

A Cross-Contextual Perspective on EFL Teachers' Assessment Knowledge

Hossein Farhady¹

¹*Doçent, Yeditepe Üniversitesi, hossein.farhady@yeditepe.edu.tr*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to report on the findings of research on EFL teachers' language assessment knowledge (LAK) and argue that consistent findings of research that teachers do not have sufficient LAK may not reflect a true picture of the state of affairs. Rather, the findings might have been due to the artifact of the framework suggested some thirty years ago upon which most LAK tests have been developed (AFT, NCME, & NEA, 1990). I would also argue that such tests may no longer reflect the reality of language assessment today since they are generic and context independent. Following Gotch and French (2014), I would argue that the present treatment of LAK, which is based on summative normative principles, might not be construct valid anymore. I will conclude the paper with suggesting a cross contextual framework that will hopefully represent a clear picture of the complex dimensions of LAK and lead to further research in this direction.

Keywords: LAK, EFL teachers, Language Assesment Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Most scholars would agree that assessment is an important and crucial component of teaching regardless of the time, philosophy, geographical location, and governing bodies (Black 1993; Stiggins 2002). That is probably due to its importance that language the field has witnessed significant changes in both teaching and testing approaches. These changes, especially in the philosophy of teaching, has influenced assessment and has led to different forms of assessments such as norm referenced, criterion-referenced, alternative, formative, summative, authentic, and dynamic (Siegel, Wissehr, & Halverson, 2008).

One major change in teaching has been the transition from the so called method era to the post method era. In the method era, teaching focused on transferring information from the teacher to the learner. In this era, learners were encouraged to store information provided by teachers and

be able to demonstrate their knowledge when they were requested. In the post method era, however, the focus of teaching has been on helping learners achieve their goals by directing instruction towards their needs in the target language situation. In this era, learners are encouraged to engage in the process of learning as autonomously as possible to transform the available information and be able to apply it to the real contexts in practice.

Along with these shifts in teaching, similar moves have been made in testing as well. In the method era, the focus of testing was on measuring the product of the language as the outcome of learning. In this era, the dominance of psychometrically oriented high stakes standard tests had an undesirable impact on instruction that is commonly referred to as test-driven instruction. In the post method era, however, the focus shifted to local and teacher made assessment intended to enhance learning. In this era, assessment is intended to assist learning that, in turn, is expected to lead to instruction driven assessment (Black 1993; Stiggins 2002).

One of the pleasant consequence of these changes, however, has been the integration of teaching, learning, and assessment processes (Purpura & Turner, 2014). This significant outcome requires some fundamental changes in the perceptions and beliefs of teachers (Xu, 2015), learners, and other stakeholders as well as changes in the infra-structure of language education. A major concern in this process has been to move away from external normative tests to internal classroom based assessment where most of the assessment responsibilities are put on the shoulders of classroom teachers. Therefore, as an important agent of instruction, teachers are expected to be well equipped with necessary professional knowledge and skills to meet the new requirements (Inbar-Lourie, 2013; Malone, 2013).

ASSESSMENT KNOWLEDGE OF TEACHERS IN GENERAL EDUCATION

When the issue of teacher assessment knowledge emerged, the preliminary steps were naturally taken by educators and measurement specialists. To help the field move forward systematically, educators attempted to provide a framework for assessment knowledge of teachers coordinated by several educational institutions. The American Federation of Teachers, the National Council on Measurement in Education, and the National Education Association

(AFT, NCME, & NEA, 1990) provided a framework by developing a set of standards to promote professionally responsible practice in educational measurement. These standards included:

1. Choosing and/or developing assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions;
2. Administering, scoring, and interpreting the results of both externally-produced and teacher-produced assessment methods;
3. Using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum, and school improvement;
4. Developing valid grading procedures to be used in learner assessments;
5. Communicating assessment results to students, parents, other lay audiences, and other educators; and
6. Recognizing unethical, illegal, and otherwise inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information. (pp. 31-32)

Following this framework, measures of teachers' assessment knowledge have been developed and used to investigate the extent of assessment knowledge of teachers. However, despite such an elaborate framework and the significance of the issue, most research findings revealed that teachers around the world are not well prepared to meet the new challenges. For example, there were reports claiming that about half the teacher work force have not received a course in assessment. Nor have they received adequate training on assessment in teacher education programs to be prepared for new developments (Jett & Schafer, 1992; Wise, Lukin, & Roos, 1991). Further, research in different fields of education has also demonstrated that teachers lack sufficient preparation in the use of educational assessments (Leiter, 1976; Mayo, 1967; Newman & Stallings, 1982; Schäfer, 1993; Schafer & Lissitz, 1987; Stiggins & Conklin, 1992; Wise, 1993).

Along the same line, Popham (2009) stated that investigations of the assessment knowledge of teachers resulted in disappointing findings. He claimed that a good number of teacher education programs do not require assessment courses for graduations. Even when assessment training is offered, it does not provide the kinds of knowledge and skills that future teachers need to become assessment literates. He concludes, with disappointment, that administrators who are expected to supervise the teachers are often less knowledgeable in basic

assessment than are the teachers. In short, extensive research on assessment knowledge of teachers have led to the conclusion that teachers, in general, are not well prepared to assess and evaluate the outcome of student learning.

Similar findings are reported in the region. In Turkey, Birgin & Burguz (2008) and Çakan (2004) conducted a survey research to elicit pre-service primary school teachers' knowledge level on measurement and assessment. They reported that most of pre-service primary school teachers did not have sufficient knowledge about alternatives in assessment methods. Their findings indicated that most of the teachers perceived themselves as unqualified in terms of measurement and evaluation applications. They recommended that pre-service primary teachers should not only be given opportunities to experience different kinds of assessment methods but also to practice them during their education period.

LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT KNOWLEDGE OF EFL TEACHERS

The field of language assessment in TEFL usually follows the principles and procedures in the wider context of education. Following the field of education, the term LAK has been used to describe what language teachers need to know about assessment issues (Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Malone, 2008; Stiggins, 1997; Stoyhoff & Chapelle, 2005). That is, similar to teachers in other fields, language teachers and instructors also need some testing and assessment training if they are engaged in (a) selecting, administering, interpreting, and sharing results of large-scale tests produced by professional testing organizations, or in (b) developing, scoring, interpreting, and improving classroom-based assessments (Taylor 2009, 2013).

Due to the peculiarities of the field of TEFL, in addition to the development of standards for assessment knowledge in general education, the field of language assessment has itself undergone a process of increasing professionalization over recent years. Therefore, in response to the needs of EFL teachers (Bachman, 1990), there also exist language testing specific codes such as the ALTE Code of Practice (1994), the ILTA Code of Ethics (2000), and the EALTA Guidelines for Good Practice (2006). Of course, as elaborations and standardization were offered for EFL

teachers' assessment knowledge, there has been growing awareness of the complexities of the LAK construct. For example, in addition to the topics in the field of assessment, research findings indicated that factors such as washback, fairness, ethics, and bias play a significant role in the interpretation of test scores and the process of decision making. (Alderson & Wall, 1996; Cheng, 2005; Green, 2007; Kunnan, 2000; Wall, 2005). Therefore, in addition to issues in language assessment, EFL teachers should be informed about the nature of and contribution of these factors to their decision making processes.

At a minimum level, LAK is referred to as "language assessment literacy (LAL)". It is defined as "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" (Fulcher, 2012, p.125).

To investigate the extent to which EFL teachers are familiar with basic concepts of testing and assessment, researchers have constructed instruments to measure and track teachers' LAL. The purpose of research in this area has been to collect information that would help EFL educators to support teachers' assessment practices (Deluca, LaPointe, McEwan & Luhanga, 2016). For example, Mertler and Campbell (2004, 2005), and Fulcher (2014) have attempted to develop and administer LAL instruments to various groups of teachers in different contexts. Lam (2015) explored the overall language assessment training of teachers and found that this training was inadequate and selected language assessment courses were unable to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Berry, Munro, and Sheehan (2016) used interviews and observations since they believed rightly that investigation of classroom practice should explore both what is happening and why it is happening in that way. Their findings also confirmed earlier findings that teachers do not have sufficient assessment knowledge in actual practice. Overall results from various studies continue to demonstrate that teachers' assessment knowledge is largely below the criteria level recommended in 1990 Standards (Galluzzo, 2005; Mertler, 2003, 2009; Zhang & Burry-Stock, 1997). A disappointing outcome of the majority of research findings was that EFL

teachers do not receive sufficient training in teacher education programs and most of them are not well prepared for the growing challenges in language assessment.

Several reasons can be speculated for the insufficient knowledge of LAL among EFL teachers. One reason could be weak theoretical foundations of the instruments developed for assessing LAL. That is, the framework offered by professional organizations might not have been developed by taking into account multiple dimensions of teachers needs for assessment knowledge in different contexts. Another reason might have been due to inappropriacy of the framework that was developed on the basis of normative interpretation of test scores and psychometrically dominant standards of those days. That is, the framework given some 30 years ago may not be construct valid to represent new developments in language assessment. Therefore, attempts were made to investigate the assessment needs of teachers in order to develop measures that would target their needs.

RESEARCH ON ASSESSMENT NEEDS OF EFL TEACHERS

Needs analysis is considered a major requirement for collecting information on many instructional areas such as curricula, programs, courses, materials, and tests at various levels (Brown, 2001). Further, needs identification is necessary for every context because the variables specific to the local context of the teachers may have valuable contributions to designing effective programs for prospective users (Miller, 1995).

EFL educators as well as researchers have conducted various studies on identifying language teachers' needs for LAK. For instance, Fulcher (2012) developed a survey instrument to elicit the assessment needs of teachers. The findings indicated that although language teachers were aware of their assessment needs, they claimed that they were not provided with opportunities to acquire necessary knowledge either in teacher education programs or in service training programs. Taking into account the results of the study, suggestions were made for modifications in teacher education programs as well as in designing teaching materials and assessment procedures.

As another example, Imao, Koizumi & Koyama (2015) investigated Japanese language teachers' needs about language testing. They reported that the participating language teachers felt their LAK was insufficient and they showed interest in acquiring knowledge on practical rather than theoretical issues of language assessment. Along the same lines, research in some European countries to investigate the assessment needs of European teachers indicated that they needed training on preparing different forms of classroom assessment such as peer and self-assessment or portfolio assessment. They also mentioned that they needed training on procedures for providing effective feedback on assessment, and effective ways of rating performance based assessment (Tzagari & Vogt, 2015).

Despite teachers' awareness of their needs, and despite their willingness to improve their level of LAK, the research findings reported on assessing teachers' LAK using needs oriented instruments have been unsatisfactory and sometimes disappointing. For example, Razavipour, Riazi, and Rashidi (2011) reported a large number of participating teachers could not recognize the appropriate definition of fundamental concepts in testing such as 'reliability' and 'validity'. Finally, Farhady and Tavassoli (2018) found similar results despite the precautions they reportedly observed in determining the needs of teachers, matching the needs with the content of assessment textbooks, and preparing a scenario based LAK test.

LAK CONSTRUCT

As mentioned before, another reason for the failure of needs based measures in determining teachers' LAK might have been due to the limited scope of the LAK construct suggested in the field. Considering the above-mentioned findings, it seems clear that the construct of LAK is more complex and multidimensional than it was conceptualized before. It seems that even developing LAK tests that are based on the assessment needs of EFL teachers did not reveal

promising results regarding teachers' LAK. This consistency in the findings of research might be due to the conceptualization of the construct of LAK inherited from educational measurement specialists in 1990's. It is clear that LAK encompasses different competences including knowledge about assessment, language, language learning, context, and the ability to design, administer, collect, and interpret data with the purpose of making logical and ethical decisions (Inbar-Lourie, 2013; Pill & Harding, 2013). To train teachers within this conceptualization of LAK, teachers need to develop general assessment skills formulated by educational institutions supplemented by other language-specific assessment knowledge. To this end, to be able to cope with rapid developments of the language assessment field, EFL teachers, they need appropriate training in modern assessment (Inbar-Lourie, 2008). That is probably why scholars have emphasized more research into the issue (Fulcher, 2012; Inbar-Lourie, 2013; Malone, 2013; Scarino, 2013).

For instance, Brookhart (2011) acknowledges the need for changes in the framework since old standards no longer fully account for the range of assessment activities or the assessment knowledge teachers require within the current context of schooling. Brookhart believes that we may not be attempting to measure the construct of LAL that addresses multiple factors influencing the nature of LAK required in its modern form. For instance, Gotch and French (2014) systematically examined 36 LAL measures and found that there is weak psychometric evidence supporting these measures and that existing instruments lack "representativeness and relevance of content in light of transformations in the assessment landscape (e.g., accountability systems, conceptions of formative assessment)" (p. 17). These findings suggest that the framework established in 1990 does not realistically represent the current status of LAL anymore. We may need to refine the definition of LAK construct and align it with the present conceptualization of assessment in EFL contexts.

The point is not, by any means, to downgrade the contribution of psychometrics to language assessment. Rather, the intention is to expand the psychometrically oriented framework to include other construct relevant, and sometimes construct irrelevant, factors which influence decision making processes in the present context of assessment. In other words, a revised, refined,

or extended definition of LAK is needed that would address, in addition to requirements of traditional testing, abilities that would enable EFL teachers to face the challenges that emerge from the principles of assessment inside and outside the classroom. In fact, traditional courses on teaching assessment both in pre-service and in service programs do not often address these issues (Inbar-Lourie 2008).

It should be mentioned that LAK measures can be improved by avoiding the use of generic measures that are based on generic needs assessment instruments. More specifically, language teachers may need to receive training that would address different aspects of assessment with different priorities related to their local contexts (Farhady & Tavassoli, 2015; Tsagari & Vogt, 2015). In addition, findings of research from language education (e.g., Tsagari & Vogt, 2015) have not, as yet, addressed the issue of the relationship between teachers' LAK level and the quality of their classroom tests or their students' learning and achievement (Farhady & Tavassoli, 2018).

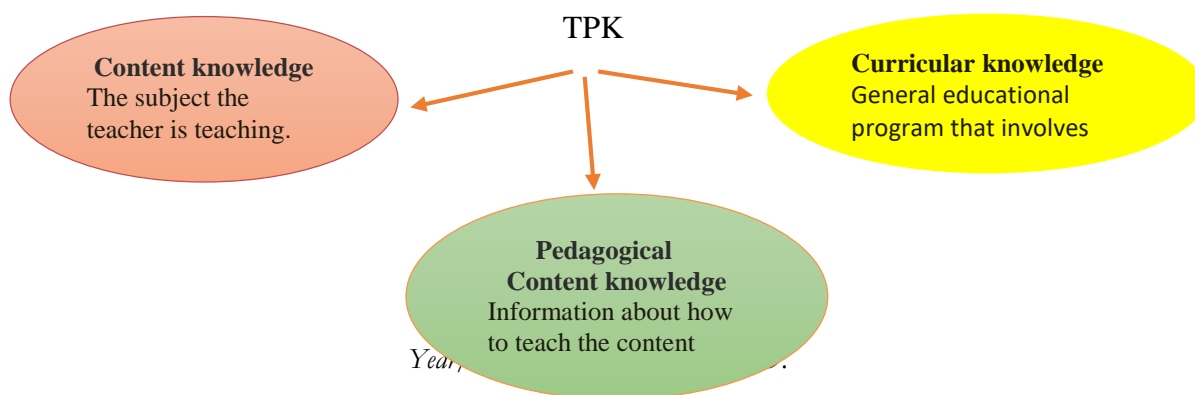
Further, assessment, as an ongoing process of collecting information to evaluate students' performance, has been accepted as a desirable alternative to traditional one-shot case testing procedure (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). This trend has influenced all stakeholders in the assessment process, especially teachers because they are expected to perform most of the classroom based assessment. Consequently, training teachers and helping them to develop professionally and improve different dimensions of their professional knowledge drew the attention of teacher education institutions (Wallace, 1991). This trend for additional trainings would influence the nature of developing teacher professional knowledge in teacher education programs. Of course, LAK or LAL is just one of the many areas of professionalism in teacher education programs. However, as a part of teachers' professional knowledge, assessment knowledge has received more attention since assessment is an indispensable part of any instructional endeavor. That is probably why teachers' LAK has been addressed more seriously in the field (Farhady & Tavassoli, 2018; Inbar-Lourie 2013; Malone 2013) than other areas of professionalism. Nonetheless, more attention to developing language assessment knowledge should not lead to less attention to other components of professional knowledge of teachers.

As a component of teachers' professional raining, LAK may be conceptualized as a construct that is rooted in theoretical principles of both language education and language assessment. Since LAK is a relatively new research field, there is no conceptual consensus among researchers. Most will agree, however, that LAL is an important part of teacher professional responsibility (e.g., Fulcher, 2012; Taylor, 2009, 2013). Therefore, early LAL research seem to have focused on the belief that test users should adopt the insights, beliefs, and principles of language testers. Perhaps because of this, most LAL research to date has focused on stakeholders' knowledge of language assessment concepts, and it has often concluded that stakeholders lack sufficient knowledge to responsibly and adequately select, use, or interpret assessments, tests, or their outcomes (Fulcher, 2012; Malone, 2013; O'Loughlin, 2011, 2013).

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM

A look at the concept of teacher professionalism indicates that scholars have identified two major areas of knowledge including content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. Content knowledge refers to the subject matter that teachers teach. In addition to content knowledge, teachers need to have the skills and abilities, i.e., pedagogical content knowledge, to teach that subject matter. There is still a third component to teacher professional knowledge that is often referred to as experiential knowledge, or curricular knowledge, or general teaching knowledge. This conceptualization offered by Shulman (1986) is presented below.

Figure 1. Shulman's taxonomy of teacher professional knowledge TPK (1986)



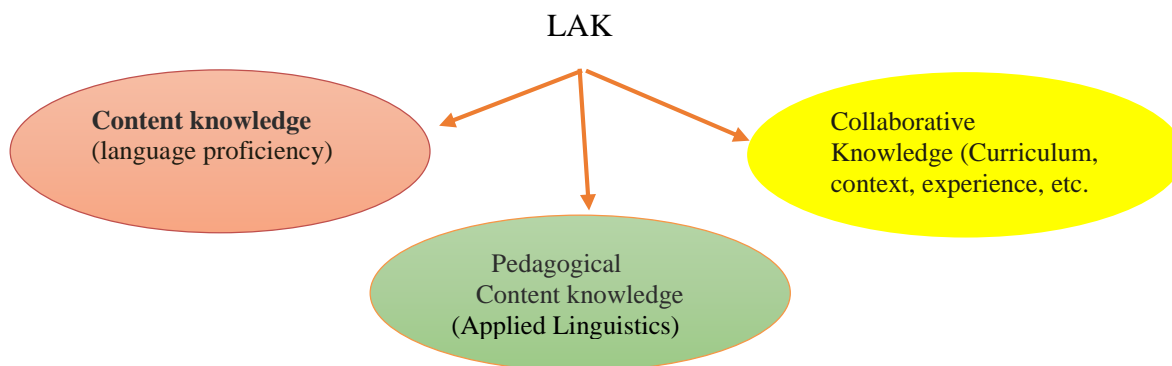
Kumaravadivelu (2012) offers a similar three dimensional framework but presents it with different terminologies. For him, content knowledge is “professional knowledge”, pedagogical content knowledge is “procedural knowledge” and curricular knowledge is “personal knowledge”. Although there are some other presentations of TPK, most of them agree on these three major components. More recently, Baker (2016) argues that teachers should have a type of knowledge that she calls collaborative. This dimension not only includes the factors that are mentioned in the third category of the previous models, but also acknowledges the significance of specificity of the context in the needs analysis process. It seems realistic to assume that TPK needs of teachers may be different across contexts with different contributions from different stakeholders.

In TEFL context, content knowledge refers to language proficiency that teachers need in order to be qualified as language teachers. It is often taken for granted, and sometimes erroneously assumed, that teachers have acceptable language proficiency without much of valid empirical data to support the assumption. However, assuming that teachers have the required command of language, they need to have pedagogical content knowledge as well. In the context of TEFL, pedagogical content knowledge refers to the knowledge about language teaching. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the diversity of knowledge teachers need to succeed in their teaching profession. It would suffice here to mention that it includes knowledge about the nature of language (linguistics), the nature of language learning and acquisition (psycholinguistics), the nature of language use (sociolinguistics) and the nature of assessing the extent of learner achievement. The list is not of course exhaustive. We may also further assume that all these types of knowledge can be subsumed under the main topic of “the knowledge of applied linguistics”

Regardless of the model selected, there is an agreement that EFL teachers need to have knowledge of language, knowledge of areas related to language teaching, and knowledge of some

other issues such as those related to classroom and context of teaching. So, we can model language assessment knowledge as illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2. Language Assessment Knowledge

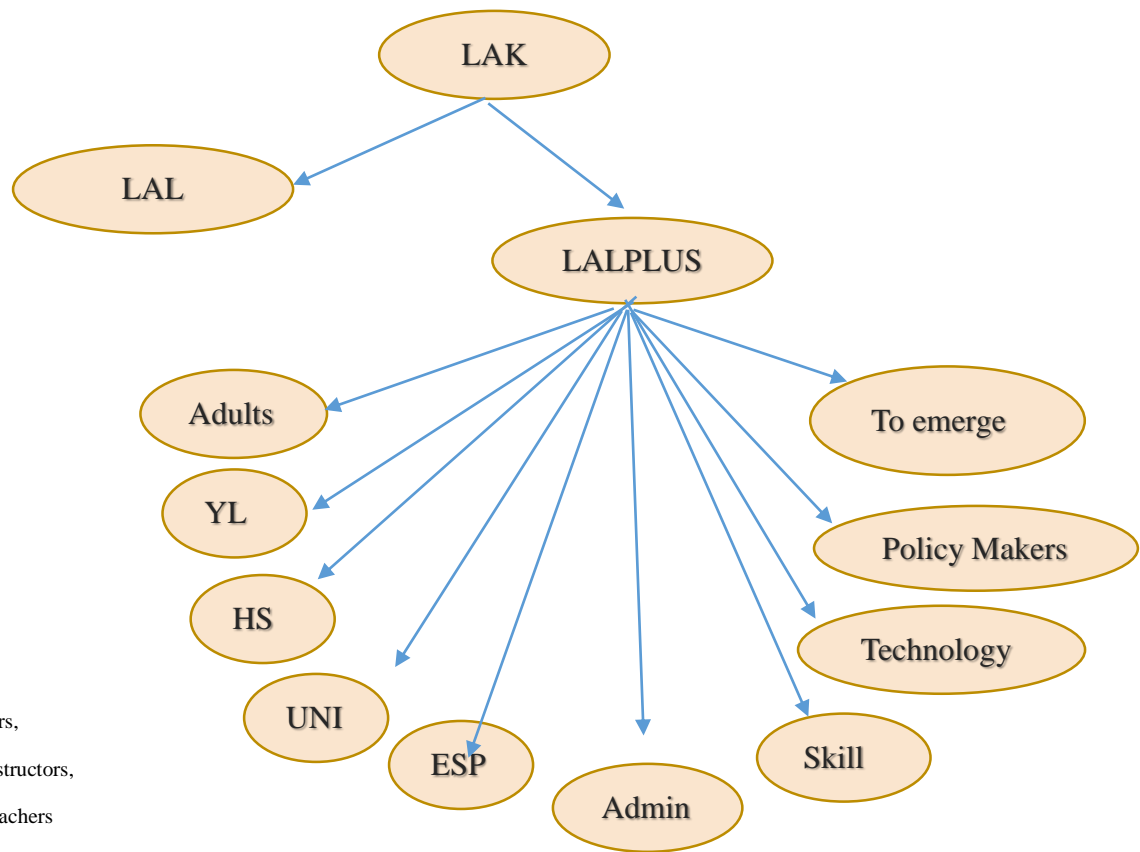


It may be argued that assuming such a unidimensional generic model may be informative at the macro level. It may not, however, be as effective when certain specific contexts require somewhat distinctly different types of LAK. Based on this generic conceptualizations, generic assessment tools have been developed as well. However, it may be so true that language teachers request receiving training across different aspects of assessment with different priorities depending on their local contexts (Farhady & Tavassoli, 2015; Tsagari & Vogt, 2015). That may be a reason for negative reports about teacher LAL since general tests do not address context specific issues.

Of course, the idea of context specificity has been addressed by Taylor (2013) who suggests involvement of all stakeholder groups during test development. Also, Inbar-Lourie (2008) suggests developing new standards for a core knowledge of skills supplemented by knowledge needed by specific groups of test users. Following these recommendations, a new conceptualization is suggested here that is more comprehensive and is intended to accommodate more context specific factors. For example, in the present generic models, some issues such as the difference between LAK level of teachers who work with students at different levels of language ability or the differences between the LAK level for teachers of young and adult learners, or high school and university teachers are not taken into account. Therefore, a more elaborate model of

LAK seems necessary that could accommodate different needs and teachers' LAK requirements who work in different contexts. Following suggestions by Baker (2016), LAK should include a core knowledge of assessment and additional knowledge of assessment necessary for different contexts. To avoid coining new words, as presented in Figure 3, we may consider LAL as the content of the core assessment knowledge that all teachers need to have. In addition to LAL, we may assume of LALPLUS for the knowledge of assessment necessary for different contexts.

Graphic Representation of Cross Contextual Model for LAK



YL: Young Learners,
 UN: University instructors,
 HS: High school teachers
 ESP: English for specific teachers, Admin: Administrators

It should be mentioned that extending the model of LAK does not necessarily mean that the problems related to the models are solved. Rather, such a model would allow us to refine our target groups and investigate their specific needs in specific contexts, develop context specific

measures LALPLUS to determine their level of LAK and provide them with more targeted assessment instructions. Some of the advantages of LALPLUS model is its potential for finding reasonable solutions for the problems regarding generic models. The new perspective may accommodate some of the issues that scholars have been trying to address. It may also lead to training more context-sensitive teachers. Further, it allows multiple stakeholders to contribute to the process of teacher education looking at the issue from different perspectives and from different contexts. Finally, the proposed model may lead to better assessment tools of LAK that may lead to acknowledging teachers' efficiency rather than criticizing their inefficiency.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The main purpose of this paper was to present the status of language assessment knowledge of teachers and make certain arguments. Apparently, most scholars would agree that teachers are the first hand agents to implement the appearing, changing, and reappearing theoretical and procedural principles in education. Scholars would also agree that a successful education system, regardless of any political, geographical, and theoretical perspective, requires knowledgeable teachers with professional personality. Further, most scholars would agree that assessment knowledge is an important component of teachers' professional knowledge. EFL context and EFL teachers are not exceptions.

However, despite elaborate frameworks to account for the parameters of teachers LAK, research findings indicated that teachers do not generally meet the standards of assessment knowledge required by professional organizations. Therefore, it was argued that consistent findings that indicated teachers do not have sufficient LAK might be due to either psychometrically oriented measures of LAK, or due to generic nature of these measures. To address some of these issues, a new framework is offered that extends the existing frameworks and accounts for many specific contexts of teaching. The new framework includes two components. The first component is LAL or language assessment literacy that refers to a minimum core knowledge of assessment that teachers need to have to implement general assessment principles. The second component, that may be equally important, if not more in the new era of

assessment, addresses the specific needs of EFL teachers in different contexts beyond LAL that is referred to LALPLUS. The purpose of extending the existing models was to provide a guideline for further research into construct validity of LAL and LALPLUS assessment instruments. Some of the suggestions for research related to the new framework that would hopefully guide researchers towards a better understanding of the needs of teachers in different contexts follows.

The first issue that needs investigation is developing needs analysis instruments that are rooted in collaboration of different stakeholders in different context. Through research in needs analysis, it would be possible to identify teachers' general assessment needs as well as their specific needs across contexts. The second issue is developing LAL measures for different contexts and investigating the construct validity of LAL and LALPLUS. This would be possible by administering tests that includes both LAL and LALPLUS items to find out whether the data supports these constructs. Last but not least, is investigating the value and contribution LAK to improving assessment practices of teachers in the real context of classroom. This is an issue not paid due attention. More importantly, research is needed to investigate the effect of teachers' LAN on the students' achievement. This is also a neglected area in the field. Teacher education programs need to be concerned about the effect of their assessment training on the students learning. It is important to understand whether LAK leads teachers to prepare better assessment instruments that would assess students' achievement more appropriately and meaningfully

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