

Boosting assessment literacy through teacher involvement

Daniel Xerri, University of Malta

Introduction

In May 2015 I attended the European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA) Conference at the University of Copenhagen. The opening plenary session was delivered by Ofra Inbar-Lourie, a lecturer at the School of Education, Tel-Aviv University. She chose to examine how the act of enhancing teachers' assessment literacy could bridge assessment policies and implementation practices. The implementation of assessment policies is bound to fail if no consideration is given to teacher agency, the role of teachers in the assessment process, teacher beliefs about assessment, and how teachers could collaborate together to form learning communities. A large part of the success of assessment policies rests upon assessment literate teachers. Trusting and empowering teachers to use assessment appropriately rather than expecting them to follow the precepts imposed by external experts is a means of facilitating effective teaching and learning. Teachers need to feel they own the process. The best way of achieving this is by equipping teachers with the necessary assessment literacy through their active involvement in assessment. In this article, I illustrate how such involvement might be enacted.

Assessment Literacy

Teachers' assessment literacy is highly significant given its impact on student learning. Coombe, Troudi and Al-Hamly (2012) maintain that "Without a higher level of teacher assessment literacy, we will be unable to help students attain higher levels of academic achievement" (p. 20). However, despite its significance, assessment literacy is not given sufficient attention in teacher education and development. Comparing assessment illiteracy to professional suicide, Popham (2004) points out that many educators "were never required, as part of their pre-service or in-service training, to dig meaningfully into the viscera of educational testing". This underscores the importance of the idea that pre-service teachers need to be provided with an understanding of key assessment concepts and how these can be applied in practice. Once they become

teachers they require plenty of opportunities of being involved in different forms of assessment, whether formative or summative. If this fails to happen their dissociation from assessment can prove detrimental to student learning and can serve to entrench negative attitudes that teachers might have with respect to assessment.

Teacher Involvement

From experience I know that teacher involvement in assessment is an invaluable form of professional development that more practitioners need to engage in. This belief was further reinforced at a workshop I attended as part of the EALTA Conference. The three-day workshop on performance-based testing was facilitated by April Ginther and Nancy Kauper from Purdue University. Ginther and Kauper argued that those wishing to assess a specific population (e.g. a relatively homogenous group of students in a specific context) should ideally develop their own test and their own rating scales. International scales like the CEFR should be used as guidelines in the design of locally developed scales rather than being adopted without any adaptation for the needs of the target population. A scale needs to be developed to suit the needs and range of abilities of a particular population operating in a specific context. A rating scale is based on a description of the typical behaviours of the target population in terms of the construct and its categories. Hence, the design of the scale should ideally be data-driven, i.e. the categories, levels and descriptors are based on a broad range of performance samples produced by the target population. Given their knowledge of the cohort, content and context, teachers are well placed to develop such a rating scale. If teacher education were to equip practitioners with a theoretical understanding of how to design a rating scale, their involvement in actual test development would be an effective way of enhancing their professional knowledge, skills and beliefs in relation to assessment.

In order for teachers to develop their assessment literacy it is important that they are involved

in partnerships that are horizontal in nature rather than top-down. Teachers need to develop assessment literacy through actual practice and collaboration. This can be achieved through teachers' involvement in rating and rater training. At the workshop, Ginther and Kauper suggested that it is considered best practice for teachers to be raters. By expecting teachers to work as raters one ensures that they have a stake in the success of an assessment programme. Training should enable teachers to form a community of raters and ensure high levels of inter-rater reliability. If raters do not understand the concept of reliability and how a scale's reliability coefficient works then this would be detrimental to the test and its candidates. By understanding a statistical measure like the Spearman coefficient, raters are able to compare their current performance against past performances and against that of other raters. One of the goals of training is to enable raters to apply the scale similarly and consistently. Hence, it is very important for raters to discuss relevant assessment issues during training. It is also important to apprentice novice raters to work with experienced raters so that they learn how to use the scale appropriately. By following rater training and

being involved in performance rating, teachers master a significant set of knowledge and skills and develop their beliefs about assessment. They would be able to transfer what they learn to classroom practice and stop seeing assessment as an extraneous phenomenon that causes them to be anxiety-ridden.

References

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