

LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT LITERACY: ESP TEACHERS IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: This study aims to identify the importance of assessment literacy and raise the awareness of LAL in the field of teaching English as a Second Language. The following study provides information on recent education reforms which obliges teachers to develop professionally. Also, operationalization of assessment terms and assessment literacy were defined. By analyzing the recent situation alternatives for the development of evaluation and assessment in ESP teaching were provided in the form of recommendations.

Keywords literacy, language assessment, literacy, ESP teachers.

Introduction

The decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on “Measures for Further Improvement of Foreign Languages Learning System” signed in 2012; Uzbekistan has started implementing education reforms. The reforms should cover improving the quality of teaching and learning foreign

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languages at all the levels of education. Under the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On Education" and the National Program of "Personnel Training" a comprehensive system of teaching foreign languages, aimed at upbringing of harmoniously developed, highly educated, modern-thinking young generation, the further integration of the republic into the world community was established in the country. Based on the changes much work was done in the sphere of teaching and learning foreign languages. Teacher training courses were organized to increase teachers experience and skills in teaching methodology. Some special seminars and workshops were conducted including some activities like training of teachers or trainers and material writing. New pedagogical technologies, method, techniques were presented, and communicative methodology started to be implemented in all levels of education. The process of teaching foreign languages changed from the core. Integration of all the language skills and aspects by implementing authentic materials become a first principle in developing foreign language learners' knowledge, ability and skills in that language. However, the analysis of the current system of organization of foreign language learning shows that assessment of progress and achievement of learners does not fully meet the modern requirements. Assessment is carried out mainly under the traditional methods. The organization of assessment procedure, test item development and assessment literacy of teachers should be further improved. In order to radically improve the assessment system in the all levels of education, the assessment literacy of teachers should be developed. So, here some questions arise:

What is the foreign language teachers understanding of assessment literacy?

How do foreign language teachers assess their students?

Are those teachers assessment practical, reliable, valid and conducive to learning?

I. Literature review

Conceptualizing Assessment

There are diverse views on the operationalization of assessment terminology in the literature and that usually cause some confusion. Very often in teaching and learning process such terms as "assessment", "evaluation" and

“test” have been interchangeably used. The fact that they result some confusions is that they are related within each other. Rita Berry (2008) states that a “test” often results in numbers. “Assessment” includes different strategies, including test, as a source of getting information about students’ learning progress. “Evaluation” is the value of judgment and interpretation of outcomes of the data collection process in the decision-making context [1; p.6]. According to Christian Coombe (2007) the term “evaluation” is all-inclusive and it is the widest base for collecting information in education. Evaluation looks at all factors that influence to the process of learning and teaching: such as syllabus objectives, course design, and materials (Harris & McCann, 1994). Assessment is the part of evaluation as it concerns with the student and what do students do (Brindley, 1989). Assessment includes different ways of collecting the data about students’ achievement and progress in learning process. Test is the subcategory of assessment. A test is usually systematic and formal procedure (paper-and-pencil) that is used to get information about students’ behavior [2; p.XV].

The evolution of language Testing

The years of experience shows that the methodology of teaching foreign languages progresses and develops from generation to generation. Thus, it is important to mention that as method of teaching changes, the assessment of achieving language ability also changes. Traditional method requires traditional assessment, alternative tasks requires alternative assessment. However, that is important to mention that evolution of language testing lags behind than evolution of language teaching methodology. Famous British specialist on Language Testing and assessment Richard West states that the evolution of language teaching and language testing started since Second World War, and they fall into three phases or generations. These generations broadly parallel three stages in the evolution of language teaching.

Stage1- grammar/translation approach

Stage2- audio-lingual approach

Stage3- communicative approach

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Most writers agree with the fact that generations of language teaching are parallel to generations of language testing. However, they are not agreeing how this generation should be called. Here are some suggestions of different writers [3;p.29,30].

1.	traditional	grammatico-literacy	Garden of Eden	intuitive
2.	modern	psycho-linguistic	Vale of Tears	scientific
3.	post-modern	socio-communicative	Promised Land	communicative
	(Spolsky 1984)	(Carroll & Hall 1985)	(Morrow 1979)	(Madsen 1983)

Richard West agrees with Spolsky on referring first generation as “traditional” for they draw on long tradition of testing in the teaching of classical languages and mother-tongue English. The techniques were typically related to translation passages (often literary) into target language, product -oriented writing and interview questions which were not related to each other. The main characteristics of first generation assessment techniques were that they were not authentic at all and the scoring was subjective. Second generation test techniques set out to eliminate those shortcomings which were practiced in the first generation, especially the problem of subjectivity. Therefore, specialists explored ways of assessing language on the right-wrong basis. Thus, the most common test technique was multiple choice. So, second generation tests became objective but even less authentic than first-generation one. Because, it is obvious that in the real life we do not make choices, especially language choices on a multiple choice basis. The results of second generation tests show that they encourage language learning and teaching which were not related to the real-world needs of students. Here, we may observe the emergency of third generation test techniques. Communicative testing as communicative teaching sees its aim in the real-world terms. The following quote by Carrol (1982) clearly states the aim:

“The communicative approach stands or falls by the degree of real life, or at least like-life, communication that is achieved in the

Foreign language in the classroom situation”.

The third generation testing techniques were quite different from that second generation. The main thing was that the replica of reality was the aim of third generation test techniques. The characteristics of the third generation the texts and tasks were as authentic as possible, techniques were contextualized, and all four language skills were integrated.

Assessment Literacy

In today's modern world we came across with new terms connected with literacy: computer literacy, media literacy, health literacy, scientific literacy, statistical literacy and others. So, what does it mean “literacy”? What do we understand by this term? The word literacy is defined as “the ability to read and write”. Definitions of these terms vary depending on the use of context. The Language assessment literacy (LAL) – represents a broadening of the traditional association of literacy with reading and writing skills. Language assessment literacy may be understood as a competence that enable an individual to understand, evaluate, create language tests and analyze test data. Majority of today's teachers know little about educational assessment. Unfortunately, for some teachers the word “test” is four letter word, both figuratively and literary [4;p.5]. The most obvious explanation of such situation was partly mentioned above. Teachers complete their teacher-education programs, which are specialized in teaching and exploring new methods, techniques of teaching methodology; however, there are no requirements to learn educational assessment. Only little session maybe conducted but that is not enough for being assessment literate teacher (La Marca, 2006). One potentially fruitful area is the conceptualizations of literacy from other fields into LAL. An approach adopted in the fields of scientific and mathematical literacy education is the rejection of a dichotomy of literacy or illiteracy in preference for viewing literacy as a continuum. A seminal book is Bybee's (1997) *Achieving scientific literacy: from purpose to practices*, in which five stages of literacy are identified and described: illiteracy, nominal literacy, functional literacy, procedural and conceptual

literacy, and multidimensional literacy.[6;p.383] The brief description of each literacy is presented below:

Illiteracy: Ignorance of language assessment concepts and methods

Nominal literacy: Understanding that a specific term relates to assessment, but may indicate a misconception.

Functional literacy: Sound understanding of basic terms and concepts

Procedural and Understanding central concepts, and using knowledge in practice. conceptual literacy:

Multidimensional Literacy: Knowledge extending beyond ordinary concepts including Philosophical, historical and social dimensions of assessment.

Let us look at some more definitions provided by scientists. Fulcher (2012) states that the earliest attempt to define assessment literacy for teachers was made by the American Federation of Teachers (1990), and it included competencies in “selecting and developing assessments for the classroom administering and scoring tests, using scores to add instructional decisions, communicating results to stakeholders, and being aware of inappropriate and unethical uses of tests” (Fulcher, 2012, p.115). After, Stiggins (1991) defined assessment literacy as “having a basic understanding of the meaning of high- and low-quality assessment and being able to apply that knowledge to various measures of student achievement.”(p.535). Making conclusion from these definitions we may consider that assessment literacy is the understanding of both theory and practice: principles and methods of assessment related to all aspects of assessing students’ learning in the classroom. Though, to find out the level of assessment literacy of teachers and the types of misconceptions about language testing some research was conducted with the teachers of ESP in Uzbekistan.

Aim

The aim of the current study is to interview University teachers of ESP with the purpose of identifying the current practices and conditions of ESP teaching in Uzbekistan. The main aims were to find out how the teaching ESP is organized, is the course content, tasks and assessment is aligned, what

methods of assessment are used and what obstacles are faced by teachers.

Methods and tools

The report is based on 120 structured interviews with teachers in 30 institutions in Uzbekistan. The collected data was aimed to cover the following:

- ◆ Methods of assessment
- ◆ Assessment alignment with the CEFR
- ◆ Teachers' views about the final and exit exams

Findings

Methods of assessment

Methods of assessment of ESP teachers are discussed in this section. The data gathered from the 120 teachers referred mostly to methods of formative assessment, which was mainly informal. In their answers, teachers focused on daily/on-going assessment of their learners, where the main factors are students' participation, readiness, etc. rather than academic work. The data collected on assessment reveals that teachers commonly rely on "participation" to evaluate their students, paying attention to how actively students take part in class discussions as well as task performance. The respondents also spoke in general terms about the classroom activities which are used to assess students' preparation and knowledge. However, there is little evidence of how these relate to the syllabus. The following activities were mentioned as being used to assess students:

Types of activities	Number of respondents (rank)
Knowledge based MCQ tests	19 (1)
Tasks on 4 skills	18 (2)
Oral tasks	16 (3=)
"can do" evaluation	16 (3=)
Participation	15 (5)
Grammar tasks	10 (6)
Written tasks	9 (7)

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Vocabulary tasks	7 (8)
Translation tasks	6 (9)
Presentation	5 (10=)
Self study	5 (10=)
Project works	4 (12)
Portfolio	3 (13)
Quizzes	1 (14)

Figure 4-9: Methods of formative assessment (N=120)

Some (15) respondents consider assessment criteria as a rating system that is common for all universities over the country and stated that they assess students based on the following:

Rank	Current/mid-term works	Self study	Final/Summative assessment	Total	Number of respondents
1	3 points per lesson x18 weeks=54	16	30	100	7
2	10 points per month x 4 month= 40 15 points per mid- term x 2 =30	-	30	100	5
3	10 points per month x 3 months=30 15 points per mid- term x2=30	10	30	100	3

Figure 4-10: Assessment grading systems (N=120)

Every higher education institution develops its own rating system aligned with the Ministry Curriculum for assessment, which is usually organized on a 100 point scale per semester. Rating consists of three types self study (daily assessment), midterm (formative assessment) and final (summative assessment). One semester consists of daily assessments, two midterms and one final test. All the tests and assessment task are designed based on the course content.

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Assessment alignment with CEFR

Those interviewed on how assessment relates to the CEFR responded as follows: some teachers (22%) stated that it can be assessed by integrating skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening); others (18%) suggested that the process of assessment related to CEFR would require a lot of time and effort; some (20%) stated that the existing rating system, which does not relate to the CEFR, is not efficient; some (22%) recommended that assessment should follow the CEFR, as it is the international standard in most countries; some (18%) stated that students' active participation and class attendance could provide the expected results. So, from these results it can be seen that teachers seem to have a little experience in aligning assessment with CEFR and in some cases have no idea about CEFR assessment.

Teachers' views on the final and exit exams

Among interviewed teachers 26 (22%) did not comment on current exit test forms and processes as they are not involved in them. 94 (78%) expressed positive views, stating that the final and exit tests are aligned with the Ministry Curriculum and institutional syllabus, and 43 (36%) stated that all language skills are included, while 45 (38%) said that they are basically knowledge-based tests which addressed translation, making up sentences, reading and retelling the content. Two respondents stated that writing is mainly assessed. Worryingly, most respondents feel satisfied with exam processes that are mostly do not use criteria or "can do" statements and are usually EGP rather than ESP in content, and did not express any wish to change or even to try to align tests with the CEFR. The reason is the lack of knowledge on assessment.

As it was suggested by Stiggins (1999) a list of seven content requirements or competences aimed to provide a comprehensive foundation in assessment practices. By following these requirements teachers will have an opportunity to provide successful assessment procedure. They include:

1. Connecting assessment to clear purposes
2. Clarifying achievement expectations

3. Applying proper assessment methods
4. Developing quality assessment exercises and scoring criteria and sampling appropriately
5. Avoiding bias in assessment
6. Communicating effectively about students achievement
7. Using assessment as an instructional intervention.[7;p.307]

Considering all mentioned above, we may conclude that assessment literacy is a skill which is needed by teachers for their own long-term professional life, so that students, institutions and stakeholders should benefit from that. Therefore, the solution to develop assessment literacy of teachers may be developing professional workshops, seminars, teacher-training courses for teachers, so that they will have an opportunity to collaborate and share their experiences.

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