



Language Assessment Literacy among School-teachers in Goa: Two Teacher Scenarios

Rama Mathew

Delhi University

Antony John Kunnan

University of Macau

This is the second part of the two-part article on language assessment literacy - in terms of understanding and classroom practice - among teachers in schools in Goa, a state in the western part of India (see Kunnan et al., 2021 for the first part). This part focuses on a qualitative analysis of data from interviews/focus group discussions as well as classroom observations. In-depth interviews and classroom observations were carried out to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The article describes the narrative views of teachers and what was observed in classrooms regarding their assessment knowledge and practices. What emerged was a clear picture of two scenarios, labelled as Scenario 1 and Scenario 2. These scenarios represented quite clearly two distinct portrayals of the role and practice of assessment. The first scenario was one in which assessment was not understood and practiced in a way that is meaningful and useful from the point of view of student learning. The second scenario described a situation where assessments were meaningful.

Keywords: Teaching, assessment, formative and summative assessment, integrating teaching and assessment

Introduction

This is the second part of the article on assessment literacy in terms of knowledge and practice among school teachers in Goa. It is based on interviews, focus group discussion and classroom observation data. It attempts to understand how teachers view and carry out language assessment in their given school contexts that form part of a larger school education system including the state Board exam. We were made aware through the study that teachers functioned in a multi-tiered system comprising *micro*, *meso* and *macro* factors (see Fulmer et al. 2015). This system influences each other and the participants—teachers, students, colleagues, parents, and the society in general – in complex ways. This exploration resulted in a deeper, empathetic understanding of how the main ‘actor’ in the whole enterprise, the teacher, conducted assessment in different ways and made meaning of their teaching and assessment work in their context.



Research Framework

The research framework that informed the full study was discussed in Part 1 of the article (see Kunnan et al., 2021, for the first part). However, salient points that specifically relate to this part of the study are discussed here. The concept of LAL (Language Assessment Literacy) has seen a shift in the last two decades, from a technical activity to that of a complex social practice (O’Loughlin, 2013). To get a deeper understanding of the concept, language assessment experts recommend incorporating teacher interpretive frameworks that emanate from their teaching contexts, practices, beliefs, values, attitudes, all of which shape their own LAL (see for example, Giraldo, 2020; Scarino 2013). Teachers are considered the central stakeholders because they are the ones directly involved in assessment (Giraldo, 2018; Tsagari & Vogt, 2017). However, school culture of which they are a part, which in turn is a part of the larger school education system, exerts a strong influence on teacher assessment practices.

Thus, to investigate the complex nature of LAL, the multi-level conceptual model connecting contextual factors with teacher assessment practices in an interlinked three-level model (Fulmer et al., 2015) was adopted for the study. The *micro* level includes the immediate context of classrooms including the teacher, students, classroom interactions and a host of other factors that affect teaching and learning; the *meso* level involves factors that are external to the classroom, but that have immediate influence upon it, such as the school climate and the image it has in the wider community in which it is located, expectations of parents and how the school and the parents interpret macro level policies; and finally the *macro* level includes education policies at national, state and district levels, cultural and social norms. The bidirectional link within and across levels provides a lens with which to study teachers’ assessment practices.

Given the complex nature of what it means to be ‘literate’ (or not so literate) in language assessment practice, it is essential to ‘recognize the “inner” world of teachers and their personal frameworks of knowledge and understanding and the way these shape their conceptualizations, interpretations, decisions and judgments in assessment’ (Scarino, 2013, p. 316). This study is a first attempt in this direction.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews and focus group discussion and classroom observations helped to understand the complexities of language assessment in practice and to develop portraits of teachers working in different kinds of contexts. As Giraldo (2020) stated, “Such research will not only listen to teachers’ situated LAL voices and their messages - loud and clear - but also use such data to further conceptualize LAL” (p. 197). Specifically, this study included both primary and secondary teachers who taught English, Hindi, Konkani, Marathi, and Portuguese languages in government, semi-private, and private schools.¹ Although we tried to meet with all language teachers in the schools we visited, many of the teachers we met were teachers of English. In addition, our data is restricted to teachers up to Grade 10.

Participants

A total of 72 teachers were interviewed individually, in pairs or groups. There were 23 classroom observations but they did not include all teachers who were interviewed. As mentioned in the first part of the article, it was not always possible to get both types of data using the interview/focus group discussion and classroom observation from the same teacher due to their unavailability.

The interview data was recorded, transcribed, and read multiple times to identify recurring themes across participants and school types (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the discussion that follows, teachers’ own words are used within quotation marks after it was translated into English to save space and provide

¹A list of schools from where data was collected is provided in Appendix 1 in Part 1 of the study.

uniformity. Teachers were assigned ID numbers to distinguish them from one another (for e.g., T1, T2, etc.). As far as possible, the ID number represented a single teacher although in the case of focus group discussions, it was difficult to isolate the teacher given the noise level in some discussions. When views are not attributed to a single teacher, it is a group view and, therefore, it is reported as such.

In the interviews and the discussions, teachers often used a mix of Hindi and English; Hindi was used because we researchers did not speak Konkani. Such bilingual responses are a common feature of most Indian multilingual speakers, especially in informal contexts. Here is an example of the *translanguaging* practice the teachers engaged in (Hindi is in italics): The question asked was: What activities do you use in the classroom to understand student language level?

Teacher: hum traditional method follow karte hain. Matlab ratna, matlab spoon feeding, hum jo bhi padhate hain, usko bachhe rat lete hain. Tabhi to test mein marks mil sakta hai. Nahin to fail ho jaayenge”.

Translation: We follow the traditional method. Means rote learning, means spoon feeding. Whatever we teach, children learn that by heart. That’s when they can get marks in the test. Else they will fail.

Interview Questions and Classroom Observations

The interview questions and classroom observations focused on:

1. Evidence of teachers doing formative assessment (FA) in class.
2. The kind of feedback they provided to students which helped them to go further in their learning.
3. Use of assessment tools (semi-formal and formal) that gave them an idea of students’ four skills of the language.
4. Difference(s) if any between primary, middle, and high school in terms of the above.
5. Evidence of positive or negative washback of the Board exam on classroom teaching and learning.
6. Any differences between what they said in interviews and their practice.

Findings

The main findings of the teacher interviews and the classroom observations can be characterized through two scenarios that teachers in Goa worked in. Scenario 1 showed that the teachers in this context found assessments very tedious and a waste of their and student time. Scenario 2 showed that the teachers in this context found assessments to help language learning. These scenarios could exist in a single school (e.g., rural or urban), in a cluster of schools (e.g., geographically north or south), or in types of schools (e.g., private, semi-private or government). In the next section, we provide descriptions of these two scenarios. The subheadings for the two scenarios are *themes* that emerged from the analysis and best captured what transpired in the group discussions.

Scenario 1: Assessment was Very Tedious and a Waste of Teacher and Student Time

Assessment in general

Assessment, as T1 said: “It is a good system as most students can pass.” Students receive at least 50 % marks even if they are not good in the language. Teachers were aware that student scores do not reflect their language ability. According to T2, “That’s what the School Board wants - to pass most students.”

A general trend observed was that no one could speak about assessment as an area of work. They had a recurring complaint that students, as T3 stated, “can’t even copy from the (black) board - they make too

many grammar mistakes and spelling mistakes.” Teachers saw their job as correcting student errors and this they found very tedious. When asked why they should correct the mistakes when it is of no use (errors persist anyway), they looked lost, but one teacher (T2) eventually said, “Parents want it, the Board wants it.”

One could see a clear demarcation between assessment which is a written test, according to Board’s² format, and teaching which is focused on the prescribed textbook to complete the units in the syllabus every term. The concept of assessing student performance is kept distinct from teaching and it is considered as something that comes at the end of the assigned content.

It was mostly primary teachers in semi-private³ and private schools who talked of fun activities that seemed to cut across teaching and assessment, but with little understanding of how they could assess students at different skills. T14 gave an example of how she conducted ‘open book exams’ though the Board format required only grammar and vocabulary items such as synonyms and antonyms after a reading passage. She gave reading comprehension questions and allowed them to refer to the text to find answers. Another teacher (T17) made them act out a drama script they wrote based on a lesson and assessed them on speaking.

Formative assessment (FA)

FAs, according to teachers, were generally paper-pencil tests conducted four times a year and SAs (summative assessment) twice a year. They complained that FA was highly taxing and required “a lot of energy and motivation” on their part.

Teachers had a very narrow, perhaps distorted, view: FA is a “procedure where we conduct tests again and again until students pass” (T5). Students were given ample opportunities to pass the test and “we are patiently correcting bundles and bundles of papers” (T7). Students took tests lightly because they knew teachers would pass them. This attitude rubbed off on students from parents who were aware of the Government’s ‘No detention’ policy of up to Grade 8. In this process, teaching low performing students who form a substantial number especially in rural, government schools was a problem for teachers. They highlighted the issue thus: “When learners don’t even know the (letters of the) alphabet, how we can make such students pass the exam” (T8)? Therefore, FA is a “burden” for them. T9 admitted, “We follow the traditional method. Means rote learning, means spoon feeding. Whatever we teach, children learn it by heart. That is when they can get marks in a test. Else they will fail.”

Some teachers who were concerned with language development of their students conducted many activities in class such as the one-minute talk, reading aloud, slip tests based on a lesson that was just completed, skits, and so forth involving all the language skills but they did not assess or give any feedback on these activities as these did not count towards FA as mandated by the Board. Moreover, these activities were meant more for students up to Grade 7. According to T10, “Actually there’s no difference between FA and SA in terms of its purpose, nature (paper pencil and similar formats) except that the content covered in FA is smaller.”

Other teachers felt that students were less focused on learning after FA was introduced in the curriculum. “Even good students are not studying properly because of FA” (T11). Given the mandated and rigid assessment formats, FA seemed to be preventing teachers from doing meaningful assessments. Clearly, there was a missing link between FA the way it was practiced.

² The term Board used in this article refers to the Goa State Board of Education which determines the curriculum and examination for the state.

³ The types of schools in Goa (and India) are referred to as private, aided and government run. In this article, the terms private, semi-private and government schools are used. For reference, private schools are run by private agencies such as religious or non-denominational agencies; aided schools are private schools that are financially aided partially by the local or state government; and government schools are run by the village, municipal, city, or education departments.

Classroom observation

In most classes we observed, teachers talked for 80-90 % of the time, and not more than half the class was actively listening, i.e., showing any evidence of understanding. Few questions were asked, and the same few boys (even in co-ed classes) answered, and a few proficient students were nominated to answer. The teacher monologue was accompanied with occasional rhetorical questions such as ‘Did you understand?’ ‘Isn’t it?’ and students seemed to know they did not need to respond. Regardless of whether it was a prose lesson or a poem, the teacher read aloud chunks from the textbook, explained it in English, switched to Konkani very often and allowed students to answer whichever language they felt comfortable in, usually Konkani and Marathi. As a result, there was a lot of listening with no apparent planned activity based on that. Not all students had their textbooks with them, but the teacher allowed them to listen to her or look at their neighbor’s textbook.

There was hardly an example of the teacher monitoring the class as she engaged in teacher-talk. There was no example of the teacher checking student understanding. There was also no chance for students to question or express their views or experiences. Clearly, there were many lost opportunities to do pair or group work and to engage students to think, ask questions, discuss, and read the content for better understanding. The teacher did not make any effort to know students’ level of understanding or to help them improve.

Here is an example of T11 asking questions: (literal reading comprehension questions):

Pratap kishangunj mein kyon aya tha?, vo kya karta tha?, vo kaisa vyavahar karta tha?

Translation: Why had Pratap come to Kishengunj? What was he doing? What was the nature of his work?

After she asked these questions, she answered them herself with a long explanation. Once or twice students started to give answers, but the teacher completed it with a long response.

Correction and feedback

T21 said that she is very particular about spelling and grammar while correcting students’ writing. Even if the content was good enough, she underlined punctuation, grammar, and spelling errors to bring it to their notice. The teacher believed that “only when a student is perfect in grammar, he/she can write or speak something on his/her own” (T21). However, she did not expect a perfect answer from them considering their low standard, but her aim was to make them speak and write accurately.

One of the high school teachers (T13) said, “In order to do assessment properly and improve teaching and learning, students should first of all have good level of proficiency.” She blamed primary school teachers and the ‘no detention’ policy for the problems they were facing in high school: “Even after coming to the 5th grade, they cannot read properly. So, we, high school teachers, must spend a lot of time giving practice in teaching the alphabet. In some cases, even 9th grade students can’t read or write properly.” According to her, teaching and assessment can happen satisfactorily only when students are at a level appropriate to their grade.

One teacher, T25, admitted quite frankly, “Since I’m a language teacher I have to teach a lot of things to students like new vocabulary, spelling, and grammar, I find it very tough to check assignments and give feedback. When tests and re-tests must be conducted in the case of every child, there are hundreds of papers, when will I correct all of them?”

Self- and Peer-assessment

Peer assessment is most often confused with copying from each other, and teachers feel that it is their duty to ensure it does not happen. Their response to the question (*Have you been trained in peer assessment?*) in the questionnaire was therefore misleading.

School environment

Teachers work in an environment where, according to T15, “The principal wants proof for everything and marked test papers are the only way of showing student performance.” School authorities suspect that teachers/schools may just assign marks/grades without teaching. As a result, teachers are under pressure to give many tests and show good results, i.e., high scores for everyone. Some teachers go to the extent of dividing 20 marks into 4 tests of 5 marks each which means, they have four times the marking to do.

Other teacher activities

In addition to teaching and preparing question papers for FA and SA, teachers had to take care of school tasks: organize the mid-day meals, prepare salary bills, complete the 16-page document for CCE (Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation of co-scholastic skills)⁴ for every student, and other documents whenever the *Mandal* office (the local school authority) asked for them. According to T28, “this is one of the reasons for poor standards in Government schools.” However, in private and semi-private schools where there was sufficient administrative staff, teachers could focus entirely on teaching-learning. Even towards the end of our visit in November, teachers had not filled the CCE document for any student.

Remedial teaching figures in their conversation quite often. Those who could benefit from regular classes, needed extra classes and the regular teachers could not take on this work. Some teachers revealed in a group interview in a government school: “There should be two teachers for every subject and every class – one to focus on teaching and one to focus on evaluating and doing remedial teaching. One teacher can’t do everything.” Other teachers felt, however, that the problem with ‘para-teachers’ or short-term contract teachers, who were expected to support the regular teacher, is that they were no help as they did not have any experience.

The group discussion also gave the impression that regular teachers did not know enough. Many of these teachers admitted that they did not know enough about low performing students or low proficiency students. They asked for proper training in designing assessment tasks including oral activities and in dealing with those who are far below grade level. However, T19 was of the view that there was no scope for using activities in English classes unlike social science classes.

Small vs. large classes

Class sizes of 40 to 60 students in private and semi-private schools was mentioned as the biggest obstacle for teaching effectively or why more-student/learning-friendly assessment, outside of FA, could not be carried out. T21 said “...if there are fewer students, we can pay individual attention and help students do better.” Interestingly, when we mentioned this situation to Government school teachers with class sizes in the 15-30 range and asked them if they were able to give students more time, the issue of students’ low proficiency, heterogeneity, lack of support at home, and so forth came up. As T9 elaborated, “these students cannot buy anything when they are given a project or do not have internet facility. Even if a simple task is assigned, they do not complete the task. It takes many days for the whole class to submit

⁴ Filling up this 16-page document twice a year for each student from Grade 6 was required at the time of data collection. However at the time of reporting the study, this requirement has been withdrawn.

an assignment, that too after I remind them often. Even parents ask why every teacher is asking them to buy something or other, and there are 10 subjects!”

Student performance below their grade level

A major difficulty high school teachers faced is that most students could not read or write at their grade level. T35, like most other teachers, felt that “if primary teachers had laid a good foundation, these students wouldn’t be a trouble at high school level” (T28). Another teacher, T35, articulated this problem thus: “They don’t know any English; how can we teach them?”

T32 was quite emphatic: “We have a problem, our children can be admitted to any class according to their age...for example, directly to Class 3, no pre-school, no (letters of the) alphabet also. But they are not shy...they can tell stories in Hindi, they are very talkative, if you allow them...” Also, beliefs about student background seem to affect teacher attitude and behavior: “they are migrant/poor children, how can they learn?”

So, because of all these problems, T30 confessed that she was not doing 100% good assessment. According to her, “if there are 5 to 6 students who fail in a class, they will be the ones who cannot even read or write. How can a teacher teach such children and do a re-test? Even if we are ready to take remedial classes, they don’t cooperate and always run away from school.”

As regards the use of tasks for developing LSRW skills in Marathi, T31 said that she asked questions related to class units and sometimes she brought in pictures to get students to speak. However, T31 said there were several mistakes in their sentences, and it took a lot of time to correct and explain their mistakes. So, the teacher said that they could not do all the assessments as there was a lot of pressure on them to complete the syllabus.

To sum up, in this scenario:

- Teachers conducted assessments so that students received many chances to pass the test and they patiently graded bundles and bundles of test papers.
- Teachers prepared formative assessments (paper-pencil test) in school while summative assessments were provided by the Association of Headmasters.
- Principals/school authorities wanted ‘proof’ of student performance - written tests were the best for this.
- Secondary school teachers usually blamed primary teachers for students’ low proficiency; and primary teachers blamed parents for not supporting students at home.
- Students, by and large, were from lower economic backgrounds as their parents were migrants from other states and daily-wage earners.
- Teachers were generally under a lot of pressure to carry out lots of assessments, both classroom-based and summative/formal exams required by the Board.
- Teachers found the whole process tedious, and of not much value.

Scenario 2: Assessment Helped Learning

Teachers in this scenario believed in the power and value of assessment, in general. For them, it is an effective tool to improve student learning. They generally made good use of FA as it is prescribed by the school system. Many task types were used in informal and formal settings, mostly up to Grade 9. This gave teachers and students ideas about how students could improve.

Classroom observation

Building on what students know: The Hindi teacher (T42) asked many referential questions and gave many opportunities for students to use language. For example, there was a genuine sharing of views on

how much they love their grandparents, how they treat them and why they need to be treated with respect. Students were motivated to speak because her questions related to their real life. Another observed lesson had a lot of interaction giving the teacher an understanding of students' understanding although it was restricted to a few students.

In the lesson "The Selfish Giant" (Grade 8, English) there were many questions and answers interspersed with the teacher's explanation of the text. Also, the teacher related the ideas in the text to their real-life experiences. The classroom atmosphere was very relaxed, and the teacher had a friendly tone.

Example 1

T: *So, what is meant by selfish? (many raise their hands)*

S1: *(Answers in Konkani, inaudible)*

T: *Somewhat ok, yes, if I'm selfish I won't give my things away (looks at others)*

S2: *I don't like to share things with others.*

T: *OK, selfish people don't like to share things with others, that's an excellent way to express selfishness.*

Example 2

T: *(After a discussion about what spring season means) (reads from the book) 'All over the country, there were little blossoms and little birds' (explains little blossoms in Konkani). 'Only in the garden of the selfish giant, it was still winter'. Why do you think it was still winter in the garden when there is spring everywhere else?*

Ss: *(answer in Konkani) Children were not there.*

T: *haan (yes) children were not playing in the garden. Why do you think children were not playing? Why?*

Ss: *(answer in Konkani, unintelligible)*

T: *Yes, possible, let's see. (continues to read)*

The teacher asked a predictive question that made students think of different possibilities given in the earlier part of the story. And after she got them to predict what the reason might be for children not playing in the garden, she went back to the text and students looked eager to know what the reason might be. One thing to note was, while she looked at the girls who were seated in rows on one side of the room, all the answers came from the boys, and she (and even students) did not seem to mind this. Thus, her monitoring of how students understood her lesson was limited to a few boys in the class.

FA vis-à-vis other assessment activities

The quiz was an extremely popular mode of assessment as it was quick, easy to score and gave a good idea of where the learner was. The school assembly had a variety of activities such as skits, news-paper reading, small speeches, and other competitions, where one could assess students' interest, effort, and abilities (though not everyone's) but they had no way to record this. Teachers, therefore, relied on paper-pencil tests as this was the only way to satisfy school authorities. Many teachers were eager to know more about how they could help students improve their performance rather than completing the syllabus and conducting tests again and again. One teacher (T43) made students read aloud, asked them to write the answer in their own words on the board. Especially in the *Konkani* class, the teacher focused on spellings and writing skill because it is a non-phonetic language.

Correction and feedback

Regarding feedback, the teacher (T44) gave one-to-one feedback. While correcting assignments or question papers, the teacher called each student and told them their mistakes. It is especially done in the case of low performing students. Another teacher (T40) involved students in class collaboratively and made her correction work easy. She stated “I asked one student to write the answer on the board. The small grammatical mistakes are corrected collaboratively and then the student’s answer is written down by everyone in their notebooks. This way my work is minimized and at the same time the student’s confidence is boosted because everyone in class is writing his/her answers.”

When asked about how she handled low performing students, the teacher (T44) said that “Such learners are also very enthusiastic and participate actively. Even though they do not know how to say it in English, they say it in their own L1 or ask their friends. This is regularly done in the classroom and so the students know that they should be prepared.”

Teachers believed that giving feedback was important for students. Whenever students made mistakes, it was written in the notebook or sometimes pointed out to students if it was a common mistake. The school principal in this private primary school made it mandatory for “every teacher (to) give feedback to the students, because if they are not told about their mistakes, how will they know their mistake?” For low performing students, the correction was not so strict. T41 said, “I take decisions for giving marks based on the capability of the students. If high performing students make mistakes, they are not given any concession.”

Self- and Peer-assessment

T42 talked about how her students exchanged their papers and read them: She said, “The student who was unable to write any answer gets a chance to read what his friend has written, reads it and then goes back and writes the answer in his own words. The spelling and grammatical mistakes are corrected but to a minimum. This paper is sent home for their parents’ signature.” These were some of the ways a teacher used to check on the problems that students were facing in writing. Another teacher (T45) often used peer-evaluation for dictation. She gave many incentives such as smileys, stars, and other types of evaluative feedback whenever a student wrote or said something correctly.

Low performance teachers’ burden, not parents’

One primary teacher, T48 said, “What we are doing in primary schools is not enough to develop the learners’ language proficiency or content. We need to stay back after school along with students and spend extra time to supervise their study. Whatever loopholes we identify during school should be tackled during remedial classes.” He also added, “It’s the teacher’s responsibility to understand the problems learners are facing, it’s not good to blame the parents or the students.”

School environment

A strong factor in teacher motivation and putting in extra work willingly and integrating teaching with assessment was based on a conducive school environment which essentially emanated from a supportive principal. Teachers in a private secondary school unanimously acknowledged this in no uncertain terms: “Our principal gives so much time and space for us to submit our marks and in fact encourages us to develop students’ competencies rather than simply give tests.” Such schools had all the necessary infrastructure, e.g., a good library and computer facilities that teachers often used for their work. We researchers also felt welcome in these schools and both the principal and teachers cooperated with us fully in carrying out the study by letting us observe their classes and conduct focus group discussions.

They were eager to talk about assessment and saw it as an opportunity to think in depth about their assessment practices.

Alternative assessment practices

Teachers used a variety of tasks, mostly outside of the textbooks that focused on different language skills to make their teaching interesting. One could also see a remarkably close relationship between teaching and assessment, as most students participated in the activities and the teacher understood how the students were doing. One teacher (T45) felt that after the introduction of FA, her work had become student oriented. As regards writing, a teacher (T39) gave an example of her own writing and a discussion was carried out about the organization, introductory and concluding paragraphs and content, and then they were asked to write on similar lines. T45 stated, “those who just copy from their friends’ books, I simply tell them to write it once again on their own because now that they have read their friend’s write-up, they have an idea of how to write and what to write.” For listening skills and speaking skills, another teacher, T47, conducted debates: “Students have lots of things to say if they are given topics that are related to their personal lives.” The class was organized in such a way that even as they sat in rows, they got into teams and each one got a chance to participate. T47 continued: “Some students feel shy because they do not know English very well and use *Konkani* words in between, this is ok.”

Aligning assessment with students’ levels

When asked about whether teachers made any changes in their teaching depending on the information obtained through student performance in oral or written tests, one teacher, T50, said that she introduced new activities if students were facing a problem. She said that the SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan⁵) training had helped her to know about some activities like vocabulary games, musical chairs (a game for memorizing rhymes or words initially and later, longer sentences). She used these activities to help her students learn better. Students too liked these activities because they automatically learn the content while playing games. Another English teacher, T48, said, “Initially I used to prepare tasks at a higher level, but after knowing the mentality and thinking of the learners here, I brought changes in my way of teaching.” She felt that it was especially important to make changes in teaching depending on the student performance and level: T48 said, “Teachers should first understand the level of the learners and plan accordingly.” She constructed slightly easier tests for students with low ability levels, gave many opportunities to students to speak and participate, gave feedback, and kept track of their progress. One Hindi teacher, T44, said, “I always tell my students to strive with themselves and not with others. They have to compare their present performance with their previous performance and thus develop.” This way she was catering for individual needs through ‘ipsative’ assessment (see Sutton, 1991, for more details) as opposed to norm- or criterion-referenced assessment.

To sum up, in Scenario 2:

- Individual teachers who were assessment-literate worked in a supportive school environment which included a supportive principal.
- Teachers understood where their students are through a variety of task types that were informal and formal settings and how they could improve. Tasks included role plays, skits, one-minute talks, poetry recitation, debates, slip tests, unseen texts and referential questions for comprehension, and frequent opportunities to use English in ‘communicative’ situations.

⁵ Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) is Government of India's flagship programme for achievement of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) in a time bound manner, as mandated by 86th amendment to the Constitution of India making free and compulsory Education to the Children of 6-14 years age group, a Fundamental Right.

- Teachers asked many questions to ensure students understood the ‘lesson.’ Students were motivated to speak because the questions were related to their real-life context.
- Teachers could build on student learning with the help of assessments rather than simply taking tests for purposes of accountability.
- Teachers were also well versed with technology and downloaded a lot of material for teaching/assessment from the Internet.
- Teachers integrated assessments with their teaching and thus assessment helped learning.

Discussion

This section pulls together findings from all sources of data, namely questionnaires, teacher-made tests, interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations at *micro*, *meso* and *macro* levels. In so doing, the study addressed the research questions. While the survey questionnaire data revealed that while teachers’ understanding of the role of assessment seemed appropriate, (i.e., to know their students’ level, help students improve and assess school quality), it was obvious they were not conversant with basic concepts such as objectivity, reliability, formative vs summative assessments or ethical concerns in assessment in practical terms. From the perspective of an idealized notion of LAL, the survey questionnaire data probably showed a case of near literacy. This however was just one side of the picture. The qualitative data revealed a more holistic and nuanced story of teachers’ understanding and practice of assessment in the context of the school culture they were part of, the larger context of the school board and its exam scheme and the Right to Education (RTE) policy at the national level.

Before presenting a detailed discussion of the two scenarios, Table 1 provides an overview of the features that characterized the two scenarios. In summary, the main theme from Scenario 1 was that teachers were under a great deal of pressure to carry out numerous paper-and-pencil tests. Everyone was looking for proof of teaching, testing, and marking which only paper-pencil tests could provide. This did not leave them happy as they strongly felt that students did not benefit from this system. They found the whole process of assessment tedious which wasted both teacher and student time. Teachers also reported that there was only a marginal difference between formative and summative assessment. They felt that formative assessments was similar to summative assessments but were administered four times a year. The only difference seemed to be in the way scores were handled: the end-of-year summative assessment scores are not shown or discussed with students. The concept that formative assessments could be used as a mechanism for monitoring and supporting learning was not familiar to teachers. This may be because due to lack of training, either pre-or in-service training that focused on assessment. This finding resonated with Tsagari and Vogt (2017) observation of ‘uncontested adoption’ (p. 54) of existing practices. Specifically, in the case of Goan teachers, it was an un-questioned adoption of a rigid assessment system mandated by the Board.

A second theme that was observed was that teachers categorically labelled the general English Language Training they received as ‘flimsy’ where the resource persons conducting the training were not up to date with innovative teaching strategies. However, it could be argued that when there was a rigid test-format prescribed by the Board, even a highly assessment literate teacher would not be able to change it or use their understanding of assessment appropriately. Scarino (2013) observed that assessment, of all the aspects of curriculum, is the least amenable to change. Goa was no exception in this regard.

However, the situation was not as bleak. From Scenario 2, we saw that motivated and committed teachers in semi-private and private schools employed many communicative activities inside and outside class up to Grade 7 before the Grade 10 exam scheme’s demands became paramount. But they did not have the wherewithal to exploit the opportunity such activities offered for purposes of monitoring student progress. Teachers in those schools where their principals insisted, gave feedback to questions that were wrongly answered and made students rewrite the correct answers several times. Some teachers went to the extent of splitting the 20 marks into four sub-tests and give four chances to the weaker students so that eventually everyone could pass.

TABLE 1
Comparison of the Two Scenarios Based on Identified Themes

Emerging themes	Scenario 1	Scenario 2
	Assessment was very tedious and wastes teacher and student time	Assessment helped learning
Relationship between teaching and assessment	Clear demarcation: request for two teachers for each class, one to teach, the other to assess	A heavy overlap observed. However, assessment 'opportunities' are often missed.
Teaching/learning in the classroom	Too much teacher talk and focus on going through the prescribed 'lesson'	Teacher engaged many students in interaction, in students' L1, built on what they know in a friendly way
The notion of assessment	Tests were written according to State Education Board format, especially in middle and secondary grades	A variety of task/test types focusing on all the language skills, especially in primary classes, but not used for assessing language ability systematically
Effects of FA	Prevented teachers from doing meaningful assessment	Helped to integrate teaching and assessment
Focus of correction work	Largely grammar and spelling – a teacher could not do much else as their foundational skills are lacking	Largely individualized feedback, correction not so strict for weak students
Self- and peer-assessment	Copying from each other that needed to be curbed	Self-, peer- and teacher-assessment used in a variety of ways wherever possible
School environment including principal's support	Expect only marked test papers as proof of assessment	Provided space and time to develop students' competencies, not to mechanically administer and mark test papers
Teachers' other activities	Teachers were busy attending to many non-academic activities	Not mentioned
Students below expected level	Beliefs about lower economic students affected teacher behavior negatively	It was the teachers'/school's responsibility, parents could not be blamed
Alternative assessment practices	Very few instances	A variety of 'extra' materials and tasks used, teachers align assessment with student levels, including use of L1
Assessment criteria used	All students had to pass if only through repeated written tests	Many instances of individualizing assessment in class

Another theme that was fundamental in the Goan context was that making education accessible and equitable to everyone in the society was also causing considerable confusion among teachers about their role as assessors. Schools that drew students from migrant families and daily wage earners such as vegetable vendors, carpenters, and construction workers, have an added social responsibility. We met many teachers who were deeply concerned about these students' learning but thought they were too laid back because they knew that they will somehow move on to the next grade without much effort. At one end of the spectrum was some deep-rooted prejudices that affected the way the teachers characterized the situation: "These are after all children of migrant workers. How can they learn?"

But there were macro challenges that the Right to Education provision posed such as 'no-detention' till Grade 8 and age-appropriate admission which allowed a student to be admitted to any grade without prior schooling. Thus, teachers must deal with students who were far below their grade level (e.g., "they don't even know the letters of the alphabet") along with others. They felt quite intimidated by their inability to handle this heterogeneity and resorted to various shortcuts. Some teachers confessed to 'playing it safe' by giving everyone a reasonably high score so that everyone was happy; a low score on a test was most likely to cause a parent to question why the teacher had not taught well enough.

At the other end of the spectrum were teachers who adopted various ingenious ways to reach out to all students. This was however limited to schools that cared for student learning. Teachers in this context devised ways of minimizing their work, for example, by getting the more able student to write on the board and asking the rest of the students to copy from it correctly. Self- and peer-evaluation was limited to dictation or reading what another student had written in response to a question based on the prescribed text. Thus, these teachers' LAL was redefined to suit their context. Others labored at correcting grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors in copied sentences from the board endlessly.

A theme that was particularly noticeable was that primary teachers in semi-private and private schools not only tried to bridge the gap between teaching and formative assessment, but they were also more concerned about the development of all the language skills and were generally more aware of student learning. They devised fun activities such as recitations, skits, debates, quizzes that focused on a variety of language skills beyond the classroom in school assembly, school level competitions and so forth. This was observed in schools where principals encouraged teachers to go beyond their official brief and provided time and freedom, and teachers therefore felt supported and rewarded. However, even here, the potential such activities had for monitoring student progress in a systematic way was not realized. It seemed that teachers often dealt with a good deal of tension that stemmed from dealing with two conflicting views of learning, one that promoted learner-friendly communicative activities for language development and the other that looked for high scores on written answers to rehearsed questions. McNamara (2003) described this situation as a “paradigm war”.

Another common theme was that regardless of the type of school, teachers in general were not equipped to carry out assessments in a way that gave them and students a good idea of their learning. In addition, there were very few teachers who seemed confident to talk about assessment related issues, but their understanding did not transfer to the design, construction and marking of paper-pencil tests in any significant way. These teachers had been through some additional training in teaching techniques, but not in assessment. Most teachers in these schools did not blame the disadvantaged background of students for their poor learning outcomes. They admitted that it was “their burden.” On the other hand, they did not seem ready to handle students who were far below grade expectations. Thus, the school context vis-à-vis roles and expectations of teachers emerged as a strong reason for the way teachers teach and assess, which in turn stemmed from the Board’s expectations to complete the syllabus and the four formative and two summative assessments.

However, it needs to be emphasized here that Goa is not alone in this endeavor to project high pass percentages. Almost all Indian states, including the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) have a paper-pencil test at the end of Grade 10 focused mainly on prescribed texts and memory-based answers with as little as 20% allotted to unseen and unrehearsed tasks (see Mathew 2012, for details). The impact of this is felt at the university level, when many students after 12 years of English instruction in school start with basic English language courses so that they can cope with English medium university demands at the undergraduate level.

Conclusion

This study adopted a bottom-up approach to understanding teachers’ LAL by locating the teacher in her/his context, i.e., the school with its myriad social and cultural underpinnings and the State Education Board as the overarching authority for school education in Goa. As we talked to teachers in rural/urban areas of Goa at primary, middle and secondary levels, observed their classes and interacted with school principals, what emerged was a multi-layered, multi-dimensional representation of assessment. The whole notion of teachers’ LAL in the Indian context, in this case Goa, turned out to be overly complex. A binary representation of ‘literate’ or ‘illiterate’ (see Baker & Riches, 2018) as the questionnaire by and large reveal, seemed inadequate. Goan teachers were caught in the web of the Board exam scheme on the one hand, and coming to grips with their own beliefs, attitudes, and competence, that defined their understanding, albeit limited, of assessment principles and practices. A few seemed to be developing their ‘personal frameworks’ of knowledge and understanding of assessment (Scarino, 2013, p. 316). They seemed to be aware of their context with all its contours well defined and were able to locate themselves in this social milieu. This personal framework will need to be the starting point for developing their assessment literacy further on theoretically sound, practically feasible, and contextually sensitive lines. This would probably empower them to question their beliefs prevalent in their ‘inner world’ of assessment and the not-so-desirable diktats from above.

There are clear indications that many teachers, mostly at the primary and middle school levels, use student-centered communicative activities as a tool to include disadvantaged and lower performing students rather than to discriminate them and thereby fulfill a social responsibility. The lack of a clearer

understanding however of how these can also double up as assessment tools to measure one's proficiency and monitor one's progress needs to be worked on further with a clear focus on listening and speaking assessment. The Board's decree at the secondary level takes away their freedom and makes them compliant, as Scarino (2013) observes: "... the institutional character of assessment (that) creates a culture of certainty and compliance ..." (p. 310). It also allowed the uninitiated to resort unquestioningly to a result-oriented pedagogy that is least risky, or worse still, to take shelter under the Board's authority to shield their own incompetence. This is clearly a case where more capable teachers are not fully supported by the system. Their contribution goes unacknowledged at best and there is opposition and isolation at worst. Therefore, it is the individual teacher's ingenuity and motivation that are at play, the system does not demand it, nor value it.

Further, if assessment must reflect learning, in this case language proficiency, the assessment itself must be more of a skill-based test rather than a memory/text-based one. The Board's Grade 10 paper-pencil exam would have to be a reliable and valid indicator of students' reading and writing abilities, not a memory-based exam to help the marginalized pass the exam. Many teachers we met during our study clearly voiced their disappointment as well as hope when they said, while the literacy level in Goa is quite high (above 90%), they are unable to match up to some of the other states in terms of educational levels/excellence. They are waiting for some *concrete steps* to be taken by the Board. It is clear then teachers are ready to take on the challenge. In-depth discussions we had with teachers on language assessment seemed to help them articulate their professional aspirations better. Therefore, teacher LAL is a direct consequence of how robust a Board's language assessment exam scheme provides. If the Board exam is reliable, valid, and ethical, the teacher's assessment literacy can also be expected to reflect that notion of reliability, validity, and ethicality. Training programmes in assessment will be meaningful only when a board with its top-down approach to assessment reform takes into its fold teachers who are the main stakeholders.

From a methodological standpoint, what this study revealed is that a survey questionnaire cannot capture the practice of assessment in a school system that is complex (as the school principal and the school Board with its curriculum and examination system exert tremendous authority over teachers). Even if teachers have the required assessment literacy there are many factors that do not allow them to practice what they know in their classes. Therefore, for a study of teacher LAL, a survey questionnaire will need to be followed up with an examination of their own classroom assessments, school-level assessments, and the Board's assessments. This is what this study attempted to accomplish.

This study also demonstrated that teachers' LAL is functional and effective to the extent the school culture including the parents it caters to and other macro aspects, such as the Board's policy of language proficiency and how it is operationally defined support it. This is an understanding that has emerged from the study. How do we view a training programme in language assessment? Which one should happen first, a systemic reform that makes a principled language assessment mandatory and therefore the training becomes obligatory? Or should teacher LAL drive the curriculum and assessment reform? This is a question stakeholders in Goa and across India will have to address.

Acknowledgement

Financial support for this study was provided by University of Macau's Faculty Research Fund in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

The Authors

Rama Mathew is Professor Emerita of Delhi University where she was also Dean of the Faculty of Education.

Email: mathewrama@gmail.com

Antony John Kunnan was Professor of English and Associate Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Macau when this research was conducted. He is currently a Principal Assessment Scientist at Duolingo, Pittsburgh and Senior Research Fellow at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh.

Email: akunnan@gmail.com

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Baker, B. A., & Riches, C. (2018). The development of EFL examinations in Haiti: Collaboration and language assessment literacy development, *Language Testing*, 35(4), 557-581.
- Fulmer, G. W., Lee, I. C. H., & Tan, K. H. K. (2015) Multi-level model of contextual factors and teachers' assessment practices: An integrative review of research, *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 22(4), 475-494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2015.1017445>
- Giraldo, F. (2018). Language assessment literacy: Implications for language teachers. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 20(1), 179-195. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v20n1.62089>
- Giraldo, F. (2020). A post-positivist and interpretive approach to researching teachers' language assessment literacy. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 22(1), 189-200. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v22n1.78188>
- Kunnan, A. J., Mathew, R., & Zhang, E. (2021). Language assessment literacy among teachers in Goa: Analyses of a survey questionnaire and teacher-made tests. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 18(3), 904-922. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2021.18.3.10.904>
- Mahapatra, S. K (2015). *Exploring the relationship between classroom language assessment literacy and practices using a short-term teacher education course* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Hyderabad, India.
- Mathew, R. (2005). How do teachers continue to learn and grow?: Understanding teacher development? In A. Pulverness (Ed.), *IATEFL 2004, Liverpool Conference Selections* (pp. 83-93). IATEFL Learning Technologies SIG.
- Mathew, R. (2012). Understanding washback: A case study of a new exam in India. In C. Tribble (Ed.), *Managing change in English language teaching: Lessons from experience* (pp. 195-202). British Council.
- Mathew, R., & Pani, S. (2009) Issues in the implementation of TEYL: A case study of two states of India. In J. Enever, J. Moon, & U. Raman (Eds.), *Young learner English language policy and implementation: International perspectives* (pp. 113-120). Garnet Publishing Ltd.
- McNamara, T. (2003). Tearing us apart again. The paradigm war and the search for validity. *EUROSLA Yearbook*, 3, 229-238. <https://doi.org/10.1075/eurosla.3.13mcn>
- O'Loughlin, K. (2013). Developing the assessment literacy of university proficiency test users. *Language Testing*, 30(3), 363-380. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532213480336>
- Ruth, S. (1991). *Assessment: A framework for teachers*. NFER- Nelson Publishing Company.
- Sultana, N. (2019) Language assessment literacy: An uncharted area for the English language teachers in Bangladesh. *Language Testing in Asia*, 9(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-019-0077-8>.
- Tsagari, D., & Vogt, K. (2017). Assessment literacy of foreign language teachers around Europe: Research, challenges, and future prospects. *Papers in Language Testing and Assessment*, 6(1), 41-63.

(Received August 21, 2021; Revised November 20, 2021; Accepted December 18, 2021)