

A Study on the Construction of Language Assessment Literacy of English Teachers in Pre-Service Secondary Schools in Ethnic Areas

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate and analyze the current situation of language assessment literacy of English teachers in pre-service secondary schools in ethnic areas, and understand the actual situation of language assessment literacy of English teachers in pre-service secondary schools in ethnic areas. Fifty-one students from class 1 grade 2019, and five master students in the School of Foreign Languages of Qiannan Normal College for Nationalities were invited to investigate the problems of pre-service secondary school English teachers in terms of assessment literacy with the help of questionnaire and interview methods. In view of this, the author proposes corresponding strategies and ways to construct and enhance teachers' language assessment literacy in order to improve the language assessment literacy of pre-service secondary school English teachers in ethnic areas, thus contributing to the quality of English education and teaching in secondary schools in ethnic areas.

1. Introduction

Assessment has long played a major role worldwide. In the 21st century, with the transformation of education, the way of educational assessment has also undergone a profound change, which is, from the traditional culture of testing to a culture of assessment aimed at facilitating teaching and learning. The assessment for learning advocated by the new curriculum reform has placed new demands on the assessment literacy level of EFL teachers in basic education. In this case, domestic research on teachers' language assessment literacy has focused on topics related to the construction of a framework for teacher assessment literacy, the overall level of regional teacher assessment literacy, and language testing and evaluation curricula. However, few studies have explored the language assessment literacy of English teachers in pre-service secondary schools in ethnic areas.

In contrast to other groups of English teachers, pre-service secondary English teachers, here referred as teacher-training English majors, are at the beginning of their teaching careers, a period that is distinctly unique. That is, they have little teaching experience and are constantly adapting to the transition from student to teacher status, which may have an impact on the language evaluation capability of them. Therefore, it is of practical significance to examine the current state of language

evaluation capability of those students themselves.

Focusing on teacher English majors' language assessment, this paper uses a combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to investigate the level of English majors' language assessment literacy and factors that influence the development of their language assessment literacy. Based on the combing of related literature, this study distributed questionnaires to pedagogical English majors as the research subjects and invited five master students to conduct semi-structured interviews.

2. Overview of Language Assessment Literacy

2.1 Assessment Literacy

The concept of “assessment literacy” was first introduced by Rick Stiggins in 1991 in an article entitled “Assessment Literacy”. According to Stiggins (1991), assessment literacy includes teachers' understanding of what assessment methods to use and when to use them in order to collect reliable information or data on student performance. He believes that assessment literacy scholars should know the difference between reasonable and unreasonable assessments; educators with assessment literacy, such as teachers, principals, curriculum directors or supervisors, should understand what they are assessing, why they are assessing it, how best to assess interest achievement, how to generate a sample of good performance, what problems may arise, and how to prevent problems before they occur when conducting any assessment. Although the term assessment literacy was originally coined by Stiggins as an understanding of the principles of sound assessment, it was not formally accepted by the language testing field until two decades later. Language testing expert Lynda Taylor presented a detailed description and discussion of measuring literacy in 2013, drawing attention to this area. Paterno (2001) defines AL as “knowledge of the basic principles of sound assessment practice, including terminology, the development and use of assessment methods and techniques, familiarity with assessment quality standards, and familiarity with alternatives to traditional learning measurement” (Paterno, 2001). The concept of assessment literacy is not a new one. Starting with Lado (1961), a number of language testing experts have been working to familiarize stakeholders, especially language teachers, with language testing. However, the conceptualization of language assessment literacy is just a beginning, and research on language assessment literacy is still in its infancy (Fulcher, 2012). The ability to define assessment literacy has expanded greatly in recent years, which is consistent with the shift from language testing to social dimensions (Mc Namara & Coever, 2006).

2.2 Language Assessment Literacy

Boyles (2005) defines language assessment literacy as language teacher's understanding of the principles and practices of language testing. She believes that in the classroom, language teachers need a tool to analyze and reflect on test data to make sound decisions. Being equipped with language assessment literacy could not only help language teachers find the right assessment method for certain purposes, but also improve instruction by properly analyzing test data to prevent unexpected negative backlash from tests. In his online survey, Fulcher (2012) defines language assessment literacy as the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to design, develop, maintain, or evaluate large-scale standardized and/or classroom-based tests, and familiarity with the testing process, and an awareness of the principles and concepts that guide and support practice, including ethical and normative practice. Place knowledge, skills, processes, principles, and concepts within a broader framework of competencies in historical, social, political, and philosophical domains, it could help understand why practices emerge as they do and to assess the

role and impact of testing on society, institutions, and individuals (p. 125). Inbar-Lourie's definition (2008b) views LAL as containing elements that measure literacy and are specific to language. She argues that in order to be literate in language assessment, one needs to understand formative and summative testing and assessment methods, interpret student scores, and understand the complexities of validity and reliability, including the current tensions that question the application of traditional psychometric methods. Teacher-based assessment, or language assessment literacy, requires that teachers not only understand the tools and processes used to assess students' language proficiency, but also that they give sound feedback to help learners achieve their goals more effectively. Taylor (2009) provides a detailed discussion of language assessment literacy. She reviews efforts to promote understanding of assessment in applied linguistics as well as in education and society. With testing and assessment booming worldwide and a growing lay audience involved in language assessment, language testing and assessment is becoming more professional and the importance of assessment literacy is being emphasized more than ever. Perceptions of the types of knowledge and understanding of measured literacy have changed (Davis, 2008a; Bailey and Brown, 1996; Brown and Bailey, 2008; McNamara and Rover, 2006; Inbar-Lourie, 2013). Currently, assessment literacy training is considered to require a balance of technical knowledge, practical skills, theoretical knowledge, and understanding of principles in the context of a thorough understanding of the role and function of assessment in education and society. Improving the assessment literacy of language test developers, test users, and other stakeholders (especially in the classroom), teachers and other educators offer increased opportunities for personal professional development (Hamp-Lyons, 2008) as well as professionalization of the field as a whole. It helps to reduce the shortcomings of inappropriate language assessment practices (Taylor, 2009).

2.3 Definition of Language Assessment Literacy

Foreign experts have defined language assessment literacy at three levels: practice, principle, and environment. This study discusses frontline English teachers' language assessment literacy since it is not mentioned in the above overview. The most comprehensive and systematic definition is provided by Dunlai Lin (2019), who states that language assessment literacy is defined as having a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the language learning being taught, possessing basic knowledge, skills and abilities to design, developing or assess language classroom assessments, being familiar with the language assessment process, and being aware of the principles and concepts behind language assessment practices. Also, it includes being able to actively involve learners in the language assessment process, being able to use appropriate feedback to effectively enable learners to set and achieve learning goals, and having a good understanding of the role and function of language assessment in a given teaching and learning environment. Mr. Lin fully demonstrated the connotation of English teachers' language assessment literacy and also argued the relationship between language assessment literacy and teachers' professional competence and the important role of it.

3. The Current Situation of English Teachers' Language Assessment Literacy in Pre-Service Secondary Schools

3.1 Subjects of the Study

The target population of this research survey was Fifty-one students from class 1 grade 2019 and five master students in the School of Foreign Languages of Qiannan Normal College for Nationalities. Fifty-one questionnaires were distributed, and 48 were returned.

3.2 Research Methodology

The data collection instruments for this study were questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire design was developed based on previous related studies, relevant literature and interviews with some secondary school teachers.

3.3 Research Results and Analysis

Through the analysis of the collected data, this paper tries to explore current situation of language assessment literacy, and the main problems and difficulties faced by English teachers in pre-service secondary schools in ethnic areas.

3.3.1 Level of Professional Knowledge

There is an interdependent and mutually influential relationship between English testing and teaching. The teaching objectives play a decisive role in teaching, which determines the content and teaching methods no matter if the teaching objectives are achieved or if testing as a means of evaluation being considered as requirements. Subjects acquired theories and knowledge related to testing and evaluation after taking a semester-long course which named Measurement and Evaluation of English Language Teaching. As shown in Table 1, the pre-service secondary English teachers in the entire study sample did not have low self-ratings of their own level of expertise, with the top three being item 12, *I understand what is the reliability of a test or evaluation*, Item 13 *I understand what is the validity of test evaluation* (both mean 3.563) and item 4 *I understand what is student self-assessment and peer assessment* (both mean 3.458).

Table 1 Pre-Service Secondary English Teachers' Self-Evaluation of Their Own Professional Knowledge Level

Questions	Sample size	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Median
1	48	1.000	4.000	2.771	0.722	3.000
2	48	1.000	5.000	3.083	0.767	3.000
3	48	1.000	5.000	3.083	0.821	3.000
4	48	1.000	5.000	3.458	0.944	3.000
5	48	1.000	5.000	3.021	0.785	3.000
6	48	1.000	5.000	2.938	0.885	3.000
7	48	1.000	5.000	2.896	0.973	3.000
8	48	1.000	5.000	3.104	0.881	3.000
9	48	1.000	5.000	3.000	0.851	3.000
10	48	1.000	4.000	2.875	0.890	3.000
11	48	1.000	4.000	2.792	0.849	3.000
12	48	1.000	5.000	3.563	0.965	4.000
13	48	1.000	5.000	3.563	0.897	4.000
14	48	1.000	5.000	2.938	0.932	3.000

3.3.2 Application Skills

For pre-service secondary English teachers, it is important to learn both the theoretical knowledge of foreign language testing and to develop the application skills of assessment. This includes the practice and application of various up-to-date assessment instruments in the teaching and learning process, attention to and improvement of the post-assessment repercussions and impact on students, as well as knowledge of educational psychology and educational teaching techniques. When I taught the course Measurement and Evaluation of English Language Teaching, I asked

students to group themselves and each team produced a set of final exam papers for the course as part of the formative assessment. Each team was given two weeks to prepare, and when the papers were completed, one student from the team was assigned to present and explain the group's papers. The best test paper was selected among the seven groups for the final exam paper. Since most of the students in the subject felt that they had some knowledge of English tests (as can be seen in Table 1), all initially found the papers easy to produce. Some groups either pieced together a set or chose unprofessional materials without combining the teaching content with the test questions, resulting in low reliability and validity, which cannot truly and effectively reflect the students' performance. From Table 2, it is easy to see that pre-service secondary English teachers do not have high self-evaluation of their own application ability. On the one hand, the students' assessment expertise is not solid enough, and on the other hand, they lack practical experience. Therefore, pre-service secondary school English teachers should continuously study relevant professional knowledge and comprehend the content, system and spirit of the English syllabus comprehensively and thoroughly in order to compose high-level and high-quality test questions and make reasonable and scientific tests.

Table 2 Pre-Service Secondary English Teachers' Self-Evaluation of Their Own Application Skills

Questions	Sample size	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Median
15	48	1.000	4.000	2.938	0.885	3.000
16	48	1.000	5.000	3.042	0.922	3.000
17	48	1.000	5.000	3.583	0.919	4.000
18	48	1.000	5.000	3.333	0.996	3.000
19	48	1.000	5.000	2.917	0.895	3.000
20	48	1.000	5.000	2.958	1.031	3.000

3.3.3 Major Problems

The talent cultivation program of the English undergraduate program (teacher training) of the author's school clearly stipulates: having solid professional knowledge of English subjects, language skills and comprehensive application ability, and understanding the connotation of core literacy of English subjects. Be Familiar with the knowledge of Chinese and Western languages and cultures, and with Chinese sentiment and international perspective. Be able to use information technology to optimize English teaching design and improve the quality of classroom teaching and educational assessment. Have strong English education teaching skills and certain teaching and research abilities, and be a facilitator of student learning and development. English Educational Measurement and Evaluation taught by the author is a compulsory course belongs to the educational foundation, 1 credit hour, totaling 18 hours (10 hours of theory and 8 hours of practical training). It is evident that the school allows students to understand and master the basic principles and specific operation methods of language assessment after taking this course, and to have certain professional qualities in order to enable them to improve the level of proposing questions and the quality of examinations in their future teaching practice. So, what is the status of student learning?

Insufficient knowledge of assessment: The study found that of the six M.Ed. students (all of them were secondary school English teachers prior to enrollment) who received semi-structured interviews, considered it necessary to learn theoretical knowledge about language assessment, but only two of them had learned about assessment during their undergraduate studies. Since they had not attended any trainings on assessment and evaluation before or after joining the company, their memory of such knowledge was very vague. The other three people knew a little about diagnostic,

formative, and summative evaluations, which they learned from books and the Internet. Another person mentioned that there are many ways of testing and evaluation in regular teaching: for example, questions in class, assignments after class and weekly quizzes, monthly exams, midterm exams and final exams. However, all this knowledge is accumulated by usual practices.

Poor knowledge of measurement and assessment: The study found that 2 people use some testing methods in their teaching, such as written tests. The test questions are ordered by the school, without the teacher's own-designed questions, and they do not understand how to order it reasonably and scientifically. When the students' test results come out, they will analyze the test situation. In this case, we pay attention to what the main students have mastered, what they have not mastered, and what deficiencies exist, so that we can plan the next step of teaching and adjust our teaching schedule in time. Sometimes parents are told the test results, but they are sent one-on-one. The other four are concerned about the average score and the excellent rate of students and also the low score, which will be reflected in the assessment of priorities and merits. This shows that the teachers do not have a firm grasp of assessment knowledge and are only concerned with superficial phenomena.

The ability to use assessment is not high: Testing is a test of one's own work, and is the basis for adjusting teaching methods. The test or evaluation is like a baton, around which a lot of work is carried out, and the test results are the most important basis for evaluating teachers. The study found that three people mentioned that: in the test, the students had a poor foundation and made very serious errors in writing essays, indicating that the students had poor expression, poor English spelling, insufficient lexical reserves and low reading level. With the amount of errors being deducted, the teaching work could place emphasis on vocabulary teaching, speaking training, etc., while it lacks of qualitative analysis. In the interview, only one person talked about how the assessment of students has changed from a single summative assessment to a focus on formative assessment. Focus on the overall development of the student, try to find the child's strengths, educate their behavior, establish their values and set goals, with goals and ideals being set out, the results will naturally rise. However, what is discussed more among colleagues is students' performance. Such discussions often occur after examinations, and the discussions focus on the top and lagged-behind students, and the teaching focuses on cultivating the best and compensating the poor.

4. Construction of Language Assessment Literacy of Pre-Service Secondary English Teachers

In order to address these aspects, this study proposes the following cultivation paths and approaches.

4.1 Enhancing Independent Learning Ability and Broadening the Knowledge of Language Assessment

The first task for teachers to improve assessment literacy is to enhance their independent learning ability. By reading relevant monographs or textbooks, you will not only acquire knowledge of assessment, but also learn practical assessment solutions for the classroom. For example, make use of rich electronic or online resources to improve your assessment literacy, in the form of courses, cases, lectures, etc., as well as reading journals and magazines related to assessment, such as *Language Testing*, *Foreign Language Testing and Teaching*, *Educational Measurement and Evaluation*, etc. Through reading the literature, you can try to build your own knowledge system and be able to grasp the core and basic content of the literature, and ideally identify problems, question and solve them. In this way, the ability of independent learning can be enhanced and the knowledge of language assessment can be broadened.

4.2 Establish a Joint Training Model of “Ethnic Teacher Training Colleges and Universities - Primary and Secondary Schools”

The primary and secondary school teachers' teaching units agree and take the lead in a joint training model with local ethnic colleges and universities, sending teachers from their own units who have potential and a strong desire to pursue master's degrees to local ethnic teacher training colleges. In addition, it is suggested that primary and secondary school teaching units can allocate English teachers fair management tasks in an effort to give them more energy and time to focus on improving their professional knowledge and teaching skills. Finally, the school should also establish sound regulations for teachers' master's degree programs, so that the rights and interests of the teachers can be protected in a practical way, so that they can study and improve without worries, and return to the school after their studies.

4.3 Establishing a Centralized Training Platform and Forum for Primary and Secondary School English Teachers in the Nationwide Category

In addition to local school conditions and policies, local primary and secondary schools and ethnic teacher training institutions should also form a national platform and forum for focused training classes for primary and secondary school English teachers. Provide English teachers in primary and secondary schools with a wide range of learning materials, including excellent knowledge, advanced ideas, useful professional skills, and ways to improve themselves. Building on a large platform will enable teachers to be forward-looking and innovative in their professional fields.

5. Conclusion

The language assessment literacy of pre-service secondary English teachers should attract more attention than just theoretical research. Teachers themselves should keep up with the times, keep learning and enriching themselves, so that more pre-service secondary English teachers can grasp some assessment concepts and have the practical skills of language assessment.

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