Language Assessment Literacy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region

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Abstract

Language assessment literacy (LAL) has become a critical topic in English language teaching since the late 1990s. Unfortunately, this is mainly due to the fact that so many English language teachers are not assessment literate. In other words, many English language teachers lack the knowledge and skills to write good language tests, evaluate the effectiveness of their tests, and use test results in meaningful ways. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the status of LAL in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. After defining what LAL is, we will discuss why it is important that teachers are assessment literate, and we will examine some of the barriers to teachers becoming assessment literate. We will then propose a course of action to improve LAL amongst teachers, such as devising an Assessment Competency Framework, and helping teachers to become more assessment literate. We will then move on to look at the state of LAL in the MENA region, and finally we will report on a number of initiatives that the Testing, Assessment and Evaluation Special Interest Group (TAE SIG) of TESOL Arabia has implemented to improve LAL amongst English language teachers in the region.

Key words: Language assessment literacy, language testing, , English language, MENA region

What is LAL?

Tsagari and Vogt (2017) note that the concept of 'literacy' has expanded considerably in recent years to include domains such as computer literacy and science literacy. Other forms of literacy could also be added to this list, including digital literacy, technology literacy, media literacy, information literacy, cultural literacy, and multi-cultural literacy, amongst others. In 1991, Richard Stiggins coined the term 'assessment literacy'. More recently, the term language assessment literacy (LAL) has been used to differentiate it from other forms of assessment literacy.

Early definitions of LAL focused on the knowledge and skills associated with assessment. Stiggins (1995) notes that teachers with a high level of assessment literacy know what they assess, why they assess, how to assess, what the possible problems with assessment are, how to prevent these problems from occurring, and they are familiar with the possible negative consequences of poor, inaccurate assessment. Paterno (2001, p. 2), further elaborates when he maintains that LAL is "the possession of knowledge about the basic principles of sound assessment practice, including terminology, the development and use of assessment methodologies and techniques, familiarity with standards of quality in assessment".

Later definitions of LAL move beyond LAL as just knowledge and skills of testing to include awareness of the impact that assessment can have on individuals and society at large. Inbar-Lourie (2008, p. 389), for example, defines LAL as the capacity to ask and answer critical questions about the purpose for assessment, about the fitness of the tool being used, about testing conditions, and what is going to happen on the basis of the test results. This criticality of the impact of assessment is also highlighted in O'Loughlin's (2013, p. 363) definition of LAL as "a range of skills related to test production, test score interpretation and use, and test evaluation in conjunction with the development of a critical understanding about the roles and functions of assessment within society".

Fulcher's (2012) oft-cited definition of LAL is perhaps the most broad and comprehensive to date: LAL is:

The knowledge, skills and abilities required to design, develop, maintain or evaluate large-scale standardized and/or classroom-based tests, familiarity with test processes, and awareness of principles and concepts that guide and underpin practice, including ethics and codes of practice. The ability to place knowledge, skills, processes, principles and concepts within wider historical, social, political and philosophical frameworks in order to understand why practices have arisen as they have, and to evaluate the role and impact of testing on society, institutions, and individuals. (p. 125)

Fulcher's definition is comprehensive as it includes the major skills and abilities that teachers need to be considered knowledgeable in assessment and thereby, assessment literate. It is interesting to note that Fulcher does not include 'language' in his working definition of LAL. However, language assessment is mentioned explicitly in Fulcher's (2012) diagram of what he calls an "expanded definition" of LAL through the inclusion of "the practice of Language testing" (p. 12).

Is LAL Necessary?

According to Cheng, (2001), research shows that a typical teacher can spend as much as a third of their professional time involved in assessment. Coombe, Troudi and Al-Hamly (2012) suggest that this figure could be even higher, arguing that teachers potentially spend as much as half of their time on assessment and/or assessment-related activities. Given these statistics, it is therefore essential that English teachers have solid grounding in language testing theory coupled with practical test-writing skills so that they can develop tools that assess their students accurately and fairly. Teachers also need to be able to evaluate and critique tests to ensure that they are fair and useful. As noted by Gronlund and Linn (1990), teachers who assess their instruction can better understand their students' needs, monitor learning and instructional processes, diagnose student learning difficulty, and confirm their learning achievement.

There is also the growing acknowledgement that good assessment can facilitate student learning (Davidson & Mandalios, 2009; Green, 2017; Hamp-Lyons, 2017; Pill & Harding, 2013; Popham, 2009). When teachers know how to interpret test data, they can

use this data to inform their teaching and to personalize their students' learning, and they may also use test results to make adjustments to their teaching syllabus, and to make improvements to the way that they teach (Khadijeh & Amir, 2015; Xu & Brown, 2017). As noted by Harding and Kremmel (2016), LAL should be an integral part of a teachers' ongoing professional development.

Barriers to LAL

It has been pointed out numerous times that many language teachers lack even the basic assessment literacy skills needed to develop, interpret and use effective classroom assessments (Boraie, 2015; Gebril & Brown, 2014; Hidri, 2015; Mertler, 2004; Mertler & Campbell, 2005; Plake, Impara, & Fager, 1993; Sacrino, 2013; Tsagari & Vogt, 2017; Xu & Brown, 2017). So, we need to ask the question: Why do so many language teachers lack the knowledge and competencies to write, evaluate and use tests effectively? There are a number of potential barriers or obstacles to teachers becoming assessment literature.

One of the most significant obstacles to LAL, as noted by Stiggins (1995), is a possible accumulation of multiple layers of negative emotions associated with assessment. In other words, teachers may have had many negative experiences with tests when they were test takers. Such negative experiences may include doing poorly on or failing tests, being given overly difficult tests, being asked test questions on content that was not taught in the classroom, not knowing what is going to be tested, not understanding poorly written questions, being unfamiliar with question formats, being unfamiliar with the weighting given to individual test questions, not being given sufficient time to complete tests, not seeing the test after it has been marked by the teacher, teachers making mistakes in marking and totaling, a perceived bias in the rating of subjective questions, not knowing what is going to be done with the test results, not being given any warning that a test was going to be given at a particular time. Teachers may also have had bad experiences with computerized testing, such as the technology not working or breaches in test security. These negative experiences with tests may contribute to making some teachers distrustful and skeptical of tests and they may put teachers off learning more about assessment.

Another potential obstacle to teachers becoming assessment literate could be that some teachers may feel that they do not know enough about assessment to write tests and use the results in meaningful ways. Unfortunately, it has been well documented that many first degrees, teacher-training courses and Masters programs do not offer an assessment component, and if assessment courses are offered, they are mainly theoretical and not sufficient in scope to fully develop assessment literate teachers, so teachers often lack the theoretical knowledge and practical experience to write tests, and use test results in meaningful ways to improve teaching and learning (Hasselgreen, Carlsen & Helness, 2004; Tsagari & Vogt, 2017; Xu & Brown, 2017).

For many teachers, language assessment appears complex with its own concepts and language. Take, for example, the concept of validity. Teachers trying to understand this concept are soon overwhelmed with the many different types of validity such as: construct, content, curricular, criterion-related, concurrent, convergent, divergent, discriminant, face, consequential, systemic, scoring, ethical, internal, external, to name just but a few. Furthermore, some of the important concepts related to assessment such as reliability involve mathematics and statistics, which can be off-putting to language teachers with limited numeracy skills. It should also be noted that the average English classroom teacher might not easily understand journal articles, reinforcing their belief that assessment is difficult and complex and is probably best left in the hands of the testing experts.

Related to this last point is the fact that many teachers do not actually need to write tests as part of their job description. Rather, the tests for their students are written by specialist test writers in a testing unit, or they could come directly from the ministry of education. If teachers are given responsibility for writing tests, it may only be for small-scale, low-stakes classroom tests. Increasing workplace demands on teachers may also mean that they do not have any time to spend writing tests. Another reason why teachers do not write tests is that insufficient resources such as release time or extra payment are not allocated for this purpose. At the end of the day, for many teachers it is just easier and more practical to leave test writing in the hands of the testing experts.

Assessment Competency Guidelines

In order to improve the assessment literacy skills of English language teachers, we need to follow an appropriate course of action. Firstly, we need to specify a set of assessment competencies that all EFL classroom teachers must have. We then need to advise teachers on how to reach these assessment competencies, and most importantly we must provide learning opportunities for teachers to reach these assessment competencies.

Stiggins (1995) notes that a combined attempt was made by the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Education Association to identify and endorse a complete set of classroom assessment competencies for teachers.

More recently, the National Institute of Education (NIE, 2010, p. 10) in Singapore developed the following Assessment Competency Framework, specifying what the assessment literate teacher should be able to do:

- Design appropriate assessment tasks

- Plan assessments as part of effective teaching and learning

- Understand and communicate the goals and criteria of assessments

- Develop capacity for self-assessment through reflective and self-directed learning

- Provide feedback to help learners improve

- Administer, score and interpret the results effectively

- Recognize unethical and inappropriate assessment practice

Developing LAL amongst English language teachers

In this next section, we outline how teachers can reach the assessment competencies mentioned above. In other words, what can we do to provide teachers with learning opportunities so they can become assessment literate (Magno, 2013).

Graduate and Post-Graduate Language Teaching Courses

One of the most effective places for teachers to learn about assessment is when they are studying for their first degree, and/or on subsequent post-graduate teacher-training courses or Master's programs. However, it is unfortunate that many undergraduate and post-graduate courses do not include modules or electives on language testing.

Training within the workplace

One of the best places to learn more about assessment is the workplace. Teachers can work with other teachers to learn more about assessment, and to write and evaluate tests. An even better suggestion is to have teachers experienced in assessment mentor teachers who are less experienced. Perhaps the most effective way a teacher can develop their assessment literacy skills is by joining the testing unit of their workplace, if there is one, to develop their theoretical knowledge and practical skills in testing.

Online Courses

A study by Fan, Wang and Wang (2011) found that a web-based model helped in-service secondary teachers improve their assessment knowledge and enhanced their perspectives on testing. Online courses aimed at improving teachers' assessment literacy, but not necessarily English language teachers, include:

WestEd: Assessment Literacy Workshops: Promoting understanding of assessment and the effective use of summative tests results among K-12 educators. Available at:

https://www.wested.org/service/assessment-literacy-workshops/

Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity (SCALE): Building Educator Assessment Literacy. Available at: https://scale.stanford.edu/content/building-educator-assessment-literacy

Oregon Department of Education: Building Educator Assessment Literacy. Available at: http://www.oregon.gov/ode/educator-resources/assessment/Pages/Building-Educator-Assessment-Literacy.aspx

Testing Books

There are many books that teachers will likely find useful in developing their assessment literacy skills. A look in all the current book catalogs from the major publishing houses in ELT will turn up a wide variety of both practical and research-oriented volumes on the topic of language assessment. A sample of comprehensive and accessible books about language testing include: Alderson (2000); Alderson, Clapham & Wall (1995); Bachman (1990); Bachman & Palmer (1996); Bailey & Curtis (2014); Buck (2001); Brown (2010); Brown (2014); Brown & Hudson (2002), Carr (2011); Chapelle & Douglas (2006);

Coombe, Davidson, & Lloyd (2009); Coombe, Davidson, O'Sullivan & Stoynoff (2012); Coombe, Folse & Hubley (2007); Davies, Brown, Elder, Hill, Lumley, & McNamara (1999); Douglas (2009); Fulcher (2010); Fulcher & Davidson (2009); Gottlieb (2016); Hughes (2003); Luoma (2004); McNamara (2000); Purpura (2004); Read (2000); Tsagari & Banerjee (2016); Weigle (2002); Weir (1993).

Another good source of language assessment research can be found in the proceedings of conferences, especially the Language Testing Research Colloquium (LTRC), the International Language Testing Association's (ILTA) annual conference, and more locally in the Current Trends in English Language Testing (CTELT) Conference proceedings published by the TESOL Arabia Testing, Assessment and Evaluation SIG (Coombe & Davidson, 2013).

Testing Journals

It should be noted that the average classroom teacher would likely find it difficult to comprehend articles in these types of journals, and the content may be too specialized for the needs of most classroom teachers. However, as a teacher's assessment literacy skills develop, they may find the two major journals of our profession, *Language Testing* and *Language Assessment Quarterly*, increasingly accessible and informative.

Language Testing is a peer-reviewed, international, quarterly journal that publishes original research and review articles on language testing and assessment. In existence since 1984, it provides a forum for the exchange of ideas and information between people working in the fields of first and second language testing and assessment. This includes researchers and practitioners in EF/SL testing, and assessment in child language acquisition and language pathology. In addition, special attention is focused on issues of testing theory, experimental investigations, and the following up of practical implications. For more information on *Language Testing*, go to http://ltj.sagepub.com/

According to their website http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/hlaq20/, *Language Assessment Quarterly: An International Journal* (LAQ) is dedicated to the advancement of theory, research, and practice in first, second, and foreign language assessment for school, college, and university students; language assessment for employment; and

language assessment for immigration and citizenship. This journal was first published in 2004 and was originally intended as a vehicle for more practically-based papers in language testing. At present, LAQ publishes original articles addressing theoretical issues, empirical research, and professional standards and ethics related to language assessment, as well as interdisciplinary articles on related topics, and reports of language test development and testing practice. All articles are peer-reviewed and are intended to appeal to an international audience.

In addition to these journals specifically devoted to disseminating empirical research on language testing and assessment, articles can also be found in other major journals of the field including but not limited to, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Modern Language Journal*, *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *Assessing Writing*, *Melbourne Papers in Language Testing*, *Applied Linguistics,* and *Papers in Language Testing and Assessment.*

Attending workshops and talks on testing at conferences

Teachers can also study independently to help develop their assessment literacy. For example, they can do a face-to-face testing course. One of the most common professional development activities for teachers is attending pre- or in-service training workshops and academic conferences. Assessment is often a timely topic or theme at these events so attending workshops and talks are often a beneficial activity and one that can help teachers become more assessment literate.

Summer courses

A number of language testing organizations and universities offer assessment literacy training courses in the summer, which is the ideal time for teachers to attend. For example, the European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA) host an annual 4-day summer school on assessment, followed by a 1-day colloquium that is open to the public. The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) run the week-long ALTE Summer Language Testing Course every summer. This summer the British Association for Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP), is hosting a Language Testing Roadshow, facilitated by BALEAP Testing Officer John Slaght. At the

University of Bedfordshire, the Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment (CRELLA), offer an annual CRELLA Summer Research Seminar.

Attending specialized language testing conferences

There are a number of specialized language testing conferences worldwide that English language teachers can attend. Most of these associations host annual conferences and publish a variety of publications related to language testing. Some of the most important are:

- Language Testing Research Colloquium (LTRC), the annual conference of the International Language Testing Association (ILTA)
- Language Assessment Research Conference (LARC)
- Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) Conference
- European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA) Conference
- Language Testing Forum, organized by the UK Association for Language Testing and Assessment (UKALTA)
- East Coast Organization of Language Testers (ECOLT) Conference, in the US
- The Midwest Association of Language Testers (MwALT) Conference, in the US
- The Consortium on Useful Assessment in Language and Humanities Education (CUALHE) Conference, in the US
- The Association of Language Testing and Assessment of Australia and New Zealand (ALTAANZ) Conference
- The International Conference on Language Testing and Assessment (ICLTA), organized by the Chinese Association for Language Testing and Assessment (CALTA)
- Asian Association for Language Assessment (AALA) Conference
- New Directions in English Language Assessment in East Asia, hosted by the British Council
- New Directions in English Language Assessment in Latin America, hosted by the British Council

- International Perspectives on Assessing World Languages (IPAWL) Conference, organized by the American University in Cairo (AUC), Egypt

Joining language testing organizations

Most language teaching organizations such as IATEFL, TESOL, TESOL Arabia etc. are likely to have Interest Sections or Special Interest Groups (SIGs) devoted to developing the language testing knowledge and skills of language teachers. These SIGs organize events and often have online forums that can be excellent sources of assessment professional development for teachers. Teachers can also develop their Assessment Literacy skills by joining these language testing organizations:

- International Language Testers Association (ILTA)
- The Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE)
- European Association for Language Testing and Assessment (EALTA)
- Association of Language Testing and Assessment of Australia and New Zealand (ALTAANZ)
- Asian Association for Language Assessment (AALA)

The Teacher Assessment Literacy Enhancement (TALE) Project

According to the TALE website, the Teacher Assessment Literacy Enhancement (TALE) project, funded with support from the European Commission, aims to "reconfigure language assessment to promote the productive involvement of teachers, trainers and students in order to improve language learning". There are three main components to this project. The first phase involved investigating the language practices and needs of 852 language teachers from Cyprus, Germany, Greece and Hungary. The findings of this investigation can be found in the *Needs Analysis* (Vogt, 2018). The second component of the TALE project is eight open-access courses that teachers can take for free. The eight courses include: The ABCs of Assessment; Assessing reading sklls; Assessing writing skills; Assessing listening skills; Assessing speaking skills; Providing feedback; Alternatives in assessment; and Test impact. The third and final component of the TALE project is a comprehensive Handbook (Tsagari, et al. 2018) which can be downloaded for free from: http://taleproject.eu/mod/page/view.php?id=1200

Cambridge Assessment English resources

Cambridge Assessment English has the following useful resources available on its website at:

https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/our-research/all-published-resources/

Conference paper abstracts from Cambridge Assessment English staff, dating back to 1990.

The references, and some full articles, of journal articles and book chapters written by Cambridge Assessment English staff since 1994.

Research Matters is a biannual publication featuring articles since 2005 showcasing the wide variety of qualitative and quantitative research carried out by Cambridge Assessment English.

Research Notes is a quarterly publication reporting on matters relating to research, test development and validation within Cambridge Assessment English, dating back to 2000, currently with 73 issues.

Research Reports conducted by the Research Division of Cambridge Assessment, or externally-funded research carried out for third parties, dating back to 1996.

Studies in Language Testing (SiLT) is a series of books, currently numbering 49 volumes, published jointly by Cambridge Assessment English and Cambridge University Press, addressing a wide range of important issues and new developments in language testing and assessment.

British Council resources

The British Council's Language Assessment Literacy Project includes excellent online resurces which provide animated introductions and worksheets on a range of assessment topics such as Test Development; Validity; Assessing Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking; Assessing General Language Proficiency; Assessing Young Learners; Assessing English for Specific Purposes; CEFR and Language Assessment; and Technology and Language Assessment. It is available at: https://www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/assessment-literacy. The British Council have also recently launched a series of books under the title 'Monographs on Modern Language Testing', with current Series Editors Barry O'Sullivan and Vivien

Berry. These monographs are written by well-known language testing academics and researchers from around the world, and members of the British Councils' Assessment Research Group. Because the authors have extensive academic, teaching and assessment experience, each book offers the reader a unique insight into the link between theory and practice. The books offer both a theoretical and a practical perspective to language testing and assessment. So far, two books have been published in this series: *Assessing the Language of Young Learners* (Angela Hasselgreen and Gwendydd Caudwell, 2016), and *Rethinking the Second Language Listening Test: From Theory to Practice* (John Field, 2019). Forthcoming books in this series will focus on Validity; Assessing Reading; Assessing Writing; and Scoring Second Language Performance.

Glenn Fulcher's Language Testing resources

One of the most useful online resources on language testing is Glenn Fulcher's Language Testing Resources website at http://languagetesting.info/. A great number of language testing resources like videos, articles, podcasts and links to conferences and events can be found at this very informative and helpful website.

LAL in the MENA region

The TESOL Arabia Testing, Assessment and Evaluation Special Interest Group (TAE SIG) was formed in 1996 and is responsible for much of the scholarly work and professional development activities on language testing and assessment in the Gulf.

In addition to its flagship conference, CTELT, the TAE SIG also organizes events focusing on many different levels of testing and assessment expertise. At the last annual Current Trends in English Language Testing or CTELT Conference in 2012, a session was held on the formation of a strategic plan and research agenda for the group. Interested educators were invited to attend a focus group to help TAE SIG Co-chairs, Christine Coombe and Peter Davidson, plan activities and identify research priorities for the coming academic years. The result of this meeting generated the following educational and research priorities for the TAE SIG.

Educational Priorities for TAE SIG

Focus group attendees were very much in favor of continuing the dual approach of the TAE SIG whereby two distinct populations of teachers are found to exist in the region; the first group are those with a fairly sophisticated level of language testing and assessment knowledge and expertise and the second group who are those identified with having a basic grounding in the field but want to develop more (Coombe & Davidson, 2013, p. 238).

Research Priorities for TAE SIG

Much of the past research on language testing and assessment in the MENA region has been disseminated through TAE SIG events and/or TAE SIG/TESOL Arabia publications. Those attending the focus group prioritized a number of research priorities for the TAE SIG including identifying teachers' levels of assessment literacy with a view to using this knowledge to better plan professional development activities and training for the TAE SIG. Two major projects were identified under 'research priorities'. The first was to collect data on the assessment literacy levels of TAE SIG members and teachers in the MENA. To this end, Hidri and Coombe (forthcoming) developed and administered a questionnaire on aspects of assessment literacy which was administered in 2015. Some 400+ responses to the questionnaire entitled 'A Survey of Teachers' Conceptions and Practices of Assessment' were received. This questionnaire consisted of 60 + items on conceptions regarding assessment and practices associated with assessment and assessment-related activities.

Another recommendation that came out of the focus group was to publish a 2nd edition of the very popular *Assessment in the Arab World* volume which was originally published in 2005 and edited by Davidson, Coombe and Jones. This first volume featured 18 research-based articles from testers and teacher educators from around the Middle East. This recommendation resulted in the publication of *Language Assessment in the Middle East and North Africa: Theory, Practice & Future Trends* (Coombe, Davidson, Gebril, Boraie & Hidri, 2017). Other recent publications include Hidri and Coombe's (2017) and Hidri's (2018) volume on the *Evaluation in Foreign Language Education in the MENA* and *Revising the Assessment of Second Language Abilities* which showcase some of

the excellent empirical work in the region in areas as diverse as evaluation, testing and assessment.

Major TESOL Arabia Testing, Assessment and Evaluation SIG Initiatives

Fundamentals of Language Assessment (FLA) Certificate course and training courses

One of the first major initiatives of the TAE SIG was the development and administration of the 'Fundamentals of Language Assessment' course. This course was originally conceptualized as a 1 to 2-day course for practicing teachers and later evolved into a series of workshops that could be delivered face-to-face in flexible 1-2 days, 1 week or 2 week formats. Through a mix of both theoretical and practical content and activities, the focus of the course is on the essential elements of assessment literacy.

Topics included:

- cornerstones of testing
- testing the 4 skills
- testing language
- writing test items e.g., MCQs, essay questions
- alternative assessment

FLA courses have been conducted in all the Emirates and more than 34 countries worldwide. Among them include:

- Gulf: UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia,
- Middle East: Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran
- Africa: Ethiopia, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco
- Asia/Sub Continent: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand
- Europe: Armenia, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, Russia
- Central/South America: Peru, Chile, Costa Rica, Brazil

Assessment publications

The TESOL Arabia TAE SIG has been committed to publishing several volumes focused on both research and practice as well as a series of CTELT Conference Proceedings. Language testing books published by TESOL Arabia include: Lloyd, D., Davidson, P. & Coombe, C. (2005); Davidson, P., Coombe, C. & Jones, W. (2005); Coombe, C, Davidson,

P. & Lloyd, D. (2009); Coombe, C. & Khan, R. (2015); and Coombe, C., Davidson P., Gebril, A., Boraie, D. & Hidri, S. (2017). Books from the CTELT conference include: Coombe, C. (Ed.). (2001); Coombe, C., Davidson, P., & Lloyd, D. (2003); Coombe, C., Davidson, P., & Lloyd, D. (2006); Coombe, C., Davidson, P., & Lloyd, D. (2007).

Online Courses

The TESOL Arabia TAE SIG offer several online initiatives to help members become more assessment literate. Since its development in 2012, the online 'Fundamentals of Language Assessment' course has been run five times to over 700 teachers. Two three-month self-access courses on 'Alternatives in Language Assessment' and 'Testing the Skill Areas' have also been developed and delivered to groups of teachers in the Gulf and in several MENA countries.

Future challenges for LAL in the MENA region

To keep up with the many language assessment initiatives that are happening within the MENA region it is necessary to continue with all the professional development projects that have been mentioned in this article. It is also important that institutions within the MENA create graduate programs at their institutions that focus on language testing and assessments. Having a future cadre of language testers that have been trained with both international and localized content would be a huge breakthrough in the region. At present those wishing to get Masters' and Doctoral degrees in our field must go abroad to study. This is not practical or affordable for most. Having local and regional programs would decrease the cost for Ministries of Education and the students themselves and more potential students would have access to these programs.

It is also imperative for academics within the region to publish books and journal articles showcasing the depth and breadth of research-based language testing and assessment work being done in MENA countries. An ultimate goal, of course, would be the creation of our own regional specialized journal in assessment.

To potentially guide these initiatives, we feel that the creation of a Language Testing and Assessment Advisory Board with representatives from each of the MENA Countries should be formed. The formation of this body could be the founders of a

professional association in language testing and assessment. It is only with such forward thinking that we will move ahead into the future in creating an internationally-recognized knowledge base in the field of language testing and assessment in the MENA.

Conclusion

The lack of LAL amongst English language teachers is a major concern that English language testing specialists need to help address. However, it should also be noted that it is not just the assessment literacy of English language teachers in the MENA region that need to be addressed, but rather the level of assessment literacy of teachers all around the world. The ongoing quest to help teachers improve their knowledge about and experience with different types of language assessment is a crucial one and one that can be enhanced with some of the professional development activities that we have discussed in this paper.

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