

‘L2 assessment and testing’ teacher education: an exploration of alternative assessment approaches using new technologies

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Abstract. Most Second Language (L2) Teacher Training Assessment and Testing courses focus on testing. Through the development of a Master of Arts (MA) in a computer assisted language learning module (based on a constructivist and ‘practise what you preach’ approach, entailing that the teachers experience firsthand the assessment types they were asked to develop), the instructor/researcher aimed to provide Computer Assisted Language Assessment and Testing (CALAT) teacher education, focusing on classroom assessment. The module was based on (1) current theories and practices; (2) participants’ earlier assessment and testing background experiences as school students, and their assessment and testing experiences and current practices as L2 teachers; (3) participants’ assessment experiences not as L2 teachers but as students of the MA assessment and testing module; (4) participants’ L2 CALAT practising needs; and (5) problem-solving by constructing assessments suitable for their practising needs. This article draws on a small-scale questionnaire, participant in- and on-action reflective journal entries, and webinar chat notes to examine the extent to which these goals were achieved. Data analysis and discussion reveals that, the hands-on, technology-based, constructivist, and reflective approach applied enhanced participants’ knowledge, skills and experiences in CALAT in general and in L2 classroom assessment in particular.

Keywords: computer assisted language assessment and testing, CALAT, teacher education, learner perceptions.

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1. Introduction

When students and teachers think of assessment and testing, they usually recall moments of stress and anxiety. This is because very often tests or high-stakes examinations drive second language (L2) learning (Cheng, 2013) and teaching. Often, results reflect the ability to pass an exam and not language competence. However, because society and educational systems traditionally believe in tests and examinations as evidence of learning, emphasis is given to them not only in the learning and teaching process, but in teacher training as well.

Most L2 assessment and testing teacher education programmes still focus mainly on testing and high-stakes examinations. This limits trainees' ability to develop their L2 assessment knowledge, skills and experiences, particularly for formative classroom assessment and its washback effect, and to be adequately equipped for an L2 language assessment and testing practice that would, to a considerable extent, involve classroom assessment and reflect real-life language competence.

At the same time, language assessment literacy (Fulcher, 2012; Inbar-Lourie, 2013) is a relatively new field, "as far as theoretical and empirical research is concerned" (Taylor, 2013).

According to the language assessment and testing literature, assessment literacy began around 2003. L2 assessment literacy requires special teacher training. Different researchers have investigated various aspects of L2 assessment literacy, such as language assessment course content (Jeong, 2013) and the effect of language assessment training on pre-service teachers (Lam, 2015). However, as research in teachers' classroom assessment practices is just emerging (Cheng, 2013), more research is needed in the area.

2. Method

This action-research study investigated the development of an MA in a CALAT module, focusing on classroom/formative assessment for L2 practitioners. The 14-week module was based on a constructivist approach, which supports learning through construction, sharing, collaboration, and interactivity. It was also based on the post-communicative era teaching methods, current theories and practices in L2 assessment and testing, and problem-solving by constructing assessments suitable for their L2 practising assessment needs. The question was to what extent and how successfully the module achieved such training.

The study was conducted during autumn 2016. The 12 participants were pre-primary, primary and secondary practising teachers from different countries, teaching different languages. Participants were assisted in constructing L2 assessment and testing knowledge, skills and experiences through hands-on tasks. They participated synchronously (Skype, Messenger) and asynchronously (Moodle, Google Drive and Document, Facebook, Messenger, email) to access the course materials and to interact, collaborate, construct, and share knowledge, skills and experiences on a weekly basis. Participants actively engaged in weekly tasks, the construction of ten artifacts and an in- and on-action reflective journal (Schön, 1983), all showcased in participants' ePortfolios.

The study adopted a qualitative and quantitative approach. Data were collected from a small-scale questionnaire, self-assessment grids, participants' in- and on-action reflective journals, and final webinar participants' reflective chats.

3. Findings

According to the questionnaire data, all students had a favourable overview of their learning experience. They all strongly agreed that the content learning outcomes were clearly set, and content and assignments reflected the learning outcomes.

3.1. Practise what you preach

Students learned about formative assessment (Bennett, 2011) through the way they experienced it as learners of the module, with the use of technologies. All participants systematically completed weekly self-assessment grids, where most students expressed that they achieved the expected outcomes successfully (most responses ranged from 'excellent' to 'very well'). They also had hands-on experience as students of rubrics, as each artifact was accompanied by one. Students acknowledged rubrics' importance and felt they helped them in both the construction and the evaluation of each artifact. Another assessment type participants experienced as learners and appreciated was the end-of-the-module 'can do' list. The following summed up the importance found in it by most participants:

“The flashback of the weeks was completed with the fill in of the ‘Can Do List’. I was impressed when I saw the amount of knowledge gained through this course summarised in that document, and I really feel that this ‘journey’ made me grow as a teacher. I feel benefited and I believe

that I improved my testing and assessment methods with the use of technology” (Student 4).

Participants also found great value in the in- and on-action reflective journal, as it helped them establish what they brought into the module from earlier experience, learned during the module and needed to develop in the future.

Peer feedback, instructor feedback, and ePortfolios were three more types of formative assessment participants found helpful as learners. The following comments are indicative:

“I understood that peer-assessment and reflections are vital in making students feel involved in their learning and promoting learner autonomy” (Student 1).

“Indeed, when we visited each other’s portfolio at the end of week 13, we were afforded the opportunity to remark students’ evidence of learning and exchange feedback with each other” (Student 2).

3.2. Collaboration, sharing and formative assessments construction

Students also enriched their assessment practices by learning about formative assessment through creating related artifacts with the use of technologies. The following comment is indicative of how most participants felt about the ‘timeline’:

“While creating the L2 Assessment & Testing Historical Background Timeline, not only I was informed on the different [historical] stages of L2 assessment and testing, I have also discovered how to use a software different from PowerPoint” (Student 3).

Participants also appreciated their engagement in collaboration and sharing:

“The collaborative annotated assessment pool was a unique experience because we worked as a community” (Student 4).

“We navigated through the internet to find rubrics assessing different skills and included them in a collaborative rubric data base. This process aided us in constructing our own rubrics” (Student 2).

In addition, students learned about classroom assessment through constructing classroom assessment tasks, thus evidencing ability to construct such types of assessment tasks for their L2 assessment practice needs:

“The artifact this week was a unique and maybe the most valuable experience I had since this master programme started. It was really useful and challenging... I created two Computer Based Tests (CBTs); the one is traditional and the other one communicative. Through this experience I have realised that creating a communicative CBT is not only motivational for the students but for the teacher who creates it as well!” (Student 5).

“This task made me think how I could turn at least formative authentic-like assessment tasks into more engaging activities for my students. I would definitely try to employ similar assessment tasks in the future” (Student 7).

“I have to admit that [developing our own rubrics for four different activities] was very challenging and engaging to choose the appropriate criteria for each rubric and make correlations with the [common European framework of reference for languages] criteria” (Student 12).

4. Discussion and conclusion

Literature indicated that there is lack of sufficient training in teacher education programmes on L2 Formative Assessment. This article has given some insights into the extent to which the provision of a CALAT teacher education focusing on classroom assessment was achieved, in an attempt to share ways in which and to what extent such training can occur. The study of the different data revealed that participants felt they benefited from the experiences they had of formative assessment as trainees, from the ‘practise what you preach’ type of teacher training and from the constructivist, hands-on approach applied, which included alternative assessment construction. The whole process enabled the participants to build a sound understanding of alternative assessment. Additional research in the area would further explore and enrich this domain.

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