Assessment for Learning in Tunisian Higher Education: English Language Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Knowledge Base

Asma Maaoui, University of Tunis, Tunisia
Amel Jarraya, University of Tunis, Tunisia

Abstract

Assessment Literacy (AL) has been shown to determine the way assessment is carried out in various teacher-led assessment contexts. Presumably, language teachers should be able to implement theory and policy-supported recommendations for more learning-driven assessment. Following the 2006 higher education reform in Tunisia, research has revealed that teachers either have a limited understanding of language assessment or misconceptions about its pedagogical role. In line with the proliferation of the Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) literature, this study sought to examine English language teachers' Assessment for Learning (AfL) knowledge base and their self-efficacy about their roles as formative assessors relying on an online survey with 153 university teachers. The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data revealed these teachers' rather deficient AfL knowledge marked by a general uncertainty and misconceptions about assessment purposes *for* learning. Additionally, the participants' self-efficacy was found to be moderate-to-low. This may hamper assessment reform initiatives in this educational context. Thus, this study is a call for further professional development and the adoption of clearer assessment guidelines during reforms.

Keywords: Assessment Knowledge, Language Assessment Literacy, Assessment for Learning, Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Introduction

New forms of assessment have been gaining ample ground in the last two decades calling into question conventional teacher-led assessment. This has contributed to turning attention towards more "pedagogically-oriented assessment" (Flaitz, 2011; Leung, 2005; Tsagari & Banerjee, 2014) forms. This is referred to as "learning- oriented" or process-oriented assessment (Carless, 2007, p.57). From this perspective, classroom assessment has been redefined to encompass Assessment *for* Learning (A*f*L) (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Black & Wiliam, 2006; Bennett 2011; Brown, 2019; Xu & Liu 2009). AfL has been often used interchangeably with Formative Assessment (FA) in the related literature as the outcome of a paradigm shift (Davison & Cummins, 2007; Inbar-Lourie, 2008) in the role of assessment in the language classroom. While formal, more traditional assessment primarily seeks to judge students' learning outcomes for accountability purposes (Shepard 2000 p.4), AfL is described as a "process of seeking and interpreting evidence" about learning (Assessment Reform Group, 2002) whereby teachers enhance learning through assessment.

This paradigm shift from a "culture of testing" to a "culture of assessment" (Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Lynch, 2001; Shepard, 2000) is grounded in recent epistemological and pedagogical theories. Knowledge has been recently perceived as individually-constructed, constantly changing and contextually-bound (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Grounded in socio-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991), teachers should be able to facilitate their students' ability to develop (Laveault & Allal, 2016; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Clark, 2012; Shepard, 2000). There is a consensus in the educational and language assessment literature that "the purpose of AfL is to monitor the progress of the learner toward a desired goal, seeking to close the gap between a learner's current status and the desired outcome" (Clark, 2012, p. 208). This has been further supported by Assessment as Learning (Earl, 2013) to attribute an even more central and active role to the learner. This highlights the benefits of addressing AfL from a multidimensional perspective including the teachers' role in knowing and adopting its principles.

Background

To cope with this paradigmatic shift it has become mandatory for practitioners to develop the necessary "assessment literacy" (Stiggins, 1991) for AfL adoption and implementation. Baseline research on assessment literacy in educational assessment (c.f., Stiggins, 2001) and language assessment (Vogt & Tsagari, 2014; Taylor, 2009) define LAL as knowledge and skills with the first construct encompassing the knowledge of "assessment purposes, content and methods" (Xu & Brown, 2016, p.156) in a specific educational context. As part of their professional development and in order for teachers to become "assessment-capable" (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2017, p.304), they need to learn about AfL both theoretically by conducting teacher learning research (Coshran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and practically by participating in professional training (Vogt & Tsagari, 2014; Fulcher, 2012). In addition to their "pedagogical knowledge about learning and assessment" (Engelsen & Smith, 2014, p.92), teachers' knowledge base should encompass methods of implementing assessment to support students' learning (Shepard, 2017). This entails a recognition of assessment as a dynamic process embedded in learning (Kozulin & Garb, 2001; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005).

Most recent research has identified LAL as including a knowledge base (Stiggins, 1991; Taylor, 2009; Xu & Brown, 2016) that teachers need to develop to be able collect, analyse and interpret evidence from assessment and adapt instruction accordingly (Black & Wiliam,

1998; Gottheiner & Siegel, 2012; Laveault, 2016; Lee et al, 2012). LAL has been framed within a much broader perspective of serving learning through the role teachers should be able to take in *informing* and *improving* subsequent learning through assessment (Broadfoot & Black, 2004; Fox, 2008). In fact, Xu and Brown's (2016) model of Teacher Assessment Literacy in Practice (TALiP) encompasses key specific types of knowledge of assessment purposes, content, methods, and feedback, in addition to student involvement in assessment. Interestingly, this model attributes a key role to assessors' *knowledge base* as it is "the basis of the teacher conceptions of assessment", "teacher assessment literacy in practice" and "assessor identity (re)construction" (p.155). A dearth of research has addressed the question of assessment knowledge (Ölmezer-Öztürk & Aydin, 2018) in general and the link between this knowledge base and AfL in particular (Abell & Siegel, 2011; Frey & Fisher, 2009; Laveault, 2016; Michaeloudes & Tsagari, 2016).

Research has shown that the shift in classroom assessment practices is partly dependent on the key stakeholders' knowledge of AfL. Teachers often struggle with understanding FA (Heritage et al., 2010; Michaeloudes & Tsagari, 2016), thus, impacting its implementation (Torrance, 2012). Even when assessment policies promote the benefits of AfL, the teachers' knowledge gap may impede its effective implementation (Leung, 2004; Stiggins, 2002) and even lead to teachers' resistance to change (Deneen & Boud, 2014; Feldman & Capobianco, 2008; Popham, 2009; Vogt & Tsagari 2014). Even in educational contexts where AfL could be partly carried out, "success depended on teachers' determination, pedagogical knowledge and their choice of mediating artefacts" (Webb & Jones, 2009, p.182). This further accentuates the determining role knowledge may play in implementing the necessary assessment changes alongside other personal and contextual factors.

In some testing-dominated contexts, this assessment knowledge base should be viewed in the light of key personal, social, and cultural factors (Inbar-Lourie, 2008). Teachers' adoption of A*f*L practices as recommended by policy statements have been shown to be problematic partly because of a lack of "professional learning" (DeLuca et al., 2012; Popham, 2009). This has been found to relate to the three factors of "time, ownership and understanding" (Gardner et al., 2011, p.109). Alignment with A*f*L is often dependent on assessors' identity (Looney et al., 2018; Wyatt-Smith al., 2010) from assessors of learning to assessors for learning (Xu & Brown, 2016). From a socio-cognitive perspective (Bandura, 2010) self-efficacy also has a mediating role in teachers' conceptual shift. As a motivational factor, self-efficacy may be defined as teachers' *personal beliefs* in their ability "to plan, organize, and carry out activities that are required to attain given educational goals." (Levy-Vered & Nasser-Abu Alhija, 2015, p.383). Assessment knowledge could also be influenced by the prevailing "assessment culture" (Shepard, 2000) through knowledge sharing in the educational community (Inbar-Lourie, 2008). For Xu and Brown (2016), it is important to attend to contextual assessment factors like "policy, cultural values, [and] social norms" (p. 155). Leung (2009) argues that "there may be a system-wide theory-practice gulf between assessment policy and more powerful social and cultural beliefs which militate against any form of non-psychometric assessment" (p. 28). This tension may make the conceptual shift towards AfL more complex in these educational contexts.

This study is carried out using Wiliam and Thompson's (2007) framework (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). The framework includes three key processes about where the learner is going, where the learner is now, and how to achieve learning goals. This is possible through "formative interaction" whereby leaning conditions lead to a growth in cognition (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 11) to make new learning happen (Shepard, 2017). To bring about change in

terms of learning (Heitink et al., 2016), and "to bridge the gap between the learner's actual level and the learning goals (Wiliam & Thompson, 2007) assessors should specifically use assessment to connect "objectives, goals, and strategies" (Clark, 2012, p.221) during learning. This is dependent on an adoption of roles as "assessors for learning" (Hopfenbeck, 2018). For A*f*L to be implemented effectively, teachers should be knowledgeable about five key strategies identified by research. This framework suggests a collaborative process where teachers', learners', and peers' joint efforts (Clark, 2012) make it possible for learning to develop in a *guided,* motivating (Bandura, 2010; Black & Wiliam, 2009*)* and self-regulated (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) way. This framework particularly attributes a central role to teacher and learner feedback.

The present study was motivated by the lack of domain-specific research on teachers' LAL development (Fulcher, 2012; Maaoui & Tsagari, 2020; Leung, 2009; Tsagari & Banerjee, 2015) pertinent to the paradigm shift in assessment. Indeed, little is known about whether Tunisian teachers, qua assessors, are aware of the new roles they are required to play (Brown, 2019) in their own tertiary educational contexts. Empirical evidence is specifically needed to determine whether their present knowledge base reflects a preparedness for the implementation of AfL in the current educational context. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions: What do Tunisian teachers know about AfL principles; 2) How do they conceive of AfL practice; and, 3) What self-efficacy beliefs do they hold about their roles in AfL?

Method

In tune with the change in learning paradigms and instructional frameworks promoting learner centeredness at the turn of the 21st century, the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education introduced significant language assessment policy changes with an orientation towards formative assessment. It calls for the new system to inculcate a culture of effort where students are encouraged to monitor and self-regulate the progress of their knowledge and "know-how" (Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education, 2006). The introduction of a new higher education curriculum in Tunisia at the turn of the century paved the way for other forms of assessment (Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education, 2006). It is worth noting that the curriculum includes interesting but limited information about some of the assessment orientations policy makers sought to put at the forefront. It is clearly stated that this reform seeks to attain international «standards», to reinforce quality assurance; modernize pedagogy; and guarantee employability (Drissa, 2006).

Data were collected from a random sample of 153 EFL full-time higher education lecturers affiliated to English language teaching departments. They were a majority of female teachers (74%) who responded to a questionnaire online via Google Form. Less than half (43%) of the sample held an MA degree as a qualification while the remainder had either a BA or a doctoral degree. Besides, more than half of them asserted having no certifications in addition to their higher education degrees. Many members of the teaching staff at university have been even described as "unqualified" (Labassi, 2009, p. 249) raising issues of language teacher professionalism.

Based on Wiliam and Thompson (2007), this paper examines language teachers' AfL knowledge base using a self-developed questionnaire with a high Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.935. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected with a view to answer the research questions and were interpreted while accounting for five main aspects reflected in the

different sections: (1) knowledge of assessment purposes; (2) language assessment background; (3) knowledge of AfL principles; (4) self-efficacy and AfL; and (5) demographic data. The data were gathered from EFL teachers from the eight Tunisian universities of Tunis, Carthage, El Manar, Sousse, Manouba, Monastir and Gabes. A content analysis of the answers to three open-ended questions (Section 3, on the purposes of using assessment results and scores, and Section 4, on their ability to link assessment results to learner improvement) was conducted in addition to descriptive statistical analysis.

Results

The teachers' language assessment background

With regard to the study participants' language assessment background, the majority of these language teachers (68.42%) reported having good to excellent knowledge and understanding of language assessment in general. As displayed in Figure 1, the responses reflected a specific pattern of knowledge of assessment purposes. In fact, about 24% strongly agree and 30% agree about the importance of "checking learner progress through assessment". However, 37% of the respondents demonstrated a lack of confidence about "enhancing learning" as an assessment goal. Likewise, 34% were *uncertain* about whether assessment aimed at grading test takers' performance and/ or ranking them. These teachers could not take a clear stand as to such matters. This is further confirmed by 37.7% of the teachers who were uncertain about the role assessment plays in motivating learning.
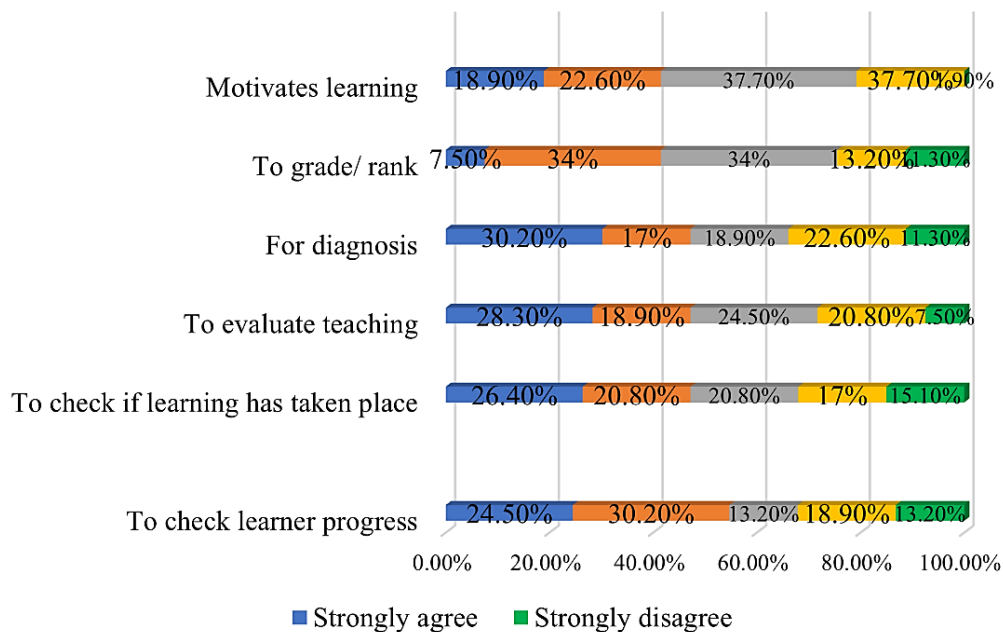

Figure 1. Knowledge of assessment purposes

Knowledge of AfL principles

Figure 2 displays the teachers' reported knowledge of assessment principles. More than half of the participants knew about the importance of feedback and its role in improving learning (62.2% strongly agree). However, less than half (17% strongly agree and 18.9% agree) of them adhere to the principle that peer assessment is useful in checking one's learning. In line with this last finding, these language teachers also demonstrated a significant uncertainty

(34%) about the role of peer assessment in helping learners check the quality of their learning. Likewise, only half (22.6% strongly agree and 28.3% agree) of them were aware of the usefulness of peer-assessment. Besides, just half (24.5% strongly agree and 24.5% agree) of them seemed to know about the value of self-assessment.
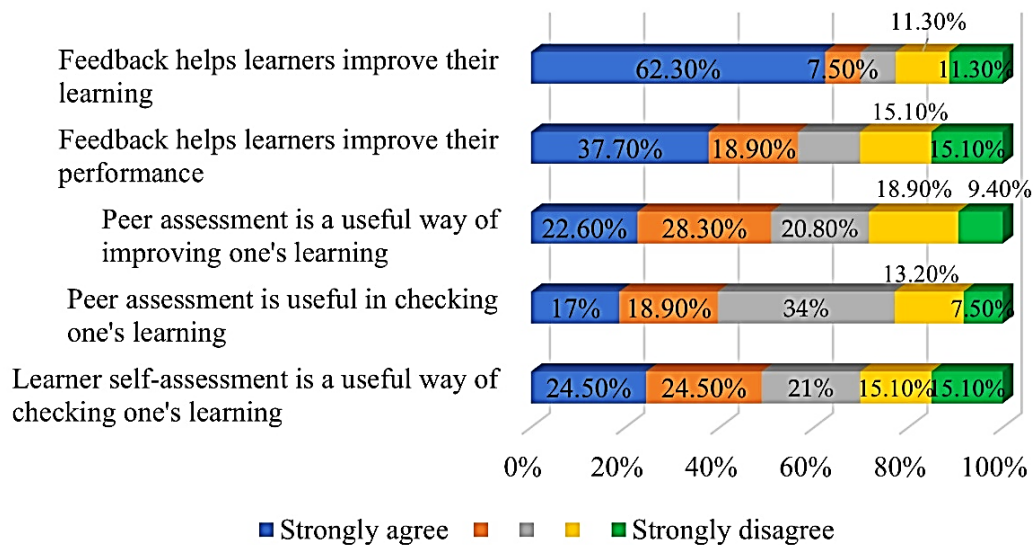

Figure 2: Knowledge of assessment principles

The qualitative question addressing specific assessment purposes (Section 5) was rather indicative of some inconsistencies. When the study participants were asked about the reasons for which they generally use assessment results and scores, their answers reflected different orientations. The count of each of the reasons stated by the participants is displayed in Table 1 below. Eighteen teachers out of the 125 teachers who answered the open-ended question referred to "accountability purposes" dictated by institutional requirements like "exam results". Even when they mentioned the question of gaining knowledge about learning, 26 teachers mentioned concerns about who is understanding the course and following the teacher. Within the same vein, 36 teachers made the link between assessment and course evaluation. Most of the stated aims are rather product-oriented while only four teachers indicated that assessment guarantees more guidance and improvement of students' learning. Only six teachers demonstrated knowledge of the role of assessment in enhancing students' motivation. Meanwhile, "feedback" as a key assessment strategy seemed to be almost ignored.

Table 1: Teachers' knowledge of assessment purposes

Product-oriented	Process-oriented
- To know who is understanding the course and following the teacher (26) - Administrative (6) - Exam results (6) - Written tests (3) - to pass classes (3) - Course evaluation (36) - Self-evaluation (10) - action research (3)	- to cater for students' needs (10) - to guarantee more guidance and improvement of students/ to enhance learning (4) to improve skills (6) - to enhance students' motivation (6) - Feedback (2)

AfL assessment knowledge (Section 3) also comprised the teachers' views of techniques providing learning evidence (Table 2). More than half of them opted for AfL techniques like classroom questions (0.25) and learner feedback (0.28). In their explanation of other possible techniques, they did not mention AfL strategies like self-assessment or peer feedback. More than half of the answers reflected a tendency to rely on written tests (0.25) and test scores (0.20).

Table 2: Relative frequencies of the teachers' views of techniques providing learning evidence

Assessment techniques	Relative frequency
Classroom questions	0.25
Written tests	0.25
Learner feedback	0.28
Test scores	0.20
Oral tests	0.00
All of the above	0.00

It was equally important to examine the study participants' knowledge of teacher and learner roles in generating feedback. Figure 3 clearly displays an almost equal importance attributed to both of them. According to more than half of the study participants (54%), teachers should provide assessment feedback very frequently or frequently (37.7%). Almost half (52.8%) of them think that learners should provide feedback very frequently and 26.4% frequently.
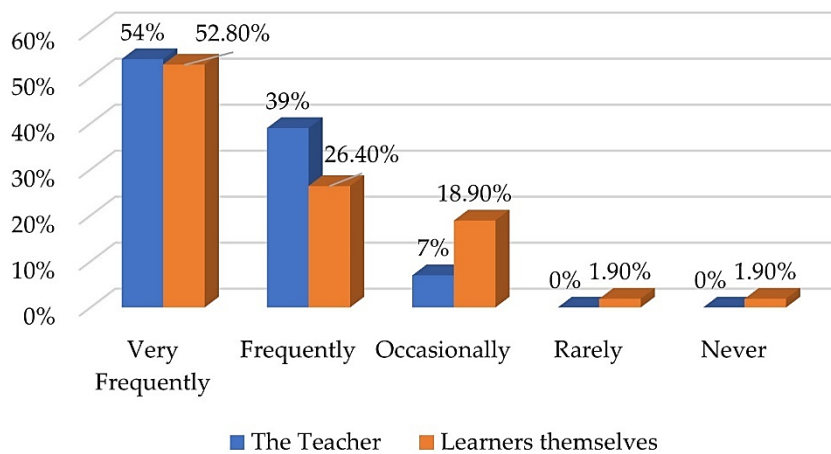

Figure 3: Feedback source and frequency

The teachers' self-efficacy beliefs as assessors

The fourth survey section concerned the degree of the teachers' self-efficacy beliefs of their role as assessors for learning. Figure 4 shows that less than half of them (43.4%) reported having strong self-efficacy about this role. Almost half of the remaining answers reflected a moderate (28.3%) self-efficacy in terms of being "assessors for learning" confirming previous research findings (Hopfenbeck, 2018).
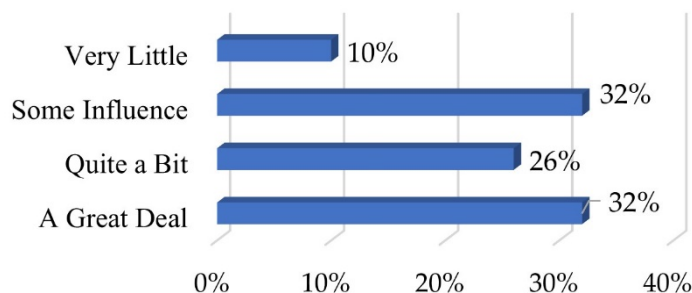
Figure 4: The Teachers' self-efficacy as assessors for learning.

Their self-efficacy as AfL was examined through an open-ended question in the same section. About one third of the participants referred to "formal assessment to improve learning" in a fuzzy way. For one teacher, "there is no direct link between learning and the outcome of formal assessment" because of "exam conditions". Similarly, another teacher admitted that he can do this "in no way". Another category (more than half) pointed out to the use of summative, achievement testing without explaining how this would serve their students' learning or if they *can* do this in the first place. This reflected a low self-efficacy in using assessment to drive learning for more than half of them.

About one fourth of the participants mentioned AfL related self-efficacy describing what they can do with their students to enhance learning. For instance, four teachers referred to their ability to "take care of their students" individually. Some (16) of the informants described their ability to enhance learning through assessment as they rely on "remedial work' (11), "backwash" (4), classroom "discussions" (3), "questions" (3) to check their progress in addition to raising their "students' awareness about their weaknesses" (2) and "errors" (6). However, only four teachers mentioned their ability to provide "feedback" to help their learners improve. Exceptionally, one teacher explained that he can "show whether the students have reached the learning objectives or not" and only one participant seemed to have the ability to encourage learner feedback. Nevertheless, none of these teachers mentioned their ability to use peer feedback. Surprisingly, only one teacher stated that "improvement can be measured through continuous assessment" for students' progress.

Conclusion

The results may confirm previous research findings on EFL teachers' insufficient assessment knowledge (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Fulmer et al., 2015; Maaoui & Tsagari, 2020; Tsagari & Vogt, 2017). This might be explained by the absence of "professional learning" (Popham, 2009) and academic training in this area. It could also be the outcome of the prevailing language assessment culture (Inbar-Lourie, 2008) that is more in line with accountability-based formal assessment. These findings have shown that the teachers were generally not knowledgeable about some key AfL purposes and principles like feedback. Without considering learners as "actors" in the learning process (Wiliam & Thompson, 2007), teachers may not be capable of using instructional strategies to "activate" learners as "instructional resources for one another" (p.64).

These Tunisian higher education teachers' moderate-to-low self-efficacy of their roles as assessors *for* learning have equally revealed some challenges bringing to light the teachers' difficulty to make the necessary conceptual shift to achieve the intended educational goals (Levy-Vered & Nasser-Abu Alhija, 2015). Various contextual and personal factors might

have shaped this knowledge. The teachers' responses and overall discourse confirms earlier research findings in the local context (Maaoui & Tsagari, 2020). It would appear that AfL cannot be introduced by policy change alone. A great deal of teacher development work is still required to enhance FA knowledge and implementation (Leung, 2004). The tension caused by the old and new paradigms of assessment *of* and *for* learning would not only lead teachers to a state of uncertainty but also widen their knowledge gap. This would in itself prevent the adoption and use of FA (Broadfoot & Black, 2004) for these teachers. Pedagogically, adequate assessment guidelines may help in providing frameworks for the adoption of AfL. Supporting a national agenda to raise the quality of EFL assessment in higher education institutions in Tunisia should be supported by clear *standards* for language assessment.

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Contact email: asma.maaoui@iseaht.rnu.tn