

Language assessment for teachers

A toolkit for teacher development



Language assessment for teachers



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These materials provide an introduction to the topic of language testing and assessment (LTA). In this module we will explore why an understanding of language testing and assessment is important for both teachers and students.

This module is aimed at:

- Teachers of English as a foreign language
- In-service teachers

Overview

- This module provides an introduction to language testing and assessment.
- Testing and assessment play an important role in the lives of both teachers and learners.
- We will explore what is meant by language testing and assessment literacy and why they are important for both teachers and learners.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this module you will have developed:

- an awareness of the importance of testing assessment
- an awareness of the impact of good testing practice on classroom learning
- an awareness of a research project which explored Language Assessment Literacy.

Who is the module written for?

Following Vogt and Tsagari (2014:377) we have adopted this definition of a teacher:

- Someone who is a practising English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher who has undergone regular training to teach English as a foreign language at state or private tertiary institutions, colleges or schools.
- We hope you feel this definition includes you.

The project

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- Now that we have defined how we are using the term teacher we are going to use the following slides to describe a research project which we undertook to explore teacher perceptions of assessment.

The project

- This module, and the others in the toolkit are based on the results of a [research project](#) which investigated language testing and assessment (LTA) knowledge.
- Much research into the topic is based on teachers completing questionnaires which explore training received and perceived training needs - see for example, Fulcher (2012), Hasselgreen, Carlsen and Helness (2004) and Vogt & Tsagari (2014).

The project

- These projects have generated useful insights.
- This project, however, adopted a different approach.
- We conducted interviews, focus group interviews and observations of teaching to understand the importance of LTA for teachers and explore which areas of practice they would like to know more about.
- We hope that the points made by the teachers who participated in the research project will be similar to your needs and concerns as a reader of the toolkit.

Importance of Language Teaching and Assessment knowledge

- Ask yourself – Is it important that teachers are knowledgeable about language teaching and assessment (LTA)?
- Who benefits from teachers being knowledgeable about LTA?



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Commentary

- Teachers need to know how to create fair assessments that provide information about learners' language ability.
- Research conducted in UK schools shows that good assessment practices can increase learner performance.
- The people who benefit most from teachers being knowledgeable about LTA are the students.

'The consequences of uninformed assessment can be losses for students in time, money, motivation and confidence.'
Crusan et al (2016:43)

Commentary

- There have been links made between the quality of teachers' classroom assessments and students' achievements in standardised tests. (Mertler,2009)
- It would seem that teachers can help language learners gain higher scores in standardised tests by being more familiar with LTA.



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Commentary

- So, the main beneficiaries of teachers being knowledgeable about LTA are the learners. Teachers who are able to assess progress and give good feedback will help learners to progress.
- Teachers who can give accurate advice to learners about large-scale standardised tests can prevent students from wasting time and money.
- Learners who get good advice about their progress can make good decisions about how to plan their future learning.

Pressures on teachers

- Do you think teachers are expected to do more work relating to LTA than they used to?
- If so, you are not alone. Three reasons for increased pressure on teachers have been identified by Glenn Fulcher (2012). He thinks that standardised tests have become more important.



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Pressures on teachers

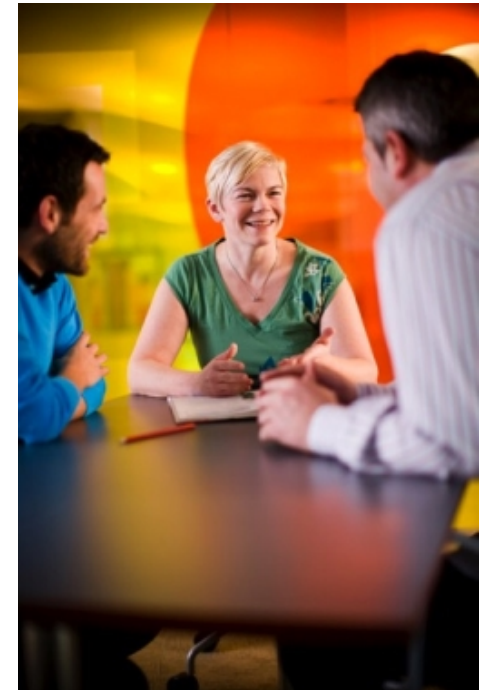
- Programmes such as [PISA](#) and [No child left behind](#) mean children are tested more regularly.
- Furthermore, the use of tests for immigration purposes means that adults are being tested more.
- Finally, in EFL there is more emphasis on the role of assessment in enhancing learning.



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Teacher cognition and LTA

- LTA understanding is more than knowledge about assessment or testing.
- Crusan et al (2016) make the point that assessment is influenced by our experiences both as teachers and learners, our philosophies as teachers and our teaching context.



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Teacher cognition and LTA

- If you want to know more about teacher cognition (what teachers know, think and believe) we recommend you look at the following section of the resources module.
- As teachers we need to reflect on our experiences and consider their impact on our assessment practices.



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Questions for reflection

These questions are intended to be prompts for reflection. You may want to make notes of your answers and discuss them with a colleague.

- Should testing be left to the ‘experts’ such as providers of large-scale standardised tests?
- Do I test my learners in the way I was tested when I was a learner?
- Is my role as a teacher to support learners and not to evaluate them?
- Are tests a ‘necessary evil’?

Commentary

- As everybody's experiences differ it would not be appropriate to offer right answers.
- [Listen to Claire](#) talking about her reflections in response to prompts you have just read.
- Are her points similar to yours? Do you agree or disagree with her?



Tasks

- Cushing Weigle (2007) writes about what teachers need to know to be good assessors of writing. Although our attention is not focussed exclusively on writing, we think that some of her proposed activities are relevant to all EFL teachers.



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Task 1

- Good objectives are needed so that you can measure if they have been achieved or not.
- Take a syllabus from your institution. Read through it and use it as the basis to write learning objectives.
- If you think the objectives used in the syllabus are appropriate, think about tasks you could develop to measure those objectives.

Commentary

- We need to be clear about what we want our students to be able to do at the end of a period of instruction. Objectives help both the learner and the teacher to know what needs to be studied and why.



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Test specifications

- Test specifications spell out what you are attempting to assess. Specifications are often thought of as being important in large scale testing. However, test specifications are also relevant to classroom assessment.
- Test specifications focus on the ability you want to test and why you think it is worth testing. The specifications should describe the task the learners have to complete and how the performances will be scored or evaluated.

Task 2 - review a set of test specifications

- This task has two stages. The first stage is to find and review a set of test specifications. These could come from a large-scale test provider or from your ministry of education.



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- Do they:
 - focus on the ability you want to test?
 - focus on why you think the ability is worth testing?
 - clearly describe the task the learners have to complete?
 - say how the performances will be scored or evaluated?

Task 2 - write some test specifications

- The second stage is to write some test specifications. Take one of the objectives you wrote in task 1. There are some sample test specifications in the appendices of this [document](#). You don't have to read the whole report but we're sure you would find it interesting.
- On page 37 there is guidance on how to read the specifications and what each section means. It provides a good idea of the range of issues which need to be considered when writing a test.
- Use these specifications as a template. As you write the specifications for your learning objective, you should also consider how you would score the task. Scoring rubrics will be covered in later slides in this module.
- If possible, trial your assessment task and see if it works with your students.

Commentary

- We hope that going through the process has helped to clarify your thinking and helped you to appreciate the need for your assessment tasks to have a clear focus. Writing good specifications will save you time in the long term and improve the quality of your assessments.



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Scoring rubrics

- Two types of rubrics are commonly used. One type is called holistic. Here, an overall score or grade is given to a student performance. The performance can be written or spoken. Here is a [holistic scoring](#) rubric.
- The other type is called analytic. Here, a score is given for each aspect of performance. Here is an [analytic scoring](#) rubric.

Commentary

- One type of rubric is not better than the other. They each have their advantages and disadvantages. On the following page there is a task which encourages you to try marking with each type of scale.



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Task 3

- Take one holistic rubric and one analytic rubric and use them to score some students work. If possible complete this task with some colleagues and compare the scores you give.
- Which rubric did you find easiest to use?
- Was it easier to decide on marks at the top or bottom of the range, rather than in the middle?

Commentary

- If you completed this task with colleagues you may have been surprised at the range of marks awarded for the same piece of work.
- You may also have noticed that your colleagues attach different levels of importance to different aspects of student performance.
- If you have completed this task alone you might have gained an idea about the importance of standardising marks.



Importance of feedback

- For assessment to be effective the learners must be made aware of the positive and negative aspects of their work and, crucially, how they can improve it.
- Giving feedback is a skill. Read [this article](#) on giving feedback.
- As Rea-Dickins (2001) notes it is important to be aware that feedback in itself is not formative. Rather it is the quality of the feedback which can make it formative.



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Problems with LTA training

- The teachers we spoke to reported having had very little training in LTA in either their pre-service or in-service training. This matches the results of a number of teacher surveys - see for example Fulcher (2012), Hasselgreen, Carlsen and Helness (2004) and Vogt & Tsagari (2014).
- Some teachers may find the nature of the training they have received to be off-putting. Crusan et al (2016) write about the problems of LTA training through lectures. The solution to this problem, according to them, is to make practical links for teachers between good assessment practices and student learning.

The importance of LTA



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- How much of your time as a teacher do you spend assessing learners or being involved in assessment related activities?
- How much time do you think the typical teacher spends on assessment or assessment related activities?
- The answer on the next slide may surprise you.

The importance of LTA

- The answer which has been reported is one third to a half of the teacher's time (Coombe, Troudi, and Al-Hamly, 2012)
- Does that answer surprise you?
- How does it compare with your experience?
- We think that this shows the importance of LTA literacy. If teachers are spending half their time on assessment then it is important that teachers have the knowledge they need to undertake this activity effectively.

The importance of LTA

- If teachers spend so much time on assessment why are some teachers resistant to engaging with LTA issues?
- Reflect on possible reasons why this might be so.



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Commentary

- Perhaps some teachers are afraid of assessment or perhaps some teachers feel that writing assessments is someone else's job.
- It has been argued that lack of interest may be due to teachers having insufficient resources. (Coombe et al, 2012)
- Teachers may also feel that their training has not prepared them to engage in LTA.



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Commentary

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- The teachers we spoke to and those who have taken part in numerous other studies all reported that LTA was not part of their training. It is not surprising if teachers avoid a topic which they feel they have not received adequate training in.

Terminology quiz



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- Here is a quick quiz to check your understanding of some of the terminology used in this module.

Match the term to the definition

- Teacher cognition
- Test specifications
- Holistic Scoring Rubric
- Analytic Scoring rubric
- A guide to giving a score to each aspect of student performance.
- What teachers know, think and believe.
- A document where you spell out what you are assessing.
- A guide to giving an overall score or grade to student performance.

Here are the answers

- Teacher cognition - What teachers know, think and believe.
- Test specifications - A document where you spell out what you are assessing.
- Holistic Scoring Rubric - A guide to giving an overall score or grade to student performance.
- Analytic Scoring rubric - A guide to giving a score to each aspect of student performance.

Conclusions

- We have shown that being knowledgeable about LTA is important for both teachers and learners.
- By improving levels of LTA knowledge amongst teachers we are helping students to achieve more.
- We hope you have enjoyed this module and will now look at the other toolkits.



What next?

You have now finished these materials on LTA. We hope you have found them useful and enjoyable. If you are interested in learning more about assessment, please look at our other materials on:

- Assessment for Learning
- Assessing level and CEFR
- Assessing young learners
- Assessment resources



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