

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21009/ijlecr.v9i1.33032>

E-ISSN: 2461-131x

P-ISSN: 2406-8586

Received: 13 January 2023

Revised: 30 May 2023

Accepted: 31 May 2023

Published: 1 June 2023

## Language Assessment Literacy: Cases of Pre-Service English Teachers

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### ABSTRACT

*Language assessment literacy is a key area for researchers or anyone with an interest in improving the quality of teaching. A good understanding of the development of assessment instruments is very important in the learning process. The aims of the study are to analyze to what extent of pre-service English teachers are academically and professionally prepared to carry out tasks related to assessing students' language skills and to analyze to what extent and how pre-service English teachers perceive language assessment literacy in their teaching practice. This study uses a qualitative method in which interviews are used to collect data. Interviews were conducted with 20 pre-service English teachers from the Jenderal Soedirman University, English Education Department. The interview questions were developed to incorporate the eight dimensions of language assessment literacy. The results of the study show that academic experience in terms of attending formal education and professional training is very necessary for pre-service teachers. In addition, it is important for prospective English teachers to understand not only the concept of assessment in the teaching process, but understanding the skills to achieve learning objectives through an assessment process using technology.*

**Keywords:** *language assessment literacy, English language teaching, pre-service teachers*

### INTRODUCTION

The need for qualified teachers will continue to increase along with the times. One of the most important issues in improving teachers' quality is to look at the language assessment literacy skills for teachers as part of mapping for teachers' literacy skills. Baker & Riches (2017) explain that assessment literacy for teachers is one of the considerations for making educational policies and interesting study materials to be associated with their influence on the learning process. Furthermore, Lam (2015) explains that studies related to language assessment literacy will still continue to develop, especially in terms of the various aspects that influence it, how it is conceptualized and how it can be developed. In the context of language assessment literacy, many discussions have been generated particularly in investigating parameters related to the specific knowledge, abilities and principles needed to define language assessment literacy (Giraldo, 2018). Not much different, teachers should have literacy skills to support the learning process so that the learning process can run well (Ekawati, 2022). Therefore, language assessment literacy for teachers has an important role in capturing the ability of teachers to develop good instruments to measure students' language skills mastery especially language aspects being taught in the classroom.

The education of pre-service English teachers should prepare them to get ready as professional teachers. One of the teacher's main tasks is to be directly involved in improving the language skills of their students. Pre-service teachers will later have responsibility for developing test instruments which are used to assess language proficiency abilities, but the concept of developing assessment literacy that must be possessed by a teacher has never been important because it is still an area that has not been properly touched and discussed. Research conducted by Taylor (2009) related to the identification of language assessment literacy levels based on the role of stakeholders. Additionally, Taylor outlines profiles for four different stakeholder groups. They are: test makers, class teachers, university administrators, and professional language testers. These four profiles are explained based eight dimensions of language assessment literacy. They are theoretical knowledge, technical skills, principles and concepts, language pedagogy, sociocultural values, local practices, personal beliefs and attitudes, and scoring and decision making. In line with the identification of language literacy ability levels, Herrera & Macías (2015) have called for (Colombian) language teachers to improve their language assessment literacy skills. The author argues that language assessment literacy is necessary among English teachers and pre-service teachers.

Various kinds of studies have been conducted related to language assessment literacy, that teachers have an important role in the process of assessing language skills. Teachers who have good language assessment literacy are able to demonstrate the ability to assess language learning. In contrast, teachers who have poor language assessment literacy skills will have problems in assessment practice. Giraldo (2021) explains that there is an urgency to see language assessment literacy level possessed by teachers because they are involved in collecting data on students' language abilities. The provision of training is urgently needed to increase language assessment literacy for teachers, providing a good understanding of the concept of language assessment literacy and how language assessment literacy is interpreted in an educational context (Coombe et al., 2020). In addition, Sevimeh-Sahin & Subasi (2019) explain that exploring current issues related to language assessment literacy can provide information about what is known, existing gaps, challenges faced and what needs to be done in the future regarding language assessment literacy for teachers. Furthermore, studies related to language assessment literacy are also directed to include identifying new things in the concept of language assessment literacy for teachers and how this is practiced in the learning process. However, there is still little known related to language assessment literacy for pre-service English teachers. Researcher is interested in seeing the level of language assessment literacy so that it can provide important information in assessing the ability of pre-service English teachers in designing English language assessment instruments. For this reason, in this study the formulation of the problem to be answered is:

1. How are prospective English teachers academically and professionally prepared to carry out tasks related to the assessment of students' language skills?
2. How do pre-service English teachers view language literacy assessment in their teaching practice?

### ***Literacy***

Literacy is one of the most frequently used terminologies in the world of education. Literacy is seen in general as the ability to read and write (Rintaningrum, 2009). Furthermore, the notion of literacy continues to develop these days. OECD (2013) explains that literacy is an individual's ability to maximize written information to help achieving individual goals. Therefore, literacy is a reflection of a person's ability to process the information they have to support all activities in life.

### ***Assessment Literacy***

Assessment literacy is an extension of knowledge and skills that teachers and other policy makers should have. Historically, assessment literacy has been one of the media for monitoring, recording, improving, and reporting students' learning. The urgency related to how assessment has influence on teaching, learning and curriculum increases over time (Brookhart, 2011). Therefore, assessment literacy becomes strategic in influencing many parties, one of which is the policy makers.

Assessment literacy in education was originally carried out by the American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education and National Education Association (1990) in Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students. The association believes the guidelines are needed to help teachers become aware of assessment in and out of the classroom context. These guidelines are divided into two categories. The first category deals with instructions; teachers must be able to select, design, and evaluate valid assessments for positive effects on learning, teaching, and schools. The second category is related to test use and test results; teachers are expected to know when assessments are used appropriately and know how to properly communicate the results of these assessments to various stakeholders.

Furthermore, Stiggins (1995) uses the term assessment literacy to include the knowledge and skills that stakeholders such as teachers and school administrators must have about assessment. In line with this, Propham (2009) explains that literacy assessment includes reliability knowledge, test content validity, fairness, development of open and closed tests, use of alternative assessments such as portfolios, formative assessment, preparation of student tests, and assessment of students' English skills. In addition, literacy assessment is needed so that teachers become aware of the strategic function of tests in language learning.

### ***Language Assessment Literacy***

Language assessment literacy is very important for language teachers as well as other stakeholders in understanding In general, language testing knowledge, principles, and skills are known as language assessment literacy (Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012; Malone, 2008). Assessment literacy has largely been defined as "teachers' understanding of the assessment process as well as their capacity to design assessment, develop adequate criteria for making valid judgments on the quality of student performance, and understand and act on information gathered through assessment" (Hay & Penney, 2013). However, the language constructed in language assessment literacy is different from its universal form, testing literacy (Giraldo, 2018). Therefore, language assessment literacy combines language knowledge, principles, and language testing skills (Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012; Inbar-Lourie, 2013). For this article, language assessment literacy is defined as the familiarity of language teachers and pre-service language teachers with the basic ideas of testing, the ability to apply these ideas in classroom teaching, and the capacity to perform tasks related to language assessment (Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Melone, 2013; Taylor, 2009).

Language assessment literacy is very important for pre-service English teachers as well as other stakeholders in understanding the scope of the field of education and teaching (Taylor, 2009). However, Scarino (2013) argues that teachers and pre-service English teachers are the most important of all stakeholders because they are direct users of tests. Unfortunately, some experienced teachers do not have adequate assessment knowledge (Crusana, et al., 2016). A study by Tzagari & Vogt (2017) found that the sample of teachers who were the object of study were not ready to carry out assessment-related tasks because they did not receive sufficient academic support from teacher education programs. As a result, they adhere to the appraisal

practices of their mentors or peers. In this regard, Tsagari & Vogt (2017) note that practices such as “test as you are tested” or on-the-job learning” stifle teacher development and create the possibility of not applying “published knowledge.” This understanding is partly supported by the study Melone (2013) conducted in the context of foreign language in the United States, who found that language teachers were interested in developing proficiency using assessment tools, unlike their partners, whose language testers focused on accurately understanding the theoretical aspects of assessment. In sum, Jeong (2013) concluded that teachers and pre-service teachers with a background of not having the ability to test language skills put less emphasis on test theory compared to teachers and pre-service teachers with background of having the ability to test language skills. An important implication of Jeong's study is that teaching outcomes of the course will vary depending on the test or non-test background of the instructors. These studies show the importance of assessment-related training for English teachers and pre-service English teacher.

## **METHOD**

This research design is qualitative in order to gain a deeper understanding of the context and participants, namely prospective teachers. Suwartini et al., (2021) explained that qualitative research with an interpretive approach was carried out to get an overview of certain meanings and behaviors from the perspective of participants who have subjective tendencies. This research aims to:

1. analyze to what extent of pre-service English teachers are academically and professionally prepared to carry out tasks related to assessing students' language skills; and
2. analyze to what extent and how pre-service English teachers perceive language assessment literacy in their teaching practice.

This research was conducted by conducting interviews with the respondents. Questions in the interview were developed by looking at the eight dimensions of language assessment literacy. The eight literacy assessment dimensions of language from Giraldo's (2018) study for language teachers were used as guiding principles in the design of the interview protocol, data collection, and analysis. The eight dimensions (Giraldo, 2018) are categorized in the literacy component of language assessment: knowledge (1. Awareness of applied linguistics; 2. Awareness of theory and concepts; 3. Awareness of own language assessment context), skills (4. Instructional skills; 5. Design skills for language assessments; 6. Skills in educational measurement; 7. Technological skills), and principles (8. Awareness of and action towards critical issues in language assessment). Each of the eight dimensions has a list of descriptors that determine the expectations of the language teacher. Although some of the descriptors for one dimension may overlap with those for another dimension, they are very helpful in identifying what a language teacher with language literacy assessment should know and do.

The purpose of qualitative interviews is to obtain the respondents' interpretations and perceptions rather than simply using them as a source of fact-finding (Warren, 2001). Accordingly, the dimensions described above were used in developing the interview guide for this qualitative study. Detailed descriptors help researcher to generate ideas related to understanding and the opportunities that language assessment literacy can provide. The interview guide is broadly divided into two parts. The first part is designed to investigate participant demographic information, such as biographies and teaching experience. The aim of the second part is to understand the knowledge, skills, and principles of prospective teachers

with regard to language literacy assessment. The respondents of this study were pre-service English teachers from the English Education Department from Jenderal Soedirman University. The pre-service teachers will be interviewed to gather data according to the required topic, totaling 20 persons.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Lack of Academic Knowledge and Professional Training***

After analyzing the results of the interviews, these pre-service English teachers received good teaching related to the assessment of language skills. There is one main course, namely Language Testing and Evaluation. However, pre-service English teachers feel that one course is not enough to facilitate the development of their skills related to language assessment literacy. Respondents felt they needed more comprehensive practice with regard to test instrument development.

Furthermore, the respondents also had never received professional training intended to improve their language assessment literacy skills. Respondents really only learned from the formal education Bachelor level of English Education Department. Therefore, the respondents should be provided with sufficient academic knowledge and professional training to improve their language assessment literacy skills. They also have not had many opportunities to develop independent and comprehensive test instruments in the context of assessing the language skills of the students they teach.

### ***Expertise in Language Test Development***

Respondents' expertise in developing test instruments is certainly related to input from existing colleagues, especially from lecturers, tutor teachers in certain programs and from fellow students. Respondents feel that their academic knowledge is still not sufficient to develop test instruments properly. In this case, one of the participants explained:

In developing the test instrument, there are still many things that I need to learn, especially in terms of the concept of assessing language skills. I searched for references about concepts and examples of assessments from documents provided by tutor teachers and from search engines. I also have many discussions with fellow students about the assessment instrument that I am currently developing. (R5)

Analyzing from this statement, respondents are still not confident to develop assessment instruments independently. Many of the respondents felt the same way. When they want to make an assessment instrument, they still see a lot from the assessment documents from the tutor. They have difficulties in developing assessment instruments for complex language skills such as alternative assessments like portfolios to assess language productive abilities.

Furthermore, the practice carried out by pre-service English teachers is through the Teaching Assistance program which is a part of the *Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka* (MBKM) program in the development of test instruments which are supervised and guided by tutor teachers. Respondents were given the opportunity to develop English language test instruments only for daily tests and midterm exams. However, not all of the assessment instruments they made were approved by the tutor teachers.

### ***Perceptions and Uses of Tests***

Respondents who are pre-service teachers have good understanding of the importance of using tests in monitoring and mapping students' language skills. However, many of them have

not yet practiced alternative assessment. Many of the respondents are still practicing the development of multiple choices model test instruments, essays, filling in gaps in text and compiling sentences into paragraphs. Respondents explained the alternative assessment as follows:

- Researcher : Do you use alternative assessments in assessing the language skills of the students you teach?  
Respondent : I usually give quizzes and tests in class.  
Researcher : Have you ever considered alternative assessments?  
Respondent : Of course, but I have limited time because when I use alternative assessments, it takes me quite a long time. (R3)

Many of the respondents explained that they had experience developing tests directly when teaching in the Teaching Assistance program. In this program, students were only given an effective time of less than 3 months in carrying out practical activities at school. In addition, the respondents were also guided by the tutor teachers to imitate the type of assessment carried out by the teachers of the subject. Therefore, the variety of assessments carried out by students is very limited.

Besides, respondents were limited language assessment literacy skills. Respondents were also not used to giving feedback related to the grades obtained by students. Many respondents have limited communication skills, especially in communicating the input that will be given. In addition, the respondents were also very oriented towards the instructions given by the tutor teachers. The instructions are very oriented towards the national exam which has multiple choices type.

### ***Awareness of Language Assessment***

The discussion related to awareness of language assessment is very closely related to the views of the respondents. Respondents felt that what they were doing was very important for students. Students must understand and know their level of language proficiency in preparation for the national exam. One of the respondents explained.

- I feel that assessment is very important for students. Students can get preliminary information before preparing for the national exam. They can prepare themselves optimally for national exams and pass with maximum scores with the adopted assessment concept. (R12)

The respondents realized that the assessment they carried out was very important for students. However, the researchers found that one of the 'tolerances' that made students also not try their best in daily tests with minimum completeness criteria. This is the minimum criteria that must be obtained by a student for each subject. One of the respondents explained as follows.

- Some students seemed to underestimate the daily tests given by the respondents. The student feels that the respondent will give the *Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal* (KKM) score no matter how low the score obtained by the student. (R14)

Students who underestimated assessment activities in class certainly gave bad impression to respondents. This is because the assessment instrument that is made certainly uses the energy, time and even the competence possessed by the respondents but is not appreciated by students. Even so, the respondents who consisted of pre-service English teachers did not give

up and continued to give their best performance as pre-service English teachers. They feel they have a moral responsibility to form linguistic competence, especially English, from the students they teach.

The respondents realized that it was important to make an English language test instrument that was appropriate to the topic being studied and according to the educational level of the students they taught. They realize that the ability to manufacture test instruments is still limited. They still need a lot of experience and opportunities to develop test instruments independently. They also realize that test instrument development training is also urgently needed to increase knowledge about assessment starting from mainstream and alternative assessments to assess English language skills.

To answer the first question in this study, the researcher found that the interviewed pre-service English teachers still needed academic experience and training to be able to design good test instruments. Approaches to language assessment literacy, especially input provided by colleagues and peers as well as experience, can hinder the process of developing one's teacher abilities (Tsayari & Vogt, 2017). The examples given in this study show that teachers must be able to demonstrate their ability to develop test instruments as part of the language assessment literacy. In addition, pre-service English teachers also have to attend a lot of formal training classes related to the development of assessment instruments so that they can become skilled test developers. Therefore, language assessment literacy of pre-service English teachers certainly still requires a long process which must go through.

The second question in this study, the researcher saw that the understanding of the purpose of the assessment from pre-service English teachers was quite good. Pre-service English teachers also see that the national exam is an aspect to be considered regarding the type of assessment to be made so that students feel familiar with the type of assessment used. However, pre-service teachers also feel compelled to develop alternative assessment instruments to monitor students' English proficiency. In line with this, Koh et al., (2018) explained that teachers who have good language assessment literacy are certainly able to improve the quality of teaching in the classroom and later provide opportunities for students to learn high-level skills from the language being studied. Therefore, the teacher's language assessment literacy becomes a benchmark for the quality of learning that is carried out formally and it is necessary to carry out periodic assessments of the teacher's language assessment literacy skills.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study analyzes the language assessment literacy skills in a small sample and may not be representative and cannot be generalized results. The results of this study show that pre-service teachers still need a variety of academic experiences ranging from formal learning to practical experience to demonstrate the ability to develop language assessment instruments. Furthermore, pre-service teachers also have an understanding of assessment quite well. This must be maintained by continuing to monitor the language assessment literacy skills of pre-service teachers so that they are ready to go into the place where they will work later like school and teach English to students professionally. Pre-service teachers also need knowledge, understanding of assessment principles and proficiency in language assessment. They also need an understanding to apply these skills in the teaching English environment.

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