

Exploring the Efficacy of Summative Assessment to Promote the Continuous Improvement of Students' English Proficiency

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Modern education has been moving from a knowledge- to competency-based approach whose axis spins around the well-round development of whole persons as regards intellectual, emotional, social, and physical capacities. In the field of language, proficiency refers to “the purposeful and appropriate application of one’s communicative competence” (Harsch, 2017), and this is a challenging process to use English—the international language of academic, travel, and business in situated contexts, not merely repeating a bunch of vocabulary in fixed grammatical structures perfectly. To evaluate language learners, formative assessment (FA) has been increasingly exploited to encourage autonomous learning that reaches out of their own sector, making for both lifelong and life-wide learning (Chen, 2009). However, FA serves as an internal dialogue between teachers and students rather than as an official channel of communication with outside stakeholders. In other words, summative assessment (SA) still has its own place in this 21st century to determine students’ overall performance and examine the extent to which learning outcomes have been met. However, all-or-nothing high stakes tests, which are commonly done at the end of the course, can trigger a state of anxiety and a learning-for-the-test attitude whilst motivation should be timely and specific through teachers’ descriptive and constructive feedback. The matter is not about the choice of FA or SA but about the way to effectively incorporate both for more informed decisions. The answer lies in critical reflection that functions as a glue to stick feedback and feedforward, FA and SA, proficiency and continuous improvement.

Keywords: efficiency, summative assessment, promote, continuous improvement, English, proficiency

Introduction

Mass media in forms of television, radio, the Internet, and the alike has acted in furtherance of authentic language use in diverse situated contexts. The free flow of migrants and mass tourism thanks to transportation innovations also means that language education now goes beyond the pure matter of linguistics. Instead, language proficiency now emphasizes on intercultural competence and multilingualism to enable individuals to effectively engage with those from different cultural norms and communication styles. Thus, traditional modes of language evaluation, which prioritized vocabulary and grammar corrections and stressed the importance of multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank activities, have been proved to hardly reflect learners’ communicative endeavor fully. Consequently, deficit-based forms of evaluation have been replaced by asset-based assessment with benchmarks, frameworks, and breakdowns. Such consistent standard sets allow assessors to recognize students’ abilities to comprehend, interpret, and produce language in diverse manners and for varied purposes, resulting in further attentiveness to learner autonomy and individualized instruction accordingly. Gradually, conventional, authoritative,

and “teacher-centered” pedagogical approaches have been transformed into collaborative efforts between teachers and students. However, lots of research and experiments have pointed out that the increased frequency of formative assessment (FA) is not synonymous with the students’ improved proficiency since in many cases, the young show a lack of motivation and a proper attitude towards their learning in general and learning a language in particular. Hence, it is of importance that both grading-based and process-based assessment be fully exploited and combined to yield the most practical result.

Language Proficiency in the 21st Century

Proficiency refers to the fact of ones being competent or being well able to do a specific action, which means them having at least a good ability, skill, and experience in doing something. Thus, language proficiency is regarded as “the purposeful and appropriate application of one’s communicative competence” (Harsch, 2017, p. 250–253). However, needed language skills vary when it comes to the topics of daily conversations or academic contexts, with the latter focusing more on high-order linguistic acquisition, serving the purposes of comparing, contrasting, and evaluating in academic tasks, and leaving the activities of teaching, learning, and assessing becoming more isolated from social interactions in reality. However, an increasingly globalized and connected world necessitates the importance of an individual’s ability to communicate effectively in English—the international language of academic, travel, and business in situated contexts, not merely repeating perfectly a bunch of vocabulary in fixed grammatical structures.

Relationship Among Test, Measurement, Assessment, and Evaluation

It is supposed or at least expected that students’ proficiency can be measured through a system of assessment or in a narrow term, through a series of tests; however, the relationship among the norms of test, measurement, assessment, and evaluation is overlapped and represented in a shape of a Venn diagram rather than concentric circles.

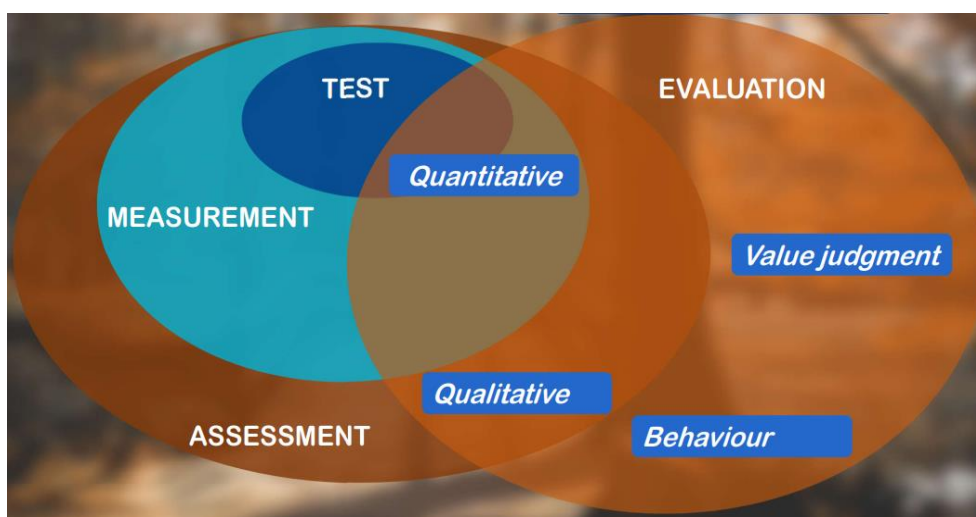


Figure 1. Relationship among test, measurement, assessment, and evaluation.

Measurement refers to the use of some standard instrument to determine the attributes or dimensions of a specific object in order to obtain information, commonly quantitatively, about it. This means the usefulness of the acquired information depends on the instrument accuracy and the skillfulness of instrument users. Differently,

assessment, which is a broad term including tests, implies the process of yielding information, both quantitatively and qualitatively, relative to a set goal or an objective. While tests are a genre of assessment carried out under contrived circumstances, other forms of assessment in language teaching such as observation, interviews, or behavior monitoring do not always need to be done in administered conditions. In terms of evaluation, its core lies in the word of “value” (Kizlik, 2012); in other words, evaluation is to produce rich judgment about a given situation from its objective, standards, procedures, appropriateness, reliability, and validity. The purposes of evaluation are to examine program accountability and program development (Weir & Roberts, 1994); therefore, the nature of evaluation itself is summative and formative at the same time, with the former characteristic aiming to determine the effectiveness, efficiency, and acceptability of a program while the latter is to identify what is going well and what needs to be tackled (Gultom, 2016). This means the timely and proper addressing of the problems in the evaluation items is synonymous with the increased extent of effectiveness.

Typically, assessment is mistakenly associated with only outcomes, kinds of tests or methodologies rather than purposes or processes, which can lead to the misconception of the term “outcome-based” and “holistic” accordingly. Here comes an urgency to view classroom assessment as a process, not an event, by which assessment should be well integrated into curriculum so that the planning process will become more coherent (Graves, 2016) through the adaptation of open-mindedness, a welcoming mindset, and a positive learning culture (Pimentel, 2018). In other words, summative and formative assessment is interactive, not contradictory with each other.

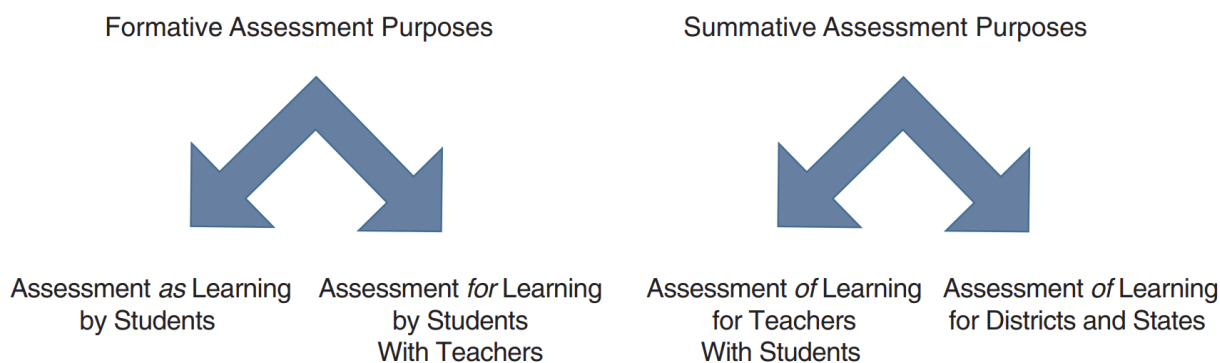


Figure 2. Assessment as, for, and of learning as an outgrowth of assessment for formative and summative purposes (Gottlieb, 2021).

Assessment of Learning

Claim-Making Sense

Assessment of learning, which in almost all cases is known as summative assessment (SA), is the most common method to document what students know, understand, and can do and this form of assessment is a useful way for teachers to give feedback and guide subsequent teaching and learning. Any form of assessment places its utmost meaningfulness and usefulness on its validity; to put this another way, on its ability to “measure accurately what it is intended to measure” (Hughes, 1989, p. 22). The validity evidence of a test reinforces its predictive power, which in turn should be measurable and interlinked with other variables to yield informed future predictions. In other words, the test score and the performance on the criterion should bear a close relationship functioning as a base for expected targets like academic success being generated. Hence, a test is validated because its accumulative evidence to support a specific inference, not the test itself.

Motivation Source

Summative assessment can give students a great source of stimulation to learn harder and in a more orientated way, making their studying less confusing to some extent. Obviously, learning more or less, even under the pressure of examinations, is still better than doing nothing. Robinson (2005) claims that the process of learning is made up of two theories, including the theory of transition to depict the relationship between cognitive abilities, learning processes and mechanisms used to transfer knowledge from Point A to Point B, and the theory of property to describe the features of knowledge from Point A and Point B. Such interindividual variables affecting these two theories will impact the process of learning and they are commonly classified into four groups, namely demographic factors, cognitive factors, metacognitive factors, and affective factors (Cochran, McCallum, & Bell, 2010). Under the umbrella of affective factors, there are five motivational/attitudinal variables influencing the learning of a foreign language: integration, attitude towards the learning situation, motivation, integrative orientation, and instrumental orientation (Robinson, 2005). Motivation is proved to support the result of learning while integration and attitudes towards learning indirectly impact the learning outcome through motivation (Henter, 2014).

Exam-and-Achievement Orientation

Summative assessment shows its limitations in some facets. Firstly, in terms of context validity, the interactions learners make with the teacher and other peers, the lesson plans and tasks, along with the surrounding environment in the classroom all contribute to shaping rich judgment about the activity of not only learning but also teaching. This attribute makes classroom assessment formative rather than summative; paradoxically, in the testing room, many seemingly typical factors will become abnormal noise or distractors, leaving the test results solely depending on the test takers' ability. Secondly, likely practical purposes to shorten the testing time down to several hours put the criterion validity into a doubt. Shorter high-stakes tests give less but all-or-nothing evidence to support some inferences on the process of learning and on the amount of knowledge, skills, and experiences learners have accumulated through the course of months or even years. This summative assessment is of learning, but not for learning or as learning. Thirdly, the feature of validity generalization goes well with the increased extent of reliability and consistency to aid modern education and assessment systems becoming more adaptable in the world of globalization and interconnectedness. To guarantee the multifaceted and complicated nature of assessment in this world of today, being assessors have grown into a separate profession from teaching, which comes at the expense of specific situations, activities, and matters in the classroom being overlooked or even ignored.

Continuous Improvement

Born in this era which features the acceleration of digital transformation and flexible learning and working environment, along with the intensification of such phenomena as globalization, interculturalism, and interconnectivity, iGen is now known as information literate citizens who can critically and independently engage with and act upon the complex nature of information's production and dissemination. In other words, millennials of the 21st century are supposed to be active agents who know how to ask and answer questions about themselves as well as about the world around them (Elmborg, 2006). Consequently, education in the modern sense of today should fulfil a purpose other than just being an act of depositing (Freire, 2000), which means teachers now should not be merely information conveyors and students are no longer passive receivers of knowledge. Pedagogical methodologies need to become more critical, creative, and open to individual voices, the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge, and the sophisticated situatedness of information literacy. To put it simply, modern educational systems

Reflection—The Glue to Stick Summative Assessment to Continuous Improvement

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Figure 3. Brookfield's critical reflection (Forsythe, 2022).

The complexity of teaching relates to its simultaneity and immediacy, which refer to the teacher having to give “automatic pilot” responses or immediate reflexive reactions to multiple stimuli at once and at the same time. Critical

reflection means repositioning or reframing our fixed perceptions with more broad-minded perspectives by means of opening up to a greater array of possible choices, erratic classroom situations, and the divergence in students' behaviors. The process of self-reflection can be envisioned through a cycle of continual examining and revisiting layers of levels, from the point of core beliefs to the position of specific actions (Shapiro & John, 1993; Larrivee, 1996).

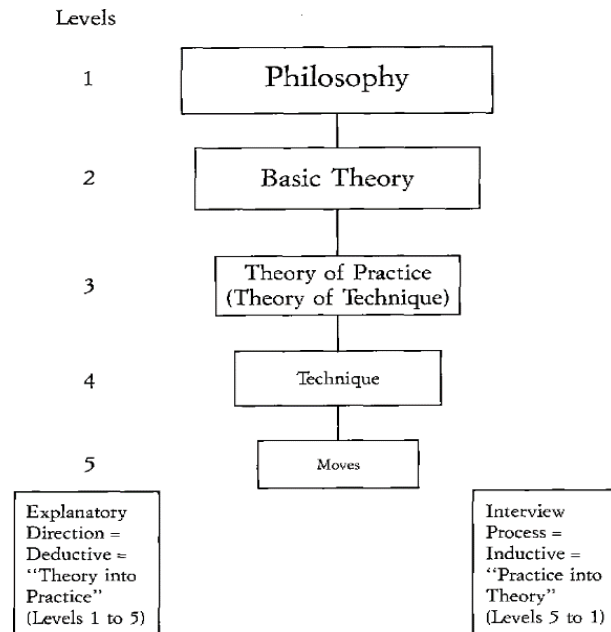


Figure 4. A framework for reflective inquiry on practice (Shapiro & John, 1993).

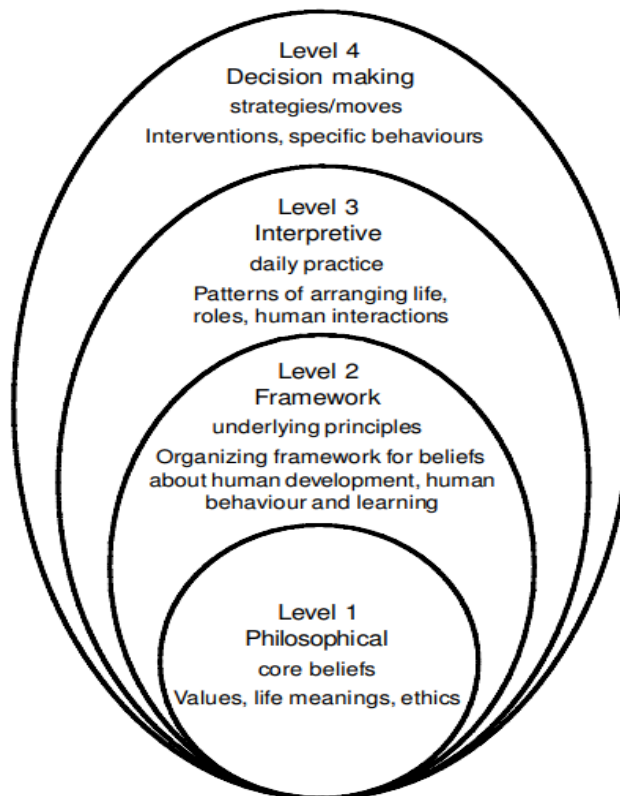


Figure 5. The congruence between core beliefs and job performance (Larrivee, 2000).

In the Throes of Uncertainty

Practice of critical reflection is like dancing, in which some steps forward are followed by one or more steps backward (Berkey et al., 1990; Brookfield, 1995; Kasl, Dechant, & Marsink, 1993; Larrivee, 1996). When conventional ways of thinking no longer sound rational but new ones have not yielded significant outcomes, the practitioners may be left swaying around the axis of uncertainty. This state of mind can result in a wave of nostalgia for the already-abandoned assumptions and a yearning to re-welcome the commonplace to keep the turmoil at arm's length. However, the throes of uncertainty, conflict, and chaos role as the hallmark for a shift in lines of thought and the birth of new propositions. The practitioners have to “weather” the turbulence, open the door to a personal deeper understanding, undergo the transformation in behavioral and perspective patterns, and then experience an “ah-hah”. In brief, the route cannot be planned in advance with an intervention formula; instead, it must be lived (Larrivee, 2000).

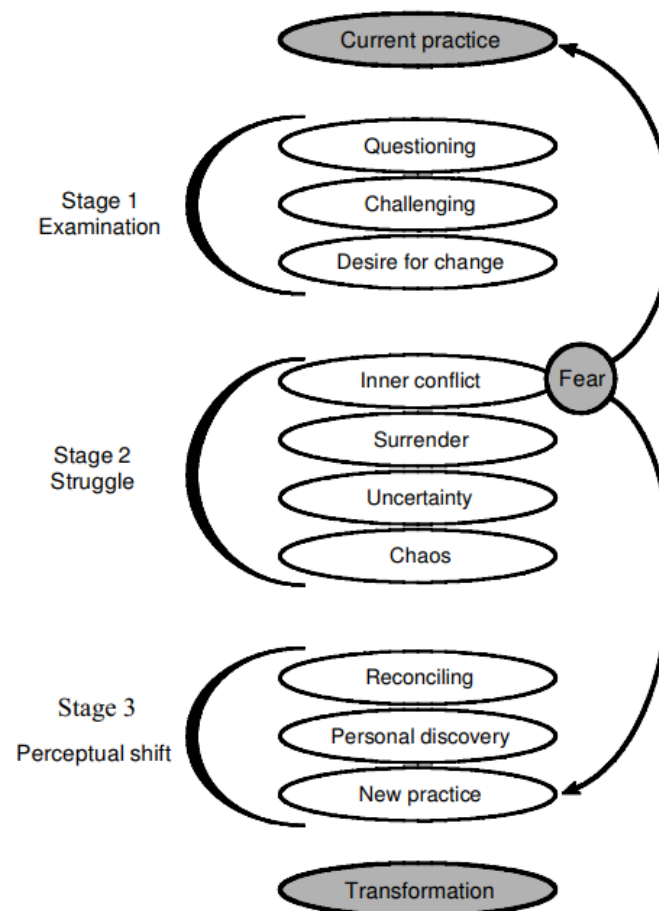


Figure 6. A framework for stages in the critical reflection process (Larrivee, 2000).

When applying specific teaching or assessment approaches, teachers need to bear in mind that global principles of language teaching are important but also that their usefulness will vary according to different cultures, contexts, and situations. Firstly, language should not be viewed as an independent system; instead, it is linked closely with other representational and cognitive abilities and impacted by non-linguistic variables like emotions or experience. Secondly, language itself is an integrated system with many components and processes

which cannot change without affecting or being affected by other counterparts (Norris & Damico, 1990, p. 212). Language components like pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary will not generate any meaning if used in isolation; hence, teaching approaches need to view language as a whole which should not be separated from its culture and social functions as well. Thirdly, timing is another point to be taken into consideration. Human cognition evolves to maximize the beings' survival likelihood so our memory has to serve our reactions to the world in the most optimal way. Humans receive information with all senses, forming the sensory memory that can last for some seconds before this classified information will come into the short-term memory to be stored for 30 seconds, then some being saved in the long-term memory to be remembered for months and years later (Gazzaniga & Heatherton, 2006).

This explains the principle underpinning the forgetting curve proposed by a German psychologist named Hermann Ebbinghaus (1913). Therefore, all types of assessment should come in time to evaluate students' understanding toward a specific topic, but also to examine their improvement in applying language into giving their ideas across effectively.

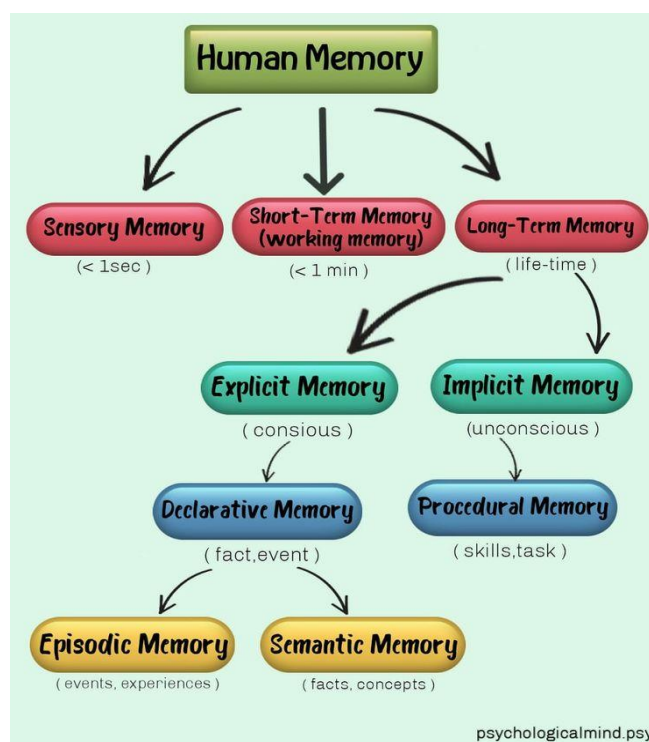


Figure 7. Human memory (Verma, 2020).

Critical Reflection Through Portfolios

Portfolios open the scope of the conventional concept to all exhibitions of “writing samples, photos, videos, research projects, observations by mentors and peers, and reflective thinking” (Barrett, 2010, pp. 6-14) to aid the process of accumulating, examining, sharing, and performing of learning outcomes with and to others via means of both offline and online media. With portfolio approaches, students can incorporate their reflections with learning that reaches out of their own sector, making for not only lifelong learning but also life-wide learning (Chen, 2009). This practice encourages students to become more active, flexible, and independent in the process of setting goals, choosing materials, practicing different language skills, and self-evaluating their learning

outcomes. Teachers can include students in the process of re-designing the portfolio workflow to boost students' stronger sense of ownership, responsibility, and commitment to the reflecting activities. Teachers can well manage all the documents and should give feedback descriptively and promptly. To prepare students well for summative assessment, teachers can give them some freedom of choices to hand in their best drafts or versions after some phases of revision and sending descriptive feedback. This method will help students be guided during the learning process. Another solution is to grant some percentages for formative materials in the grading scale to give an extent of motivation for students to be more autonomous but also effective in their self-regulation. There are some other reflective activities to build up a rich and detailed portfolio for each individual.

Structured Journals

Self-monitoring through a pile of journals, though inevitably crucial for the cognitive development and expectedly done with high creativity, is sometimes regarded as a burden. This situation is typically solved with simple descriptive clusters of sequences, thoughts, evaluations, and feelings in a form of introspection or reflexivity rather than critical reflection. Journals, which are supposed to give reflection on a series of incidents frequently, are even made up in just one night of intensive writing (Eyler, 2001). Therefore, some suggestive questions should be prompted to form a basic template and propel the writer to observe more carefully, trigger their critical thinking more actively, and make connections more continually.

Reflective Essays

Making sense of the practitioner's failure in communication as well as documenting her triumphs in creative forms of essays, videos, short stories, or other artistic genres like mind-mapping, road-mapping, story boarding, or scrapbooking is beneficial to illustrate the power of theory in the light of real experience.

Peer Observation, Peer Evaluation, and Group Discussion

Some prompts to push discussion with others beyond simply sharing reactions and observations can follow the famous process of "What? So What? Now What?" based on Kolb's cycle of action and reflection (Kolb, 1984). In this structure, "What" is to outline the problematic matter, "So What" explores the validity of the experience, and "Now What" aims to consider forward-moving actions. Discussion not only allows the participants to review their growth but also to clarify the course of betterment, paving more than a way to monitor experiences and intervene when necessary, which certainly and eventually will provide feedback along with challenges to the reflectors.

Conclusion

Assessment needs to align with the curricular standards, students' ages and interests, the organization's philosophy of language learning, national guidelines, and real demands from recruiters. If the renovation only focuses on one facet, for example merely in teaching methodology, in the whole complex system, this movement is likely to distort rather than improve the system (Vu, 2008). Such formal classroom-based assessment like regular interim tests strictly follows the control of the authority while informal forms are left entirely in the hands of the teachers; hence, the combination of both SA and FA is important to encourage and direct both teachers and students in the process of designing and taking the exam suited for the expected levels, concerns, and capacities.

Language testing has changed its landscape to the sociopolitical and employment polars, leading to a higher degree of professionalization and generalization of testing practice. However, the alienation of testing design and

teaching activities has resulted in a view of language assessment as highly technical and specialized—best left to experts while teachers who directly manage the classroom activities have to struggle to follow a frame beyond their control. Absolutely, the answers we get depend on the questions we ask and implicit paradigms will impact our choice of methods and how we interpret the data. An informed decision requires teachers to do their own research, broaden their own knowledge, and master their own skills so that they can give one or more “intelligent actions” (Dewey, 1944), in another word, “practical wisdom” at once and at the same time. The matter of rational empathy and sensitivity to the classroom situation and to human interactions will make sharp differences in the way teachers choose and practice their pedagogical and assessment methods.

Students should incorporate their reflections with learning that reaches out of their own sector, making for not only lifelong learning but also life-wide learning (Chen, 2009). This proposal comes timely to an Asian culture with high levels of open-mindedness and flexibility but still longing for more systematic pedagogical approaches to serve the present-day generations.

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