

# Language assessment in the Middle East and North Africa: An Introduction

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Assessment in language programs has constantly received substantial attention by different stakeholders in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) given the dependence on examinations in various instructional settings in this context. Research (e.g., Gebril & Hozayen, 2014) has shown language assessment being used for a wide range of purposes including screening, admission, scholarship selection, placement, and program exit. National assessment centers have also contributed to testing practices in public schools in the MENA countries. Likewise, there is visible presence of international testing programs that provide proficiency testing to millions of students in the region. In spite of these assessment efforts, research on language assessment in the MENA region has not received the due attention and generally there are sporadic publications in international journals from this region. Consequently, the current issue attempts to address this gap by showcasing assessment research efforts in the Middle East and North Africa.

A special issue of *the Arab Journal of Applied Linguistics (AJAL)* on Language Assessment in the MENA context is indeed timely and critical. AJAL has offered a platform for the MENA applied linguistics scholars to publish their research and we feel honoured to be the guest editors for the first special issue of this journal allocated for language assessment research. The current issue fills in a gap in the international language assessment literature by focusing on the MENA region as indicated earlier. On

a related note, a number of education reform initiatives have been suggested in different MENA countries, such as Egypt, the UAE, and KSA that warrant discussions and attention. Hopefully, this issue could encourage other researchers from these countries and other ones to be involved in investigating relevant issues in these instructional settings and the role assessment plays in the context of educational reform.

The special issue includes four articles focusing on a wide range of assessment issues in this part of the world. Coombe and Davidson investigate language assessment literacy (LAL) in the MENA context and the need for teachers' expertise in the area of assessment. This know-how is manifested in the capacity to design tests that reflect a test construct or a set of course objectives. The authors offered comprehensive definitions of language assessment literacy (LAL) and the associated challenges in this context, such as the negative perceptions of assessment emanating from frustrating past experience, lack of knowledge about how to develop test items, and the complex nature of key assessment concepts. The authors suggest an assessment competency framework to help teachers become assessment literate. This framework could be used in both pre-service and in-service teacher training. They further draw on the experience of the Testing, Assessment and Evaluation Special Interest Group (TAE SIG) of TESOL Arabia to develop assessment literacy among different stakeholders, by equipping them with the right tools, skills and strategies. The authors call for launching an assessment advisory board in the MENA region whose role is essential in developing teachers' LAL.

In the second article, Zebib, Henry, Messarra, Hreich and Khomsi report on the validation of an oral proficiency test for children in Lebanon - ELO-L (Évaluation du langage oral chez l'enfant libanais). The ELO-L test taps into a number of language skills including receptive vocabulary, expressive vocabulary, sentence comprehension, sentence production and expressive phonology. The validation of this norm-referenced test was based on a sample of 1,718 children in Lebanon. As editors we were keen to include this article in the special issue since it is not usually the case to see research projects reporting on test validation in the MENA region. Hopefully this project and similar ones would encourage testing programs in this part of the world to be more transparent and share their validation data with the public. Results of the study showed

promising psychometric characteristics and generally indicated significant relationships between the different age groups and the psychometric aspects of this norm-referenced test. The authors recommend using the ELO-L test as a language screening measure in different contexts. They also recommend employing the test data along with clinical observation and qualitative linguistic analysis to ensure more accurate diagnosis and more appropriate therapeutic projects. The authors stress the usefulness of the ELO-L test for children with learning difficulties, such as DLD and SLPs.

In the third article, Cosenza and Masillo look into the influence of test takers' linguistic background on their test performance. More specifically, the study investigates the linguistic characteristics of B2 Arab students studying Italian as a foreign language. In order to carry out this study, a corpus was built based on test responses from a group of Arab students and an error analysis approach was employed. The results of the study showed that performance errors of those students are systematic and classifiable. The authors call for considering the plurilingual repertoire of these learners to understand their communicative needs in a multilingual context. Both teachers and students could benefit from these errors with regard to addressing accuracy problems in Italian writing performance.

Alabar in the final paper in this issue investigates an important topic related to the concept of the "native speaker" in the context of language assessment. For this purpose, she collected interview data using a social constructionist approach from three different groups: Assessor teachers, teachers of Arabic as a foreign language, and learners of Arabic. The participants seemed to have different perspectives about the concept of the native speaker and generally there was no agreement among those participants concerning who the NS of Arabic would be. The researcher calls for an L2 user to be the norm in the context of language assessment instead of using the native speaker. She strongly believes that this perspective requires changing both testing and instructional practices in different TAFL settings to cater to the student's need and aspirations.

Building on the discussions put forth by the different authors in this issue, the status of language assessment in the MENA context needs to be revisited. Language

assessment literacy should be promoted in both in-service and preservice teacher training, and in other professional development settings. These efforts could help us equip future language professionals with the required knowledge related to when, how and what to assess. This training should go beyond traditional test design skills by focusing more on score use and interpretation. What those professionals need is to be able to ensure test quality and use assessment results in a meaningful way. Future research efforts should focus more on the bilingual and/or multilingual context of language assessment and how English or any other second or foreign language is perceived in the MENA region. We think that probing this bilingual or multilingual context will enlighten researchers to better understand the status of these languages and therefore the way they are assessed.

## References

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