

Teachers' Assessment Literacy in a North American IEP

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Abstract

In 2013, *Language Testing* published a special issue on the subject of assessment literacy, reflecting a growing awareness in the field that individuals other than language testers need assessment literacy. Assessment literacy is the knowledge of and ability to implement assessments possessed by stakeholders, including teachers and administrators (Malone, 2013). Each stakeholder needs to know different things to have assessment literacy. Teachers are a hub connecting students, administrators, and assessments. Their assessment literacy needs are particularly important. Previous research has focused on assessment class content and what teachers themselves perceive as being necessary information (e.g., Brown & Bailey, 2008). The present study followed these studies by exploring how teachers achieve assessment literacy. It also looked at what teachers believed to be their strengths and weaknesses in assessment. Results indicated that both education and on-the-job training play a role in supporting teachers. The implications of this are important for both teacher training programs and Intensive English Programs.

Keywords: assessment literacy, English as a second language, teachers

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In 2013, Language Testing published a special issue on assessment literacy. The articles contained therein came from researchers in the United States, Australia, South Korea, and the United Kingdom. Since then, additional articles have been published by researchers from other countries. The topic of assessment literacy has been growing as language teachers, teacher trainers, and language testing specialists continue to grapple with questions regarding what assessment literacy is and how much of it and what types of it different stakeholders require. This project was conducted to continue to explore the question of how in-service language teachers continue to develop their assessment literacy. The literature review first gives a definition of assessment literacy. It then presents an overview of assessment literacy studies.

Assessment Literacy

Definitions of assessment literacy tend to be general and do not contain specific information about who the different stakeholders are or details of what each stakeholder should know. For example, Malone (2013) offers this definition of assessment literacy: “stakeholders’ (often with a focus on instructors’) familiarity with measurement practices and the application of this knowledge to classroom practices in general and specifically to issues of assessing language” (p. 3). The definition itself does not specify what those measurement practices are. The definition does make clear, however, that the focus is on teachers as stakeholders. A chapter in Kunnan’s edited series of language testing on test development literacy does not offer any definition (Grabowski & Dakin, 2014). The content headings in the chapter, however, offer insights into what the authors consider the important elements of assessment literacy. These headings include the conventional uses of tests, test development (with subheadings covering

construct definition, defining the TLU domain, test specifications, task types, item and task writing), test administration, scoring (with subheadings covering scoring methods, rater and rater training, reporting test results), test data analysis (with subheadings covering descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, item analysis, higher-level analyses/IRT). This chapter was written with test developers in mind. Different stakeholders do require different assessment literacies. For example, test writers need knowledge of theory, principles, and concepts, as well as technical skills, that is higher than that required for language teachers, which in turn is higher than that required for university administrators (Taylor, 2013).

When considering what specifically should be included as part of assessment literacy, teacher standards can provide a starting point. Recently developed standards from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation include standards for teachers related to being able to create, select and use formative and summative assessments (Kahl, Hofman, & Brynat, 2013). These standards also include assessment literacy standards for administrators, which include a different range of purposes than those for teachers.

In second language assessment literacy research, studies have used quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods designs. Surveys and questions are a common method of data collection (Brown & Bailey, 1996; 2008; Jeong, 2013; McGee & Colby, 2014; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). These are often followed by interviews with a subset of the survey participants (Brown & Bailey, 2008; Jeong, 2013; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). Qualitative methods typically include not only interviews, but also artifacts such as teacher evaluations and teacher-developed assessments (Lam, 2015). Other qualitative designs may focus on a single type of data, for example, transcripts from a parliamentary session (Pill & Harding, 2013).

Data collection instruments are surveys, questionnaires, and interview protocols. Questionnaires have typically been based on pre-existing questionnaires, though they have been modified to meet the study purpose. McGee and Colby (2014) adapted a survey instrument developed by Mertler & Campbell that was developed prior to 2005. This instrument was intended for general assessment literacy and was designed with k-12 content teachers as the target audience. It consisted of five teaching scenarios and seven related multiple choice questions. It probed teachers' ability to identify, understand, and apply terms and concepts such as diagnostic assessment, analytic rubric, criterion-referenced test. Vogt and Tsari's (2014) questionnaire was adapted from an earlier one developed by Hasselgreen, Carlsen, and Helness prior to 2004 to survey assessment literacy in European teachers. Vogt and Tsari (2014) used to questionnaire with European language teachers. It targeted knowledge related to classroom testing, the purpose of testing, and theoretical concepts of testing.

Results of these studies have all shown that teachers feel that their assessment literacy could be improved (Brown & Bailey, 1996; 2007; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). Although more than half of the teachers surveyed (68%) reported having received some pre-service training in assessment, most reported that they desired greater training in testing productive and receptive skills, improving the reliability and validity of their own tests, and using statistics to analyze tests (Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). Brown and Bailey (2008) found that between 1996 and 2007, survey participants showed an increase in knowledge in only one area. This was the use of the Kappa statistic, which increased from .263 in 1996 to .883 in 2007.

Despite the interest in developing greater assessment literacy, teachers face certain challenges related to finding knowledge teachers in doing so. Teacher trainers teaching assessment courses do not always feel comfortable teaching the concepts generally covered in

such classes (Jeong, 2013). Non-language testers are aware that their knowledge might be lacking.

Research Questions

Assessment literacy is an important part of language teachers' education, the need for which continues as teachers shift from pre-service to in-service status. Despite its importance, there are gaps in teachers' knowledge that are the result of gaps in their training. Teachers recognize that these gaps exist. To date, there are no studies that focus on how teachers identify and attempt to fill these gaps. The present study seeks to provide this information through the following research questions:

1. In what ways do ESL teachers in a North American Intensive English Program (IEP) develop their understanding of language assessments?
2. Which aspects of language assessment are ESL teachers most and least aware of?
3. How and in what manner does this awareness change through training and assessment experience?

Methods

Participants

Participants were five teachers in a North American Intensive English Program.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to collect data for this study. Teachers completed an initial reflection journal that asked about background and training in language assessment. Participants were then asked to complete reflection journals consisting of three open-ended questions after assessment meetings, test proctoring and administration, test scoring, and any other assessment related activities. Participants were given non-directive instruction in completing the journals.

The final instrument was a semi-structured interview with teachers. Interview questions were written based on those asked on similar studies.

Procedure

The researcher met with each teacher individually, explained the study, and obtained IRB approval. Teachers were then instructed to complete and upload the background journal and reflection journals to an individual folder on Google Drive. Only the teacher and the researcher had access to each teacher's folder. The study began in the middle of the fall 2015 semester. At the end of the semester, the researcher conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the teachers. The transcripts were transcribed by the researcher.

Analysis

Analysis followed an iterative process appropriate to quantitative data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). First, themes in the reflection journals and interviews were noted. These themes were cross-referenced against the background journals. For example, if validity appeared as a theme in reflection journals and the interviews, participants' responses to the question asking about familiarity with the concept of validity on the background journal were examined.

Results

Results are presented in connection to the research question they answered.

The first research question asked in which ways teachers in an IEP developed their assessment literacy. This question was answered through teachers' responses to interview questions about what they saw as the gaps in their knowledge and how they filled those gaps. The two most common ways of learning about assessments were through assessment courses and through on-the-job training. Two of the three teachers had taken a course specific to assessment in their MA TESOL training, and most of the teachers had previous IEP teaching experience. For

assessment training gained through on-the-job training, these consisted of assessment-specific workshops and work with level and area coordinators as well as with assessment team members.

The second research question was related to the aspects of language assessment that the teachers were most and least aware of. This question was answered by examining background questionnaires and in interview questions designed to probe these gaps. Two trends emerged. First, teachers' responses and comments revealed their prior experiences as students and as teachers. Second, most teachers reported a gap in their understanding of a concept and their level of comfort in applying it. Experiences as students influenced what teachers became aware of. Two teachers reported that a lesson they had learned was that a teacher should test what is taught, not the other way around. Their experiences as students had taught them otherwise. Other teachers reported that the concept of analyzing item performance on tests was a new concept they had learned in both the assessment course and in their job meetings. Teachers noted gaps in conceptual knowledge and practical application of that knowledge. In the background questionnaires, most teachers believed that their understanding of validity was relative strong, though they were less comfortable applying it. One teacher made a note about wanting to seek expert advice in applying it. Other teachers noted that they were comfortable with other concepts and felt that they understood them, but still felt uncomfortable applying them. Included in this were item statistics, reliability, and developing speaking and writing rubrics.

The third question asked how teachers' awareness of assessment-related concepts changed through training and experience. Most teachers had had prior teaching experience at IEPs, and several had reported taking an assessment-related course in their MA program. Through the course of this study, there did not appear to be much new information related to assessment that the teachers learned. Most of their learning had taken place prior to the semester

in which this study took place. The on-the-job training that they received during the course of the semester appeared to help them refine skills and knowledge that they already possessed.

Relevance to PIE and L2 Teaching

The results of this study provide useful information that is relevant to second language teaching and to the NAU PIE. It is clear that developing assessment literacy require more than classroom education. Teachers who felt most comfortable with assessments benefited from a two-step process of education and on-the-job training. The most beneficial form of education was a specific ESL/EFL assessment course at the MA level. The most beneficial form of on-the-job training was a system of workshops, and close work with level and skill coordinators. Teachers also appeared to benefit from working with members of an assessment team. In fact, the teachers who appeared to struggle most with creating assessments were not working with an assessment team member. The PIE at NAU provides on-the-job training and support to its teachers. These results suggest that this system provides strong assessment-related support to teachers, particularly those who have previously taken assessment courses at the MA level.

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