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Research Article

Language Assessment Literacy of a Vietnamese EFL University Lecturer: A Qualitative Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Assessment literacy plays an important role in language teaching, helping teachers make the right decisions to support learners' learning. This qualitative case study clarified the language assessment literacy of a university EFL teacher at a public university in Vietnam. The data were collected through a semi-structured interview and analysed according to Giraldo's framework, which consists of three dimensions: knowledge, skills, and principles. The findings show that the participant has a clear conceptual understanding of the different assessment purposes, closely align with expected learning outcomes and program objectives. However, she encounters numerous challenges at the macro and micro levels and must negotiate her way to meet the standards while helping her students reach their final objectives. The study illustrates how language assessment literacy is perceived and translated into practice in a higher education context in Vietnam and proposes suggestions regarding professional development and future research.

Keywords: *EFL teaching, testing and assessment, higher education, teacher assessment knowledge, skills and principles*

Introduction

The term "assessment literacy" (henceforth AL), as proposed by Stiggins (1991), has gained acceptance and refers to the array of skills and knowledge stakeholders need to possess in the assessment process. An assessment-literate teacher is expected to understand the fundamental principles of measurement directly applicable to classroom learning (Malone, 2013). Despite its conceptualisation in the 1990s, it was only in the early 2000s that researchers began to

revise and further develop an understanding of language assessment literacy (henceforth LAL) (Weng & Shen, 2022).

Language testing and assessment directly shape curriculum development and the quality of teaching and learning (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Teachers and stakeholders use assessment results to modify teaching methods and policies. Students identify their strengths and weaknesses and build a plan to meet course requirements. Therefore, assessing student learning daily is one of the teacher's most

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important, complex, demanding, and time-consuming tasks. As the main and direct stakeholders, teachers must ensure quality classroom assessments and use them to best support student learning (Cheng & Fox, 2017).

In addition, language testing and assessment have been shown to strongly impact the quality of learning outcomes (Tsagari, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to enhance teachers' LAL (Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2020). Although teachers recognise the importance of AL, their assessment competence often remains functional. They express hesitation in designing and selecting suitable assessment tasks (Mertler, 2009; Xu & Brown, 2016). Previous studies have identified several common reasons for this shortcoming. These include insufficient integration of language assessment content into pre-service teacher training programs (Fulcher, 2012) and limited training courses for in-service teachers to improve assessment skills (Crusan et al., 2016). Moreover, failure of policymakers and administrators to ensure that teachers receive adequate training before starting their teaching careers is another major factor (Coombe et al., 2020).

These inadequacies in pre-service curriculum and in-service training programs lead to a lack of teachers' competence to perform their assessment duties effectively (Mertler, 2009; Sultana, 2019; Xu & Brown, 2016). Specifically, Mertler (2009) indicates that teachers have a limited understanding of assessment conceptualisations, which prevents them from designing and implementing standardised assessments. In her study, Sultana (2019) also reports an inconsistency between theory and practice, suggesting that knowledge of assessment alone is insufficient and the context also has a crucial role in assessment practice. Similarly, Villa & Brunfaut (2023) highlight challenges in practice, although LAL research has made recent progress. The results confirm an inconsistency between theory and practice and point out the need for continuous

improvement in LAL training and support systems.

In the EFL context, teachers also face similar challenges, including incomplete foundational knowledge and limited practical application (Bui, 2021; Ngo, 2024; Sun & Zhang, 2022). Numerous key reasons have been identified. First, the inadequate focus on LAL in pre-service teacher training curricula is considered the primary concern. Few credit hours for this subject are insufficient to provide students with fundamental knowledge and experience with real-life situations. As a result, many teachers are not well-prepared for real-life teaching challenges. In addition, there remains a substantial disconnect between assessment policy and its classroom implementation. The enactment of policy does not often keep pace with reality. Meanwhile, language assessment courses, which are annually organised, fail to meet the requirements, leaving teachers without the necessary competencies in AL.

In addition to the disconnect between conceptual understanding and practice, recent research shows that teachers have limited understanding of key concepts. This severely limits teachers' ability to create and conduct effective assessment strategies (Sultana, 2019; Xu & Brown, 2016). This deficiency undermines not only the accurate assessment of student progress but also the overall quality of education. This deficiency also calls for specialised professional development to enable teachers to fulfil their roles more effectively.

In Vietnam, although communicative language teaching and assessment have been prioritised, language teachers and other stakeholders still face a gap between policy and practice. Specifically, research has revealed that assessment practices in Vietnam remain highly traditional, focusing mainly on scores and exams, rather than learner improvement. Meanwhile, scoring systems are often not meaningful to students because feedback is infrequent (Hoang, 2010; Nguyen,

2013; cited in Bui, 2021). Moreover, the quality of exam items and questions is a continuing controversial issue (Ngo, 2024).

Although previous studies have examined English language teachers' assessment literacy in the EFL context, relatively few empirical studies have examined how Vietnamese teachers practice their assessment literacy and the difficulties they face. This study fills this gap by examining how an English language teacher translates her assessment literacy into practice and adapts to contextual constraints. The research attempts to answer the following questions: 1/ How does the teacher perceive her language assessment literacy in terms of knowledge, skills and principles? and 2/ What constraints does she have to face in assessment practice?

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study research design to collect data on the assessment literacy of a Vietnamese EFL university teacher. The teacher was questioned about her language assessment literacy according to the three core components of knowledge, skills and principles developed by Giraldo (2018). With knowledge, teachers are expected to understand applied linguistics, language assessment, and the assessment context. Regarding skills, teachers should master giving instructions, designing assessment activities, conducting measurements and applying technology. In terms of principles, teachers should demonstrate fairness and address critical issues in language assessment.

Respondents and Sampling Method

A female English language teacher (pseudonym Orchid) who participated in this study has 15 years of experience teaching through different curricula, including advanced programs, General English (GE), English linguistics, and graduate programs. She earned BA and MA degrees at the University of Languages and International

Studies (ULIS, VNU). As an undergraduate, she completed 4 credits in language testing and assessment. She also participated in assessment-related training workshops offered by her institution.

After obtaining permission and receiving approval, the researcher conducted an interview via Microsoft Teams. The interview was recorded and transcribed simultaneously. The interview questions were designed following the framework of three components of knowledge, skills and principles developed by Giraldo (2018). The interview schedule was sent to the participant in advance and covered conceptions of formative and summative assessment, assessment purposes, task design, feedback, use of technology, fairness, validity, reliability, constraints, and professional development. The interview protocol was attached to Appendix 1.

The transcript after the interview was downloaded and cleaned. Then, thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data. According to Braun & Clarke (2019), thematic analysis is a flexible method that helps the researcher summarise and report meaningful data, thereby enabling a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences. The six-step process was conducted as follows:

First, the researcher re-read the transcript to obtain overall and detailed information from the participant's answers. Thanks to this step, the researcher developed basic ideas and took notes on Ms Orchid's perceptions, understanding, and assessment practices.

Second, after getting familiar with the data, the researcher started coding. The notes were assigned to different codes, showing denotative meaning or connotative meaning in Ms Orchid's answers. For example, the very first codes were "formative assessment", "summative assessment", "feedback" or "difficulties in designing rubrics".

Third, the codes were examined to determine their relationships and remove duplicates.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Category	Information
Pseudonym	Orchid
Role	English lecturer and head of department at a public university in Vietnam
Teaching experience	15 years
Teaching contexts	General English, English for Specific Purposes, advanced programmes, English major courses, graduate teaching
Qualifications	BA and MA, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University
Assessment background	Four-credit language testing and assessment course; university training workshops

Then, they were grouped by similarity and developed into potential themes. The potential themes were established according to the conceptual framework.

Fourth, the themes were examined to assess the validity and relevance to answer the research question. The consistency of the themes was reviewed to ensure a strong connection and reflection of important components.

Fifth, the themes established in stage four were carefully described and examined in detail to reveal their characteristics and their connection to the research question.

Sixth, the researcher wrapped up the themes and wrote the report to tell the participant's story. Each theme was illustrated with evidence and direct quotes to make her knowledge, skills, and principles regarding her language assessment clear.

Results and Discussion

Data analysis of the interview revealed five closely connected themes in the LAL of Ms Orchid: knowledge of language assessment, assessment skills, assessment principles, contextual constraints, and professional development needs.

Knowledge of Language Assessment

Ms Orchid demonstrates functional understanding of the distinction between formative and summative assessment, articulating clear differences in purpose, timing, and function. She describes "*formative*

assessment is typically conducted during a semester alongside summative assessment, and formative assessment is a form of testing and evaluation carried out during the learning process, for each part of the course."

The interviewee identifies Ms Orchid's perception of two central purposes of formative assessment: grading and adjusting in-class instruction. This dual-purpose understanding reflects Ms Orchid's practical classroom context and also reveals a tension between assessment-for-learning and assessment-of-learning paradigms. She must balance what she needs to test students with what she needs to help them reach learning outcomes. Ms Orchid states: "*The test results serve two purposes: one purpose is that it is also a form of testing that counts toward student grades. And it is also a way for instructors to modify their teaching methods in the next phase of the course.*"

Another purpose of assessment - summative assessment is understood as "*the test conducted at the end of a course, and it examines whether students have achieved what is called the learning outcomes of the course*". This understanding is consistent with assessment theory, emphasising the evaluation of students' expected learning outcomes. Ms Orchid correctly identifies summative assessment as measuring achievement against predetermined learning outcomes, including what learners do, know, and can achieve by the end.

When being asked about different assessment purposes (assessment for learning, assessment of learning, and assessment as learning), the interviewee's responses reveal stronger attention to assessment for and of learning but limited indication of assessment as learning. Ms Orchid demonstrates her hands-on implementation of assessment for learning through multiple strategies, such as portfolio-based reflection, informal interviews, and mid-term assessment analysis. She shares *"I ask students to write, or use a portfolio format where students record what they have learned in each lesson and what they feel they haven't received or expect in upcoming lessons, and I will use that portfolio to adjust my teaching content and methods"* or *"I can directly ask students after each lesson"*, *"I can also use the mid-term test results to see if students need additional supplementation or need to practice certain skills again"*.

Her descriptions demonstrate the diagnostic use of assessment data to modify teaching strategies and improve students' learning outcomes, which are core components of assessment for learning. With Ms Orchid, assessment of learning is chiefly linked to summative evaluation and the final grade decision. Meanwhile, the concept of assessment as learning, in which students actively monitor, reflect on, and regulate their own thinking and learning, receives minimal explicit attention in the interview. While the portfolio approach mentioned above has potential for assessment as learning, the interviewee views it primarily as a tool for teacher adjustment rather than for student self-regulation. This gap suggests an area for professional development, as assessment as learning constitutes a more sophisticated level of assessment literacy that enables students as active agents in their learning process.

Language Assessment Skills

Regarding language assessment skills, Ms Orchid reports a diverse repertoire of classroom assessment practices. She carefully

explained the process she often adopted, from designing assessment activities to giving feedback on in-class activities. She spends a lot of time on formative assessments by assigning and checking students' homework, assignments, sample midterm and final tests, teamwork and group work, short presentations, and debates. With writing skills, she assigns students a portfolio, uses peer feedback and then students correct and hand in final versions. She then reads, checks, and corrects common mistakes in front of the class. Ms Orchid also gained a clear understanding of how to use AI when students are doing writing tasks. However, she has not had a strict measure to address this problem; she has just focused on *"warning of punishment"*.

In test design, she emphasises alignment between course specifications and learning outcomes, particularly for general English and English for Specific Purposes courses. She always tries to sustain alignment between course specifications and course objectives; however, it is indisputable that she sometimes has to *"compromise herself"* and adjust the test difficulty to suit most students. She knows that mechanically cutting tests affects validity and reliability, but she has no choice because many students are at a lower level and cannot meet the requirements. She shares her worries in the interview, *"I know cutting the test mechanically is not a good way because it might violate the reliability of the test, but there is a large number of low-level students in class, and I can't ignore them. If I adopt a standardised test, I'm sure that many students will fail!"* Ms Orchid's case is not uncommon; similar tensions have been reported in research on teachers whose assessment scheme is partial rather than standardised (Crusan et al., 2016; Sun & Zhang, 2022).

In terms of technological skills, Ms Orchid adopted some approaches, but only to a limited extent. To address obstacles such as large class sizes, she often asks students to take quizzes on platforms like Google Forms or apps like Quizizz and Padlet, so they can check their results immediately. She also gives bonus

points to active students and shows better results over time.

Ms Orchid raises awareness of the need to consider technological assessment skills following a recent training course. She indicated, *"After completing the course, things became clearer, and I learned how to implement certain tasks more smoothly and effectively, and I also applied the techniques I learned in the course when creating tests."* Thereafter, the course brought positive changes both in perceptions and implementation for the participant.

Although Ms Orchid mentioned some key concepts related to assessment skills, the answer discloses several gaps, namely: limited theoretical vocabulary; weak representation of assessment as learning; limited consideration of construct validity; fairness and bias; and the psychological attributes of learners. These gaps are not unusual for teachers without specialised assessment training and indicate areas for specialised professional development.

Language Assessment Principles

Ms Orchid displays a full understanding of the test's validity and reliability. She confirms, *"The tests are always aligned with the internationally standardised format and the course's expected learning outcomes"*. In addition, she pays attention to students' levels of discrimination and background, and cares for students who have limited opportunities to learn English at lower and higher secondary schools. This ethical orientation corresponds to the principles dimension of LAL as discussed in the literature. She shares, *"I always try to conduct fair assessments; big classes and unequal levels are common problems which require us to focus more on lower-level students, give them more materials and encourage them to self-study."*

Moreover, she tries to secure transparency in formative assessment by providing rubrics for marking presentations, outlining task requirements, giving feedback, and marking immediately after each presentation. She

indicates, *"Scoring rubrics are always available in the course specification; marking writing tasks also have a checklist to follow. I always mention all of them from the first lesson"*. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that classroom teachers often understand fairness intuitively while lacking access to more formal assessment conceptualisations or validation frameworks (Fulcher, 2012; Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2020).

Constraints in Assessment Practice

The interview uncovers major limitations at different levels that limit Ms Orchid's ability to implement ideal assessment practices in the real context. These constraints originate from institutional, resource, and individual levels.

Institutional constraints

First and foremost, the absence of dedicated assessment specialists within the institution was critically mentioned: *"In my opinion, although all lecturers participate in the assessment process, the institution should also have specialised personnel for this work. We need people having deep knowledge to guide on necessary tasks."* As a head of department, Ms Orchid encourages colleagues doing a PhD in assessment: *"For example, doctoral dissertation topics should include topics on testing and assessment instead of mainly focusing on teaching methodology."* In addition, Ms Orchid identifies inadequate financial and administrative support as a major barrier: *"Funding and policy support for testing and assessment work must be recognised as an important, regular task that operates consistently, not just implemented when exams come around."* This constraint shows a common systemic gap in the institutions' training of assessment specialists.

The interview also suggests an exam-oriented culture in which assessment is predominantly considered as grading or ranking rather than as an essential element of teaching and learning. The need to prioritise assessment as *"important, regular work"* indicates that assessment has been mainly

used for learning, rather than as a means of learning. The repeated concerns from Ms Orchid reaffirm the need for top-down support at macro and micro level so that teachers can actively and effectively implement assessment activities in class.

Workload and Time Pressures

As a full-time teacher and head of department, Ms Orchid experiences workload and time constraints when balancing efficient assessment methods with the challenge of applying comprehensive assessment practices alongside teaching responsibilities. Moreover, the cost of quality assessment training appears as a major constraint: *"The problem is that the course requires quite a large budget, so the institution should support teachers to improve their testing and assessment skills."* This constraint creates inequitable access to professional development. In reality, few teachers are willing to pay for costly training courses. Therefore, it is difficult to expect professional development without suitable support in terms of cost and time management.

Although Ms Orchid did not mention it clearly, her emphasis on conventional assessment methods such as written midterm and final tests, portfolios, and direct questioning in class implies limited access to digital tools or automated scoring systems. Likewise, Quainoo et al. (2025) suggest that the lack of institutional funding and personal time constraints leaves knowledge and belief gaps which limit teachers' development of AL.

Skills barriers and the need for professional development

Ms Orchid shares in the interview: *"In the past, there were tasks I only knew about, but I hadn't actually used or applied."* Specifically, she finds it difficult to conduct assessment activities despite existing conceptual knowledge of assessment. She is aware of knowledge and conceptualisation but finds it difficult to apply what she learns in the classroom. This is also a common pattern of AL development for teachers (Xu and Brown,

2016). From this practical reality, the interviewee also recognises the need for continuous professional learning: *"I must have this knowledge, and I must apply it in the process of my work, for example, in test development or grading."* This demonstrates her professional development and dedication to self-directed learning despite institutional constraints.

The interview uncovers the participant's training needs for LAL enhancement. She emphasises her readiness for continuous learning opportunities: *"I will equip myself with necessary things, such as participating in training courses and participating in sessions for exchanging and sharing about testing and assessment work."* This reflects her recognition that AL is not a fixed but dynamic conceptualization that teachers need to learn continuously and engage in reflective development.

The interviewee demonstrates Ms Orchid's adherence to her ownership of her career growth: *"So I also try to have a certain level of knowledge. I must have this knowledge, and I must apply it in my work process."* This implies a call for accessible self-study resources and learning materials. This need coincides with broader arguments in the LAL literature that professional learning should be situated, ongoing, and supported by the institution rather than delivered as a stand-alone workshop or conference (Coombe et al., 2020; Sun & Zhang, 2022).

As a responsible head of department, Ms Orchid advocates for institutionalised training: *"For the teaching staff, we also need to participate in necessary courses, training, and workshops so that we can conduct testing and assessment work more systematically and professionally."* A vital need is for dedicated assessment specialists: *"A unit should have specialised personnel for this work, to have deep knowledge of this work and to implement and guide the team in general."* Besides individual training, there is a need for organisational development: *"Proposals regarding support, both in terms of funding and policies, as well as*

compensation and funding for testing and assessment work, must be recognised as an important, regular task that operates consistently."

Conclusion

This qualitative case study provides a partly comprehensive picture of an English language teacher's LAL in terms of knowledge, skills, and principles. The participant demonstrates her fundamental knowledge of the different purposes of assessment, ability to use a range of classroom assessment activities, and appreciation of fairness and alignment with learning outcomes. Nevertheless, her assessment practices are hindered by large, mixed classes, a heavy workload, limited specialist support, and incomplete guidance on the use of AI in assessment. The case is expected to highlight a remaining gap between theoretical perceptions and sustainable classroom implementation.

The study has several implications. First, pre-service curricula and training courses should be given more attention to the duration and content. Classroom-based assessment design, rubric development, and responses to the use of technology should be integrated. Second, at the institutional level, assessment should be recognized as an academic professional activity and stimulate more adequate investment. This study also has some limitations. Because it is conducted with a single participant in a specific context, the findings are not generalizable. Future research should involve more participants across multiple contexts to examine how language assessment literacy is enacted in tertiary EFL settings in Vietnam.

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APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1/ How do you understand formative assessment and summative assessment? How do you distinguish among assessment for learning, assessment of learning, and assessment as learning?

2/ How do you apply concepts such as validity, reliability, and fairness when designing assessment activities such as essays, written assignments, or presentations?

3/ What process do you usually follow when designing and using scoring criteria or rubrics? For example, do you draft them first, share them with students for comments, revise them if necessary, use them for scoring, and then provide feedback/results?

Do you usually use analytic rubrics or holistic rubrics? Do you refer to the CEFR or any other standards when developing your rubrics?

4/ How do you usually provide feedback to students in terms of frequency, timing, and format? Do you encourage self-assessment or peer-assessment?

When teaching large classes or facing time constraints, how do you manage the feedback process?

5/ What principles usually guide your assessment decisions, for example transparency, inclusiveness/fairness, and support for lower-performing or special-needs students?

6/ What are the major challenges you currently face in classroom assessment, such as class size, time pressure, plagiarism, or the impact of technology/AI? How have you addressed these challenges, for example by making rubrics more explicit, using peer assessment, designing frequent mini-tasks to strengthen formative assessment, or integrating technology into assessment practices?

7/ What suggestions do you have for improving the quality of assessment and enhancing your own assessment literacy? These suggestions may relate to professional support, standardisation of test design and scoring, feedback design, or policy adjustments.