ASSESSMENT OF LEARNERS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY: A BALANCED APPROACH

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Abstract: *Accurate assessment of learners' English proficiency plays an important role in English teaching and learning, as it can have a significant impact on the learning process. This article reviews several key concepts related to assessment in general and the assessment of English proficiency in particular. Based on the purposes of assessing English proficiency, the present paper analyzes the strengths and limitations of standardized testing as well as other forms of assessment. From this analysis, it introduces a balanced approach to the assessment of learners' English proficiency. Such a balanced approach is suggested to meet several essential requirements, including assessing both the learning process and learning products, while also creating a positive washback on teaching and learning.*

Key words: *assessment, English proficiency, testing, communicative competence, assessment of learning, assessment for learning, assessment as learning*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, researchers have never stopped trying to find an appropriate, accurate and effective approach to the assessment of English proficiency of students learning English as a foreign language (EFL students). However, this is not always an easy task because assessment purposes and contexts vary greatly. Particularly in the era of AI, when many academic tasks once used to evidence learning can now be done by Gen-AI, the case for authentic assessment which helps measure students' ability to apply knowledge and skills in "realistic, meaningful contexts" and provide reliable evidence of human capability becomes increasingly important and urgent (Bowles, 2025, p. iii).

II. KEY CONCEPTS

It would be helpful to have a look at the definitions of some important concepts with regard to the assessment of English proficiency.

2.1 Testing and assessment

It is necessary that the distinction between testing and assessment is clarified because there is some confusion when the two terms are used synonymously and interchangeably (Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010, p.3). Noticeably, the term "assessment" has a broad meaning whereas the term "testing" has a narrow meaning. Brown and Abeywickrama (2010, p.3) use the definition of assessment introduced by Mousavi (2009), saying that assessment is "appraising or estimating the level or magnitude of some attribute of a person" (cited in Mousavi, 2009, p. 35). In their perspective, assessment is a process in which "a wide range of methodological techniques" can be used to measure a person's ability. Meanwhile, testing is only "part of assessment," "a subset of assessment," or "a genre of assessment techniques." Accordingly, a test can be understood as a tool that is used to measure "a person's ability, knowledge, or performance in a given domain." Additionally, testing is often used to refer to a "prepared administrative procedure" in a course that takes place at a point of time when students try to perform to the best of their abilities with the knowledge that they are being assessed (Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010, p.3; Law and Eckes, 2007, p. 35).

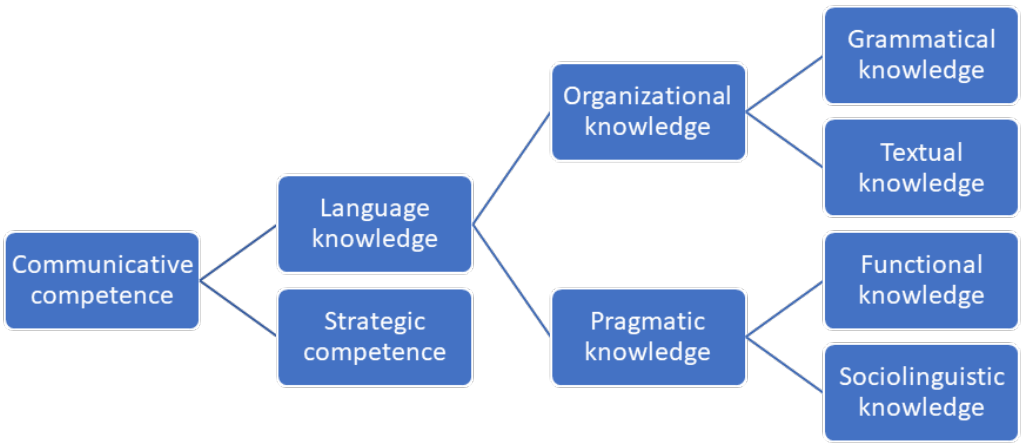
2.2. Communicative competence

One of the key concepts in the area of language assessment is communicative competence. This is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. The authors of the Canadian Language Benchmarks use the two terms "communicative competence" and "communicative language ability" synonymously and define this ability as "the ability to communicate: to interact, to express, to interpret and to negotiate meaning, and to create discourse in a variety of social contexts and situations" (Canada, 2012, p. vi).

In the area of language teaching and assessment, researchers posit that it would be more helpful and of better practice to look into the structure of communicative competence and thus they come up with various models. Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence includes three important components: (1) grammatical competence; (2) sociolinguistic competence; and (3) strategic competence. The two researchers describe grammatical competence as "knowledge of the lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and

phonology." Meanwhile, sociolinguistic competence is to do with social and cultural rules of language use which include various things such as the appropriate use of politeness, vocabulary, or register. Strategic competence is referred to as "verbal and non-verbal communication strategies" that the language user uses to make up for communication breakdowns that may occur and overcome difficulties in communication (Canale and Swain, 1980, pp. 29-30).

Bachman and Palmer (1996) also came up with a model of communicative competence which is very influential in the area of language testing and assessment.



As described in the table above, the model consists of two components: language knowledge and strategic competence. According to the two researchers, language knowledge is the main component and is further broken down into two categories: organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge.

Organizational knowledge is again divided into 2 subtypes: grammatical and textual knowledge. Pragmatic knowledge is also divided into functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge.

Grammatical knowledge, equivalent to Canale and Swain's grammatical competence, is to do with someone's knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and graphology. This knowledge helps learners to construct accurate sentences or utterances.

Textual knowledge, quite similar to Canale and Swain's discourse competence, is to do with cohesion and rhetorical or conversational organization. In other words, this knowledge helps establish the connection between sentences and helps create cohesive, logical, cohesive, and coherent texts.

Functional knowledge is to do with the knowledge that enables the language user to carry out a communicative function, i.e. to understand or convey a communicative goal in a sentence or utterance such as provision of information, social interaction, making an order or request.

Sociolinguistic knowledge, similar to Canale and Swain's sociolinguistic competence, refers to the knowledge that encompasses social and cultural rules of language use (e.g. cultural and social norms, rules of politeness, etc.) and enables the language user to understand and produce appropriate written or oral texts that fit in the communicative context.

Strategic competence is to do with the ability to employ and incorporate all other components to use the language successfully and achieve communicative goals. In other words, this competence refers to the knowledge of communication strategies and putting them into action to communicate effectively. Therefore, it is to do with such things as planning communication, avoiding difficulties, repairing breakdowns that may occur in communication.

2.3. Proficiency and assessment of proficiency

In the area of language testing and assessment, researchers find it difficult or even sometimes impossible to measure directly all the components of communicative competence. Rather, what they can do is measure them indirectly through a range of performances and make generalizations of a learner's competence. In other words, in practice, communicative competence is less to do with the underlying things and more to do with performance or language use which is often termed as proficiency. That is why proficiency can be understood as someone's "competence put

to use" or someone's actual use of the language to communicate (Council of Europe, 2001, p.187). In other words, in practice, the assessment of a person's English proficiency is actually the assessment of her or his actual use of the English language in various situations in the real world.

III. PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

A single form of assessment cannot meet all the needs of different stakeholders and serve all their purposes (Law and Eckes, 2007, Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010), and thus different assessment activities are used to serve different purposes. That is why clarification of the purpose of an assessment activity from the beginning is an important step before a form of assessment is chosen.

According to Brown and Abeywickrama (2010), commercial tests (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL) may serve to measure proficiency or to place students into a certain learning program. A bit different from commercial tests, classroom-based assessment activities may serve to measure students' achievements in a certain course of study or are more to do with the diagnosis of students' strengths and weaknesses.

Law and Eckes (2007) also discuss various purposes of assessment with reference to different stakeholders. They maintain that different stakeholders have different assessment purposes. Administrators may want to use the assessment results to make decisions on which language programs to place students. Teachers may want to use the information gathered from the assessment activities to make adjustments to improve the quality of teaching and learning activities. Students may want to know how they perform in the course, what they have achieved, what they need to improve. Parents may want to know about how their children are doing in school.

With focus placed on classroom assessment, Earl and Katz (2006) break assessment purposes down into three broad categories: (1) assessment of learning; (2) assessment for learning; and (3) assessment as learning. These researchers hold that assessment of learning is carried out to measure what students know and can do, or to know whether they achieve the outcomes expected according to the curriculum. In this regard, to a great extent, this kind of assessment is summative. Differently, assessment for learning is primarily aimed to provide teachers information so that they can modify their teaching and learning activities. Assessment as learning seems a bit similar to assessment for learning in that it promotes learning, but it places more focus on the active role of students and their engagement in the assessment process. Accordingly, assessment as learning is aimed at turning assessment into a process of learning in which assessment activities help develop students' metacognition (pp. 13-14). In other words, by engaging in assessment activities, students carry out various learning activities and monitor their own learning. Clearly, different from assessment of learning, assessment for learning and assessment as learning are formative.

IV. THE PROS AND CONS OF STANDARDIZED PROFICIENCY TESTING

When it comes to assessment, it is tempting to think of testing. It is known that testing, particularly standardized testing, is all too often used these days when it requires assessment of students' learning or their English proficiency (Earl and Katz, 2006; Law and Eckes, 2007; Chappuis and Stiggins, 2008; Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010).

Standardized proficiency tests are designed to compare someone's knowledge and skills against "a set core of knowledge and skills deemed essential for him" (Law and Eckes, 2007, p. 23). In a standardized proficiency test, all test-takers do "the same tests, under the same conditions" (Law and Eckes, 2007, p. 30).

There are good reasons for standardized proficiency testing to stay. One of the reasons is that tests provide "hard data" which appears scientific and objective. Second, tests are also believed to offer the kind of accountability that educational organizations may need to provide stakeholders and the public (Law and Eckes, 2007, p. 34). For these reasons, clearly, standardized tests are particularly useful to serve administrative purposes.

Despite the strong points described above, Law and Eckes (2007) maintain that tests have their shortcomings.

First, it is easy to see that proficiency tests are one-shot and they are administered at a particular time on a single occasion. In other words, test results can only tell us what the student can do at that particular time. That is why proficiency tests cannot provide reliable information about the learning process.

Second, proficiency tests are often decontextualized. These tests are often taken out of a meaningful context in which real-life communications take place. This results in the lowering of the level of authenticity.

Third, proficiency tests "fragment" language knowledge and skills (Law and Eckes, 2007, p. 30). It is quite easy to find "proficiency tests" that are designed to measure separate elements of the language. Here is an example:

Choose a word that best fits in the blank:

You'll ... yourself a lot of time if you take the car.

A. spend

B. make

C. spare

D. save

Obviously, this item type fragments a learner's ability and measures the knowledge of vocabulary. A student's correct answer to this question does not necessarily indicate that he or she could succeed in communication in real-life contexts and vice versa. In this sense, proficiency tests are not actually used to measure the kind of "proficiency" that we want as defined and described in previous sections.

It is also worth noticing that the results of a proficiency test do not always reflect what a student really knows or can do. This is because many items in a proficiency test are objective and thus they do not provide information about how or why the student reached the answer. The student may have guessed and come up with the correct answer. In this regard, again proficiency tests do not actually measure "proficiency" and thus lack validity.

Furthermore, even errors made in tests do not necessarily mean a student's failure in learning or development. In language learning, when a student makes errors in communication, she or he is actually "progressing" (Law and Eckes, 2007, p. 35). For example, when a student says "I goed to school yesterday", in a test, "goed" is considered a grammatical error and an indication that the student failed to master the irregular past form of the verb "go" (which is "went"), but at the same time it can also be seen as a signal of the student's progress in learning in that she is trying or beginning to use the "regular" simple past form of the verb that she might not ever use before. It is common knowledge that learning is not a product or a destination, but a process or a continuum, so in this sense the learner's use of "goed" is clearly an indicator of development, not an error or failure as it is frequently perceived.

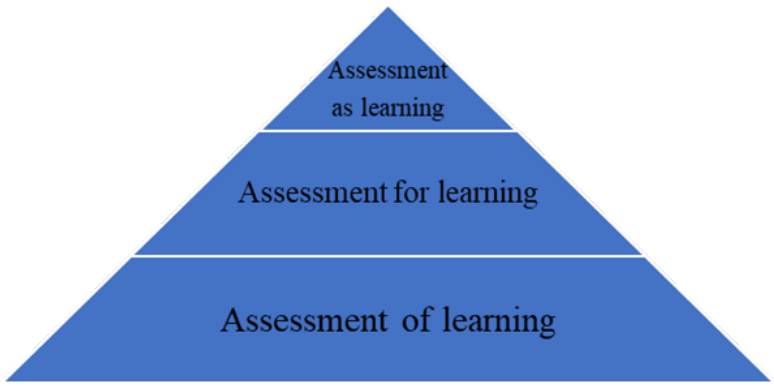
For the reasons described above, in many cases, proficiency tests do not always serve as an accurate indicator of what students can do or a good means to promote learning and teaching.

V. BALANCED APPROACH TO THE ASSESSMENT OF LEARNERS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

In the area of English proficiency assessment, no single piece of research proposes that only one form of assessment should be used to gather information about EFL students' proficiency. However, in reality, high-stake standardized tests are all too often used as the only criteria for stakeholders to make important "life-event" decisions such as the entrance to an undergraduate or graduate program, graduation, promotion, or retention (Law and Eckes, 2007, p. 35). Clearly, this is one-dimensional and incomprehensive, and thus may negatively affect students and their opportunities for development. That is why important decisions should be based on accurate, multi-dimensional and reliable information about students.

In the classroom context, with focus placed on assessment purposes, it is believed that

assessment of learning is of the most common practice as shown in the traditional model in Figure 1 (Earl and Katz, 2006). However, this practice has negative effects and washback on learning (Earl and Katz, 2006; Law and Eckes, 2007; Chappuis and Stiggins, 2008). That is why it is recommended an alternative approach be taken and some kind of balance could be achieved In this regard, it would be useful to employ a reconfigured model introduced by Earl and Katz (2006) in the following pyramid:



With focus placed on the methods which can be used to gather comprehensive data and find some kind of balance in the assessment of students, it is proposed that teachers, educational administrators and other stakeholders use the Quad model introduced by Anthony et al. (1991) as cited in Law and Eckes (2007, p. 117):

Observation of process	Observation of product
Classroom measures	Decontextualized measures

Observation of process

The name of this quadrant, to a great extent, tells us about its focus: observation and assessment of students when they immerse themselves into learning tasks and activities during the process of learning. Notably, the role of the teacher here is of great importance. This is because during the process of learning while students are participating in learning activities, doing listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks, the teacher is supposed to get involved, respond, provide support, etc. to help facilitate the tasks. In this respect, observing students and their learning is a natural part of the job of the teacher. However, it is necessary to design teacher observation in a way that it can gather "good data" and help serve assessment purposes.

In order to achieve this, it is suggested that teachers employ Law and Eckes' model (2007, pp. 122-123) which includes the four steps of planning, collecting, analyzing and interpreting.

Step	Description
Planning	Teachers create a folder or a repository for each individual learner to keep the notes on the student's performance.
Collecting	Teachers choose a task (embedded in the syllabus) that allows students to demonstrate their language constructs or abilities. Teachers note down examples of student's use of language. For better analysis and use later on, it is suggested that teachers establish the connection between the notes and the construct/ability assessed, record the time and describe the context.
Analyzing	Teachers review the notes, analyze the data, rate or comment on the student's specific construct/ability, overall performance, or progress, or make decisions about the student's proficiency level.
Interpreting	Teachers interpret the implications of what is observed and analyzed, and work out the interventions necessary for the student, for the learning and teaching.

Observation of product

The name of this quadrant is also telling: the observation and assessment of students' learning products. Products of student learning are various, ranging from projects, video clips, audiotapes, writing assignments, reading logs to selected pages of students' notebooks.

In order to assess students' learning products effectively, we can also employ the 4-step Law and Eckes' model.

Step	Description
Planning	Teachers work out what to collect. If the teacher wants to effectively assess a student's ability, then it is suggested that teachers collect and analyze that student's independent pieces of work rather than group projects that the student participates in. In most cases, the data from a student's independent work would be more reliable and more telling than that from group projects because generally it is difficult and time-consuming to get to know what contributions each member of the group makes to the group project.
Collecting	Teachers collect the students' learning products as planned. It would be helpful for teachers to record the date and the description of the learning products collected so that they could analyze later on.

Analyzing	With reference to a specific construct, ability or skill, teachers analyze a student's products, make notes of how the student is performing, the strengths and weaknesses, look for patterns or trends of the student's development from the learning products and document their growth over the period of time.
Interpreting	Based on what analyzed, the teacher may want to know what the implications of the data are, what inferences can be made about the level of the skill at which the student is performing, e.g., just beginning, developing or already well-developed and ready to progress to another, more complex and challenging level. It is also necessary for the teacher to work out the interventions necessary to help the student. It would be helpful for the teacher to incorporate the information gathered into planning their lessons and their subsequent teaching.

It is worth noticing that the observation of the process and the observation of the product are not necessarily separate, but intertwined. It would be helpful for teachers to observe the process taking account of the students' learning products, and the other way round when teachers observe the products with reference to the process, i.e., over a certain period of students' learning.

To a great extent, it is understood that these first two quadrants are mostly to do with formative assessment, assessment for learning or assessment as learning.

Classroom measures

This third quadrant is mainly to do with a variety of traditional assessment tools such as teacher-made tests, comprehension questions or homework. These measures continue to be of common practice these days.

The measures in this quadrant are mainly to do with summative assessment and assessment of learning.

Decontextualized measures

This final quadrant mainly refers to standardized tests which are decontextualized, often criterion-referenced and administered outside the context of the classroom.

VI. CONCLUSION

The assessment of English proficiency remains a complex field where purposes and contexts greatly vary, compounded by competing demands for reliability, validity, and authenticity. This article has examined key concepts central to the field – testing and assessment, communicative competence, proficiency – highlighting how each frames the understanding of what it means to measure language ability. While standardized testing has long been the dominant form for the assessment of EFL students' proficiency, its limitations are clearly evident. As Gen-AI and other technologies begin to replicate traditional academic tasks, the weaknesses of standardized testing become even more pronounced, underscoring the need for assessment approaches that genuinely measure learners' abilities to use language meaningfully.

In response, this article has proposed a balanced approach to the assessment of EFL students' proficiency which includes four quadrants integrating the strengths of standardized measures with more authentic, process-based methods. The present article provides a detailed description of the steps that teachers can follow to assess their students' learning. By combining traditional and standardized tools with the obsearvation of the learning process and products, teachers and decision-makers can achieve a more comprehensive picture of EFL students' proficiency.

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