EFL/ESL Teachers' Writing Assessment Literacy: State of the Arts

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Abstract

The ability to assess the language learners' progress has been known as one of the most important parts of EFL/ESL teachers' literacy. Language assessment literacy (LAL). The notion of LAL has evolved over time, as a large number of researchers showed to be enthusiastic to study this research area. However, the number of studies on teachers' Writing Assessment Literacy (WAL) is scanty. As writing skill is very necessary for language learners to communicate with native speakers of the English language, it is very important for writing teachers to develop assessment tasks to positively contribute to the rate of learners' progress in writing skill. Therefore, it is of much significance to review the related studies on assessment literacy, language assessment literacy, and writing assessment literacy. In this review study, the relevant studies were reviewed and further directions for writing assessment literacy of EFL/ESL teachers are suggested to the researchers interested in the field.

Keywords: assessment, assessment literacy, language assessment literacy, writing assessment literacy

1. Introduction

School and tertiary teachers, besides teaching activities, need to select and/or design assessment methods and strategies, determine grades, give feedback, develop assessment tasks, and report students' outcomes to those influenced by assessment including administrators, parents, students, and/or teachers themselves (Popham, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2014; Russell & Airasian, 2012; Tayebi & Moradi, 2020; Traylor, 2009, 2013). With regard to the significance of assessment in education and its great contribution to students' achievements, a classroom-based assessment which promotes learning has been widely acknowledged and progressively received scholars' attention (Davison, 2019; Leung, 2014; O'Loughlin, 2013; Moradi & Tayebi, 2020; Rea-Dickins, 2008). As a consequence, teachers' abilities to employ assessment techniques to promote EFL learners' learning as well as checking on their progress have turned out to be an essential part of teachers' cognition and literacy. Therefore, English language teachers need to keep updated and informed of the recent developments, changes, and innovations in classroom Assessment Literacy (AL) (Abbasi et al., 2021; Tajedin et al., 2022; Mertler, 2009; Popham 2006).

In the early years of the 21st century (Fulcher, 2012), interested researchers in the field of the second language began to study EFL/ESL teachers' cognition, and practice of Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) (Ghaderpanahi et al., 2021; Heidari, 2021; Moradi & Tayebi, 2020; Pill & Harding, 2013; Tajedin et al., 2022; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). As research on LAL expanded, "the skill-based notion of LAL was brought about by some scholars who maintain that studies of LAL need to be skill-specific" (Moradi & Tayebi, 2020, p.12). In the same vein, Crusan et al. (2016) have called for the promotion of Writing Assessment Literacy (WAL). Given the increasing use of English writing assessments which are extensively used for decision-making across different domains including, immigration, second language education, and article writing for professional development, promoting knowledge of writing assessment sounds necessary for language teachers who are considered to be the main stakeholder involved in assessment process. In this review study, at first, the studies on English language teachers are reviewed. Then, the studies on WAL literacy are reviewed. Finally, the gap and the areas which need to be well-explored and taken into account by teachers of the English language are suggested.

1.2. Assessment Literacy

The review of related studies indicates that teachers spend a great time on assessment activities (Bachman, 2014). Therefore, the quality of instruction and student learning is likely to affect the assessment quality, which teachers use in classrooms (Green, 2014). Accordingly, teachers should know how to integrate assessment results with the student's learning and their teaching activities (Popham, 2014) so that they can meet the academic goals of the century and prepare their students for learning skills needed in their daily as well as academic life (Binkley et

al., 2012). Teachers are also highly required to know what assessment tasks are needed for assessing students' academic progress as well as life skills (Masters, 2013a)

The Assessment literacy (AL) notion has gradually evolved within the last few decades, because a great number of researchers were interested to study this concept in the field. At first, the notion of AL was introduced into general education, and later it was viewed as a facet of teaching language. Despite the existence of different concepts and notions for assessment, there is still no consensus among the researchers regarding the definition of AL (Fulcher, 2012). As such, different definitions have been offered by numerous researchers. For example, in the literature on general education, Stiggins (1999) as a leading researcher coined the term AL for classroom teachers to show whether classroom teachers can make a distinction between unsound and sound assessments. Furthermore, Stiggins (2010) has argued teachers with high levels of assessment literacy know about the harmful and negative consequences of unreliable and invalid assessments.

It is also known that the ability to assess students' progress has proved to be one of the main teachers' professional responsibilities (White, 2009). Several scholars have stated that teachers allocate a great proportion (one-third) of their teaching time to assessment including designing tasks, monitoring the student's progress, and giving feedback to the students, school managers, and students' parents (Moradi & Tayebi, 2010; Tajedin et al., 2022; White, 2009). However, a large number of researchers have raised concerns with teachers' AL in general education (e.g., DeLuca & Klinger, 2010; Popham, 2009) and English language education (Fulcher, 2012; Hasselgreen et al., 2004; Jin, 2010; Tsagari & Vogt, 2014).

One main reason for the teachers' assessment illiteracy as reported by some researchers is a lack of appropriate in-service and pre-service teacher education programs and teacher professional development courses (DeLuca & Bellara, 2013; Malmir & Bagheri, 2019; Mendoza & Arandia, 2009; Stiggins, 1999; Salehizadeh et al., 2020; Taras, 2007). As Stiggins (2002) argues: "Few teachers are prepared to face the challenges of classroom assessment because they have not been given the opportunity to learn to do so" (p. 762). Similarly, Taylor (2009) believes that a large number of teachers have rarely received relevant and appropriate training in both theory and practice of educational assessment in their pre-service or/and in-service course (Taylor, 2009).

A large number of researchers have called for investigating teachers' LAL levels and their assessment-related professional development needs (e.g., Levi & InbarLourie, 2020; Sultana, 2019; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014; Vogt et al., 2020, Xu & Brown, 2017). For instance, Vogt and Tsagari (2014) argued that "the lack of ability to critically evaluate tests represents a risk for the teachers to take over tests unquestioningly without considering their quality" (p. 391). They believe that the skills required to be able to critically evaluate tests are the most needed for language teachers. Similarly, in another study on EFL teachers' LAL, Sultana (2019) using semi-structured interviews reported that the teachers' inadequate assessment knowledge undermines their ability to develop and handle assessment-related tasks. Recently, in another study which aimed at exploring German and Greek English language teachers' status quo of LAL, and their training needs Vogt et al. (2020) found that although similar constructs were used in the participant teachers' LAL level, their training needs

were different based on their different educational settings. They also strongly recommended local teacher education courses and activities in LAL.

Another group of researchers limited their studies to education curriculums and workshops appropriate for developing teachers' LAL (e.g., Arias et al., 2012; Baker & Riches, 2018; Lam, 2015; Lee, 2019). For example, Lee (2019) designed an instructional program, based on the definitions of LAL and test-usefulness model. She reported that the educational project helped the participants develop their assessment literacy level and reflect on their assessment practices. Furthermore, Baker and Riches in their 2018's study investigated the impact of assessment-related workshops on LAL of 120 Haitian assessment experts and language teachers. They found that while making collaborative decisions, their knowledge base in assessment turned out to be facilitative and complementary, although they have different levels of language assessment.

1.3. Teacher Assessment Literacy

Teachers need to know how to assess students' learning in line with 21st-century skills such as creativity, critical thinking, decision-making, flexibility, problem-solving, collaboration and responsibility (Masters, 2013b). Also, they are highly required to develop assessment tasks in order to assess students' life skills as well as academic outcomes (Masters, 2013a) through moving to an assessment culture. In a testing-related culture, teachers employ exams just to determine achievements. In an assessment culture, on the other hand, teachers use assessment as a means to promote instruction and enhance students' learning achievement (Shepard, 2013).

There has also been a repeated request for blending assessment beliefs with the AL concept until recently (Scarino, 2013). This request highlights the vital role of personal beliefs in assessment in addition to the basics of assessment knowledge previously defined within the literature on general education. Although there have always been debates around the essence and scope of such knowledge, skills, and principles (Inbar-Lourie, 2013a, 2013b; Taylor, 2013), there is no question that LAL is different from the generic interpretations of the term *Assessment Literacy* as it deals with a clear understanding of language, language use, and language pedagogy (Popham, 2009).

A number of studies were undertaken to expand the domain of skills required for teachers' LAL. For example, Walter (2010) emphasized the necessity of teachers' awareness and understanding of test construction to come up with test specifications and criticized the top-down approaches to language teaching and testing. Closely drawing upon the democratic assessment viewpoint, Arias et al. (2012) endeavored to raise teachers' ability to incorporate transparency and democracy into their language assessment practices. In fact, the dearth of research to delimit the language teachers' critical language assessment literacy is strongly felt, which is precisely what the current research is aspiring to achieve.

Giraldo (2018) produced a core list of LAL after carefully scrutinizing conceptual reviews and subscribing to their own personal experience in language assessment. The author introduced

the list drawing upon Davies' (2008) three basic components of knowledge, skills, and principles. In spite of proposing various models for LAL, these models do not take the measures required to touch on CLA principles as their core component. Furthermore, Popham (2006, 2009) defined assessment literacy as the teachers' the teachers' ability to understand and employ the basic principles and procedures of assessment which affect the decisions made on education. They also know how to avoid bias which might affect the quality of the designed assessment tasks. More recently, (Scarino, 2013) has requested the inclusion of assessment beliefs into the AL concept. This urgent call indicates the acceptance and strong belief in the important role personal beliefs play in assessment besides the foundation of assessment knowledge previously conceptualized within the literature on general education.

More specifically, LAL refers to essential *knowledge*, *skills*, and *principles* language teachers are required to possess to perform well in the assessment practice (Brown, 2019), and there seems to be an urgent need for language teachers to promote their LAL. Although there have always been debates around the essence and scope of such knowledge, skills, and principles (Adalberon, 2020; Inbar-Lourie, 2013a; Taylor, 2013), there is no question that LAL is different from the generic interpretations of the term *Assessment Literacy* as it deals with a clear understanding of language, language use, and language pedagogy (Brookhart, 2013a, 2013b; Popham, 2014). As with the concept of AL, LAL is an ever-changing notion with often unstable boundaries in its process of expansion, and it is almost unanimously agreed by scholars that more research is needed to enrich LAL (Fulcher, 2012; Coombe et al., 2012; Taylor, 2013).

Recent years have witnessed a large body of language assessment research targeting the wider scope of LAL (e.g., Care & Griffin, 2009; Cheng & Wang, 2007; Cheng et al., 2008; Davies, 2008; Earl, 2013; Fulcher, 2012; Inbar-Lourie, 2013a; Jeong, 2013; Malone, 2013; Scarino, 2013; Taylor, 2013). To gain a better insight into the wide scope of the LAL, it is not out of place to provide Inbar-Lourie's (2013b) outline of the constituents of LAL. She regards LAL as a complex entity which includes:

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 of 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)

## 1.4. EFL/ESL Teachers' Assessment Literacy

Despite the above-mentioned seemingly comprehensible list of LAL ingredients, the boundaries of LAL are still a moot point requiring further exploration and clarification (see Fulcher, 2012; Giraldo, 2018; Inbar-Lourie, 2013a; Jeong, 2013; Malone, 2013; Scarino, 2013; Taylor, 2013). According to Scarino (2013), teachers' interpretive frameworks, being strongly affected by teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and practices within particularities of a given teaching context, should be also included as a part of LAL. As Giraldo (2018, p. 185) echoes the same idea that "knowledge, skills, and principles in language assessment coexist with teachers' ways of thinking and acting upon the act of assessment". This idea is in sharp contrast with top-down perspectives on the LAL knowledge base which describe and prescribe its content based on available textbooks (Davies, 2008) or courses on language assessment (Bailey & Brown, 1996; Brown & Bailey, 2008; Jeong, 2013; Jin, 2010).

With the wisdom of hindsight from the literature on stages of language assessment, Giraldo (2018) proposes that such assessment stages as planning, execution, evaluation, and reporting assessment process and results can be added to the notion of LAL. According to Rea-Dickins (2001), the assessment process includes four stages of 'planning, implementation, monitoring, and recording and dissemination'. In a more recent study, McNamara and Hill (2011) proposed the same stages to language assessment using different labels: planning, framing, conducting, and using assessment data.

Closely drawing upon the democratic assessment viewpoint, Arias, Maturana, and Restrepo (2012) endeavored to raise teachers' ability to incorporate transparency and democracy into their language assessment practices. Although they did not explicitly refer to LAL, according to the authors, teachers' critical language assessment knowledge should be part of LAL. In fact, the dearth of research to delimit the language teachers' critical language assessment literacy is strongly felt, which is precisely what the current research is aspiring to achieve. Quite after carefully scrutinizing conceptual reviews and subscribing to his own personal experience in language assessment, Giraldo (2018) suggested a core list of LAL. He introduced the list based on Davies' (2008) basic components of knowledge, skills, and principles.

Figure 1

A Core List of Language Assessment Literacy Dimensions: Knowledge, Skills, and Principles (Giraldo, 2018, p. 187).
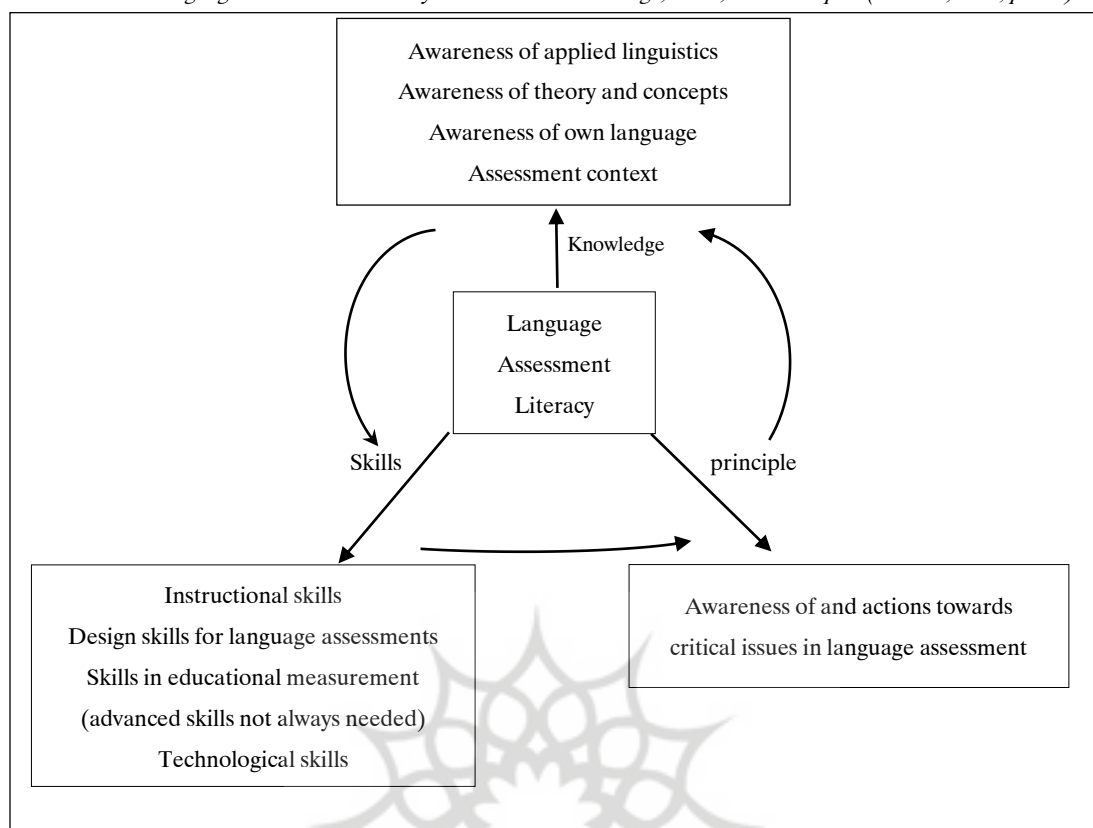
Knowledge, as the first component, the component includes three aspects. It also entails an awareness of fundamental issues in applied linguistics as suggested by Davies (2008) and Inbar-Lourie (2008). The third aspect reflects teachers' awareness of their own language assessment context (Scarino, 2013). The second component is the *skills* necessary for language assessment, which consists of four sub-components. The first dimension is based on studies conducted by McNamara and Hill (2011). Following this, skills for designing language tests and assessment tools to measure learners' knowledge in the four major language skills are taken into account based on Fulcher's (2012) and Taylor's (2009) studies. The next aspect delineates measurement skills emphasized by researchers such as Fulcher (2010, 2012), and Davies (2008). Finally, drawing on Davies' (2008) and Inbar-Lourie's (2012) studies, Giraldo (2018) included a number of technological skills in the list.

The last component represents *principles* of language assessment as derived from a number of scholars' works (Arias et al., 2012; Coombe et al., 2012; Malone, 2013; Taylor, 2009). Among others, ethical and fairness considerations in language assessment, as a major aspect of critical language assessment introduced by Shohamy (2001), are incorporated into the list as essential principles for language assessment contributing to teachers' critical awareness of current assessment practices (Fulcher, 2012; Scarino, 2013).

In addition, transparency and democracy are presented within this component following research done by Arias et al. (2012). To begin with, the proposed list is the result of the

researcher's attempt to amalgamate all the information on LAL requirements from various scholars and experts in assessment and particularly in language assessment into the concept of LAL (Giraldo, 2018). Although various models have been proposed for LAL, these models do not take the measures required to touch on WAL principles as their core component. Thus, among other factors, it seems that WAL still remains theoretical in nature largely due to the disregard of issues involved in language assessment in LAL and the dearth of systematic research into a practical understanding of WAL principles.

Guskey (2013) asserts that all types of assessments are accompanied by systematic and random errors. Therefore, he strongly believes that teachers need to be careful while making decisions about the performance of the test takers to reduce the rate of error. With regard to teachers' level of preparation for assessment, Plake (1993) found that over 70% of teachers taking in a national survey, had exposure to the contents of tests and measurement content, through either in-service or pre-service training courses on assessment. Similarly, Yamtim and Wongwanich (2013) investigated the primary school teachers' assessment literacy and suggested guidelines for improving the AL of primary school teachers. They also suggested teamwork and cooperative learning with knowledgeable people acting as coaches and mentors during practicum courses.

1.5. Writing Assessment Literacy (WAL)

The review of the related literature shows that so far, a small number of studies focused on English language teachers' classroom WAL. The current trend among the researchers is that although that assessment illiteracy holds true for L2 writing teachers, they do not receive enough training in writing assessment indicating appropriate attention is not paid to writing teachers' assessment literacy (Crusan et al., 2016; Lee 2017; Tatebi & Moradi, 2020; Weigle, 2007). For example, Weigle (2007) has argued that "Many graduate programs in TESOL and rhetoric/composition do not require students to take a course in assessment or evaluation, and courses on teaching writing often devote only a limited amount of time to the discussion of assessment" (P.194). As teachers have not been well prepared to take responsibilities of assessment practices in writing classroom, they might think assessment is not a main aspect of teaching (Weigle, 2007).

Similarly, Crusan et al. (2016) have mentioned that through teacher training programs teachers and teacher students should be equipped with necessary assessment knowledge. She strongly believes in the inclusion of a writing assessment as a main component of the English language education curriculum through which student teachers and in-service teachers can have the best practice in writing assessment.

Wiegle (2007) argues that "writing teachers must be adequately prepared to construct, administer, score, and communicate the results of valid and reliable classroom tests" (P.195). She believes that developing classroom writing assessment not unlike the other types of assessment

should be associated with some critical steps which teachers need to learn about including: "setting measurable objectives, deciding on how to assess objectives (formally and informally), setting tasks, and scoring" (P.196). As Hill et al. (2010) argue, to understand whether teachers receive the required writing assessment education, we, as researchers interested in the field, should know what they learned about writing assessment in pre-service teacher training courses.

Similarly, Crusan et al. (2016) attempted to investigate second language teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and practices regarding writing assessment through a survey. About 50% of the participants believed that they are competent in writing assessment, as they received training in writing assessment. However, they revealed that have low self-confidence in their assessment practices. In the same related study, Lam (2019) investigated Hong Kong secondary school teachers', conceptions, knowledge, and practices with regard to writing assessments through triangulation method: interviews, questionnaire, and observations. They found that participants had positive perceptions about alternative writing assessments, and had basic knowledge of writing assessment. They also believed that writing assessments had a positive impact on their writing performance.

2. Conclusions

In line with the findings of the related studies on LAL presented in different sections above and the points of divergence and agreement from the research outcomes, it could be argued that "the literature on LAL does not reflect an entirely optimistic view" (Tasqari, 2019, p.30). A gap between the theoretical foundations of LAL and teachers' practice of LAL, has been frequently mentioned by a large number of researchers (e.g., Tajedin et al., 2022; Tasqiri, 2019; Tayebi & Moradi, 2020). It can also be inferred that there is no consensus among the scholars that whether or not the LAL field of study has really evolved in recent studies on assessment literacy. Still, it can be inferred that the essential facets of LAL in general and teachers' WAL in particular need to be further studied and developed. Moreover, it can be concluded that researchers have recently attempted to promote EFL/ESL language assessment literacy, but WAL has been ignored to some extent.

In line with a couple of researchers (e.g., Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Levi & Inbar, 2020; Taylor, 2009; Vogt et al., 2020), it can be concluded that LAL is a multilayered concept which needs a more contextualized conceptualization based on which different dimensions of LAL need to be "firmly contextualized within a sound understanding of the role and function of assessment within education and society" (Taylor, 2009, p. 27). To use Popham's 2009, it can be generally discussed that LAL is a sign of professionalism which can lead to the teachers' autonomy and empowerment (Coombe et al., 2009; Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Taylor, 2009). It can also help tackle negative views, emotions, and attitudes towards teachers' assessment literacy (Taylor, 2013).

Undoubtedly, further research on LAL and WAL will further develop the present theoretical frameworks and it is likely to expect some other novel theoretical frameworks and designs in the future. We, as researchers, expect to witness the models without previous conceptual problems and

defects. However, as the overview of conceptualizations shows, some critical aspects of LAL and WAL should be given more attention because LAL and WAL components, concepts, and practices have not been clearly articulated and defined clearly till recently. As Inbar-Lourie (2016, 2017) concludes, the field of the study is characterized by the absence of the language variable from the definitions suggested in the literature. Therefore, more research is needed to clarify the relationship between LAL and assessment literacy (Kremmel et al., 2017) as the two concepts are mainly treated as synonymous and interchangeable because of a lack of clarity in theoretical foundations.

3. Future Directions in Writing Assessment Literacy

Detailed analysis of the studies reported in the previous sections indicates that it is clear that assessment literacy in general and language assessment literacy of teachers of English affects the quality of instruction and the language learners' academic outcome and progress in the English language. Findings also reveal that EFL/ESL teachers' language assessment has been well studied. What lacks is skill-oriented language assessment. Writing teachers' assessment literacy is one of the less explored research areas in language assessment-related issues. Therefore, in response to the call for research in the area of WAL in the context of classroom-based assessment and regarding the scarcity of studies in the EFL context, it is highly recommended that the other researchers fill in the gap of the literature through:

a) Developing and validating the construct of EFL/ESL teachers' writing assessment literacy through employing mix-methods research designs.
b) Investigating EFL teachers' writing assessment literacy in terms of the status quo, lacks, requirements and suggestions for development.
c) Exploring the facets which might affect EFL/ESL teachers' assessment literacy
d) Investigating the impact of EFL/ESL teachers' writing assessment literacy on the language learners' writing performance
e) Exploring the variables which affect the EFL/ESL teachers' writing assessment literacy
f) Exploring assessment strategies for assessing writing skills of young language learners
g) Developing the construct of academic WAL

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