

Global principles – local practices: Developing language assessment literacy in second language teacher education

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This abstract

- outlines recent thoughts on the importance of Language Assessment Literacy (LAL);
- highlights some of the differences in approaches to teaching LAL within the four clusters providing secondary teacher education in Austria;
- summarizes general reflections on LAL (development) in the context of second language teacher education

1 Introduction

With teachers spending a considerable amount of their time assessing students' achievement, progress, and proficiency (Cheng, Rogers, & Hu, 2004), assessment is an essential field of teacher activity. It is well proven both empirically and experientially that assessment and feedback are crucial factors in student learning (Black & Wiliam, 2010). Professional competence in the field of language testing and assessment, commonly referred to as Language Assessment Literacy (LAL), is therefore an essential requisite for all language teachers (cf. Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Tsagari & Vogt, 2017). However, although language testing and assessment is increasingly being anchored in second language teacher education, pre-service teachers often lack an adequate degree of LAL for their future careers. It is in this context, between the poles of increasing importance and insufficient levels of LAL, that meta-reflection on what constitutes professional competence in the field of language testing and assessment has gained momentum internationally (cf. Berry, Sheehan, & Munro, 2019; Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Vogt, Tsagari, & Spanoudis, 2020; Yan & Fan, 2020). What do language teachers need to know about assessment? What skills do they require? What principles should they apply? While there is still much debate about what precisely constitutes LAL, the focus of attention has recently shifted from the knowledge and skills teachers are thought to require for assessing their students' language competence to levels of LAL and learning trajectories (cf. Berger & Heaney, 2023; Berger, Heaney & Sigott, 2023). At the same

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time, there is a growing understanding that within a possible global canon of LAL components, local language assessment literacies may be more appropriate in specific contexts. The two sessions on LAL at SLTED 2022 (n.d.) explored some of the interfaces between local practices and global principles.

2 Local practices

Representatives of the four clusters of secondary teacher education programmes in Austria were invited to outline the main features of testing and/or assessment courses offered by English departments in both Bachelor's (BEd) and Master's (MEd) degrees (Armin Berger, University of Vienna, for Verbund Nord-Ost; Kathrin Eberharter, University of Innsbruck, for Verbund West; Ulla Fürstenberg, University of Graz, and Guenther Sigott, University of Klagenfurt, for Verbund Süd-Ost; and Thomas Wagner, University of Education Upper Austria, for Verbund Mitte). What courses in all four clusters have in common is a combination of discussions on theoretical input (e.g., test purpose, usefulness, and formats) with practical applications relating to classroom testing/assessment, the standardized school leaving examination, a selection of language skills/systems, and the CEFR.

In the north-east cluster, there is one compulsory course on assessment in the BEd, with once-a-year options in the MEd. A survey adapted from Kremmel & Harding (2020) and described in Berger, Heaney, and Sigott (2023) elicited students' and teachers' perceptions of essential abilities, knowledge, and skills (AKUs) in LAL. This resulted in a difficulty scale of salient features which was used to order and combine the topics and stages of practical work in a revised version of the BEd course.

One unique feature of the west cluster is the combination of a theory-oriented lecture with a language-specific course in small groups. The latter involves analysing, designing, and marking testing tasks for the skills and systems in relation to the principles covered in the lecture. Of necessity teamwork for staff and students alike is writ large. Here, too, ongoing research, for example on raising awareness of LAL as part of lifelong learning for teachers, is used to tweak course contents and methods.

The presentation for the south-east cluster focused on classical test theory and, as the common denominator, formative feedback. In Klagenfurt, for example, students practise formulating feedback in relation to the substance (what needs changing) and scope (context necessary for detection) of an error in a written text and also make use of corpora for written corrective feedback. In the buddy project in Graz, students are paired up with pupils at school; in a series of emails, they introduce themselves, design/respond to a personalized writing task, and provide feedback on the performance/on the corrections; the students then create a portfolio of their work, including a personal reflection.

Finally, in the central cluster there are compulsory courses in both the Bachelor's and Master's programmes. A local survey revealed that students considered LAL to be important but still felt that there was not enough input, especially in relation to finding materials for writing and developing listening materials. They were more confident about testing the four skills in lower secondary than in upper secondary. One conclusion drawn was that in-service support is essential to preserve pre-service gains in LAL.

Indeed, this conclusion is true throughout Austria, particularly in view of the fact that aspects of teacher-led assessment relating to the "how" and the "what" (Berger, Heaney, & Sigott, 2023,

pp. 160–1) have been formalized in all subjects since the mid-1970s in the *Leistungsbeurteilungsverordnung* [Act on the Evaluation of Performance] (BMB 1974–2021). Despite the legal framework calling out for a nationwide “community of practice” (Taylor, 2013, p. 407), courses addressing LAL for pre-service teachers were not introduced, for secondary education at least, until the mid-2000s. One result appears to be the existence of “communities of malpractice” in which novice teachers who have attended pre-service courses on LAL find it hard to implement what they have learned because not all of their colleagues have had formal input relating to LAL (unpublished survey on LAL in practising teachers of English in Austria). The endeavours of all English teacher education programmes in Austria to strengthen students’ AKUs in LAL to counteract this issue should not only be seen locally, however, but also understood in a global context.

3 Global principles

In the second session, a distinguished panel of international experts explored present and future developments in LAL, the changing knowledge and skills base, the role of context and experience in LAL development, and the relationship between LAL and language pedagogy. First, Dina Tzagari (Oslo Metropolitan University) set the scene by providing a comprehensive overview of existing thinking about LAL. After outlining the historical development of the field of language testing and assessment, she discussed specific challenges faced by teachers, factors impacting teacher assessment, and current research into teacher assessment. The presentation concluded with important lessons learned from conceptualizing LAL over the past two decades, including the needs to localise LAL practices, to better understand progression in LAL, to foster interdisciplinary approaches, and to enhance teachers’ own agency in LAL development.

In the second presentation, Karin Vogt (University of Education Heidelberg) elaborated on the need for professional development, introducing a range of initiatives to promote LAL among teachers, notably TALE (<https://taleproject.eu/>) and ENRICH (<http://enrichproject.eu/>), two projects which, amongst others, generated useful resources and materials for language teacher education. Criteria for LAL development were suggested, with particular emphasis on the role that context, experience, and self-reflection (should) play in LAL development. Vogt ended her presentation with a call for greater attention, both theoretically and practically, to the specific needs of pre-service teachers.

Finally, Henrik Bøhn (University of South-Eastern Norway) examined different uses of the term ‘language pedagogy’ in the LAL literature. While it is often considered to be a key component of teachers’ LAL, there is no consistent interpretation of what it actually means in this context. After outlining some conceptualisations of pedagogy and assessment, Bøhn discussed the extent to which they share a common theoretical basis. A critical look was taken at the notion of formative assessment as one of the possible assessment-pedagogy interfaces. The presentation concluded with practical implications, particularly in terms of decisions teachers make about their instruction, scaffolding, and feedback.

Discussant Benjamin Kremmel (University of Innsbruck) raised a number of questions which may open up avenues for further research. To begin with, Kremmel called for greater methodological diversity in researching teachers’ needs, along with increased efforts to close the theory-practice divide when it comes to educating (future) teachers. Secondly, he raised questions about the extent to which teachers’ knowledge and skills base is actually changing.

While basic principles of language assessment may provide a relatively stable foundation, it is particularly the role of technology which will shape assessment practices in the future. Thirdly, in relation to the role of context and experience in LAL development, Kremmel pointed to insights from research into teacher cognition and beliefs. If LAL (development) is based on “global” principles, further work is needed to establish what they are and how “local” they can and should be. Finally, as regards the relationship between assessment and pedagogy, Kremmel reminded the research community to investigate the real-world implications of terminological distinctions.

4 Conclusion

In view of an ever-changing educational landscape with dynamic constructs, differential needs, multilingual contexts, and technological advances, there is a great need for professional LAL programmes. Second language teacher education ideally prepares (future) teachers to be able to cultivate successful communities of practice and, where necessary, advise communities of malpractice. In particular, teacher education should help students to develop the skills they need to navigate between common standards in language assessment and specific contextual factors that influence the implementation of language assessment in the classroom, a goal that requires a balance between global principles and local practices. Future research will have to show how sustainable the impact of LAL programmes is and how such programmes influence communities of (mal)practice.

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