

## Assessment Literacy for Language Educators

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Assessment literacy is an understanding of the measurement basics related directly to classroom learning; language assessment literacy extends this definition to issues specific to language classrooms (Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Stiggins, 2001; Taylor, 2009). While most agree that teachers need to assess students' progress (National Education Association, 1983; Schafer, 1993), many teachers have a limited background in assessment fundamentals (Popham, 2009).

Strong, properly implemented assessment provides teachers, students, and other stakeholders with important information about student performance and the extent to which learning objectives have been attained (Stoynoff & Chapelle, 2005). Assessment can and should integrate with teaching, forming a relationship in which the two inform and improve each other. However, this relationship cannot develop when language teachers do not have adequate training in assessment.

In 2006, CAL conducted an online survey ( $N=1,600$ ) of foreign language teachers, administrators, and teacher trainers in preK–university settings to investigate how and what kinds of assessments were being used and what other resources were needed. The results showed that these educators wanted more information on how to select and develop tests and interpret and report test scores (Malone, Swender, Montee, Gallagher, & Wicher, 2008). Furthermore, survey results revealed that standardized language tests developed for specific contexts, audiences, and purposes were being used in ways inconsistent with their stated purposes. Overall, the survey results indicated a need for improved assessment literacy.

When instructors understand assessment, they are able to create a learning culture in their classrooms (Shepard, 2000) that allows for continuous improvements to teaching and learning based on feedback from assessments. Moreover, assessment, when used appropriately, can have significant positive washback (Hughes, 2003)—that is, positive effects on classroom practices—

with the potential to improve teaching, learning, and the overall quality of the language education experience.

Professional development is often limited by resources such as time and distance. New technological resources have made it easier for language educators to gain important training in assessment literacy without taking time away from their primary responsibilities (Malone, 2008). This digest describes some of these resources. It discusses key concepts of assessment, presents select resources that promote assessment literacy among language educators, and explores how these tools can be useful for all stakeholders.

### Key Concepts in Assessment

Language teachers want to know why and how they should assess their students and what kinds of assessment instruments to use. These questions speak directly to the four key concepts of assessment: validity, reliability, practicality, and impact.

#### Validity

A test's fidelity in measuring what it purports to measure is called *validity*. Some testers believe that validity is the primary concern in any testing situation. Traditional testing focuses on multiple aspects of validity, such as construct validity, content validity, and face validity. Messick (1989) portrays validity as multifaceted and encompassing all aspects of assessment. However, the most important aspect of validity is the appropriateness of a particular test for the audience and context in which it is being used. In selecting a test, educators should consider what information they want to gain from administering the test and how that information will be used.

#### Reliability

One factor of reliability is a test's consistency in producing results. If a test is reliable, a student taking it at two different times should receive the same result, assuming all else remains equal. Similarly, a test should yield the same results regardless of who scores the test (human

or machine). Finally, in tests with multiple versions, all versions should have comparable content and yield the same results. It is important to understand, however, that a test may be reliable without being valid. For example, a highly reliable test developed for university students will not be valid if administered to fourth-grade students.

### **Practicality and Impact**

The practicality, or feasibility, of a test will often be the primary concern when making testing decisions. Important factors include the availability of time, personnel, equipment, space, and funding to implement a test. Impact requires thinking about and planning for the effects a test may have on stakeholders. Knowledge of assessment allows educators to make informed decisions about the types of assessments that are appropriate for their classrooms and programs.

### **Online Resources**

In recent years, organizations and individuals working in the field of language testing have developed new resources for promoting assessment literacy. The following resources are available online for free.

#### **The Foreign Language Assessment Directory**

Developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), the Foreign Language Assessment Directory (FLAD) is a searchable directory of nearly 200 tests in over 90 languages. Educators can search by name of test, grade, proficiency level, language, skills targeted by the test, and intended test use. Entries also include background on the test's development and the publisher's or developer's contact information for further inquiries. (<http://www.cal.org/calwebdb/flad/>)

#### **Understanding Assessment: A Guide for Foreign Language Educators**

CAL created this tutorial as a companion resource to the FLAD. It introduces key concepts in language testing to help educators select tests and use results appropriately. Topics include practical considerations when selecting a test, reliability and validity, the use of results, and the impact of testing in the classroom. A list of resources and a glossary of assessment terms are included. (<http://www.cal.org/flad/tutorial/>)

#### **The Virtual Assessment Center**

The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition developed the Virtual Assessment Center (VAC) to help language educators plan for and implement assessment in their classrooms. The VAC offers a series of learning modules that provide teachers with background infor-

mation, step-by-step guidance, and practical resources on developing proficiency-based second language assessments. (<http://www.carla.umn.edu/assessment/vac/>)

#### **Language Testing Resources Website**

This website, developed and maintained by Dr. Glenn Fulcher, provides a variety of print, electronic, and video resources on general language testing. The site includes current popular press reports on language testing outcomes and issues worldwide. (<http://languagetesting.info/>)

### **Conclusion**

Language assessment and language teaching go hand in hand. The best teaching involves high-quality assessment practices, and great assessment provides positive washback to the teaching and learning process. Educators need a strong background in assessment literacy in order to implement effective assessment practices in their classrooms and programs. New online resources make it easier to gain this knowledge, leading to an improved testing, teaching, and learning experience.

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