done extensive research on the topic, but we also chose to restrict our references so as to maintain a more specific focus and prioritize the areas of knowledge that we consider most relevant for the practicing teacher, material developer or academic coordinator. We hope you will like our friendly and straight-to-the point approach and that you will truly enjoy getting into assessment!



INTRODUCTION



# WHY TEACHERS SHOULD BE ASSESSMENT LITERATE



# HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED THESE SITUATIONS IN YOUR EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORY AS A STUDENT?

- You were assessed by way of one single test after a long unit of study, such as two months.
- You were sure you knew the content well, but when you took the test, it was so different from what you had studied in class that you did not do well.
- Your grade was penalized for factors that were not directly related to what the assessment was supposed to measure.
- You took tests with very tricky items that misled you and you ended up getting answers wrong even though you knew the content.
- You received a numerical score on a composition, but you were not sure how the teacher arrived at that grade.
- You took an oral test and the prompt that you were assigned to discuss (out of the ten or so covered in the unit) was the one single topic that you did not remember that well.
- You concluded a language course with very high grades, but when you took a proficiency test, you received a score that was lower than the one you should have theoretically received considering the level you had reached in the program.

If any of these have applied to you, how did the situations affect your learning and how you felt about yourself as a learner? These are only a few examples of the negative effects that bad assessments or bad decisions about assessment can have on students. These bad assessments or decisions were likely the result of lack of assessment literacy on the part of the test designer. When professionals do not study assessment theory and practice, they are prone to making these and other types of mistakes. Many times, because they are reproducing familiar models (and with the best of intentions), it starts from a very basic problem: not knowing exactly what assessment is and what it is not. So, what is "assessment", anyway?

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, assessment is the action or an instance of making a judgment about something: the act of assessing something: appraisal. Assessment is part of our daily lives. If we think about it, we make judgments all day, all the time, in different contexts of our lives: about ourselves, other people and situations. We assess whether we are making the right decisions regarding when to wake up, what to eat, what we do at work, how much we exercise, etc. We also constantly make judgments about the people and situations around us. We assess the movies we watch, the food we eat, the books we read, even the roads we drive on and the places we go – the list goes go on and on.

It is no different in the classroom. Assessment permeates everything teachers do, whether or not they are aware of it. According to Brown (2004), effective teachers are always assessing students in either an incidental or intended manner. For example, we often assess students when they respond to a question, offer a comment or experiment with new structures or lexical items. This assessment might be unconscious but the student's performance is constantly monitored and scrutinized on more or less formal occasions.

We need, then, to make a distinction between informal and formal assessment. Every time we respond to a student, we are, in a way, assessing them. Whenever we decide what to say, whether to offer praise or corrective feedback, and how to do so, assessment is taking place; but, in many situations, it is informal – unplanned and unsystematic. Formal assessments, on the other hand, are designed to comprehend a range of skills and knowledge through exercises or established procedures. These assessments aim at giving teachers and students an appraisal of student achievement in a systematic way (Brown, 2004).

However, if assessment, be it formal or informal, is such an important part of teaching, why is it that teachers, in general, know very little about its principles and practices? In our experience, every time we give talks about this topic or present it at teacher education programs, we realize that most teachers are not cognizant of even the basic principles of assessment. We, ourselves, only came to really understand this domain once we engaged in more advanced studies of English language teaching (ELT) and started designing and supervising the different types of assessment used in the programs we were teaching and managing.

In the next section, we examine some of the reasons that lead most teachers to be "passive consumers" of assessment.



### Why many EFL/ESL/EAL¹ teachers are not assessment literate

Many language teachers harbor a deep mistrust of tests and of testers [...] It cannot be denied that a great deal of language testing is of very poor quality. Too often language tests have a harmful effect on teaching and learning, and too often they fail to measure accurately whatever it is they are intended to measure. (Hughes, 2003, p. 1)

While written some 20 years ago, Hughes' statement is still true in some cases, and this very mistrust has scared many teachers away from testing and assessment.

For many years, formal assessment was considered synonymous with testing, and testing was regarded as an endeavor that only psychometricians could engage in. Testing was not something classroom teachers had to trouble themselves with: they were not expected to understand the psychometric, or statistical, principles that went behind designing tests; moreover, they could not ensure that their tests would satisfy the basic cornerstones of testing, especially in terms of validity and reliability (as we discuss later in Chapter 2). Teachers were therefore led to believe that they did not have the necessary training to develop tests and, as such, should use the tests provided in their materials (developed by the publishers) or the ones provided by international testing agencies. The latter, in fact, were meant to be used at the end of each cycle so that students would have an unbiased, external, internationally recognized appraisal of their progress in English, as we have heard over and over.

Teachers could, of course, have used classroom assessment tools in their daily routines in order to give feedback to students; but what really mattered for students' grades were these external assessment tools, the ones developed by the people who really understood how to design tests. This belief was widespread, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, an era philosophically dominated by positivism in psychology, by behaviorism in education and by structuralism in applied linguistics. This resulted in approaches to teaching English that included the direct approach and the audiolingual method (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). Bachman and

 $<sup>1\,\,</sup>$  EFL – English as a Foreign Language; ESL – English as a Second Language; EAL – English as an Additional Language. In this book, we use EAL to refer to our object of study, as this is currently the preferred terminology.

Dambök (2017) corroborate this by pointing out that, in the past, language assessment was "viewed primarily as a technical activity of obtaining test scores and analyzing these statistically" (p. 3).

Because traditional assessment was done predominantly by way of tests, and tests had to be designed according to rigorous psychometric principles, testing became a specialized field within applied linguistics, and not a subject that teachers were required to master in their education programs. In fact, still today, it is only at the graduate level that language teachers study testing more in depth – and it is usually an elective. This means that teachers have been led to believe that assessment and testing are not their responsibility because they are not qualified to design tests or other types of assessments, assuming that designing tests should be left to a testing specialist.

Another factor that distances language teachers from assessments is the fact that many work for language programs in which the same materials and assessment instruments are used by all teachers, and these instruments are usually designed by an academic supervisor or coordinator. Often, even academic supervisors or coordinators are hardly involved in the design of the instruments, opting to use the ones that come with the course book they adopt – the common "test generators". As a consequence, in many contexts, teachers are not responsible for designing their own tests or assessment instruments – they are merely consumers of instruments designed by others.

The problem with this belief is that teaching and assessment are intertwined: we teach and assess, assess and teach all the time, meaning that it is problematic to think that it is one person's job to teach and another's to assess. Every teacher should be cognizant of assessment theories and practices, and language teachers should know the particularities of assessing language learning, which is different, in some ways, from assessing content. In the next section, we discuss the reasons why teachers should become assessment literate.



## Why language teachers should be assessment literate and what they need to know

In 2009, James Popham, a well-known specialist in assessment, wrote an article discussing whether the growing interest in assessment literacy for teachers was just a fad or whether it was here to stay. In his article, he discusses why teachers should be assessment literate and presents a list of items that should be addressed in an assessment

literacy program. He avoids drawing a distinction between formative and summative assessment (which will be discussed in Chapter 2) and divides assessments into two types: classroom assessment and accountability assessment. He notes that teachers must make assessment-related decisions all the time regarding these two types of assessments. These decisions end up having an impact on how students are taught, meaning that the more assessment literate teachers are, the better the decisions they make will be (Popham, 2009).

In terms of classroom assessment, the more well-versed teachers are, the better their tests and other types of assessment instruments will be, as well as the interpretations derived from these assessments. Well-developed assessments have an impact on instruction, student motivation and, ultimately, education, whereas flawed assessments can affect student motivation, and. subsequently, learning (Popham, 2009). When students do not feel they are being assessed in an effective, equitable and fair manner, this can be detrimental to their motivation and self-esteem and cause them to feel discouraged. We know that motivation and selfesteem are especially relevant for acquiring a second language, a process that involves more than merely learning content. As such, assessment literacy for language teachers, in particular, is arguably even more important. For contexts in which it is not the teachers themselves who design most of the assessment instruments, assessment literacy will help them become critical consumers of the instruments they use and allow them to provide well-informed feedback to the decision-makers so that necessary changes can be made. As a field, language assessment has "broadened its focus, including classroom-based assessment that provides information to improve learning and teaching" (Bachman and Dambök, 2017, p. 3).

Let us now turn to accountability assessments, that is, exams and other forms of assessments developed and administered by an external agent, be it for the purpose of program evaluation or for the purpose of language proficiency certification. Teachers also need to be assessment literate in this area or, at the very least, be able to inform students about the format and purposes of these instruments. More than that, teachers need to be assessment literate so they can function as agents in the decision-making process of their programs and become involved in the selection of the best assessments for the given context. In addition, they need to be assessment literate in order to be able to interpret the results of accountability assessments.

Now that we have provided a sufficient number of arguments in favor of assessment literacy among teachers, what, specifically, should language teachers be assessment literate about? These are the topics that we consider relevant and the ones that will be addressed in this book. They were adapted from Popham (2009) and expanded to our context of language assessment. We decided to state them as can-do's so that, at the end of this book, readers can self-assess whether these objectives have been reached.

Assessment literate language teachers can:

- Differentiate between assessment and testing.
- Identify a wide range of assessment purposes and instruments, in relation to the skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and systems (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) being assessed.
- Evaluate the quality of different types of assessment instruments and their appropriateness for the skill(s) and system(s) being assessed.
- Provide well-informed and genre-appropriate feedback on assessment instruments that were not designed by them, utilizing accurate terminology.
- Design both traditional and alternative assessment instruments for skills and systems that are authentic, valid, reliable, fair and equitable, and that will result in a positive effect on teaching and learning.
- Differentiate between formative and summative assessments and use them for their intended purpose and at the right time.
- Select the best assessment type and instrument for the given assessment purpose and context.
- Interpret and report results derived from assessments responsibly and fairly.
- Identify new trends in assessment and judge whether they are applicable to their context.
- Identify the format, purpose and characteristics of the main accountability assessments in the field, such as proficiency exams and university entrance exams, as well as the framework on which they are based (e.g. the Common European Framework of Reference).
- Identify the stages in the language program at which students will be ready to take a proficiency exam.

- Inform students about accountability assessments and, if necessary, help them select the one that best suits their purpose.
- Maintain a critical view of accountability assessments, considering the purposes and interests they serve and, when possible, act as student advocates in the decision-making process.
- And, finally, be equipped, both theoretically and practically, to convince stakeholders to change their assessment practices whenever they are not contextually appropriate, technically well-designed or fair and equitable.

We start our journey towards achieving these objectives by introducing and reviewing key terminology related to assessment. We understand that some of you will be novice to the field of assessment, while others will be more experienced and already know most, if not all, of the terminology.

#### **ACTIVITIES**

#### ACTIVITY

Go over the negative situations related to testing and assessment mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Place a check next to the ones you have experienced in the past. Can you think of any other similar situations? Talk to a peer about a specific situation that comes to mind involving these topics.

You were assessed by way of one single test after a long unit of study, such as two months.	
You were sure you knew the content well, but when you took the test, it was so different from what you had studied in class that you did not do well.	
Your grade was penalized for factors that were not directly related to what the assessment was supposed to measure.	
You took tests with very tricky items that misled you and you ended up getting the answer wrong even though you knew the content.	



You received a numerical score on a composition, but you were not sure how the teacher arrived at that grade.

You took an oral test and the prompt that you were assigned to discuss (out of the ten or so covered in the unit) was the one single topic that you did not remember that well.

You concluded a language course with very high grades, but when you took a proficiency test, you received a score that was lower than the one you should have theoretically received considering the level you had reached in the program.

Other situations:

#### IACTIVITY 2

Go over each item on the list of what assessment literate teachers can do. Next to each item, circle Y for "yes", P for "partially", or N for "no" based on how you see yourself.

I can:			
Differentiate between assessment and testing.	Υ	Р	Ν
Identify a wide range of assessment purposes and instruments, considering the skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and systems (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) being assessed.	Υ	Р	N
Understand and use the right terminology related to assessment and testing.	Υ	Р	N
Evaluate the quality of different types of assessment instruments and their appropriateness for the skill(s) and system(s) being assessed.	Υ	Р	Ν
Provide well-informed and genre-appropriate feedback on assessment instruments that were not designed by me, utilizing accurate terminology.	Y	Р	Ν

# IACTIVITY 2

Design both traditional and alternative assessment instruments for skills and systems that are authentic, valid, reliable, fair and equitable, and that will result in a positive washback effect on teaching and learning.	Y	Р	N
Differentiate between formative and summative assessments and use them for their intended purpose and at the right time.	Υ	Р	N
Select the best assessment type and instrument for the assessment purpose and context	Υ	Р	N
Interpret and report results derived from assessments responsibly and fairly.	Υ	Р	Ν
Identify new trends in assessment and judge whether they are applicable to my context.	Υ	Р	Ν
Identify the format, purpose and characteristics of the main accountability assessments in the field, such as proficiency exams and university entrance exams, as well as the framework on which they are based (e.g. the Common European Framework of Reference).	Y	Р	Ν
Identify the stages in the language program at which the students will be ready to take a proficiency exam.	Υ	Р	N
Inform students about accountability assessments and, if necessary, help them select that one that best suits their purpose.	Υ	Р	N
Maintain a critical view of accountability assessments, considering the purposes and interests they serve and, when possible, act as a student advocate in the decision-making process.	Y	Р	N
And, finally, be equipped, both theoretically and practically, to convince stakeholders to change their assessment practices when they are not contextually appropriate, technically well-designed or fair and equitable	Y	Р	N

Having self-assessed your ability in each item, on a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate your assessment literacy right now? Share your feelings about this with a peer.

1 2 3 4 5
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