Learning-Oriented Assessment: The Contextual Dimension

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Over five hundred years ago, Copernicus presented findings that revolutionized the world by shifting focus away from the Earth and towards the sun as the center of the universe. Education has been encountering a similar paradigm-altering shift with the center of learning moving from the teacher to the learner. Learning-oriented assessment (LOA) is an emerging framework of that reconceptualization. LOA is, at its core, learner-centric, where attention falls concentrically, beginning with the learner, followed by learner interactions with other agents in the learning process, then moving to factors outside of the learner within the learning space (J. E. Purpura, personal communication, September 12, 2014).

LOA can be described as embedded assessment, focusing on the learner through seven inter-related dimensions, with the end goal of helping to facilitate the determination of best practices for teaching (Turner & Purpura, 2015). One of these seven inter-related dimensions, the contextual dimension, is often overlooked, but may contain substantial keys towards helping to unlock best teaching practices. Too often, the search for the most effective and efficient practices towards facilitating learning begins with the teacher. If the LOA framework begins with the learner and then moves through the circles of influence surrounding the learner, could it not be argued that each of the seven dimensions of LOA should be examined through the same lens in order to ensure that focus on the learner is maintained? For example, if the contextual dimension is viewed through this lens, a student fluent in several Romance languages may need little help in learning the verb tenses of Romanian, or even many latinate cognates in English (J. E. Purpura, personal communication, September 12, 2014). However, the context created by individual students, even when needs analyses are collected, is rarely taken into full consideration, as up until now, the circles of influence in the classroom begin with the teacher and then move to the classroom and its agents. However, if the context of individual learners are examined and capitalized upon, might that not save precious time for both language and content teachers, and the language learners themselves?

In this way, the contextual dimension of LOA, when closely examined, may provide many insights influencing best practices. In the language learning classroom, with the learner at its heart, the contextual dimension includes the learner's language background, the distance of their first language (L1) from the target language, their depth of L1 knowledge, not to mention non-linguistic aspects, such as motivation, learning styles, and the extent to which they are affected by the language ego (Guiora, Brannon, & Dull, 1972). Next, the contextual dimension moves to other agents with whom the learner interacts. As a classroom is usually made up of one teacher and many students, the learner usually has more opportunity to interact with his or her peers, with less time available for talking with an instructor. Therefore, logically, peer-peer interaction should be investigated at least as much as teacher-student interaction to look for the types of interaction that might be most beneficial or a potential hindrance to the language learning process. An additional aspect of the context deserving attention is the way learners respond to materials used in or outside of the classroom in connection with a language course (e.g., textbooks, technology, games). Finally, the larger context outside the learner comes into play with variables such as high stakes standardized tests, an ESL versus EFL setting, the language load required for study in other areas, the context of the culture(s) of the communities

they come from and live in, age, the education being pursued and countless other aspects affecting the learner directly or through their educational institutions.

Fortunately, the Roundtable on Learning-Oriented Assessment was unique in the breadth to which these multiple contexts were investigated and discussed. Topics ranged from exploring learning progressions (Heritage & Bailey, 2014; Wylie, 2014) to bolstering language acquisition through peer-feedback and to the exploration of the target language culture aided by the use of technology-enhanced tools (Abraham, Stengel & Welsh, 2014). Additionally, the conference revealed the need for more interdisciplinary collaboration within the K-12 context. This collaboration is especially needed with the high language demands inherent to the Common Core, where, for example, students are expected to express their content knowledge in science through essays, or decipher the nuances of prepositions in math word problems. The unsettling fact is that, up until now, the language needs of ESL students in the content areas have still not been well understood when creating content-based large scale high-stakes assessments. The support for English learners has often been left to the teacher even though teachers have little or no control of test content nor are often allowed direct interaction with students during these standardized assessments.

Part of the struggle many K-12 language learners face is the false assumption that their language needs will be met if their teachers use best practices in content area instruction. However, the converse is true; non-English language learners will benefit from the best practices of ESL instruction in and out of the content areas. As Turner and Purpura (2015) argue, it is a teacher's understanding of content knowledge, language teaching and grammar, and pedagogy that determines the effectiveness of their teaching in the classroom. With the continuing rise of English language learners in American schools, in order to ensure that assessments are accurately testing the target content area without using language that is prohibitively difficult for language learners, all three aspects of understanding need to be considered by assessment creators. Thankfully, discussions of research at the Roundtable on LOA helped reveal this need to both content area test creators, as well as to the best and brightest in the field of language assessment. Because of LOA's focus on the context of the learner, collaboration supporting language might begin to take place.

That being said, if our focus is truly on the learner and best practices for their language learning, we need to extend our focus outside of the classroom, and work to give students access to more resources that facilitate learner autonomy. In this way, on-going assessment will be truly learning-oriented with individual attention given to each learner. Considering the high level of input and output necessary to increase language proficiency, the doors are wide open for using technology in the form of games or tutorials based on research, theory, and pedagogy, to support the language learner outside the classroom and/or in conjunction with formal instruction inside the classroom, especially when instructors are given access to formative information from the software.

In conclusion, despite often being overlooked or dismissed, the contextual dimension of LOA may offer helpful answers for informing best practices of learner-centered language instruction in the future.

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