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What Needs to be Developed to Facilitate Classroom-based Assessment?

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Alister Cumming, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Abstract: As assessment has become increasingly important, frequent, and consequential in all aspects of education, many experienced language educators find themselves needing to develop their knowledge and abilities in three areas in order to conduct classroom-based assessment effectively: (a) increasing their professional knowledge and abilities, (b) connecting classroom assessments to relevant policies; and (c) utilizing assessment to promote learning. Teacher educators, program administrators, and researchers need to help language teachers to become familiar with, use, and further develop the broad range of resources, principles, practices, and research findings that have recently emerged about classroom assessment.

When invited to contribute to this Forum I asked myself, What issues have seemed most fundamental—yet perplexing because they are not well or widely understood—for the students who usually take my Masters-level course called Second-Language Assessment? These Masters' students are experienced teachers, mostly of English, but also of other languages such as French or Japanese, who come from Ontario and many other parts of the world to improve their professional qualifications and knowledge. They teach in schools, businesses, colleges, or universities in Canada, Asia,

Europe, or the Middle East. What have they, while reflecting during assignments or class discussions, considered crucial to understand and develop about classroom-based assessment?

A primary issue is these teachers' own knowledge and professional abilities. A common remark is, "Why wasn't there a full course on assessment during my initial degree (i.e., Bachelor of Education or TESL Certificate)? I've needed to know these things for years now". Or, "Why don't my employers (or principals or department heads) give us workshops or organize projects on assessment?" A second issue concerns relating assessment to professional or curriculum standards in their teaching. Students in this Masters' course might remark, "Now I can see how to use the criteria in this policy to help my students evaluate their own progress." Or they may ask, with astonishment, "Why didn't anyone else ever tell us about the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages?" A third issue involves relating assessment to their students' learning. They might ponder, for instance, "I am never sure whether my responses to students' writing really helps them improve." These are three issues about classroom-based assessment in need of further development, not only conceptually but also in respect to the practices of ordinary language teaching: (a) increasing professional knowledge and abilities, (b) connecting classroom assessment to relevant policies; and (c) utilizing assessment to promote learning.

As assessment has moved into the foreground of education, it has required all teachers to be able to make effective use of certain knowledge and skills. In addition to being ubiquitous and consequential, the functions of assessment in language education are also complex. For example, most language teachers are routinely expected to: Assess

and respond purposefully to their students' written and oral communication; describe the specific needs, then report on subsequent achievements, of individual students in their courses; diagnose individual learning challenges or problems; determine student groupings for placements or learning tasks; evaluate in an informed manner test instruments for their validity and suitability; and interpret and apply, often in collaboration with other teachers, curriculum policies based on benchmark standards or criteria. These seemingly ordinary pedagogical functions involve specific expertise and informed judgments. To take just one example from my own research, experienced ESL/EFL writing instructors typically use 27 different types of decision-making behaviors while evaluating a single composition (Cumming, Kantor & Powers, 2002).

Systematic research has only recently begun to describe the nature and complexities of language teachers' assessment practices (e.g., Brindley, 2000; Edelenbos & Kubanek-German, 2004; Grierson, 1995; Rea-Dickins, 2001, 2007). Surprisingly few studies have considered how language teachers develop such abilities throughout their careers (e.g., Bailey, 1998; Casanave & Schecter, 1997; Johnson, 1999; Winer, 1992). At the same time, the analytic methods associated with language assessment have become increasingly specialized and technical. Evidence of this specialization is the International Language Testing Association (ILTA), with its own networks, annual meetings, and code of ethics for language assessment (<http://www.iltaonline.com/>). Dictionaries are necessary to explain the technical terminology (e.g., Davies et al., 1999). Responding to this expanding range and depth of knowledge, over a dozen introductory textbooks on language assessment were published during the 1990s. Several specialized

scholarly journals are now well established: *Language Testing*, *Assessing Writing*, and *Language Assessment Quarterly*.

The centrality of assessment in language teaching has arisen, in part, as curriculum standards around the world have linked closely curriculum specifications, recommended teaching practices, and the outcomes in language proficiency that students are expected to achieve (Brindley, 1998; Cumming, 2009). These trends have both global and local realizations. A few standards for language education have ascended to nearly universal status, notably the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001) or TESOL Standards (TESOL, 1998). At the same time, many institutions, school boards, or professional or national agencies have established unique standards, particular to local populations and programs, or have “benchmarked” theirs against the international frameworks. Reconciling teachers’ local pedagogical circumstances with international standards creates unique dilemmas for both formal tests and classroom-based assessment (Byrnes, 2007) as well as specialized and costly needs for professional development (e.g., Adamson & Davison, 2008; Short et al., 2000).

The third area in need of further development is relating teachers’ assessment to students’ learning. In marked contrast to curriculum standards is the concept of dynamic assessment, which views ongoing teacher-student interactions as the central (but evolving and jointly constructed) processes for language learning in classroom settings (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Leung, 2007; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). Other notable applications of assessment focused on language learning are diagnostic assessment (Alderson, 2005), self-assessment (Ekbatani & Pierson, 2000), and goal-directed learning (Cumming, 2006). While such principles of assessment for students’ learning are established,

examples of their programmatic applications are scarce. Moreover, these are contingent on the great variability in the contexts, populations, and purposes for which people learn and teach languages. For instance, decades of research on responding to students' second-language writing have produced many analyses about this phenomenon, but fundamental debates remain about preferred techniques and their benefits for learning (Ferris, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

In sum, a key developmental issue in classroom-based assessment is to help practicing language teachers appreciate and utilize the extensive, specialized information that has accumulated about assessment. Conversely, research also needs to document and understand more fully the knowledge and practices that constitute effective assessment in ordinary language teaching as well as to analyze how teachers acquire and improve such abilities. Curriculum standards do help to clarify the outcomes expected of students in language programs, but these are complex policies that require interpretation, professional development, and modeling for implementation. Nonetheless, teacher-student interactions are central to learning in classrooms, and these inevitably involve much tacit as well as formal assessment, but uniquely so for every teacher-student relation, which in turn develops and changes over time. These are all matters that we all need to understand better.

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