

A MISSING LINK OF THE CURRICULUM: WHY DO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINERS IN VIETNAM NEED LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT LITERACY?

Luu Thi Kim Nhung and Cao Thi Hong Phuong*

Faculty of English, Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam

Abstract. This current study explored the status quo of language assessment literacy among Vietnamese language teacher trainers who carried out the mission of the assessment reform set by the National Foreign Languages Project. Inspired and informed by Gu's (2012) [1] core components of teachers' assessment that language teachers should develop, this study collected interview data from 16 teacher trainers of English who were at the forefront of the reform. Document analysis of policy guidelines and curricula was employed. Theme-based analysis was used to analyze the data through Nvivo 12 software to measure the perceived understanding of assessment literacy among the participants. Major findings revealed that the majority of participating language teachers employed assessment of learning (summative assessment or tests) during their teaching. Little attention was paid to assessment for learning (formative assessment) practices. It is suggested that these teacher trainers may lack core components of language assessment literacy, which include teachers' understanding of language competence and curriculum. For language teacher trainers to improve their assessment literacy, consistent and sustained training should be needed from both top-down and bottom-up processes. The authors argue that there is a missing link in the curriculum, which requires stakeholders, including English teacher trainers, and English teachers to be assessment literate. Thus they can understand the theoretical issues of assessment and know how to employ these issues in practice, thereby better implementing the curriculum.

Keywords: language assessment literacy, Vietnam, English teacher trainers, curriculum 2018.

1. Introduction

For the last two decades, Vietnam has invested a great deal of financial and human resources in improving English language proficiency among its population across educational sectors, so that the country can better integrate with its ASEAN counterparts (Nguyen & Gu, 2020) [2]. Particularly, the Vietnam Foreign Languages Project was launched to carry out the mission. It envisions that by 2025, beyond graduation, tertiary students will have been able to communicate with their work partners from multicultural and multinational environments (MOET, 2013, 2014, 2021) [3,4,5]. One among seven

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Contact Cao Thi Hong Phuong, email: hongphuongct@hnue.edu.vn

critical tasks are to strengthen language teachers' assessment literacy to help boost this overall aim (MOET, 2018) [6]. Although existing research has shown that teachers' language assessment literacy plays a significant role in helping language learners improve their language competency (Gu, 2020) [7], there is a paucity of research line on exploring Vietnamese in-service EFL teachers' assessment literacy (Nguyen, 2019) [8]. This study was carried out to address the gap by providing a status quo of assessment literacy among English language teacher trainers working at four leading teacher training universities in Vietnam.

2. Content

2.1. Theoretical background

To enhance the teaching quality or improve language competency, English language teachers need to strengthen their knowledge and abilities in language assessment (Koh, 2011, 2014; Koh et al., 2018) [9,10], or assessment literacy (AL). This is because AL is considered a critical agent for driving teachers' good teaching practices. The significance of teachers' assessment literacy has been highlighted, however, this domain has witnessed a lack of attention to it by assessment researchers (Inbar-Lourie & Levi, 2020; Gu, 2020) [11,7]. So far, not much has been done to examine language teacher assessment literacy. Coombs et al, (2022) [12] also expressed their concern for this lack of attention in language teaching and called for an emphasis on helping language teachers to use assessment to improve their teaching practices. Based on teachers' capacities to use assessment information to support learning, students can identify their learning gaps. Students then know what to do to close these gaps towards the intended curriculum goals. To achieve this, English language teachers, especially teacher trainers need to be equipped with core components of assessment literacy.

Several frameworks have been proposed in terms of basic components of assessment literacy in general education. Stiggins (2002) [13] proposed four areas for teachers to be assessment capable: (1) what to assess, (2) why to assess, (3) how to assess, and (4) how to prevent negative washback of assessment. Stiggins (2002) [13] suggested that teachers need knowledge and skills in assessment, which include testing and classroom assessment. Along this line, McMillan (2000) [14] developed eleven fundamental principles of assessment literacy, such as assessment theories, validity, ethics, fairness, feasibility, technology incorporation, and multiple methods. According to these two frameworks, teachers need an understanding of different types of assessment, assessment quality, and ethical issues in both assessment and testing.

Brookhart (2001) [15], however, recognized a lack of formative assessment in the previous frameworks; therefore, he went on to propose eleven assessment skills that acknowledged the importance of formative assessment. These skills include (1) pedagogical content knowledge, (2) standards and curriculum goals, (3) clarifying curriculum targets to the students, (4) using available assessment tools, (5) engaging students in the assessment process, (6) providing effective provide effective on student work. The author also added that (7) quantifying student performance into useful information for the decision-making process, (8) interpreting assessment results, (9) administering the external assessment, (10) carrying out their legal responsibilities and (11) ethics in assessment work to ensure that assessment decisions should result in

improved student learning and growth. Brookhart's (2001) [15] list, so far, overcomes a lack of focus on formative assessment and emphasises that pedagogical content knowledge in teachers' assessment literacy is significant.

Teachers' assessment literacy in general education has been researched for the last three decades, language assessment rather lagged in this domain. Recognizing this lack, Inbar-Lourie and Donitsa-Schmidt (2009) [16] introduced the term language assessment literacy into the body of literature on language education. These authors advocated assessment for learning or formative assessment, as other assessment researchers around the world (Leung & Rea-Dickins, 2007; Li & Gu, 2023; Ratnam & Tharu, 2018; Van der Kleij et al., 2018) [17, 18, 19, 20] and called for a reformulation of the required competencies needed for using assessment.

Elder and Davies (2006) [21] was among the pioneer researchers to define what language assessment literacy includes. They pointed out that knowledge, skills, and principles in language testing and assessment had to be incorporated into language curricula. However, this framework seems to put more emphasis in measurement theory such as test validation and test analysis. This framework does not adequately pay attention to feedback for enhancing teaching and learning. Inbar- Inbar-Lourie and Levi (2020) [11] continued their work and pointed out the shift from a testing culture to an assessment culture to emphasize the importance of assessment for learning in language programs.

Corroborating earlier frameworks of language teachers' assessment literacy, Gu (2012) [1] identified essential components for language teachers: (1) pedagogical content knowledge, (2) different types of assessment, (3) understanding of assessment qualities, (4) beliefs in testing and assessment, and (5) ethical issues in testing and assessment. In line with other researchers, Gu stresses that pedagogical content knowledge and different types of assessment play a significant part in helping teachers use language assessment to better carry out language curriculum.

2.2. Research questions

The rationale behind this study is twofold. First, because of the increase in the standard movements, educational contexts, including Vietnam are likely to impose external benchmarks using standardized testing to assess student language competence (Klenowski, 2009) [22]. The knowledge to prepare students for their language communicative competency is pedagogically relevant to language assessment literacy. Second, as educational systems around the world have shifted from a testing culture to an assessment culture, understanding teacher assessment literacy would be of importance, especially in Vietnamese language classrooms, where an examination-driven culture is predominant (Cao, 2023) [23]. As Davison and Leung (2009) [24] argued, more emphasis should be put on how teachers can understand and use assessment to enhance learning. Therefore, there is a pressing need to examine language teacher trainers' assessment of literacy.

Given that English language teacher trainers in Vietnam are expected to acquire and use assessment knowledge and skills in implementing the reform (MOET, 2018) [16], teachers' confidence in assessment literacy may impede or facilitate their assessment practices. To guarantee the successful implementation of the reform, it is essential to understand the status quo of the English language teachers' assessment literacy.

As mentioned earlier, the authors specifically explored whether the teacher trainer participants working at four leading teacher training universities across Vietnam are sufficiently assessment-literate in terms of pedagogical content knowledge and types of assessment to carry out the requirements of the curriculum. How these teacher trainers can try out assessments for learning or formative assessment or whether these participants further require professional training in aligning teaching and assessment? Because of this, we address the following questions in this study.

1. How do teacher trainers perceive language assessment literacy in terms of pedagogical content knowledge and types of assessment, according to their perspectives?
2. Which aspect(s) of language assessment literacy do the participants need further improvement?

2.3. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this current study builds upon Gu's (2012) [1] confidence level of assessment literacy among language teachers. Among key components, pedagogical content knowledge and different types of assessment are used in our interview protocol (see Appendix A). The reason for adapting Gu's model in this paper is that this model has been validated and fully captures two essential components of language teacher assessment literacy in current literature (Table 1). In terms of pedagogical content knowledge, five areas have been identified (Andrews, 2001) [25], which include knowledge of (1) teaching objectives and curriculum, (2) contextual issues, (3) teaching strategies, (4) students' learning, and (5) knowledge of subject matter. Regarding types of assessment, it is generally agreed that formative assessment or assessment for learning is employed as a practice throughout the learning process to identify students' strengths and weaknesses to help them move closer to the intended targets. Summative assessments or assessments of learning, on the other hand, are typically high-stakes tests and are used to summarise what students have achieved (Cao, 2023; Gu, 2022) [23, 7].

Table 1. Two key components of language teacher assessment literacy

Two key components of LAL	Sub-constructs
Pedagogical content knowledge	(1) Knowledge of teaching strategies
	(2) Knowledge of teaching objectives and curriculum
	(3) Knowledge of contextual issues
	(4) Knowledge of subject matter
	(5) Knowledge of students' learning
Different types of assessment	Summative assessment (tests)
	Formative assessment (practice and process)

2.4. Methodology

2.4.1. Participants

This study was part of a bigger project that examined English language teachers'

confidence in assessment literacy across all language education sectors. For this paper, data were qualitatively collected from 16 English teacher trainers working at four leading teacher training universities in Vietnam. The participants were purposely selected to reflect the geographical profile across the country. There was a total of 2 male and 14 female teacher participants. All participants were voluntarily taking part in our research project. Details of participants and their workplaces are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' Profile

Universities	Participants (N=16)	Position	Years of Teaching	Formal Training in Assessment
University North	Nguyen	Dean	15	Building test banks
	Tran	Lecturer	10	Building test banks
	Le	Lecturer	4	Building test banks
	Dang	Lecturer	5	Online course in assessment
University South	Sara	Dean	18	Building test banks
	Maria	Lecturer	10	Building test banks
	Lina	Lecturer	12	No formal training
	Min	Lecturer	12	Building test banks
University Centre	Lien	Dean	11	Building test banks
	Mai	Lecturer	5	Online course in assessment
	Lan	Lecturer	6	Online course in assessment
	Tien	Lecturer	9	Online course in assessment
University Southwest	Tai	Dean	17	Building test banks
	Tra	Lecturer	19	Building test banks
	Chau	Lecturer	23	Building test banks
	Minh	Lecturer	21	Building test banks

* Pseudonym was used as names of teacher trainer participants and universities

2.4.2. Data Collection Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were employed as a major data collection tool for two main reasons. Firstly, semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility of interview questions (Patton, 2015) [26], making the interviews between the teacher-trainers and the authors more smoothly and creating room for discussion. Secondly, semi-structured interviews also allowed more insights from participants (Patton, 2015) [26]. Because of these features, the authors could ask follow-up questions to gain insights into teachers' confidence in assessment literacy. Apart from semi-structured interviews, documents of the policy guidelines, and curricula, were also collected to triangulate interview data.

2.4.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2021) [27, 28, 29] was used to analyze the semi-structured interview data and documents with six steps. The whole process of data analysis is presented in Figure 1.

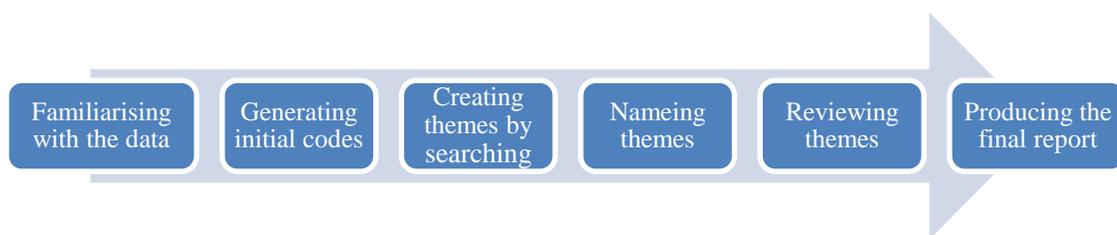


Figure 1. Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013, 2021) theme-based analysis

Taking the six steps of Braun and Clark's (2006, 2013, 2021) [27, 28, 29] approach, the authors familiarised themselves with all audio recordings through organising, transcribing, and translating the whole set of data. A total of 16 recordings with a duration of approximately eight hours were stored safely. The second author transcribed the interviews. For cross-checking, the first author checked all transcriptions and translations used in this paper. The second author then imported all the transcripts in NVivo 12 for coding. The second author assigned initial codes to segments of texts that represented meanings. After that, she searched for themes using NVivo queries. Once the themes were identified, the second author reviewed the themes and asked the first author to double-check. The last two steps were a discussion between the authors to name the themes, and sub-themes, and produce the final report. Major themes are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Coding scheme for Teachers' assessment literacy

Themes	Categories/sub-themes
Teachers' background	Teaching experience
	Qualifications
	Teaching position
Status quo of pedagogical content knowledge	Confidence in teaching strategies
	Lack of knowledge of teaching objectives and curriculum
	Confidence about contextual issues
	Confidence about the subject matter
	Confidence about student learning
Status quo of types of assessment used	Summative assessment as the major focus
	Absence of formative assessment practices
Areas of assessment literacy need improvement	systematic language assessment training in formative assessment and pedagogical content knowledge

2.5. Findings

This section presents major findings in association with the two research questions. The authors begin with the first question by describing the teachers' perceived levels of language teacher assessment literacy in terms of pedagogical content knowledge and types of assessment used.

2.5.1. Perceived levels of language teacher assessment literacy

The findings reveal that most of the participants reported a high level of confidence

about their teaching strategies, contextual issues, subject matter, and student learning, they seemed to lack understanding of teaching objectives and curriculum (see Table 4).

Table 4. Teachers' confidence in pedagogical content knowledge

Categories	No. of participants	Examples
Confidence in teaching strategies	16	innovative teaching methodologies, such as project-based, and task-based
Lack of knowledge of teaching objectives and curriculum	12	Interest in textbooks, and examinations rather than curriculum objectives
Confidence about contextual issues	16	Adaptation to existing facilities
Confidence about the subject matter	13	Understanding of language competence
Confidence about student learning	14	Understanding of students' learning styles, strengths and weaknesses.

As shown in Table 4, all 16 English teacher trainers were confident about their innovative teaching methods that help improve students' language. For example, Nguyen, the dean of University North shared with us:

"Colleagues in my department, and I, have used different innovative teaching methodologies, such as project-based, and task-based language teaching to help boost our language proficiency" (Nguyen, experienced teacher trainer, and dean).

Interestingly, 12 teachers out of 16 were concerned about their lack of understanding of learning objectives and curriculum. The participants seemed to be aware of the general learning objectives and curriculum, they either failed to connect the curriculum with their daily teaching and assessment practices or evaluated whether their teaching had achieved the curriculum requirements.

Tai, the dean working at University Southwest confessed:

"It is a challenge for teachers, including me to understand and use learning objectives and curriculum information in their teaching. They only care about what has been told in the textbook, not the outcomes of the curriculum" (Tai, experienced teacher trainer, dean).

Regarding confidence about social or contextual issues, they were confident in adapting their teaching practices to the school facilities. All participants mentioned that they were able to make use of available facilities to support their teaching and students. In terms of the confidence level of subject matter, 13 participants reported that they understood what communicative competence means, and they made efforts to help their students improve their communicative skills. However, two participants (Le and Min) seemed to confuse communicative competence with students' ability to score well on their tests. For instance, Min told us that he knew "*how to help his students to widen their vocabulary repertoire so that they scored better in their speaking tests*" (Min, experienced teacher trainer, University South). About confidence about student learning, 14 teachers felt confident about their knowledge of student learning. They were aware of students' strengths and weaknesses.

Moving to types of assessment, all 16 participants reported that they mostly focused on summative assessment or tests, although they were aware that they should use formative assessment to improve student learning. Some participants were still confused about the assessment of learning (summative assessment) and assessment for learning (formative assessment). For instance, Minh said:

“I really want to use project work to give my students scores as a way of formative assessment, or assessment for learning, but I can’t do it because of time and large class sizes” (Minh, experienced teacher trainer, University Southwest)

Sara shared the same concern with the authors, stating that, teachers in her faculty need more understanding of assessment. She said:

“Some of my colleagues have been confused formative assessment with tests when they referred mid-terms tests with ongoing assessment or formative assessment. So, if they say they are using formative assessment, I guess, it might be the case that they use mid-term tests. One of the reasons, I think, is because we put too much focus on building test banks and test items, instead of formative assessment” (Sara, University South)

The interview data also show that the interviewees seemed to lack knowledge of formative assessment when they referred to formative assessment as a specific technique.

In summary, the semi-structured interview data suggest that the teacher trainers were considerably confident about pedagogical content knowledge, except for knowledge of curriculum and learning objectives. The answer to the research question one is that the teachers perceived having moderately acquired language assessment literacy and are still far away from attaining a full understanding and use assessment in their classrooms. The reason for this finding perhaps lies in the fact that most participants had official training in developing tests rather than in language assessment.

2.5.2. Aspect(s) of language assessment literacy the participants need further improvement

This section describes areas of language assessment literacy that the participants thought needed further improvement, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Aspect(s) of language assessment literacy the participants need further improvement

Areas need improvement	No. of participants
Knowledge of teaching strategies	0
Knowledge of teaching objectives and curriculum	12
Knowledge of contextual issues	2
Knowledge of the subject matter	15
Knowledge of students’ learning	3
Summative assessment	3
Formative assessment	16

According to Table 5, 12 teachers mentioned that they and their colleagues need further training about learning objectives and curriculum. Fifteen teachers expressed their

need to understand more about the subject matter. This means that they need to improve their knowledge of what language competence may entail. Surprisingly, all participants stated that they need further improvement in formative assessment. These teacher trainers stated that they lacked adequate knowledge to put the theory of assessment into practice. This is perhaps because they did not attend official training courses about assessment in general, and formative assessment, in particular.

For example, Chau shared with us her needs in terms of understanding what language assessment requires:

“We seem to equate tests with assessment in our documents. Whenever we mention assessment, it seems that we think about different types of tests to measure students’ abilities. Therefore, I believe that we should have been trained on how to employ assessment to collect students’ learning to help them improve” (Chau, teacher trainer, University Southwest).

Similarly, Tien, a teacher trainer from the university center told us that he had not understood what formative assessment meant until he attended an online course about classroom-based formative assessment. He used to think that formative assessment was mid-term tests or any type of ongoing test that teachers used to give students scores during their teaching. The findings also show that it is pressing for themselves and their colleagues to learn more about how to use formative assessment in their practice. To do so, they also need to be equipped with theoretical knowledge of formative assessment.

In summary, the findings show that the teacher trainers had a partial understanding of language assessment literacy. There was somewhat of a lack of fundamental knowledge of assessment to inform teaching and learning throughout the data sets. In line with the discussion of research exploring language teachers’ assessment literacy, results reveal that it seems that most studies have found insufficient confidence about AL among the participants.

2.6. Discussion and Implications

The findings from document analysis show that the importance of language assessment literacy is well recognized by different stakeholders from top-down policy levels to classroom practitioners. However, the current assessment situation in the Vietnamese tertiary English language education sector not only shows a mismatch with the objectives of education reforms but also reflects a complex picture, warranting more research into teachers’ assessment literacy and practices in this setting. Vietnamese localization of language assessment from theoretical perspectives and teaching strategies is crucial in classroom implementation. Vietnamese education has long used high-stakes examinations as a means to determine students’ prospects. For example, when formative assessment has been promoted in Vietnamese classrooms to improve teaching and learning, it requires great efforts from different stakeholders. With this in mind, we attempt to suggest several implications for better translation of language assessment literacy into Vietnamese tertiary classrooms, where summative assessment is still dominant.

2.6.1. Implications for Policy

Changes in the Vietnamese education system have been occurring since the latest

issued Open-Door Policy (Doi Moi) in 1986. Vietnamese policymakers have developed specific strategic plans to boost the quality of English teaching and learning in all sectors, including tertiary education. This is reflected in the national policy which states that the English language should be taught to university students. It is important to note that the Vietnamese government not only highlighted the significance of ELT in the tertiary sector but also acknowledged that assessment activities have a role to play in improving the quality of ELT. Therefore, better elaboration of a detailed assessment policy about assessment for learning or formative assessment is required.

2.6.2. Implications for In-service Teacher Training Program

As previously mentioned, teachers are the most crucial agents for transforming assessment into classroom contexts, they need to be assessment literate. Professional learning of the in-service teachers is essential to improve the quality of teacher assessment for learning. Literature also highlights that Vietnamese teachers lack assessment knowledge to conduct feedback in a formative way (Duong et al., 2011) [30]. Research by Yin and Buck (2015) [31] suggests that assessment training programs should be given sufficient time for teachers to absorb knowledge and skills thoroughly. Professional development programs not only build teacher assessment capability to implement assessment innovation but also transform their long-held beliefs of conventional assessing methods. Hence, long-term professional development programs are also needed for in-service teacher assessment-for-learning literacy so that teachers are more capable of the appropriate use of language assessment.

3. Conclusion

Assessment literacy has been considered a highly effective and intriguing way to enhance teaching and learning. In one way, assessment knowledge can consistently enable teachers to modify their instructional plans and practices. In another way, students can use the assessment information to close their learning gaps. More efforts are required to establish a better collaborative relationship between top-down and classroom levels to take up the potential benefits of pedagogical content knowledge, for example. Besides, teachers will need more time and support to further develop language assessment literacy. As such, teacher educators, school administrators, and policymakers should also be required to deeply engage in the policymaking process and reform-based curricula toward assessment for learning.

The findings of this study could serve as a starting point for future research on teachers' professional development in language assessment. However, this study also has some limitations. Firstly, the interview used in this study may not capture existing issues of assessment literacy among the participants. It is essential to use multiple sources of evidence to triangulate the findings. Furthermore, the current study collected mostly interview data, and the results might be biased, which needs future studies employing observations or reflections.

Appendix 1. Teacher Interview Protocol

1. What teaching strategies do you use in your language classrooms? To what extent are you confident about these?
2. Could you please share with me the teaching objectives and curriculum you are currently teaching? To what extent are you confident about this?
3. What do you think about your assessment practices? To what extent are you confident about these?
4. How do you know your students learn? To what extent are you confident about this?
5. To what extent do you think formative assessments are feasible in your teaching context? (e.g., self- and peer-assessment, projects, portfolio assessment, etc.). To what extent are you confident about this?
6. What have you learnt in your professional development programs in terms of assessment?
7. Could you tell me how you assess your students? To what extent are you confident about this?
8. What types of assessment do you use in your teaching?
9. Do you have any recommendations as to how assessment can be done differently in your language classrooms?

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