

Assessment Literacy

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More than ever before our educational systems are under pressure to be accountable for student performance and to produce measurable results because of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Foreign language teachers have watched their mathematics, reading/language arts, and science colleagues anxiously await high-stakes test scores that are reported in faculty meetings or even in the local newspaper. Even though foreign language is not one of the core content areas for which NCLB requires assessment and the public reporting of results, educators realize that accountability through assessment is critical; without it foreign language programs are more easily reduced or eliminated from the K–16 curriculum.

No longer can foreign language teachers just gather chapter test scores or letter grades and report them to students and parents on multiple occasions throughout the school year. Nor can they dismiss the results of a particular test score in light of what they “intuitively” feel they know about the student. Falsgraf (2005) asserts that foreign language teachers need a strong knowledge of assessment practices and how to use assessment results because it will allow them to be both “student-centered and empirically rigorous” by “supplementing that intuition with empirical data on student performance.”

Assessment also is the key to a smooth transition when students move across levels within the K–12 sequence and when moving from secondary to postsecondary levels of education. As a profession, we must identify the common goals and expectations in the K–16 pipeline, use performance-based assessments at every level, and make recommendations based on these data.

Definition of Assessment Literacy

A priority that arose early in the discussions at the National Assessment Summit is the need to develop in foreign language teachers an understanding of the principles and practices of testing and assessment, known as “assessment literacy.” Foreign language teachers and administrators need the necessary tools for analyzing and reflecting upon test data in order to make informed decisions about instructional practice and program design.

By developing assessment literacy, foreign language educators will not only be able to identify appropriate assessments for specific purposes, such as student placement or program evaluation, but will also be able to analyze empirical data to improve their instruction without negative repercussions should the initial outcomes not be what teachers had hoped for in early test results. With this opportunity, there is an emerging

priority: to provide professional development for inservice and preservice foreign language teachers so that they become literate in assessment analysis.

Simply collecting assessment data and dutifully recording it on individual student record reports is not enough. Moving from a passive interpretation to an active application of assessment data that will impact teaching and the curriculum is the crucial bridge that must be built and crossed in order for data to be meaningful and useful to the classroom teacher. To develop assessment literacy, foreign language professionals need a toolbox filled with skills and strategies that will enable them to decode assessment results, analyze their meaning, respond to what the results reveal, and apply them in teaching and in program evaluation. Based on her research of foreign language teachers in Indiana, Hoyt (2005) proposes that the toolbox of assessment literacy include: knowing appropriate test practices, acquiring a wide range of assessment techniques, and utilizing tests that accurately assess higher-order concepts.

Participants in the National Assessment Summit recommended sustained professional development for teachers to achieve assessment literacy and suggested that the availability of assessment resources, preferably online, is critical. They recommended that training be both online as well as face-to-face at the district level, through Language Resource Centers, at the annual meetings of national, regional, or state language associations or organizations, and as an integral part of the teacher preparation program for preservice teachers. Several examples of professional development for assessment already in existence are provided in the next section.

Professional Development for Practicing Teachers

School District

Examining how some school districts have successfully developed assessment literacy in their teachers can exemplify the processes used and the outcomes experienced for other districts. In this section several examples of professional development in assessment are provided.

Fairfax County, Virginia: The district coordinator in Fairfax County, Paula Patrick, reports positive changes in foreign language instruction with the introduction of the formative and summative performance-based assessments, Performance Assessment for Language Students (PALS) for grade 7-12 students. Both teachers and students field-tested the writing and speaking rubrics, which were designed to reflect the language development of students by instructional level in the Fairfax County foreign language program. Every summer the district offers staff development in performance-based assessment to teachers in order to guide them in writing good formative tasks. Teachers also receive training in the evaluation of writing and speaking samples with the district's scoring rubrics in order to maintain inter-rater reliability. In the summer, a committee is formed to validate the samples that were sent in by teachers at the end of the previous school year.

“Teachers were pleasantly surprised at what their students could really ‘do’ with the language,” Patrick said. “They also felt more ownership of and responsibility to each level of the county’s articulated language program.” She notes, however, that because teachers assessed their own students, results are not as objective and reliable as in second-rater assessment. Teachers received both countywide and class averages on the

PALS assessments, but Patrick asserts that more feedback is needed in terms of analytic data in addressing the different domains of performance. In order to really impact improvement in instructional practices, teachers need to know the strengths and weaknesses of their students. For example, are students meeting expectations in use of vocabulary, but not meeting district expectations in regard to comprehensibility?

Understanding and utilizing this type of data would provide an important link in assessing district programs. Patrick clarifies further that the time needed both for teacher professional development and for work with data is a limitation that prevents a more in-depth analysis of assessment data.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Funded by a federal FLAP (Foreign Language Assistance Program) grant award, the Pittsburgh Public School district developed an online assessment (PPS ORALS), based on ACTFL's Proficiency Scale (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1999, 2001) and the SOPI test, to test K–12 students' oral proficiency and to provide tools for teachers to begin to analyze and act upon assessment data. These tools included: a) scoring rubrics, b) a rating feedback sheet to assist teachers in analyzing student performance by categorizing 16 areas of strengths and weaknesses, c) an instructional tip sheet to help teachers adjust their teaching strategies to address some of the language functions in which students show weaknesses as revealed by the student assessment data, and d) professional development workshops in decoding, analyzing, and responding to district assessment data.

According to district supervisor Dr. Thekla Fall, the fundamental professional development effort has been “to help teachers truly understand the test, tasks, and rating” (personal communication, April 20, 2005). Training is offered each year to new staff members, and as a refresher, for those who have rated PPS ORALS for several years. Additionally, teachers are trained in developing and creating assessment tasks. Both parents and students are able to go to the district's website to see a sample rubric used in evaluating student performance. The next level of Pittsburgh's planned professional development is to train teachers to use the feedback comments that accompany every rating. These comments define the areas in which the students did well and what the students will need to be able to do to attain the next level.

Professional Meetings and Summer Institutes

Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon: CASLS will offer the first of a number of workshops on assessment at the ACTFL Conference (November, 2005). These assessment workshops will present practical tools for gathering data on students and ideas on how to use that data to modify teaching from a base of empirical information. Additionally, during 2005-2006 CASLS will collaborate with the New Jersey Department of Education, using the data derived from the STAMP test (see Online Assessment Resources in this paper), to show teachers how to adjust their teaching and curriculum to maximize student performance.

National K–12 Foreign Language Resource Center, Iowa State University and the Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC: At the ACTFL Conference (November, 2005), a workshop will introduce participants to the Student Oral Proficiency Assessment (SOPA), a valid assessment used by K–8 second language programs to assess student second language oral proficiency. Participants in the workshop will have hands on training in how to administer the SOPA and rate students using the SOPA

Rating Scale. Participants will receive the Oral Proficiency Assessment Manual, the SOPA Rating Scale, and sample scripts.

Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota: Offers a week-long summer institute that guides teachers as they design performance assessment tasks and scoring guides based on the three modes of communication (Summer, 2005).

National Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC) at the University of Hawaii: Offers a two-week workshop in Honolulu in which participants gain an understanding of the fundamentals of creating sound language tests, with a particular emphasis on designing tests to facilitate placement decisions. Participants use computer programs, such as Excel, to practice setting up, analyzing, and interpreting assessment data (Summer, 2005).

Online Professional Development

Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) University of Minnesota: Offers the Virtual Assessment Center (VAC) to provide teachers background information and step-by-step assistance in developing and interpreting second-language assessments. This online professional development component can provide some of the basics in the development of assessment literacy in addition to resources on theory and sample assessments and rubrics. For example, in one section of the module, teachers are given strategies to help them in providing students with assessment feedback that would show students where, when, and how they can improve their performance. The Minnesota Language Proficiency Assessments (MLPA) were developed to determine whether Minnesota students had attained minimal proficiency in a second language (intermediate low and intermediate mid/high). The data have been used for the purpose of certifying that students have met the designated levels and to facilitate the process of articulating expectations of student performance at the end of secondary studies and the beginning of postsecondary studies and for fulfilling a proficiency level in programs using proficiency rather than seat time for satisfying a language requirement.

Preparation of New Teachers

The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) principles (2002) address the need for preservice teachers to understand and use a variety of assessment strategies to monitor student learning, to inform language and culture instruction, and to report student progress. This emphasis on assessment supports the efforts of many university preservice programs at the undergraduate level as they focus on assessment issues.

Wake Forest University, North Carolina: Dr. Mary Lynn Redmond reports that through their preparation in both technology and methods, preservice teachers in the program at her university learn to design rubrics which they use in their methods course for assessment of interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational communication (personal communication, July 19, 2005). She explains that preservice students are taught to use reflection as a valuable tool to make good judgments about teaching and assessment. “We try to help them form the big picture and to see that assessment is a big part of what they do in planning specific language outcomes,” says Redmond. “Teaching and assessment

practices are constantly being re-evaluated. It is really an on-going process and a thread that is woven from start to finish through the program.”

Online Assessment Resources

Foreign Language Test Database

The foreign language test database as described by Malone and MacGregor (in this series of papers) is a three-year project beginning in October 2005 that will provide a free database of K–16 foreign language tests in 25 languages and a tutorial on selecting and using appropriate tests and assessment resources.

Online Assessment

CASLS has developed the Standards-Based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP), which is an online summative assessment of reading, writing, listening, and speaking proficiency for novice low to intermediate high levels of proficiency available in seven languages. The test items are based on authentic materials and realistic tasks. Items assessing the listening skill are currently being field-tested and the piloting of these items is scheduled to be completed by 2006. STAMP data are then reflected back to teacher and learners. All of the assessment information comes back aggregated and disaggregated in multiple ways to allow teachers, students, and administrators to draw conclusions about how individuals and classes of students perform on various item types to verify where students are in terms of language performance.

CARLA Coordinator of Proficiency Projects at the University of Minnesota, Ursula Lentz, reports that the Minnesota Language Proficiency Assessments (MLPA) is a battery of computer-delivered instruments that have been designed to measure learners’ proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening at two intermediate levels on the ACTFL scale in French, German, and Spanish that will soon be available online. The primary purpose of these assessments is to appropriately place students in a college program after completing their secondary studies or to determine that students have attained the required proficiency level either after one or two years of language study at the college level. The computer-delivered reading and listening assessments provide immediate, automatic scoring for both the student and administrator of the tests.

Recommendations

In order to develop “assessment literacy” on a national level, participants at the National Assessment Summit suggested that the first priority is to develop a universal understanding of what constitutes a good assessment and to build a common, articulated set of criteria for exemplary assessments. There is an urgent need to organize and encourage professional development through both online training of teachers and through assessment workshops at national, regional, and state meetings. Professional development programs also need to offer training to help teachers use the data derived from assessments to adjust teaching practices and to provide concrete evidence of student performance for curriculum review purposes. Summit participants also suggested that an ACTFL Assessment Special Interest Group (SIG) be formed so that interested teachers and administrators would have a forum for ongoing discussion. Clearly this assessment

literacy initiative needs to learn from, be directed by, and involve language educators at all levels, from kindergarten through postsecondary.

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