight dimensions: namely, “knowledge of theory, technical skills, principles and concepts, language pedagogy, sociocultural values, local practices, personal beliefs/attitudes, and scores and decision making” (p. 410). According to this line of thinking, for classroom teachers, “language pedagogy” is highly important whereas “knowledge of theory,” “principles and contents,” and “scores and decision making” are considered less important (p. 410). Researchers, in general, appeared to find such differentiated models helpful. Kremmel and Harding (2020) validated Taylor’s model through a large-scale survey and made only a slight modification to her model.

While agreeing that differentiated LAL may be necessary for different stakeholders, my colleague Jiyeon Lee and I wondered why learners have not been viewed as “stakeholders” in those discussions. There is no question that learners are most affected by the design, administration, and results of assessment. So why aren’t learners’ needs incorporated in the conceptualization of LAL? Don’t learners need LAL as well?

In 2019, Lee and I conducted a search of LAL in papers published in major English-language journals from 2001 to 2019 and found that 46 out of 52 studies (88.4%) focused on teachers’ LAL and that the rest of the studies either examined LAL of other stakeholders, such as university admissions officers, employers, and policymakers, or compared teachers’ LAL with that of other stakeholders’ (Lee & Butler, 2020). The only exception that we found was Watanabe (2011), in which basic principles of language testing were introduced to college students learning a foreign language. The results indicated that the students’ perceptions of testing changed from negative to positive after receiving lessons on LAL for a semester. Malone (2017) mentioned the value of including learners’ perspectives in LAL in her presentation at the 2017 East Coast Organization of Language Testers conference, but very few other researchers acknowledged the value of including language learners at that time. Later, we found that

Kremmel and Harding (2020), mentioned above, also attempted to include learners' responses in their survey; however, the learners comprised only 2.8% of their data, leading them to exclude learners from their analysis. In any event, learners were largely missing in the discussions of LAL.

Meanwhile, a number of studies outside of LAL examined learners' perceptions and cognitive processing as well as test-taking strategies when engaging in assessment (e.g., Butler, 2018; Cohen & Upton, 2006; Ma & Winke, 2019). Assessment validation studies also came to be interested in incorporating learners' experience of taking the test as a source of validation for the test score interpretation and use (e.g., Cheng & DeLuca, 2011; Fox & Cheng, 2007; Winke et al., 2018). Furthermore, some other studies reported discrepancies in students' and teachers' perceptions of assessment even though the researchers did not frame their studies as LAL (Sato & Ikeda, 2015; Vlanti, 2012). Taken together, these studies suggest that learners can provide valuable information for improving assessment practice (Lee & Butler, 2020).

Incorporating Learners' Voices

In light of this situation, I decided to conduct an exploratory study to understand young language learners' LAL with my colleagues (Butler et al., 2021). We focused on young learners because, even though they are highly sensitive, or vulnerable, to assessment practice (Carless & Lam, 2014), their perspectives had rarely been considered in language assessment research. As a researcher who primarily works with young learners, I anticipated that they would be able to articulate their thoughts sufficiently if given appropriate guidance. My colleagues and I conducted individual interviews with a group of English-learning primary school children (ages 9–10 and 11–12, $N = 20$) in China after they had completed mock tests prepared for each grade level. The mock tests were composed of adapted select items from the tests that were made by the local government for the respective grade levels, and thus the children were familiar with both the test content and the form. We conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with individual children in Mandarin. We asked the children a series of questions, such as “Were there any questions that you had difficulties in answering?” followed by “Do you think that the test shows your actual English ability? Why and why not?” In another series of questions, we asked “Did you use any tricks or strategies to take the test?” followed by “Do you think that taking these strategies would change the testing results?” and “How would you design a test if you had a chance to do so?” (Please refer to Butler et al. (2021) for a list of questions that we asked the children.)

We found that learners, even young learners, could obtain sophisticated knowledge about assessment practice based on their experiences taking language assessments (inside and outside of school) as well as based on comparisons of those experiences with the experience of taking assessments in other subjects, such as language arts and science. Although the young learners in this study were not specifically trained to reflect on their experience with assessment practice (Malone, 2017), they could express their understanding about what, how, and why assessments should work (Inbar-Lourie, 2008). The young learners in the study addressed the problems and dilemmas associated with current form-focused classroom assessment at their schools, and they

wanted assessments to be more learner-oriented, meaning-focused, and diagnostic, as exemplified in the following remark from Scarlet,¹ a Grade 6 student.

I think that the design of a test should be a little more “humanized,” when the basic communication is met, there should not be too much attention on the details, because the test is meant for using the language, it should not be testing only for the sake of testing . . . As long as the tester can understand your meaning, it is okay. (Butler, et al., 2021, p. 442)

The young learners offered constructive suggestions for making the assessment more enjoyable and cognitively challenging, such as by using authentic stories. Comparing English assessment with assessment in language arts, Quest (Grade 6) observed:

Chinese readings have a wider variety of topics. I feel all Chinese readings are like short stories and quite fun to read. But English readings seem to be written by the examiner, and they are not real. (Butler, et al., 2021, p. 442)

As these quotes from children suggest, we realized that there are a few potential merits of incorporating learners’ voices in LAL discussions. First, considering learners’ experiences and views can make LAL more directly connected to learning and instruction. If one embraces the spirit of *assessment for learning* (Black & Wiliam, 1998), assessment is part of learning and instruction, and thus it should be contextualized in such a way that it directly connects to one’s learning and teaching. As mentioned, LAL was largely developed in a theory-driven and deductive fashion, primarily from the perspectives of assessment specialists (Taylor, 2021). Incorporating a bottom-up approach through listening to learners’ voices makes it possible to better contextualize LAL – making LAL more directly linked to learners’ needs and more useful for educational policy decisions related to accountability (Lee & Butler, 2020). In the specific context where our study was conducted, for example, the local education policy did not allow teachers to administer any assessment that deviated from the curriculum or the government-approved textbooks because of growing gaps in access to extra English lessons beyond what is offered in the classroom (i.e., some families pay for their children to receive instruction outside of school while others do not). Meanwhile, the current written-focused assessment does not match the needs of many students. When asked what kinds of tests he would make, Quest (Grade 6) gave voice to the dilemma between the students’ learning needs and a fairness issue associated with the language policy:

Because now I feel the school pays a lot of attention to grammar, but not to speaking. But if I include too many difficult oral questions, it may be obvious that I put pressure on those students who do not take outside classes. And I think that is not fair. So I think only if the school textbook

¹ Pseudonyms are used. The original remark was in Chinese.

has a major change to teach more speaking, then I can include more oral questions. (Butler et al., 2021, p. 444).

Second, listening to learners' voices can narrow the gap between learners and teachers (and/or assessment developers) in their understanding of the target abilities being assessed (i.e., constructs) and other construct-irrelevant factors, as reported in previous studies (e.g., Sato & Ikeda, 2015; Vlanti, 2012). In our study, the young learners' perspectives on construct-irrelevant factors, such as anxiety, confusing assessment formats and procedures, and various test-taking strategies, could potentially be used to improve the validity of the assessment. Test-taking strategies, in particular, are an area in which learners' experiences and perspectives can contribute greatly to assessment validity discussions, and thus may need to be part of LAL. Raising meta-awareness of test-taking strategies and their consequences is also critically important for learners as well as other stakeholders (Butler et al., 2021).

Related to the point above, the learners' frequent remarks about affective elements in the assessment—such as anxiety, enjoyment, interest, and playfulness—made us realize that LAL discussions have not paid sufficient attention to the role of affect and its influence in understanding and developing LAL. In assessment, affect has largely been considered a construct-irrelevant factor (Wise, 2019), and LAL models also have focused on cognitive elements. However, given that cognition and affect are “inseparable” (Calkins & Bell, 2010, p. 4), more consideration must be given to the role of affect in LAL (e.g., knowledge about how to make the assessment more enjoyable to learners) (Butler et al., 2021).

Last but not least, incorporating learners' voices in LAL discussions can make assessment concepts and technical terms more accessible to all stakeholders—including learners—rather than just to experts. Researchers have also acknowledged the need to enable non-experts to become more familiar with assessment concepts (Taylor, 2021). Moreover, inviting learners into the process of assessment development can be an opportunity to mutually enhance stakeholders' LAL. In our study, the young learners were enthusiastic about the idea of being consulted by teachers when they develop assessment/tests, although none of the learners had any experience making tests. Kerry (Grade 4) said:

I think they [teachers] should consult with the students because adults may have different thoughts than children. For example, adults may have more knowledge than children, and sometimes the questions they design maybe too difficult for us to understand. (Butler et al., 2021, p. 443)

Exploring Assessment with Learners

The young learners' willingness to be involved in developing assessments in Butler et al. (2021) motivated me to further explore the idea of *assessment with learners*. As a researcher primarily working with young learners, I have been following discussions of *research with children*, as opposed to *research on children*, in child development studies over the years with great interest. Child development studies predominantly treat children as objects of studies (e.g., giving

children tasks or measurements in controlled settings) or as subjects of studies (e.g., observing and interpreting children's behaviors and attitudes from adult perspectives); however, such approaches often ignore "the disparities in power and status between adults and children" (O'Kane, 2017, p. 190) and thus have been challenged by ideas that promote children's agency and grant greater autonomy to them as social actors (Christensen & Prout, 2002). Kuchah and Pinter (2021), for example, defined *research with children* as follows:

Rather than acting as data sources, children can be encouraged to contribute to adult initiated research in active ways such as by suggesting alternative questions to explore, by evaluating draft research tools, by collecting data from their peers, and in some cases by taking charge of the whole of the research process as research assistants and researchers in their own right. (Kuchah & Pinter, 2021, p. 13).

Pinter (2014), then, suggested that researchers in child second language acquisition (SLA) should embrace this idea more in their research.

How best to conduct *research with children*, however, is a matter of debate; in particular, both epistemological and methodological questions have been raised about the rather radical position to promote *research by children* (i.e., the last part of Kuchah and Pinter's definition above) (Christensen & James, 2017). Of course, depending on the purpose of the research, *research with children* or *research by children* may not even be a realistic option. In fact, I do not see *research by children* as a feasible approach in my own work. However, Pinter's (2014) statement that "research involving children as social actors benefits all participants, helps to deconstruct knowledge hierarchies and can lead to new, important perspectives and open up uncharted territories within the field of child SLA" (p. 180) is worth considering seriously. My take on this discussion on *research with children* is that it is not the method that brings a new perspective but rather how all the participants, including researchers, engage in critical reflection and mutual learning (Butler, 2021). This point should apply to *any* learner participants, not just to children. Learners, in general, have few voices in language assessment research, including research on LAL, which has been largely developed relying on experts' views (Taylor, 2021). With this background in mind, I propose adopting an *assessment with learners* approach because it can greatly enhance our understanding of LAL.

I conceptualize *assessment with learners* broadly, without referring to any particular method. *Assessment with learners* is any approach where (a) learners are invited to assessment practice not merely as passive receivers of assessment but as social agents and (b) learners' views and experiences can directly or indirectly contribute to the improvement of assessment theories, practices, and consequences. Critically, learners should benefit from this process by having an opportunity to learn. I acknowledge that, as with *research with children*, *assessment with learners* will not always work depending on the type of research, but I believe that embracing "methodological plurality" (Pinter, 2014, p. 177) when feasible can stimulate and advance our understanding of assessment theories and practice.

Currently, I am exploring the idea of *assessment with learners* in my research on language assessment. In a recent project (Lee et al., 2021), for example, my colleagues and I invited middle school ESOL (English-to-Speakers-of-Other-Languages) students in the United States, along with their ESOL teacher, to participate in a graduate-level course for preservice ESOL teachers that was designed to enhance all participants' LAL. Unlike the traditional knowledge-transmission-based courses commonly offered by language assessment specialists, in this project, the preservice teachers could develop LAL in a contextualized manner by directly interacting with the inservice ESOL teacher and her students. Because all the participating stakeholders brought their knowledge and experience to the project, they could all benefit from participating in the project. The ESOL students made comments on the classroom-based assessment that the preservice teachers developed for them. In return, the ESOL students received detailed feedback on their performance on the assessment from the preservice teachers and responded to the feedback. Through such interactions, the ESOL students had an opportunity to reflect on their English performance and gain a sense of accomplishment by contributing to the professional development of preservice teachers (Lee et al., 2021).

In another project that I am working on, I will be asking young learners of English (upper primary school students) in Japan to develop a formative assessment for themselves, together with their English teacher. As preparation for developing the assessment, the participating children have engaged in self-assessment every 2 weeks for over a year and thus have developed a relatively high degree of ability to self-reflect on their language performance. Although this project is in the early stages, I hope that involving learners in the assessment development gives them an opportunity to enhance their awareness and understanding of what, how, and why assessment works (Inbar-Lourie, 2008) while negotiating with the teacher.

Conclusion

It was through Fulcher's (2012) data-driven approach to LAL that I came to be interested in incorporating learners' voices as a way to better contextualize teachers' LAL. My work was also stimulated by the *research with children* discussions taking place among child development researchers. It was the confluence of these approaches that led me, in this essay, to suggest *assessment with learners* in LAL and in language assessment studies in general as a way to bring a new perspective to the discussions of LAL as well as to assist learners in enhancing their own understanding of how assessment works. In making a case for the value of an *assessment with learners* approach, I drew on examples from my current and past research. In Fulcher's apprenticeship content model of LAL (Fulcher, 2012, 2020), he addressed the value of practitioners' experiences when developing professional training courses and course materials on language assessment while placing the content in a larger historical and sociocultural context. *Assessment with learners* is a way that stakeholders, including both learners and teachers, can mutually enhance their LAL by practicing assessment in context. With its emphasis on "by doing" and "learner-centered" elements, it is my hope that *assessment with learners* resonates well with Fulcher's apprenticeship content approach.

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