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**Paper Title** Illuminating Learners' Voices: Inviting Learners to Share Responsibility in Developing Language Assessment Literacy

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## 1. Objectives

The present study explored English language learners' (ELLs) language assessment literacy (LAL) while actively engaging them in LAL enhancement tasks. LAL refers to stakeholders' understanding of and abilities to appraise language assessment (Author 1, 2019; Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012). It is critical for language education stakeholders to have advanced LAL as it can strongly influence their experience of assessment and learning and their decisions about learning, instruction, and assessment, which in turn, can impact the quality of their educational experiences.

In this study, 14 adult ELLs, attendees of an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) course at a university affiliated institute, engaged in a series of LAL enhancement tasks. During the tasks, they were encouraged to share their assessment experience, review assessment items, and eventually design an ESL reading test as a group. These LAL enhancement tasks helped learners develop critical perspectives on both their assessment and learning experience. This study corresponds to the recent call for more learner-centered approaches to understanding LAL so that learners can facilitate their autonomy over assessment practices, rather than being mere receivers of ready-made assessments (Author 1 & Colleague, 2020; Malone, 2017). By paying attention to learners' voices concerning language assessment, the authors attempted to challenge both practical and theoretical concerns regarding learners in assessment practices (e.g., designing, using assessment data) and theory building of LAL.

## 2. Theoretical framework

It is generally agreed that LAL is critical for stakeholders to enhance their education experience. LAL is a domain-specific assessment literacy and refers to stakeholders' understanding of assessment theories and social-cultural-pedagogical-political-ethical impact of assessment and skills to design assessment, analyze, use and report assessment results to stakeholders (Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012; Inbar-Lourie, 2008). Although LAL research is still at the early stage (Fulcher, 2012), studies have helped us understand the components of LAL and its pedagogical impact. To date, LAL research has largely focused on teachers and testing professionals; the studies document teachers' lack of LAL and repeatedly note their varied and substantial needs in LAL (Fulcher, 2012; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). Importantly, research also reveals that focused training on assessment improved teachers' LAL (Kleinsasser, 2005; Koh, et al., 2017), which positively impacts learners' education experience.

In contrast to the substantial attention to teachers' LAL, neither LAL theoretical models nor empirical studies investigate learners' perspectives on assessment or the ways in which teachers should respond to learners' voices in understanding, designing, and using assessment (Author 1 & Colleague, 2020; Author 1 & Colleagues, under review; Malone, 2017). Considering the dire test-based accountability consequences for ELLs, it is imperative to accurately understand learners' perspectives and understanding of assessment, as well as to find ways to enhance their LAL for constructive assessment experience.

Some scholars expressed their concerns about the capabilities of learners to share their perspectives on assessment (Malone, 2017); however, even the limited information available to-date provides a strong rationale for investigating learners' perspectives on building valid theoretical models of LAL. Cheng and DeLuca (2011) show that learners' perspectives on assessment provide strong empirical evidence to broaden assessment validity discussions, highlighting the importance of better understanding learners' perspectives. Studies also reveal that learners have difficulties identifying constructs of language assessment accurately (Sato & Ikeda, 2015), and are frustrated by not receiving enough information about assessment (Vlanti,

2012). However, targeted instruction on assessment theories, purposes, and functions help learners change negative attitudes toward assessment (Watanabe, 2011). With this background in mind, this study addressed the following research questions:

(1) To what extent do English language learners have LAL?

(2) To what extent do the LAL enhancement tasks, namely language assessment development tasks, impact learners' LAL development?

### 3. Methods & Data analysis

The participants were 14 adult intermediate level ELLs. They came from Asian, European, and Middle Eastern countries and were currently attending an ESL program affiliated with a mid-size university at the time of data collection. The amount of time that each participant resided in an English-speaking country averaged about two years. Due to their unique education experience in two or more cultures, their LAL insights provided extensive, meaningful information. We connected with the participants in a virtual classroom where we facilitated both large and small group discussions on language assessment. We audio-recorded all sessions which were later transcribed for further analysis. Data was collected in the following manner:

Figure 1 Data collection procedure

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English proficiency assessments and surveys. The participants took a web-based ESL reading assessment of 20 items prior to beginning the study and another after the completion of the research sessions. The language assessments were modeled off of the Cambridge First Certificate of English, which is a standardized language assessment designed for intermediate level ELLs. The English assessments were used to confirm the participants' proficiency levels and give opportunities to experience new perspectives from the LAL enhancement tasks. The surveys were conducted before and after the research sessions. Composed of three sections, the first asked their general language assessment experience such as the frequency of language assessment they have taken during their formal education and the language assessments' stakes for their education. Section 2 asked for their perceptions about what constitutes good English language reading assessment. Section 3 assessed their LAL regarding poorly written multiple-choice test items which they rated on a Likert scale.

LAL enhancement tasks. The LAL enhancement tasks consisted of two pre-tasks and a task. All were implemented in an online learning management system. In order to maximize the interaction opportunity, we separated participants into three groups of four to five individuals. The two pre-task sessions were an hour long, consisting of discussion questions and a brief review of reading assessments both theoretically well- and poorly constructed. The participants discussed (1) different types of assessment purposes, (2) constructs of language assessment, and (3) what entails good language assessment. In the task session, participants were invited to design a brief English language assessment, incorporating their discussions from the pre-task sessions. They selected a text and formulated four reading test items, which reflected the target constructs and formats of language assessment that they agreed upon and chose as a group. The participants later evaluated the assessments developed by the other groups and voted for the assessment they judged as best.

Focused interviews. Four participants joined the focus group interviews. Each participant represented a diverse first language background (e.g., a European, two Middle Eastern, and an Asian participant). During the 60-minute semi-structured interview, we asked about their experience of taking language assessments in general and developing one as a part of the study. Each participant had equal opportunities to share their experiences.

Data analysis. First, both authors went through the transcription independently to make ourselves familiar with the data. Then the authors worked to analyze the data qualitatively. Based on the LAL model, the authors performed an initial coding of the data then shared the coding and participants' quotes to obtain emerging themes. Based on initial discussions, they repeated the process two more times and finalized themes to answer the research questions. Thematic analysis assisted in reporting the participants' experiences and meaning making in relation to language assessment within social contexts.

#### 4. Results and discussions

The focus group interviews helped answer both research questions addressed earlier. Despite some researchers' concerns regarding learners' lack of experience to articulate their LAL in a way that can advance our understanding of their LAL for research or pedagogical purposes, our findings from the focus group interview confirmed that the ELLs had LAL and were capable of presenting it in their unique ways. Although they did not extensively use any technical jargon such as validity, reliability, fairness, or washback effect, they articulated their perspectives on assessment principles. Talking about the testing format his group selected, one participant stated, "even if you don't know the answer, you can still make a correct answer because you have it in the options". Therefore MCQ lacks *validity* because the correct answer is there and could be selected by chance. Another participant pointed out that his lack of English-speaking ability is due to the absence of English speaking tests in his previous education in his home country. He argued that if he had an exam to prepare for, he could have worked on his English speaking. Although he did not use any jargon, his comment can be well aligned with the discussions of washback effect and the consequences of assessment. The interviews provide strong evidence that teachers and researchers can trust learners and invite them openly into constructive conversations about assessment, which may ensure a more positive experience in education.

The focus group interviews also confirmed that LAL enhancement tasks had pedagogically positive effects on participants' LAL and their assessment experience. As none of the participants had experience of developing or even sharing their opinions about language assessment they took in previous schooling, the participants shared excitement about the new experience. One participant from a Middle Eastern country said, "I think it was very useful for understanding the other side of question creation, and when I read the questions now, it's definitely different, the understanding of the question is different for me." This was echoed by another participant, "When I had the post-test after our three sessions, I was thinking differently that I was during the pre-test. I was thinking in the post-test now they are testing my comprehension or my vocabulary. I understood what they were asking." These statements confirmed that the LAL enhancement tasks helped the participants have a more active outlook on test-taking rather than passive receivers who do not necessarily pay attention to the purpose or goals of assessment.

The LAL enhancement tasks also motivated them to develop different perspectives on assessment. A participant from an Asian country mentioned that the majority of assessment he experienced at school was summative, which means the relationship between assessment and instruction was usually linear. However, he argued that assessment should be diagnostic to tell them what they do not know and provide guidance on how to tackle their weaknesses. His comment was also echoed in the following statement made by a student from a European context. "So we have to use test results to evaluate the knowledge that students have gained and also it is important to understand how good students listened (to) the material, so maybe you

have to repeat something because they didn't understand it well." Another student also said teachers should use test results to see what strengths students have and what skills they need to focus on more. The participants' remarks indicated that the LAL enhancement tasks helped learners build more critical perspectives on assessment construction as well as assessment experiences.

Interestingly, despite their excitement and positive experience of discussing and designing assessment, when asked whether learners should be involved in assessment development, the participants shared rather passive and cautious perspectives. One participant mentioned that young learners may not be able to articulate their thoughts properly. However, Author 1 and Colleagues' research on young learners provided counterevidence that even fourth graders had innovative and creative ways to assess their second language skills (Author 1 & Colleagues, under review). Another participant stated that if learners know what would be covered in assessment, teachers would worry that everyone would pass or receive good grades. The authors speculated that the participants' former schooling has molded their perspectives on assessment and has trained them as passive receivers of assessment rather than active and autonomous stakeholders of assessment and its consequences.

#### 5. Significance of the study

Reflecting the current heated discussions of learner-centered approaches in the field of language assessment, this research contributes to our understanding of (1) learners' perspectives on assessment; and (2) ways to facilitate their autonomous and active engagement in the language assessment to maximize its benefits for learning. This study also joins the conversation on the construct of LAL as it expands the scope of the theoretical accounts to incorporate learners' perspectives as its core component. By doing so, the findings help us better prepare our learners and teachers.

(1994 words)

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Figure 1 Data collection procedure

