

Learning-Oriented Assessment: The Learning Dimension

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While learning-oriented assessment (LOA) situates learning as the ultimate goal of assessment, current assessment practices often fail to reflect the role of learning and its bidirectional interactions with assessment. During Teachers College Columbia University Roundtable in Second Language Studies (TCCRISLS) 2014, a number of remarks were made in order to address the importance of understanding the interrelationship of learning, teaching, and assessment.

First of all, Purpura and Turner (2014) provided a framework for understanding LOA as an approach to classroom-based assessment, placing assessment as a pivotal component of learning in its various facets and embracing its evolving nature. Thus, it can be determined that language assessment, as conceived in this approach, is to be implemented with the goal of promoting learning while taking into consideration the various factors that have an influence on it. Purpura and Turner (2014) pointed out that learning, as a conjunct of processes, outcomes, and involved agents (including learners themselves), should be placed at the core of the curriculum and as the basis for instructional decision-making. In addition, assessment tasks should collect information that can be used to promote further learning through the identification and closing of learning gaps, while at the same time informing instruction in the classroom context.

Along with promoting learning, informing instructional decisions is a key purpose of learning-oriented assessment. Heritage and Bailey (2014) provided an example of the use of language assessment to enhance learning: the application of Dynamic Language Learning Progressions (DLLPs). DLLPs aim at collecting information about the learning trajectories of students, recognizing that students are at different developmental stages, and allowing for the validation of the expected tendencies of language development over time. Empirical data showed that the use of DLLPs for explaining language function enabled teachers to use high-leverage features of formative language assessment while assessing the content area, and thus better understandings of language learning were attained since teachers were able to trace the progress students made in each of the different features of this language function. By placing students along a trajectory, DLLPs help understand the skills that each student needs to develop, and then they can collectively inform teacher decisions to move forward on instruction and assessment.

A key characteristic of the learning dimension of LOA signals the need to identify learning in the instructional and assessment contexts. Yet, this is often an issue that remains implicit or disregarded in many settings. In alignment with this position, Everson (2014) urged for the incorporation of the developments of learning sciences into instructional designs to successfully elicit evidence of learning to inform instruction. In order to do so, an assessment framework should be developed so that data-driven inferences of learning can be attained by setting learning objectives and expected outcomes, and be linked to instruction. Moreover, cognitive processes (e.g., short- and long-term memory, problem solving skills) ought to be accounted for in the learning objectives of any classroom context, so that there is not only an account of the targeted language goals, but also of how learning is believed to take place.

Similarly, both assessments for the classroom and large-scale contexts should make explicit how their constructs are integrated with learning so that they can actually be considered

as learning-oriented. For instance, when discussing the constructs pertaining the *Global Integrated Scenario-Based Assessment (GISA)*, a large-scale reading comprehension computer-mediated test, O'Reilly and Sabatini (2014) explained that in addition to typical skills assessed in reading comprehension assessments, other important components that are often disregarded were incorporated into the construct, such as background knowledge, motivation, self-regulation, metacognition, and reading strategies. The last component, reading strategies, was directly incorporated into the test through, for example, the use of graphic organizers, paraphrasing, questioning, and predictions. Moreover, O'Reilly and Sabatini discussed that learning was often attained as a social process in the classroom; therefore, collaboration and discussion were simulated through the use of technology in this assessment. These efforts lead the way for the further development of assessments that are conducive to learning and have considered the cognitive processes that are targeted in such tasks.

In identifying the several ways in which assessment can be implemented to promote further learning, a distinction was made concerning the use of planned vs. spontaneous assessments in the classroom. Purpura and Turner (2014) acknowledged the role of talk-in-interaction in the structuring and mediation of learning, which often occurs as part of spontaneous assessments. For example, this can be seen while embedding a spontaneous assessment during a planned assessment task, such as the use of questioning to better understand students' grasp on the language point to be tackled as part of a practice task. Hill (2014) also addressed the need to identify these dichotomies when discussing a framework for analyzing classroom-based assessment; however, she attended to the importance of the quality of the evidence provided by interaction and instructional activities when they are used as incidental assessments. These remarks point out to the need to understand the nature of different assessment task types, so that they can be implemented to successfully elicit the evidence of learning that is being sought, and can subsequently be conducive to learning.

Another aspect that concerns the learning dimension of LOA is feedback and its role in serving learning processes. Leung (2014) brought up the problem of the traditional teacher-centered IRF/E interactional sequences, and the need for the initiation of exploratory talk and for a balance of talk-in-interaction in the classroom. In addition, it is necessary to provide qualitative feedback to language learners rather than just grades, particularly given the possible outcomes resulting from student responses to feedback. In an empirical phenomenographic study conducted in a university in London, Leung (2014) identified four types of students attitudes towards teacher feedback: reluctance, "happy let it passers", critical acceptance, and fulsome reception of the feedback. With these varying degrees of attention to feedback, it was noted that feedback on its own would not be sufficient for learning to be achieved for it does not guarantee that the intended message would be received or that the student would take action to foster their learning. In addition to the learning-oriented questioning and feedback provided by the teacher, student agency needs to be encouraged, and this requires a mutual understanding of the values and orientations that are specific to the learning environment of each classroom. Feedback needs to be accompanied by pedagogically-oriented dialogues, so that students are equipped with the metacognitive strategies to make sense of the feedback they are given without dismissing their individual characteristics and perceptions of learning and their performance. Furthermore, Hill (2014) noted that in addition to the content of feedback, timing and format play a role on the impact feedback has on learning. Feedback, along with metacognitive instruction, is one of the necessary factors to achieve self-regulation, another process that concerns the learning dimension of LOA.

Finally, after discussing some of the key factors that concern the learning dimension of LOA, it is important to remember that a learning-oriented assessment approach does not seek to undermine other approaches or assessment practices. Instead, it aims at creating a better-informed assessment culture, with a clear incorporation of learning at the different levels of curriculum and instruction. As Norris (2014) discussed, although all assessments implemented in the classroom have the potential to be learning-oriented and provide valuable information for distinct purposes, LOA seeks to maximize learning through careful planning and implementation of assessment tasks in alignment with learning objectives, cognitive processes, the agents involved, and the characteristics of a given educational context.

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