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## **Studies in Language Assessment**

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- Each table and figure should have a brief explanatory title.
- Table titles should be placed above the table, and figure titles should be placed below the figure.

**SPECIAL ISSUE:**  
**Contextualising language assessment literacy**  
Guest editors: Dina Tsagari & Karin Vogt

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## **Introduction to the Special Issue Contextualising language assessment literacy**

Dina Tsagari, Oslo Metropolitan University  
Karin Vogt, University of Education Heidelberg

Language Assessment Literacy (LAL), a relatively new addition to the discourse of various academic and public domains in recent years, refers to the skills, knowledge, methods and techniques needed by various stakeholders in different capacities to design and carry out effective assessment tasks and to make informed and principled decisions based on assessment data (e.g., Inbar-Lourie, 2008, 2013; Fulcher, 2012; Taylor, 2009, 2013; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). Language teachers, a group of major stakeholders among others, are at the centre of the LAL debate. In many educational systems around the world teachers find it challenging to fully respond to assessment mandates. Research has shown that many factors seem to be playing an important role such as lack of resources (time), large classes, lack of training in LAL, external/societal pressure, and institutional constraints distorting or changing LAL principles (Hasselgreen et al. 2004; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014; Mäkipää, 2021; Alyami, 2022).

In addition, despite the growing body of research accumulated in the field, LAL does not seem to be a straightforward matter. Neither a unanimous definition of the term nor a universally accepted conceptualisation have emerged in the field, and this does not come as a surprise. The concept itself involves several components (Baker & Riches, 2018; Bøhn & Tsagari, 2021; Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Taylor, 2013) while the perspectives of rather diverse stakeholders such as test developers, learners, policy makers or teachers operating in different (working) contexts make it challenging to agree on one widely-accepted definition (Coombe et al., 2020; Lee & Butler, 2020; Tsagari, 2020). For example, teachers' LAL development seems to be a situated activity, located in particular educational contexts, each characterized by assessment practices compatible with the social and pedagogical values and beliefs that the 'school' community upholds, hence the school's assessment culture (Inbar-Lourie, 2008). Recently, studies have begun looking at LAL in particular contexts, drawing attention to the intricacies in examining teachers as assessors and the perceptions and knowledge about learning and assessment they bring to the dynamic LAL acquisition process (Scarino, 2013; Vogt et al., 2020).

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The goal of this special issue is to examine the notion of LAL on a constructive or interpretive epistemological basis, taking into consideration the importance of context. The current issue accommodates high-quality original submissions that address a variety of LAL issues from a theoretical as well as from an empirical point of view. Contributors to the special issue are academics, researchers and professionals in the field of language assessment.

The special issue comprises six linked papers. It opens with a conceptual contribution by Karin Vogt and Dina Tsagari titled 'Language assessment literacy and test validation: Highlighting the role of language teachers'. The paper argues in favour of teachers' important contribution as professional agents to the quality of the validation argument and their LAL at the same time. The paper addresses conceptual issues of LAL on a broader scale in an attempt to embed concepts of LAL in theoretical approaches to validity and explore the role of teacher LAL therein. Starting from well-known theoretical frameworks of validity (e.g., Chalhoub-Deville, 2016; Chalhoub-Deville and O'Sullivan, 2020; Kane, 2013, 2016; Messick, 1989, 1995), the potential contribution of teachers with appropriate LAL levels, in particular, and other exemplary stakeholders is discussed.

The following five papers, focusing on perceived levels of LAL on teachers in higher education and the school sector, inform and expand very well-known conceptualisations of LAL (e.g., Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Taylor 2009, 2013). Additional issues relate to the effectiveness and sustainability of training teachers in LAL. Researching the micro- and macro-assessment culture residing in various educational contexts, the papers also look at the interface between institutional assessment culture, the collaboration of teachers and researchers and the development of teachers' LAL.

More specifically, papers two and three focus on the types of contextual variables identified in teachers' written assessment feedback and the development of rating scales in higher education as part of their assessment literacy trajectory. Kathryn Hill and Ana Maria Ducasse in their paper titled 'Contextual Variables in Written Assessment Feedback in a University-level Spanish program' investigate contextual influences on teacher feedback practices and learner responses respectively. Their study uses Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1979) to analyse data in order to shed light on the 'situated' nature of assessment and explain why feedback interventions are successful in certain settings. Their study found that teacher practices were influenced by perceptions of the learners in addition to task and performance characteristics, institutional policies and practices and by external professional accreditation standards. Also contextual factors, e.g., learner perceptions of teachers, timing and valence of feedback, course level and maturity as a learner, were found to be influential. The study confirms the importance of systematic

reflection on contextual influences in language assessment research. In paper three, Olga Kvasova, Liudmyla Hnapovska, Vira Kalinichenko and Iulia Budas include the notion of context on two levels, namely the educational context of Ukrainian university language teachers and the assessment instrument, a context-specific rating scale for assessing writing. More specifically, their study explored the impact of training in writing assessment on the outcomes and processes university teachers used to develop an analytic rating scale. The study results present a positive impact of the training on teachers' enhanced literacy in writing assessment.

The next three papers draw on results from empirical studies that expand our understanding of what type of LAL stakeholder groups, e.g., teachers, students, testing professionals and researchers operating in different professional and geographical contexts, need to fulfill their assessment roles. The need to cater for local settings when conducting professionalization activities that enhance teachers' LAL is foregrounded in these papers. The results highlight the importance of context in profiling LAL needs as an important precondition, and the types of assessment training offered across stakeholder groups.

Julia Zabalda Delgado and Cristina Rodriguez explore the adult education context in Spain, investigating the extent and profile of LAL in teachers of adult language education, their perception of training received and of their future perceived training needs. The authors contend that changes in the legislative framework related to high-stakes testing have sparked a vivid interest in related LAL training on the basis of a broader assessment knowledge base. Contextual factors become apparent both in the content of the LAL training delivered and the training needs expressed by the teachers involved in the study, who have come to perceive LAL as a vital element of their professional expertise as they have to take a more active role in test development. This is due to an increased offer of training courses. LAL training was thus found to have a beneficial effect on their teaching practice in this particular context. The type of training needs voiced by the language teachers in the Spanish educational sector is again influenced by contextual factors, e.g., their striving to link exams to an international framework like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Amira Shahzadi and Ana Maria Ducasse explore aspects of LAL with teachers of English for Academic Purposes in an English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) context at higher education institutions in Pakistan. In an exploratory case study, the authors used a questionnaire in numerous Pakistani universities, complemented by interviews with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers at one EMI university, and a qualitative deep dive consisting of e.g., document analysis of relevant ELT course outlines as well as interviews. The aim was to investigate the way EAP teachers felt equipped to design language assessment, the main challenges they perceived and

their self-reported training needs for enhanced LAL levels. In this particular context, the authors found a lack of LAL training both on pre-service and on in-service level that would be associated with a lack of effective assessment. Burdened by contextual constraints on effective EAP assessment, despite a certain level of experience-based resilience, teachers tended to separate teaching and assessment, thus potentially lacking understanding of the affordances of assessment for learning and using assessment as a part of teaching. Despite knowledge about basic concepts of assessment, teachers did not seem to consider the social consequences of their assessment practices.

The paper by Henrik Bøhn and Dina Tsagari is an attempt to inform our understanding of the LAL construct. The focus of the study is to investigate how Norwegian EFL teachers understand LAL and to examine the extent to which teachers found Taylor's (2013) LAL model relevant in the Norwegian context. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers (lower and upper secondary levels), the teachers were in agreement with some of Taylor's hypothesized dimensions, e.g., *language pedagogy* but not with others e.g., *test-specific skills*, as these were believed to be less relevant in the local assessment culture that favours an Assessment for Learning (AfL) orientation towards assessment. Interestingly, teachers placed importance on *disciplinary competence* and *formative assessment*. The paper presents a new modified model of LAL that illustrates the contextualized nature of teacher assessment literacy.

The book review by Armin Berger of *Learning-Oriented Language Assessment: Putting Theory into Practice*, edited by Atta Gebriel, completes the special issue. The evolving field of Learning-Oriented Language Assessment is closely connected with LAL and particularly teacher LAL, and therefore is particularly suited for the review section of this issue.

In sum, covering a variety of geographical areas of the world (Australia, Norway, Pakistan, Spain and Ukraine) as well as various professional and instructional settings (e.g., school sector, adult learning and higher education programs), the special issue covers important aspects in an area currently under scrutiny, and becomes the 'venue' of epistemological traffic between researchers in LAL in different parts of the world. The contributions to this volume discuss innovative ways of implementing LAL in various contexts. We are confident that the papers of this special issue will contribute further to the discussions and understanding of the contextualised operations of LAL and that, at the same time, offer an effective answer to teachers' and other stakeholders' LAL needs in our increasingly evolving and fragile world.

We would like to thank our authors for sharing their expertise and experience in language assessment and language assessment literacy, theory and practice. We also hope that this volume will be useful to language assessment scholars, language

practitioners, researchers, examination boards as well as graduate students with an interest in the field.

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