Language Awareness and Assessment

Neus Figueras

Introduction: Language Awareness and Language Assessment, the Story So Far

The chapters in this volume address the many facets of language awareness and the different perspectives explored since the term gained accepted currency in the early 1990s (Garrett and James, 1993). They provide different interpretations of the definition of language awareness given by the Association for Language Awareness (ALA) on their website, as the “explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use”, and they illustrate how language awareness can serve as a catalyst for related and less-related issues in language learning and language teaching, thus confirming Svalberg’s words in her state-of-the-art article in 2007 (p. 287):

LA straddles a cognitive to sociocultural spectrum and involves such apparent distinct areas of research and practice as cognitive linguistics (attention and awareness in language learning), language teaching, language use and intercultural communication (cross-cultural awareness).

However, despite the wide encompassing nature of language awareness and despite its many sub-fields, the term assessment is very seldom used in the literature on language awareness. A search of the Language Awareness journal (published by Taylor and Francis), for instance, shows very few explicit references to assessment or testing in the titles of the papers published since the journal was launched in 1992, and the same occurs in the specialized literature in the field. And something similar happens if one accesses language testing and assessment journals and bibliographies, where the term ‘language awareness’ is largely absent, although there are references to metacognition, metalanguage, consciousness or explicit learning, terms clearly related to language awareness.

This is unfortunate, as both language awareness and language testing and assessment have language learning at the centre of their concerns. The issues raised by researchers
in language awareness have many points of coincidence with the issues occupying researchers in language testing and assessment. Construct definition (how language is operationalized and described), the central role of users or stakeholders (the main players and recipients, their needs and characteristics), cognition (how students represent knowledge and what processes and operations they complete when responding to tasks) or consequences (the impact of the different uses of language assessments, intended or not) are common topics of research in both fields.

Research on language awareness in fact spans a very wide approach to language in language learning and language teaching – and implicitly in language testing and assessment – (see Svalberg, 2016 for a recent update on language awareness research). Language is studied from a morphosyntactic perspective (Long, 1991; Doughty and Williams, 1998), to a pragmatic, discourse-based perspective (Carter, 1990; Carter and McCarthy, 1995), and to its social dimension (Fairclough, 1992), as used by diverse stakeholders in different contexts, including both teachers and learners in different scenarios, in monolingual or in multilingual contexts; teaching or learning a first language, a second or foreign language. Moreover, language awareness studies have always tried to capture elusive notions affecting human behaviour, language learning and language proficiency, such as aptitude, motivation and opportunity, terms already described by Rubin in 1975 as characteristics of “a good language learner”, and further explored and expanded by language awareness researchers (Hawkins, 1999; Schmidt, 2010), to the study of attention and noticing and to the discussion of implicit vs. explicit knowledge, or incidental vs. intentional learning (Hjulstin, 2013).

Despite these commonalities in terms of interests, however, language testing and assessment have kept their distance from language awareness despite explicit requests from the field (van Lier, 1996). Research on the impact of classroom assessment in mainstream education (Black and Wiliam, 1998) and washback studies on how exams impact on teaching and learning languages (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Bailey, 1999) have focused on teachers’ methodologies and/or students’ achievements or results, and not specifically on how testing and assessment may influence or enhance students’ and teachers’ language awareness, as defined by the ALA.

Recent social and geopolitical changes have evidenced the importance of language in educational success and brought about new conceptualizations of language learning. Language has gained new currency and been given a more prominent role across the curriculum, a development much argued for already by Hawkins (e.g. 1981, 1984, 1999) and in the publications of the Modern Languages Projects and the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe since the early 1970s. Language has ceased to be considered just ‘a subject’ and a system or tool of communication, but is a main actor in creating knowledge (Little and Erickson, 2015; Schleppegrell, 2015), a change that has consequences for language policies, and that asks for the joint collaboration of all the disciplines that can contribute to more efficient language learning, amongst which, it can be argued, are most importantly language awareness and language assessment.

Another reason which recommends closer contact between language awareness and language assessment is related to how the field of testing and assessment is responding to the changes and new demands in society, by gradually widening to include different forms and purposes of assessment that enhance learning (Takala et al., 2016). Recent developments in theoretical approaches and empirical studies focus on how assessment (be it planned or unplanned, formal or informal, student-initiated, teacher-initiated or external) can promote language learning processes and increase both learners’ language
Language(s) Learning and Education

Two assumptions need to be made when discussing the issues to pay attention to when analysing the impact of the changes in the consideration of language learning in education in the recent past. To this effect, relevant information can be found in the Council of Europe’s Platform of Resources and References for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education (Council of Europe, 2014) or in the work carried out across the Atlantic by Cummins (2000), Schleppegrell (2004, 2015), or Garcia and Wei (2014) and how these may have implications for language awareness and language assessment.

The first assumption is worded by Little and Erickson (2015) when they discuss the contributions of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) in teaching and learning languages. These authors refer to the role and purpose of education as “a process of ‘people shaping’ designed to help learners extend and perhaps in some ways modify their identity while exploiting and developing their agency” (2015: 120). The second assumption refers to how language itself is used, described and taught, in different contexts and for different purposes, as “the languages of schooling have features very different from the language pupils encounter just through experiences of everyday living” (Cummins, 2000, cited in Schleppegrell, 2015: 2).

These two assumptions (education and schooling as instruments for the empowerment of individuals, and language as a key learning tool, and not only as a tool for communication and social exchange) are crucial in understanding the role of schools and what contributes to school success. They are closely related and have direct bearing on how and what teachers teach and what learners learn, and on their future lives and personal stories. Only curricula and teaching approaches that incorporate these two assumptions guarantee equity for learners in the different domains and contexts in the different classrooms of the 21st century.

The presentation document to the Platform of Resources for Plurilingual and Intercultural Education (2009), found on the website of the Council of Europe (2014,
already referred to at the beginning of this section), which aims at enabling European governments to address these changes, takes up these assumptions in the present socio-political context in Europe and states the following:

Access to education and success at school depends heavily on language competences. Some pupils may be disadvantaged as soon as they start school because their competences do not match the school’s expectations: children from disadvantaged backgrounds, children from migrant families, or children whose first language is a regional language. But all, whatever their language repertoire, must learn to communicate in school. A command of the language(s) of schooling is vital to success at school and social advancement.

*Council of Europe, 2009: 3.*

It is important to bear in mind that what has been said so far also has implications for the teaching and learning of languages outside school, in contexts and programmes normally referred to as “foreign language learning programmes”, either in universities or in continuous education scenarios. The interests, the needs, the social and the educational backgrounds of those very numerous groups embarking on learning a foreign language in their adulthood have never been more diverse.

In this complex context, organizing curriculum development, teaching methodologies and classroom work (including testing and assessment, which will be discussed in the following section) is not easy. It takes conceptualizing and planning language policies and curricula and the training of all agents involved, whilst considering the many different existing educational, social and linguistic scenarios. Van Lier’s (1996: 5) approach to curriculum design, drawing on the work of Stenhouse (1975), was somehow premonitory, especially in his claim that it should be based on a triad of foundational principles or “constants”, essential properties of the “educational enterprise”: awareness, autonomy and authenticity (AAA).

Van Lier’s discussion of awareness, autonomy and authenticity, the “basic triad”, is also most relevant for the content of this chapter, as he argues that this main AAA triad “is of little use unless it is structurally and functionally connected to other phenomena in learners’ education and social life” (1996: 14). Learners need to relate their personal development (their feeling of knowing resulting from the first triad), to the context in which they operate (and have knowledge of success). This interpersonal dimension is represented by van Lier as another triad that he considers “secondary”, and which he labels with three additional As: accountability, assessment and achievement.

Assessment is therefore described by van Lier as the crucial witness of achievement(s) in education, although his view of assessment is not measurement-oriented – as it mostly was in the 1990s at the time of his writing his book – but rather instruction-driven, with learners playing a role in the definition of the content and form of the assessment activities. It is not the purpose of this chapter to discuss in detail the “triads” model developed by van Lier, nor its sources or the literature published in the last 20 years since its publication, but its conceptual representation is useful to inform the following section and can contribute to the establishment of more explicit – and useful – links between awareness and assessment which have nevertheless always been there, albeit implicitly.
Assessment and Learning

The paradigm shift announced by Gipps (1994: 1) from psychometrics to a broader model of educational assessment also advocated by the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) in the United Kingdom in the 1980s and by similar initiatives in the USA (The Gordon Commission) is today fully developed and documented (Pellegrino, DiBello and Goldman, 2016; Turner and Purpura, 2016). It seems that the pendulum that veered towards standardization and accountability with the advent of proficiency and norm-referenced assessment in the 1970s has moved back, and that more attention is paid to the assessment that functions close to classroom teaching and learning to be able to respond to the new needs. In this context, collecting data on students’ achievements, on reactions to different assessment practices, and on when and how such practices contribute to the development of students’ language awareness, will provide extremely useful and relevant feedback on the impact of assessment(s) on students’ learning.

Assessment or Testing?

It is difficult today to find the term ‘testing’ in manuals or specialized articles. Experts and extensively published authors in the language testing field have moved their focus of interest onto the uses of testing (referred to as ‘assessment’ in most publications after 2010) and its results and outcomes for learning purposes (see Bachman and Palmer, 2010; Turner and Purpura, 2016; Saville and Jones, 2016, amongst others).

Educators should welcome this change, but they should make sure as well that it is handled with care. They can do this, on the one hand, by paying special attention to the many facets of language assessment activities and their use(s) in the classroom (see Gardner’s (2006) volume for a good collection of views on assessment and learning and on the implications of the different approaches) and, on the other hand, by ensuring quality control procedures. Any assessment activity has its consequences, and no matter the stakes involved, it has to be properly planned and scrutinized before taking it into the classroom (see Pellegrino et al., 2016 on the importance of adopting an assessment validity framework also in the assessments that take place in classrooms). There is still an additional hurdle for practitioners to overcome in relation to assessment, and that is making sense of the terms that have been coined in the last few years to describe what is actually involved in educational assessment. The fact that work on defining the relationship between language assessment and language learning is still in progress (Turner, 2012) and the profusion of new terms for very similar, if not the same, actions (classroom assessment, continuous assessment, formative assessment, assessment for learning, learning oriented assessment) is not helpful. Such embarrassment of riches responds to the need of researchers for precision, but it may have the opposite effect with teachers and non-specialists, who may end up confusing the means with the end, that is, putting assessment first, and considering teaching to be at its service, rather than using assessment as an instrument to help teaching and increase learning.

Different authors coming from very different contexts (Harlen, 2006; Bachman and Palmer, 2010; Pellegrino et al., 2016) warn against addressing often conflicting approaches as dichotomies. Instead of opposing assessment and testing, or formative assessment and summative assessment, they recommend viewing the relationship...
between such terms as dimensions within a continuum. There are, of course, blurred boundaries in the characteristics and purposes of assessment and teaching activities, (e.g. formative assessment and summative assessment), and tensions will always be there, but the focus should be on the roles and purposes of each assessment endeavour instead. In that respect, the work of Bachman and Palmer (2010) on defining and operationalizing the development of an assessment use argument (AUA) framework is particularly useful, as it provides both a theoretical perspective to principled assessment and offers a practical and systematic approach for practitioners. The AUA helps visualize (and justify) the links from any learner performance in an assessment activity to the way the performance is recorded or scored by the teacher/tester/assessor, to the way it is interpreted, to the decisions based on such interpretation and to its foreseen consequences (be they positive or not).

There seems therefore to be agreement in the literature on the need for principled, quality assessment that is fit for purpose (Stiggins, 1992), and that focuses on the collection of relevant evidence(s) that allow for valid inferencing, always in response to whatever the objectives and functions of the assessment are. The Assessment Reform Group (ARG) did, in this respect, pioneer work in providing a useful definition of assessment for learning (AFL) as “The process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to go there” (ARG, 2002). The ARG was very active in teacher development and teacher training for more than ten years in the UK. Their list of ten principles that characterize the assessment that focuses on and is relevant for teachers and learners, both as individuals and as social agents in a classroom context, is still valid and relevant. For the ARG, assessment for learning has the following features:

- It is part of effective planning.
- It focuses on how students learn.
- It is central to classroom practice.
- It is a key professional skill.
- It is sensitive and constructive.
- It fosters motivation.
- It promotes understanding of goals and criteria.
- It helps learners know how to improve.
- It develops the capacity for self-assessment.
- It recognizes all educational achievement.

Nevertheless, having reached agreement on the importance of assessment and on its crucial role in education, researchers and practitioners – and policy-makers – need to make further progress and find meaningful links and interactions between large-scale assessment operations and the assessment(s) that take place in the classroom. This needs to be done to ascertain how well the different assessment instruments and the results they provide relate to educational principles and the learning goals set, and to investigate how useful the inferences made by different stakeholders can be for teaching and for further learning. Most importantly for the subject of the present chapter, there is also a need to find out whether and how the useful inferences made on the basis of assessment results can contribute to an increase in language awareness, and respond to questions such as the ones posed by the ALA itself, as included in the following section.
Language Assessment and Language Awareness, Whys and Hows

In the scenario outlined so far, with language having gained importance in education, with assessment being asked to contribute and enhance language learning, and considering the similar concerns that the fields of language assessment and language awareness share (namely, the definition and operationalization of the language construct, the needs of users, how learners react to language activities, and how assessment may affect them), the links between language assessment and language awareness are obvious. There is an urgent need to have consistent, theory-building data on the impact of different assessment approaches, methods, instruments, on whether these generate increased language awareness, and on the effect of it. Assessment can offer instruments for a systematic approach and stable conditions for data collection.

Interestingly, the ALA (n.d.) itself in the “About” section of its website, and whilst referring to the wide field that the term LA covers, includes questions that evidence the need for data to prove the impact of language awareness: “Can we become better language users or learners or teachers if we develop a better understanding? And can we gain other advantages: e.g. in our relations with other people and/or cultures, and in our ability to see through language that manipulates or discriminates?”

The following pages present references to the most visible initiatives and approaches within the field of assessment that in the past 20 years have aimed at enhancing language learning. They all target, in one way or another, learners’ language awareness, as it is in fact difficult to perform any educational action without necessarily touching upon it. They contemplate different teacher roles and different techniques and instruments, but they all share the aim of involving students in their own learning process, illustrating different techniques whilst aiming for the same goal. They use elicitation and inquiry techniques, prompted by the materials and/or by the teachers, which aim at the engagement of the learners. They also use different types of feedback, a key element in learning, teaching and assessment, and a major instigator for language awareness. Feedback, whether implicit or explicit, written or oral, positive or negative, provided by the teacher or generated by the students themselves (Ellis, 2006; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Stobart, 2014), has a major role in mediating knowledge, in helping teachers and learners establish common ground and in linking where students find themselves to where they need to reach for.

The recent work by Turner and Purpura (2016) on an approach they have labelled as learning oriented assessment (LOA) has tried to map the foci of these initiatives onto a coherent “working framework” which can allow building a theory for research and should help bring different convergent strands together. In their attempt at theoretically underpinning the many interrelated dimensions impinging on learning-oriented assessment, they have identified seven dimensions that involve the different agents in LOA: contextual, elicitation, proficiency, learning, instructional, interactional, and affective. These dimensions, in fact, can be related to the five domains that Garrett and James (1993) stated language awareness was relevant for: the affective domain, the social domain, the power domain, the cognitive domain and the performance domain.

Autonomy, Self-Assessment and Peer Assessment

Most of the work on autonomy, self-assessment and peer assessment was initiated within the Council of Europe Modern Languages Project (Trim, 2010). Holec’s pioneering work on learning autonomy was first published in 1979 and described teachers
incorporating activities and techniques in their everyday teaching practice to help students reflect upon, understand and assess what they achieved, what they needed to improve, and what they needed to do to make progress. Oscarson’s work (1978) offered a way forward in the concretization of instruments to facilitate autonomy by developing self-assessment charts – which could also be used in peer assessment. Such activities and approaches had an assessment function but, being learner-centred, were meant to be integrated in the learning-teaching flow. They aimed at illustrating how to operationalize the belief that purposeful and effective learning is best achieved if the student actively participates in all phases of the educational process, including assessment. The checklists in Figure 12.1 provide examples of that work, which had considerable success and was fast included in textbooks and teaching materials and has found its way to the 21st century, through varied adaptations and interpretations, as can be seen in Oxford (1990), the self-assessment section in the Dialang Project (Alderson and Huhta, 2005), or the self-assessment grid in the CEFR (2001: 26–27), which graphically presents in the form of ‘can do’ descriptors learner performance definitions at different levels in both receptive and productive skills. There are also many available online checklists and charts by both private and public institutions (like for example, the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (n.d.), which publishes level-specific language self-assessment grids).

The two sample checklists in Figure 12.1 exemplify two different approaches to self-assessment of language proficiency: a skill-specific, concrete and graded checklist in Sample 1, and a YES/NO wider ranging, level-based checklist in Sample 2.

Autonomy, self-assessment and peer assessment features prominently in the CEFR, in the European Language Portfolio (ELP), and in the accompanying documentation that can be accessed in the Platform mentioned earlier in this chapter. The ELP includes various types of self-assessment checklists in its different sections (Passport, Biography, Dossier), but one of the aims of the ELP is to include as many languages as possible, used at different levels of proficiency and in different contexts for different purposes. There is a clear intention to raise language awareness in many of the validated Primary and Secondary ELPs by the Council of Europe, like for example the Primary ELP of the United Kingdom (SCILT, 2012).

There is a wealth of research on how the ELP approach to assessment can and has been implemented in mainstream education, in migrant contexts and in foreign language teaching (Little, 2009, 2012; Little and Perclová, 2001; Little and Lazenby Simpson, 2004; Glover, 2011; Kühn and Pérez Cavana, 2012). These works exemplify practices that enhance learning, favour autonomy and develop agency through self-assessment and peer assessment, and describe case studies (Little and Lazenby Simpson, 2004; Kühn and Pérez Cavana, 2012) where such approaches have been deemed successful. In many of the accounts, references to language awareness are made, often implicitly, and engagement and noticing on the part of the learners are sought in order to gain their conscious involvement in the learning process. The Guide for users of the ELP (Little and Perclová, 2001), unfortunately not as widely used as might have been expected considering its very concrete and practical examples, provides a balanced collection of pedagogical advice and practical tips. On the one hand, it discusses how to manage time and space in order to integrate the ELP into ordinary teaching practice, with useful tips on how to gear such conscious involvement by means of classroom management techniques, activity worksheets, self-assessment and peer assessment charts, etc. On the other hand, the Guide includes illustrative tasks and activities for use with students to
become aware of the value of reflection, self-assessment and peer assessment, like for example creating their own teaching materials or a bank of learning activities (2001: 31). Nevertheless, and despite the considerable work on autonomy, self-assessment and peer assessment, there is a lack of empirical experimental studies like the one carried out by Glover (2011) on the use of CEFR descriptors to raise language awareness by means
of self-assessment and which provide evidence on the impact of these approaches. In his study, Glover explores how learners’ awareness of their competence in speaking skills increases by analysing the language they use in their self-evaluative reports before and after they are fully familiarized with the CEFR reference level descriptors, first through exposure, then followed by discussion and use in peer assessment activities. Knowledge and familiarization with the reference level descriptors raises the learners’ awareness of their competence(s) as it provides them with the language they need to express what they think and perceive about their own speaking skills. The following learner’s comment is an example of how learners, when provided with the necessary language tools and scaffolding techniques to build their confidence and understanding of their own learning, can articulate their thoughts:

My accuracy … is better because before this term, while speaking, I wouldn’t take notice of the grammar in my sentences, I just used to try to express myself, but now I can control my sentences when (I) thought of the grammar and meaning

Glover, 2011: 130

Learning Visibility

The proposals in van Lier (1996) already mentioned, highlighting the power of the learner’s feeling of achievement and success in maximizing learning (that is, the importance of learning visibility), also deserve renewed attention. Although partaking characteristics of the work on autonomy, self-assessment and peer assessment already described, it distinguishes itself by its focus on the classroom, on teachers’ work and on the array of materials and classroom dynamics that help learners come to terms with and further their learning. The sources for this approach can be found in constructivist learning theories (Bruner, 1966; Dewey, 1897; Piaget, 1971; Vygotsky, 1978). There are different groups working along these lines, with different perspectives, and although not all of them work with language(s) they are included because the techniques they propose may be useful for language learning as well. It is important to note that these groups substantiate their approaches by providing evidences and also reporting increased effect sizes in learning outcomes.

A first group of researchers and grassroots teachers has its headquarters in King’s College, London, and includes some former members of the Assessment Reform Group (ARG). The group has continued the work of the ARG on mainstream education students of sciences in the UK and in other European countries. One of the group’s projects, which has received European funding, SAILS (n.d.), is based on inquiry learning and uses teaching approaches that incorporate assessment activities with the main aim of fostering students’ reflection and cognitive engagement. The project puts into practice the ARG’s definition of assessment for learning already quoted, which is:

the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.

ARG, 2002

The webpage of SAILS includes the materials for science teaching developed by the group and the reports of their studies (Harrison, 2014). Assessment activities are based
on the inquiry skills focused on in each unit, whether they are planning investigations, scientific reasoning, forming coherent arguments, or working collaboratively, and the assessment methods vary across units, and include classroom dialogue, peer- and self-assessment, worksheets, teachers’ observation and evaluation of students’ production or artefacts. Most often, such assessment events are not isolated but often embedded in the teaching-learning process.

A second group has been exploring classroom social interaction(s) and the power of scaffolding to develop knowledge. Their focus is on accompanying learners along their learning path by putting into practice what is labelled as dynamic assessment, which operates within the students’ zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). Dynamic assessment relies on scaffolding techniques that are engineered and managed by the teacher as a result of his/her observation of students’ own progress, and that inform all steps along the learning and teaching process. The publications of this group, mainly based in the Centre for Advanced Language Proficiency and Research (CALPER) in Penn State, USA (Poehner and Lantolf, 2010; Lantolf and Poehner, 2011) describe successful case studies in the teaching of different languages. Poehner (2014) reports on an assessment project which combines in an online test two different marking procedures whereby learners get a profile which includes an ‘actual score’ that reflects the learner’s independent performance, and a ‘mediated score’, which is calculated on the basis of the prompts (or help) they have received. Mediation prompts are constructed on the basis of mediator (teacher)-learner face-to-face interactions during a pilot phase and reflect different ways in which a teacher acting as mediator can support the learner in constructing meaning, drawing his/her attention to relevant detail, etc.

Hattie (2012) and Popham (2008) represent a third group working from a wider angle from very different geographical locations. The focus of these researchers is on the school community and on how the school’s ethos and the teachers’ savoir faire, savoir faire, and savoir être (CEFR, 2001) impact on students’ learning. They propose systematic, step-by-step procedures that plot and document all actions in the school, by all stakeholders, including non-teaching staff, parents, learners and council representatives. Hattie’s (2012) work on visible learning also includes an impressive meta-analysis which is highly informative and worth consulting prior to embarking on new research.

Managing to make learning visible is not easy. There is no set of ready-prepared worksheets. Visible learning can be engineered in the classroom between teachers and learners, but it may also be the result of individual enquiry. In whatever the case, it arises from quality, real and relevant questioning which, when taking place in a classroom, should be engaging and supporting.

Exams and Tests

The use of exams and tests (developed by teachers, included in textbooks or external and standardized), and the use of their results as sources of feedback with the intention to foster further learning with the development of both learning and language awareness, has been a common approach for many years, even by those claiming not to believe in exams. This is most probably due to a lack of assessment literacy on the part of the teachers, in particular in classroom assessment practices, and their adequacy of use depends on where and when they are used and also on the quality of the exams and
tests themselves, which is often very varied. There has been a long-standing and heated debate on the usefulness of such instruments. Stiggins (1992) argues that “centralized assessment for accountability purposes cannot meet the needs of teachers for assessment information”, whereas Harlen (2006) warns about the “potential dangers for formative assessment in assuming that evidence gathered for summative assessment can serve formative purposes”. Tomlinson (2005) and Figueras (2005) take the classroom stance and discuss from opposing positions the impact that the repeated use of tests and exams as teaching materials may have on students’ learning and on their perception of learning objectives.

In the field of external, standardized exams, some boards have improved their score reports by including more detail and clearer references to teaching goals to cater for their use as instruments to gear teaching and learning. These new developments need to be welcomed but carefully scrutinized from the perspectives of researchers who consider exams and tests as methods of educational control and power (van Lier, 1989; Shohamy, 2001; McNamara and Shohamy, 2008).

**Challenges**

The lines of research undertaken to date, plus the new developments and demands in the field of education and the present socioeconomic scenarios, make a clearer relationship between language assessment and language awareness unavoidable. Nevertheless, a number of issues need to be addressed when embarking on any research that aims at surfacing close connections between language assessment and language awareness. Some issues are already existing challenges, which should be addressed as opportunities for the future.

Amongst the existing challenges, the first one has to do with the definition and operationalization of language awareness as a construct. What does language awareness look like? How many types of language awareness exist? There are a lot of studies on the effect of different assessment practices which aim at enhancing language learning and language awareness, but most of these studies focus on achievement results (effect sizes) and on learner satisfaction (on the basis of think aloud protocols, questionnaires or interviews). If evidence of language awareness is to be named, identified, described and traced, researchers have to know what it looks like and how it may differ across individuals, across contexts and across levels of proficiency.

Another existing challenge is the need to agree on a clear road map of the different types and functions of assessment, and of the complex interactions in the classrooms whilst assessment is taking place. The working framework of learning-oriented assessment (LOA) proposed by Turner and Purpura (2016), discussed earlier, with its seven interrelated dimensions can be extremely useful for the purpose of this chapter, as are the questions their authors raise.

A third challenge is related to the characteristics and the quality of the assessment instruments used and, as a consequence, the validity of the inferences and the interpretations made on the basis of their results. The recent contribution by Pellegrino et al. (2016) in teasing out the three validity components (cognitive, instructional and inferential) to look for in all instructionally relevant assessments, be they standardized and external or teacher developed, and in providing a framework for the analysis of data collection procedures and activities, can help ensure that all assessment that takes place in the classroom can claim due validity evidence.
A final, already identified, challenge is that of empowering teachers and learners to make the best possible use of learning events and the materials available. Teachers have the responsibility of mediating the assessments to learners and of awakening their learning to learn capabilities and of contributing to the development of much-sought awareness. Distributing in class the results and the answer keys of assessment activities, using self-assessment charts with no prior training or post discussion, or providing feedback that focuses solely on error correction, will only occasionally enhance awareness and foster further learning, and this will be only in highly motivated students. Both teachers and learners need training, and teacher training that includes assessment literacy suited to the needs in case has to be the starting point.

Conclusions

What has been reported in this chapter shows evidence of the work done to bring together language awareness and language assessment. Despite the existing challenges discussed, classroom approaches and materials are available, research initiatives are constantly growing, and in some research strands meta-analyses are also available (Hattie, 2012, on learning visibility). There are some areas, however, which have not been discussed in the preceding pages and need to be mentioned as they will definitely demand a role in the interaction between language assessment and language awareness.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), for obvious reasons, features prominently as an area that will be a good experimenting ground when addressing the challenges described in the preceding section. CLIL as an approach provides authentic contexts for communication in a seamless integration of content and language (Coyle, Hood and Marsh, 2010), and allows for the observation of language in action for communication purposes and for learning purposes. However, CLIL contexts also demand special attention from language testers, as the grounds for observation of learning evidence(s) may not be straightforward. Should research on assessment and on learning awareness distinguish between content and language? Why? How can this be done?

As a result of social and political changes, new learning scenarios, involving new intercultural encounters and increased multilingualism, will keep appearing and affect how learning and assessment is to be addressed. Both practitioners and researchers will need to address how multilingual learners use the potential in languaging and translanguaging techniques in the classrooms (Garcia and Wei, 2014), how such techniques can help them voice their language awareness in the target language, and whether they can be accepted or accounted for in assessment.

A way forward in developing assessment instruments in these complex scenarios can be provided by corpus studies, which provide tangible language evidence of which learners do and say what in different contexts at different levels. Many institutions and publishing houses are already developing their own corpora, and there are also free-access ones such as the English Profile or the Spoken Language Corpus Trinity-Lancaster. The feedback that such corpora can provide for teachers and for learners can be very useful as it encompasses the different aspects of language use, morphosyntactic, discursive and pragmatic phenomena that are relevant to language assessment and language awareness research. Increased dissemination of the existence of such information, and the increased user-friendliness of the available sources (Gablasoba, Brezina, Mcenery...
and Boyd, 2015) will impact on the development of assessment tasks and approaches to feedback. Unfortunately, most of this work is only in the English language and there is an urgent need for similar work in languages other than English; CALPER offers Calperlex (n.d.) in Chinese, Spanish and Russian, addressed to teachers, with worksheets to explore language through corpus analysis.

It seems therefore, that the links between language assessment and language awareness need to remain and prosper, due to the new social arenas and the new educational demands. The already existing (and often converging) research strands and projects, the current interest of policy-makers all over the world, and of society at large to improve language learning, and the need to keep abreast with new developments and new scenarios point to a very active and fruitful next decade for language assessment and language awareness.

Related Topics

Self-assessment; learning visibility; Council of Europe/European Language Portfolio.

References


Rubin, J. (1975) What the good language learner can teach us. TESOL Quarterly, 9, 41–51.


Svalberg, A. M.-L. (2016) Language awareness research: Where we are now. Language Awareness, 25 (1–2), 4–16


