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Language Assessment Literacy and the Professional Development of Pre-Service Foreign Language Teachers

Frank Giraldo



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Introduction

The professional development of pre-service language teachers is of vital importance, given that they are expected to provide quality language teaching at the institutions where they will work. Language teacher education programs, then, are expected to provide scenarios for pre-service teachers in which they will learn about the language teaching profession and will be kept up to date with the latest developments in language education.

Inevitably, in-service teachers are faced with the task of conducting language assessment, using already-made materials or designing their own, and evaluating the consequences of their assessment process. Thus, pre-service teachers should be trained in assessing language professionally and, hopefully, doing so based on current understandings and practices of the field (Djoub, 2017; Herrera & Macías, 2015; Inbar-Lourie, 2017; López & Bernal, 2009).

Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) is, indeed, a recent topic of discussion in the area of language testing related to the professional development of teachers. The discussions have highlighted the need for sound approaches that can help teachers to raise their LAL levels. Educators themselves have reported they need a wide range of tools and support in matters of language

assessment. Consequently, the field is a fertile ground for the implementation and proliferation of initiatives that can help teachers improve their LAL.

In the case of pre-service language teacher training, there is currently a gap regarding LAL: We know very little about how LAL is being promoted for them. There are very few studies that report either the implementation of LAL programs for pre-service teachers or the impact of such programs on their professional development (Giraldo & Murcia, 2019). Against this background, I present this book aimed to contribute to the LAL discussion by reporting my experience in planning, implementing, and evaluating a language assessment course for pre-service teachers at a language teacher education program in Colombia. Specifically, I report the development of the first cohort of the course (2-2017) and some insights from subsequent cohorts (1-2018 and 2-2018). The name of the program is Classroom Language Assessment Course (CLAC).

As a framework, I used action research within a qualitative paradigm. The diagnostic stage of the study allowed me to collect data from 30 pre-service teachers and eight teacher educators. With this information, a colleague and I planned and designed the CLAC. The action-evaluation stage of the research cycle involved teaching and evaluating LAL in the CLAC. Once all the data were available and the first cohort of the CLAC ended, I decided to write this book, which is the product of my teaching, my research, and a continuous reflection on how the pre-service teachers in the CLAC learned about language assessment.

This book is divided into ten chapters, each telling one part of the history of the CLAC, along with general recommendations and practical ideas to devise LAL programs elsewhere. The primary audience of this book are foreign language teacher educators, particularly in the Colombian context. However, much of the content in the book can be useful for language teachers who want to improve their LAL. Although I focus on English language assessment as the foreign language in the CLAC, as the title of

this book suggests, the information contained herein may be relevant to those involved in teaching foreign language assessment in general. Below is a summary of each chapter.

Chapter 1, *Language Assessment Literacy for Language Teachers*, provides a comprehensive research- and discussion-based definition of what LAL means for language teachers and the implications it has for these stakeholders.

Chapter 2, *Professional Development through Language Assessment Literacy*, overviews the meaning of professional development in language teaching, reviews studies that connect professional development and LAL, and provides an outline of the professional development approach for the CLAC.

Chapter 3, *Problematizing Language Assessment in Colombia*, provides a necessary look at the language learning policy and related assessment policies that may influence professional development through LAL. This chapter also helps to further contextualize the CLAC, by putting it in the social educational arena where it operates.

Chapter 4, *Designing a Language Assessment Course for Pre-Service Teachers*, explains how I planned and designed the CLAC, from an exercise in the needs analysis to the process of making decisions for content and teaching approaches for the course.

Chapter 5, *Creating Awareness of Language Assessment*, foregrounds the teaching approach I use in the CLAC. This chapter offers and explains various strategies that can be used to help pre-service teachers reflect on what they know and do not know about the field of language testing and assessment.

Chapter 6, *An Approach to Teaching the Design of Language Assessments*, provides details on how I go about training pre-service teachers in the creation of items and tasks for language assessments. This chapter also shows the gains and challenges in doing so.

Chapter 7, *Setting Design in Motion*, naturally follows chapter 6 because it describes how the pre-service teachers in the CLAC actually design instruments and what happens when they do so, especially regarding their professional development.

Chapter 8, *Assessing LAL in a Language Assessment Course - Part I*, explains how I, as a teacher educator, assess the development of LAL of the pre-service teachers I guide. The chapter emphasizes the need for complementary approaches to assessment where formative and summative assessment coexist.

Chapter 9, *Assessing LAL in a Language Assessment Course - Part II*, provides the learner and learning-based focus of assessment of LAL. This chapter shows how I help my students to implement self- and peer-assessment for the same purpose: To analyze and improve their LAL.

Finally, Chapter 10, *Evaluating a Language Assessment Course*, details a multi-componential strategy to ascertain to what extent the CLAC has been successful and what areas for improvement remain.

The appendix includes a *Quick Guide for Busy Teacher Educators*. The purpose of this guide is to synthesize major ideas, in the form of principles, for planning, implementing, and evaluating language assessment courses for pre-service teachers.

As of today, LAL is indeed a puzzle in which models, constructs, and stakeholders are the pieces that make it complete. In this book, I seek to add one more element, with the overarching goal of sharing findings from an experience that can be useful to other teacher educators. In turn, these educators can use my insight to problematize LAL in their contexts and, so I hope, provide high quality LAL education for pre-service teachers, a much-overlooked stakeholder group in the puzzle.

CHAPTER 1

Language Assessment Literacy for Language Teachers

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I set out to provide a comprehensive review of Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) as it specifically relates to language teachers. For this purpose, I review the construct the way it has been discussed by scholars and researchers and operationalized through frameworks, components, and models. Then, I develop a proposal to expand LAL for language teachers, based on prominent frameworks concerning classroom-based assessment (CBA). The chapter starts with a general review of assessment literacy, the generic name in education, and then details the development and issues pertaining to LAL.

1.2 Assessment Literacy in Education

The term assessment literacy (AL) can be traced back to Stiggins (1995; 1999), who defined it as the knowledge and use of assessment methods for teachers to gather reliable information about students' learning outcomes. Stiggins also stated that AL includes the ability to report assessment-based data to a variety of stakeholders, including teachers, students, and school administrators. In 1990, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Council on Measurement in Education, and the National Education Association (1990) published seven principles for assessment in general education. These principles, reproduced in Table 1.1, lay out the key knowledge, skills, and principles that teachers utilize to do sound, professional assessment.

Table 1.1 Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students (AERA et al, 1990)

1. Teachers should be skilled in choosing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions.
2. Teachers should be skilled in developing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions.
3. Teachers should be skilled in administering, scoring, and interpreting the results of both externally produced and teacher-produced assessment methods.
4. Teachers should be skilled in using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and improving schools.
5. Teachers should be skilled in developing valid pupil grading procedures which use pupil assessment.
6. Teachers should be skilled in communicating assessment results to students, parents, other lay audiences, and other educators.
7. Teachers should be skilled in recognizing unethical, illegal, and otherwise inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information.

In order for teachers to put such standards into practical use, they need to possess and combine knowledge of assessments and their design, skills to produce them (as clearly stated in standards 2 and 5) and be guided by principles to evaluate the use and impact of assessments, as standard 7 professes. The standards imply a vision of teachers as rounded professionals for the assessment enterprise. In their literature review, Xu and Brown (2016) complement and expand the standards presented above. For them, assessment literacy for teachers should include the following foundational domains:

- *Disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK):* Knowledge of the specific subject to be taught (in the case of language assessment, *language ability*). On the other side, PCK involves the knowledge and use of appropriate instructional approaches for teaching core content.
- *Knowledge of assessment purposes, content, and methods:* Teachers need to know the reasons why they assess and how these reasons can be met by a variety of instruments targeting specific student knowledge or skills.
- *Knowledge of grading:* Teachers should know what the grading system where they work implies and what procedures and instruments are used to collect and evaluate grades.
- *Knowledge of feedback:* Teachers should combine knowledge and skills related to feedback, so they can see their effects and drawbacks and, in general, how they affect student learning.
- *Knowledge of assessment interpretation and communication:* The data generated by assessments, grades included, need to be carefully interpreted so as to reach substantiated conclusions about student learning; similarly, communicating such data

to different groups, in a transparent form, is part of teachers' assessment literacy.

- *Knowledge of student involvement in assessment*: This refers to teachers' use of peer- and self-assessment to engage students in the assessment process, by making it clear and inviting student participation.
- *Knowledge of assessment ethics*: Teachers' ethical assessment involves the appropriate use of assessment data and professional attitude towards students, which involves non-discriminatory practices, for example.

Xu and Brown explain that these dimensions compose the fundamental knowledge base for teachers to do assessment, implying that this base represents an operational rather than a reflective level. For heightened awareness of assessment, according to the authors, teachers need to combine this knowledge with their beliefs, contexts of teaching, and their own understanding of assessment. Together, these aspects may lead teachers to become teacher assessors, who are knowledgeable professionals on doing sound assessment.

As can be evidenced in the general frameworks above, doing good assessment is a serious matter; doing it poorly may lead to negative consequences for students. Teachers with high levels of assessment literacy generally exercise and effect positive change on their students and institutions at large. It might be a disservice to students and education not to provide spaces for teachers to equip themselves with the AL they need to conduct reliable assessment. In the next section, I set out to explore what LAL means and, in turn, advance the argument that education in LAL needs to start with pre-service teachers so the lack of training in this area is discouraged.

Following, I explore how LAL has come into shape, critically appraise existing LAL models, and highlight developing issues in this construct. In the last part of this section, I propose a definition of LAL that I use as the ground to connect the different chapters of this book as they explore LAL for pre-service language teachers, a key stakeholder group in the LAL puzzle.

1.3 LAL in the Literature

1.3.1 Language Testing Courses

The literature in LAL has focused on how language testing and assessment are taught through different means. A core strategy to educate stakeholders in LAL, particularly teachers, is the use of courses and textbooks. In Brown and Bailey (2008), following a study they conducted years earlier (Bailey & Brown, 1996), the researchers collected information from language testing courses, including instructors, students, and contents. Brown and Bailey (2008) report the inclusion of hands-on experiences such as test critique, test analysis, and item writing, among others. In terms of contents, the courses included general topics such as measuring the different skills (e.g., listening and speaking), classroom testing practices, testing in relation to curriculum, among others. For item analysis, the researchers report item content analysis, quality analysis, discrimination, and others. For descriptive statistics, the courses included calculations such as mean, standard deviation, and score reports from tests like the TOEFL. In terms of test consistency, the courses explored topics related to measuring reliability indices. Validity-related topics such as construct validity and content validity are also reported. Finally, the report states that these courses were designed for graduate and undergraduate students, some of whom took their language testing course as a requirement and some as an optional subject in their curriculum.

In total, the questionnaire Brown and Bailey (2008) used had 96 items covering knowledge, skills, and, more recently, principles such as consequential

validity, all of which represent education in language assessment. Of course, some of these items are about the participants rather than contents about language testing. In Jin's (2010) study with instructors of language assessment in tertiary education in China, the items for language testing topics are 109 and include theoretical and technical matters. In recent surveys with language testing instructors (Jeong, 2013; Jin, 2010), and pre-service teachers (Lam, 2015), there is still a combination between theory and practice. However, as Jeong explains, courses are taught differently depending on instructors' background—specialists in language testing incline towards a more theoretical side, while non-specialists focus on practical matters for classroom-based assessment. In Jin (2010), for example, little attention is given to the development of language assessments for classroom use. Lam (2015), on the other hand, reports that the language testing courses in his study do not include principles such as ethics and fairness but do include knowledge of theories related to language assessment (e.g., assessment for learning) and practical skills for test construction.

In general, the studies above have some clear trends. Topics such as validity and reliability are common and core in language testing courses. Frameworks such as norm-referenced and criterion-referenced, summative and formative, and traditional and alternative assessment also rank high in these surveys. Measurement topics, including statistical calculations, are included. Contrarily, the general trend seems to be that topics related to the social dimension of language testing are not strongly present, despite the call scholars make to highlight the importance of studying the impact of language testing within a social milieu (McNamara & Roever, 2006).

1.3.2 Language Testing Textbooks

In a seminal paper on language testing textbooks, Davies (2008) reviews the foci that these sources of LAL provide. Davies highlights that the field of language testing has primarily focused on the combination between knowledge and skills. As Davies explains, language testing requires knowledge of

measurement and language description (the construct of language assessment), language learning and teaching, and language testing movements such as communicative language testing. In terms of skills, language testing involves item writing, test analysis, and statistics for score examination and reports. However, the movement Davies highlights in textbooks for language testing reflects the increasing need to account for principles, as I signaled earlier in my review of language testing courses. As Davies (p. 328) explains, “[p]rinciples concern the proper use of language tests, their fairness and impact, including questions of ethics and professionalism.” Principles for language testing, as Davies argues, take prominence as language testers need to respond for the uses that are made of language assessments and their impact on people and institutions.

Thus, I believe it is sensible to conclude that LAL is composed of the three broad components that Davies proposes: *knowledge*, *skills*, and *principles* for doing language assessment; the components have in fact been echoed by other authors (Giraldo, 2018a; Inbar-Lourie, 2008). The scope of these components, however, varies according to stakeholders engaged in language assessment. In this book, I will use these three components as overarching for exploring the LAL for pre-service language teachers. To discuss the scope of LAL as shown in the literature, I now move on to a review of LAL models that, to date, have been prominent in the discussion of this construct as it relates to different stakeholders, with specific attention to LAL for language teachers.

1.3.3 Models and Components of LAL

Brindley (2001) was perhaps the first author to propose a model for developing language teachers’ LAL. The author argues that a professional development program in language assessment should at least contain the following components, all of which can be adapted for the particularities of a given context.

1. *The social context of assessment* is a core unit that should include reference to the impact of language assessment at large, ethics, and the purposes of language assessment.
2. *Defining and describing proficiency* is the second core unit in Brindley's proposal. It deals with the long-standing question of what language ability is for assessment purposes. Language ability models in this unit are discussed so that they can be aligned with test construction and evaluation. Validity and reliability are dealt with in this module.
3. *Constructing and evaluating language tests* is an optional unit that deals with test construction and analysis. Statistical techniques for test analysis are proposed.
4. *Assessment in the language curriculum* integrates language learning objectives and assessment in a criterion-referenced system. The module includes exploration and construction of assessments for this overall system.
5. *Putting assessment into practice* is an optional module that helps teachers develop follow-up projects in which they use what they learn in the core and optional units of Brindley's proposal.

Inbar-Lourie (2008) used Brindley's units for LAL and critically expanded their scope. She locates her proposal within three key questions that need to be asked in language assessment: the why (purposes), the what (constructs), and the how (methods). Inbar-Lourie agrees that teachers need to know about purposes for language assessment, but this dimension should be emphasized, especially because of the impact of language across society. In terms of the what (e.g., language proficiency), Inbar-Lourie argues that the construct needs to include issues such as bilingual learners and their needs, the role of the L1 in foreign language assessment, how language is really used in society, and others. As for the how, Inbar-Lourie states that

stakeholders (language teachers included) should engage themselves in examining large-scale and classroom-based language assessments, rather than focus on one type, as Brindley (2001) suggests.

All in all, Inbar-Lourie (2008) and other works she has written (Inbar-Lourie, 2012; 2013a; 2017) highlight that LAL is a multi-layered and rather complex construct. For example, Inbar-Lourie (2013b) outlines the ingredients of LAL as they relate to language teachers. The ingredients attest to her idea of LAL having multiple levels, which is why, as I highlight elsewhere, the depth and scope of LAL are still in development (see *Ongoing Issues* later in this chapter). The *ingredients*, with minor stylistic modifications (e.g., I changed capital letters where necessary), are shown in Table 1.2 below.

Table 1.2 Ingredients of LAL for language teachers (Inbar-Lourie, 2013b)

1. Understanding of the social role of assessment and the responsibility of the language tester. Understanding of the political [and] social forces involved, test power and consequences. (p. 27)
2. Knowledge on how to write, administer and analyze tests; report test results and ensure test quality. (p. 32)
3. Understanding of large-scale test data. (p. 33)
4. Proficiency in language classroom assessment. (p. 36)
5. Mastering language acquisition and learning theories and relating to them in the assessment process. (p. 39)
6. Matching assessment with language teaching approaches. Knowledge about current language teaching approaches and pedagogies. (p. 41)
7. Awareness of the dilemmas that underlie assessment: formative vs. summative; internal external; validity and reliability issues, particularly with reference to authentic language use. (p. 45)
8. LAL is individualized, the product of the knowledge, experience, perceptions, and beliefs that language teachers bring to the teaching and assessment process (based on Scarino, 2013). (p. 46)

As the domains Xu and Brown (2016) explain, the ingredients in the table above reflect the prominence of LAL for language teachers. This construct integrates the social dimension (e.g., impact of language testing), the technical dimension (e.g., item writing), the theoretical dimension (e.g., SLA theories), the methodological dimension (e.g., approaches to language teaching), and the personal dimension (e.g., teachers' contexts). The ingredients Inbar-Lourie proposed, then, give the idea that language teachers need to have a wide repertoire of knowledge, skills and principles. It appears that, to some extent, language assessment is a point of convergence in language education: Language assessment affects and is affected by the aforementioned dimensions.

Another highly cited model of LAL for language teachers is the one proposed by Fulcher (2012). Unlike previous models, Fulcher's is grounded on empirical data and adds to the dimensions of LAL I have covered so far in this review. Through a questionnaire, Fulcher asked 278 teachers from different countries what their skills and needs in language testing were, as well as what they considered important for a course in language assessment. The questionnaire also asked participants about what they would like to get from a language assessment textbook for teachers. Fulcher (p. 121) synthesizes the findings from this study into four major themes: *Test design and development*, *large-scale standardized testing*, *classroom testing and washback*, and *validity and reliability*. Based on closed- and open-ended responses, Fulcher (p. 125) then proposes what he calls an expanded definition of LAL for the language classroom, as follows:

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.

What Fulcher adds to the construct of LAL, apart from the fact that this definition is based on empirical data, is the explicit inclusion of history, society, politics, and even philosophy for language assessment. Thus, LAL has become a construct that goes beyond theory and practice of doing language assessment; it includes now far-reaching issues in language education. While there is some complaint that Fulcher does not explicitly use the word language in his definition of LAL (see Stabler-Havener, 2018), I believe he probably took for granted that he referred to *language* anyways. In fact, Fulcher includes a figure (see Figure 1.1 below) where he includes the word language and outlines how the components of LAL interact with one another.

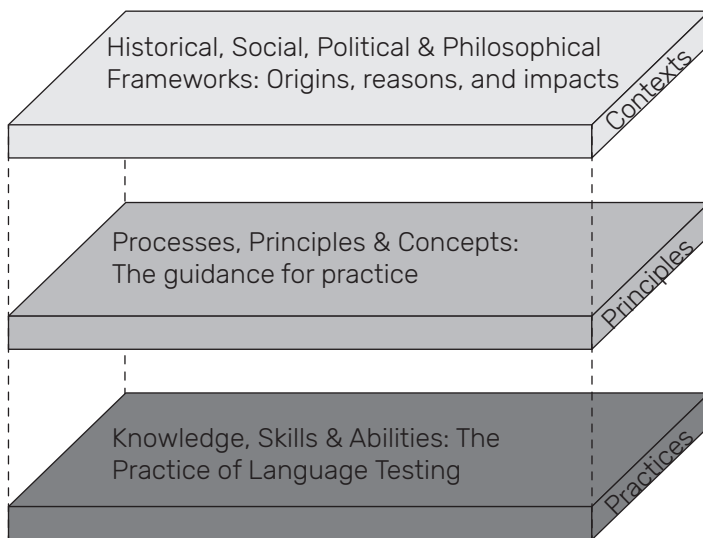


Figure 1.1 Language Assessment Literacy: An expanded definition (Fulcher, 2012, p. 126)