

Report on Workshop on Classroom Language Assessment

Windhoek, Namibia

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14 October 2014

Background

In January 2014, Dan Douglas, then President of the International Language Testing Association (ILTA), circulated an e-mail soliciting proposals to conduct workshops in language assessment for teachers in Southern Africa. We responded that we would be interested in conducting a workshop in Namibia. Following Dan's positive reply, we contacted Mr. Hefeni Hamakali, a lecturer at the University of Namibia Language Centre, whom we had met while he was an MA student at California State University, Los Angeles, asking if he would be interested in serving as the local organizer for a workshop. Mr. Hamakali agreed, and we subsequently included him as the local contact in our proposals for funding.

Funding for the workshop was received from ILTA and from the TOEFL Grants and Awards Committee. Once funding had been secured, we again contacted Mr. Hamakali, who then put us in touch with Ms. Chuma Mayumbelo, at the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Unit, University of Namibia, who then consulted with colleagues in the Ministry of Education and at the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED), whose approval was needed in order for the workshop to proceed. Since it is the practice of the NIED to conduct in-service training for teacher trainers rather than classroom teachers, we agreed that the participants would be teacher trainers, rather than classroom teachers, as we had proposed. We then agreed to conduct the workshop on the dates of 3 – 4 September, 2014.

Workshop contents and activities

The 2-day workshop was held from 3 – 4 September at the Conference Center of the Safari Court Hotel in Windhoek, Namibia. The sessions ran from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., with breaks for refreshments and lunch. The detailed schedule is given below.

Wednesday 3 September		
Time	Length	Topics
Session 1: 08:00 – 10:00	2.00	I. Introductions (facilitators, participants) II. Overview of the workshop III. Introduction to language assessment IV. Language assessment in language instruction and learning V. Consequences and decisions
Break: 10:00 – 10:30		
Session; 2: 10:30 - 13:00	2.50	I. Importance of decisions II. Practicality III. Accountability IV. Assessment use argument (AUA) V. Articulating claims in an AUA VI. Intended beneficial consequences (Claim 1)
Lunch: 13:00 – 14:00		

Session 3: 14:00 – 15:00	1.00	I. Decisions (Claim 2)
Break: 15:00 – 15:15		
Session 4: 15:15 – 17:00	1.75	I. Decisions (Continued, if needed) II. Interpretations (Claim 3)
Length, Day 1	7.25	
Thursday 4 September		
Time	Length	Topics
Session 5: 08:00 – 10:00	2.00	I. Interpretations (Claim 3): Continued II. Using task characteristics describe TLU tasks
Break: 10:00 – 10:30		
Session; 6: 10:30 - 13:00	2.50	I. Using TLU task characteristics to develop assessment tasks II. Assessment records (Claim 4)
Lunch: 13:00 – 14:00		
Session 7: 14:00 – 15:00	1.00	I. Assessment records (continued) II. Scores/marks and grades
Break: 15:00 – 15:15		
Session 8: 15:15 – 17:00	1.75	I. Summary: Some things to think about before using an assessment II. Wrap-up and planning ahead: using this workshop and materials for the training of teachers
Length, Day 2	7.25	
Total Length	14.50	

The content of the workshop was based on the approach to language assessment development and use described in Bachman and Palmer (2010). Workshop activities included presentations by the facilitators, small group activities with four participants per group, and whole group discussions. The basic sequence followed throughout the workshop was as follows:

1. a presentation by one of the facilitators
2. small group work (with facilitators moving around and working with the groups),
3. whole group discussions, during which participants shared what they had done in their small groups.

The small group work led participants to apply a given concept or process that had been presented, to the classroom setting. Beginning in the afternoon session of Day 1 the small group work focused on the development of an actual language assessment task. For this, each group specified a particular purpose, area of language ability to be assessed, and grade level or learner. The small group activities then led them step-by-step through the process of articulating claims in an assessment use argument, defining the construct to be assessed, identifying a target language use (TLU) domain, describing a TLU task, and then using this description to specify and create an assessment task.

Participants

The participants were 22 teachers and teacher trainers for Upper Primary (Grades 5 – 7). All were experienced, senior teachers in their schools, teaching at these grade levels.

Results of evaluations

Two different evaluations were completed anonymously by the participants. One was the standard workshop evaluation form used by the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Unit, while the other was one we developed for collecting formative feedback.

The results of the CPD evaluation were generally very positive. The primary concerns voiced by the participants were the inadequacy of the time and that some of the content was not easy to understand. We would note that we had originally suggested a longer workshop, but this was not possible, given the limitations on funding. Regarding the content, we recognize that much of the content was completely new for the participants. However, from our wrap-up discussion at the end of the workshop, the majority of the participants felt that although the first day's content was difficult, by the second day, after we had reviewed content, and as they worked through it in their small group work, most of them had grasped the course content and saw its relevance to the classrooms and teachers' needs.

The results of our formative evaluation indicated that the participants generally perceived the different aspects of the workshop to be both interesting and useful. Looking at the means, the small group activities were perceived to be marginally less interesting and useful than the other activities.

The participants' comments indicated that some would like to have had a longer course, to have been able to cover the material in greater depth, and more "practical" activities, which were covered most in Day 2. One participant wanted less group work and more individual work, two wanted less listening, one wanted less of some difficult terminology, and one wanted less information overload, abstract theory, new technical terms, and concepts. The participants noted that most of this occurred on Day 1. As best liked feature, virtually every aspect of the workshop was mentioned by at least one participant. Only four participants mentioned a "least liked feature", and these included Day 1, lots of explanation, and two topics that were fairly new and technical. The general comments were complementary, but also mentioned the need for more time.

These results point to the problem of presenting new and somewhat technical concepts to teachers who have essentially no prior experience or training in assessment. If we want to build teachers' capacity to improve their classroom assessment practice, we need to present concepts and procedures that are, to us, relatively non-technical, but which nevertheless may seem overwhelmingly technical at first to teachers. Given this issue, we would recommend that future workshops be longer, so that sufficient time can be provided for the participants to absorb the new information and to better understand it through applying it to more practical examples.

Reference

Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (2010). *Language assessment in practice: Developing language assessments and justifying their use in the real world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.