Learning-Oriented Assessment: The Proficiency Dimension

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The proficiency dimension of the learning-oriented assessment (LOA) framework addresses the specific linguistic and content knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) possessed by L2 learners – it is the substance, or the "what" of teaching and learning. It raises questions such as: What do learners know? What are they expected to know? What do they actually know? (Turner & Purpura, 2015). Proficiency is often conceptualized through theoretical models of L2 ability, such as Lado's (1961) "Skills-and-Elements" model, Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model of communicative language ability, and Purpura's (2004) conceptualization of L2 Proficiency. These proficiency models attempt to identify how KSAs are situated in the minds of learners. In addition to these models, the proficiency dimension also examines the dynamic role of learner proficiency by asking how KSAs change and may be tracked over time.

Many speakers at the TCCRISLS Roundtable on LOA touched upon the proficiency dimension. Proficiency, as noted, is not merely a result of teacher dispensation of knowledge; learners, too, play an instrumental role in their learning. This means that learners need to be cognizant of their own proficiency gaps in order to be able to close them. Another common theme at the conference was that learners often require various types of support or scaffolding to accurately and best display their true proficiency level both in class and on formal assessments. This evidence of proficiency provides formative information that can be used to enhance and further learning.

During the first TCCRISLS presentation, Purpura and Turner (2014) offered examples to illustrate how one might understand LOA through the proficiency dimension. The primary example showed that students' demonstration of knowledge on an assessment task about a wetland ecosystem improved over several iterations when the students were provided with different types of assistance. In the task, students were asked to describe a picture of a food chain several times, each time with a different type of scaffolding, including reframing of questions, provision of labels, and exchange of peer feedback. Nearly all students showed improvement in performance as a result of the scaffolding provided, which helped to trigger processing and development in terms of both linguistic and content knowledge. Linguistically, learners utilized better organization, more appropriate labeling of terminology, and more detailed expressions. In terms of content, learners were able to better explain and identify scientific processes related to wetland ecosystems and food chains. This points to the importance of considering how learners who lack specific linguistic and content knowledge might be able to better express their KSAs if provided appropriate assistance, and in fact to even learn *during* the test-taking process as some of the learners did on this task.

Poehner (2014) addressed proficiency through the lens of dynamic assessment and mediated learning, approaches that draw heavily on Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory. Poehner shared an excerpt of classroom dialogue between a mediator and a college-level, advanced L2 English learner named Nadia. The specific linguistic content targeted was Nadia's use of the tense-aspect system from a recalled-point perspective, and the discussion was about a piece of writing she had produced for her class. The mediator helped Nadia to address how to write about time events through the incorporation of metalinguistic terminology such as *boundary* and *timeframe* concepts stemming from a cognitive linguistic theoretical approach to language. The

mediator asked guiding questions such as, "What are the boundaries? If there are any?" and "What kind of timeframe are you creating here?" In doing so, Nadia was able to apply abstract concepts to explain real-world events, developing a more holistic understanding of why and how certain time expressions were used. In the excerpt, Nadia toyed with the idea of using the expressions *since* and *these days*, and ultimately realized that she ought to use the present perfect tense to explain her sentiment. At no point did the mediator dispense this knowledge to her; Nadia was able to arrive at these conclusions herself with assistance in the form of guided questions. This clip demonstrates a highly learning-oriented approach to L2 proficiency in which the learner was able to better understand how the tense-aspect system functions by taking charge of her own learning and arriving at the conclusions herself.

Similarly, Wolf and Lopez (2014) showed how guided questioning strategies can serve as a type of scaffolding that enables learners to better display their proficiency level on standardized assessments. They discussed a new type of proficiency examination constructed for ELLs in public schools in the United States. A sample assessment task was shown featuring a video in which a cartoon teacher demonstrated the process of writing on paper with lemon juice. Questions following the video elicited information through various levels of guided query. The results showed that some learners were unable to display their proficiency given general questions about the video; however, when provided specific, targeted questions such as "What did the teacher just do?" some learners were better able to retell what happened in the video. This improvement in performance reveals the usefulness of scaffolded assistance in providing ELLs with linguistic guidance, so that ultimately they are better equipped to express their KSAs.

O'Reilly and Sabatini (2014) unveiled unique scenario-based assessments used to target reading skills in their talk. The two speakers highlighted the importance of conceiving reading ability as a purposeful activity that utilizes skills such as word recognition, decoding, vocabulary, morphology, sentence processing, reading efficiency and basic reading comprehension. In one sample test task they shared, test-takers were asked to work on a website about organic farming; in another, they were asked to fix errors on a website after it was hacked. Such activities were intended to stimulate and better align with real-world, authentic expressions of reading ability. The two speakers effectively demonstrated how scenario-based assessment can be used to target more authentic KSAs.

Also highlighting the nature of reading ability was Pellegrino and Goldman's (2014) presentation. Pellegrino called for a shift in KSAs targeted by teachers of grade 6-12 in the context of science, history, and social studies classes through a project known as Project READi. Pellegrino emphasized the need to move beyond teaching students to "learn to read" and instead to focus on "reading to learn." As national indicators show that current educational practices have not been sufficient in producing citizens with these skills, it has become essential to train teachers to target skills that actually promote understanding in students. Three specific skills mentioned were the ability to integrate multiple sources of information, to evaluate the hypothesis, data, analysis, and conclusions in a scientific or technical text, and to synthesize information from a range of sources into a coherent understanding. Ultimately the goal of this project is to achieve domain-specific, disciplinary literacy.

The proficiency dimension was discussed at TCCRISLS in multiple ways, ranging from the use of scaffolding strategies to allow learners to best display their proficiency to new assessment techniques that call for a shift in targeted KSAs. More classroom data linked to theoretical models of L2 proficiency would provide useful information about learner proficiency.

Ideally, future research would explore ways to help learners become more aware of their own proficiency level and to identify best practices for closing proficiency gaps.

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