UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS' ASSESSMENT BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN THE MALAYSIAN TERTIARY CONTEXT

NIVEEN R. M. ELSHAWA

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By

NIVEEN R. M. ELSHAWA

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DEDICATION

Tothe soul of my father,

To my compassionate mother,

To my dear husband, Abedelrahim,

To my beloved children: Hala, Mohammad, Ayah,

Leen,

and Huda

To all with my eternal love and gratitude

Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2016

Chairman : Associate Professor Ain Nadzimah bt Abdullah, PhD
Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication

Language assessment can be a valuable tool for giving information regarding language teaching. Given the importance of assessment that has undergone much change, there are important issues that warrant investigation, particularly those related to language instructors. The main objectives of the study were to investigate the English language instructors' beliefs about assessment, the assessment practices that English language instructors use in assessing students' work and the extent to which language instructors' assessment beliefs correspond to their practices. Differences in the assessment beliefs/practices of the English language instructors in terms of TESL qualifications, years of work experience, number of courses taught per week and source of prior assessment training were also investigated.

This study employed an explanatory sequential quantitative driven design. In this design, the researcher collected data through two questionnaires and a semi-structured interview from six Malaysian universities' instructors using a purposive sampling strategy. English language instructors were selected as informative and useful subjects for the study based on two criteria: those who are employed full time, and those who are teaching proficiency courses. Using descriptive statistics, the researcher was able to answer the first two questions of the study. Frequency, percentage, means, and standard deviation (SD) were used to report descriptive data. Pearson correlation coefficient was employed to explore the relation between English language instructors' assessment beliefs and their reported practices. Independent-Samples t-test was used to examine the differences that occurred in the independent variables of the study for the first four hypotheses in both the fourth and the fifth questions of the study, namely: TESL qualification, years of teaching experience, work load and class size. Three one-Way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to examine the differences that occurred among the three groups of the fifth independent variable namely: assessment training.

Analysis of data showed that English language instructors believed that the purpose of assessment was to improve teaching and learning. They tended to use a variety of assessment methods to assess students' language ability in their classrooms giving more weightage on formative assessment (course work) than on summative assessment (final test). Further, they apply process-oriented approach to second language assessment more than product-oriented approach. In addition, they use different types of assessments for every language skill taught in the language unit/center. All correlations between subscales on both assessment beliefs and practices were estimated as positive and statistically significant indicating that instructors' assessment practices were notably dependent on their assessment beliefs. Finally, this study has found out that none of the hypothesized factors influencing assessment beliefs and practices of English language instructors (TESL qualifications, years of work experience, number of courses taught per week and source of prior assessment training) had any significant difference between different categories of teachers depending on those factors.

These findings highlight that instructors should be more empowered in their role as the assessors of students. Their knowledge about what, how, when to assess should be developed through long profession development courses; one-shot workshops or seminars would not be enough to improve instructors' assessment literacy.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

KEPERCAYAAN DAN AMALAN PENILAIAN PENGAJAR BAHASA INGGERIS DALAM KONTEKS TERTIARI MALAYSIA

Oleh

NIVEEN R. M. ELSHAWA

Disember 2016

Pengerusi : Profesor Madya Ain Nadzimah bt Abdullah, PhD
Fakulti : Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Penilaian bahasa boleh menjadi alat yang bernilai untuk memberi maklumat mengenai hasil pembelajaran bahasa. Memandangkan kepentingan penilaian yang telah mengalami banyak perubahan, terdapat isu-isu penting yang memerlukan pemeriksaan, terutamanya yang berkaitan dengan pengajar bahasa. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji kepercayaan pengajar bahasa Inggeris terhadap penilaian dan amalan penilaian yang diguna oleh pengajar bahasa Inggeris dalam menilai tugasan pelajar dan sejauh mana kepercayaan penilaian pengajar bahasa sesuai dengan amalan mereka. Perbezaan dalam kepercayaan penilaian / amalan penilaian tenaga pengajar bahasa Inggeris dengan: Kelayakan TESL, tahun pengalaman kerja, bilangan kursus yang diajar setiap minggu dan sumber latihan taksiran sebelum turut dikaji.

Kajian ini merupakan reka bentuk penerangan berurutan kuantitatif. Dalam reka bentuk ini, pengkaji telah mengumpul data melalui dua soal selidik dan temu bual separa berstruktur daripada enam universiti di Malaysia menggunakan strategi persampelan bertujuan. Pengajar bahasa Inggeris telah dipilih sebagai subjek untuk mendapat maklumat untuk tujuan kajian berdasarkan dua kriteria, iaitu pengajar yang bekerja sepenuh masa dan yang mengajar kursus kemahiran. Melalui penggunaan statistik deskriptif, pengkaji dapat menjawab persoalan kajian pertama. Kekerapan, peratusan, min dan sisihan piawai (SD) telah digunakan untuk melaporkan data deskriptif. Pearson pekali korelasi telah digunakan untuk menjelaskan hubungan antara kepercayaan pengajar bahasa Inggeris dan laporan amalan penilaian mereka. Sampel bebas ujian-t telah digunakan untuk mengkaji perbezaan yang berlaku pada pembolehubah bebas kajian itu untuk empat hipotesis pertama dalam soalan keempat dan kelima. Analisis ANOVA telah digunakan untuk mengkaji perbezaan yang berlaku di kalangan tiga kumpulan pembolehubah bebas yang kelima iaitu latihan penilaian.

Analisis data menunjukkan bahawa tenaga pengajar bahasa Inggeris percaya bahawa tujuan penilaian adalah untuk meningkatkan proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran. Mereka cenderung untuk menggunakan pelbagai kaedah penilaian untuk menilai keupayaan bahasa pelajar di dalam kelas mereka memberi lebih wajaran kepada penilaian formatif (kerja kursus) berbanding penilaian sumatif (ujian akhir). Selanjutnya, mereka menggunakan pendekatan berorientasikan proses penilaian bahasa kedua lebih daripada pendekatan berorientasikan produk. Selain itu, mereka menggunakan jenis penilaian untuk setiap kemahiran bahasa yang diajarkan di unit bahasa / pusat. Semua hubungan antara sub skala pada kedua-dua kepercayaan dan amalan penilaian dianggarkan sebagai positif dan signifikan secara statistik yang menunjukkan bahawa amalan penilaian pengajar khususnya bergantung kepada kepercayaan penilaian mereka. Akhir sekali, kajian ini telah mendapati bahawa tidak ada faktor-faktor hipotesis mempengaruhi kepercayaan penilaian dan amalan tenaga pengajar bahasa Inggeris (kelayakan TESL, tahun pengalaman kerja, bilangan kursus yang diajar setiap minggu dan sumber latihan taksiran sebelum) mempunyai perbezaan yang signifikan antara kategori guru yang berbeza bergantung kepada faktor-faktor tersebut.

Penemuan ini menekankan bahawa pengajar perlu diberi lebih kuasa dalam peranan mereka sebagai penilai pelajar. Pengetahuan mereka tentang apa, bagaimana, bila untuk menilai perlu dibangunkan melalui kursus-kursus pembangunan profesyen. Bengkel dan seminar seharus tidak memadai untuk meningkatkan literasi penilaian pengajar.

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Lastly, I would like to thank Allah for blessing me to pursue my graduate study in Malaysia. I would like to say that it has been a wonderful experience to meet such a wide variety of people, to live in a different culture, and to be part of an intellectual community during these years.

I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 5 December 2016 to conduct the final examination of Niveen R M Elshawa on her thesis entitled "English Language Instructors' Assessment Beliefs and Practices in the Malaysian Tertiary Context" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

Members of the Thesis Examination Committee were as follows:

Zalina binti Mohd Kasim, PhD
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

Rosli bin Talif, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

Helen Tan, PhD
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Internal Examiner)

Bronwyn T. Williams, PhD
Professor
University of Louisville
United States
(External Examiner)

NOR AINI AB. SHUKOR, PhD
Professor and Deputy Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 26 January 2017

This thesis was submitted to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

Ain Nadzimah bt Abdullah, PhD
Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

Sabariah bt MD Rashid, PhD
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

Ramiza Binti Darmi, PhD
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

ROBIAH BINTI YUNUS, PhD
Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date:

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I hereby confirm that:

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Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name and Matric No: Niveen R. M. Elshawa / GS30909

Declaration by Members of Supervisory Committee

This is to confirm that:

- the research conducted and the writing of this thesis was under our supervision;
- supervision responsibilities as stated in the Universiti Putra Malaysia (Graduate Studies) Rules 2003 (Revision 2012-2013) were adhered to.

Signature: _____
Name of Chairman of Supervisory Committee: Associate Professor Dr. Ain Nadzimah bt Abdullah

Signature: _____
Name of Member of Supervisory Committee: Dr. Sabariah bt MD Rashid

Signature: _____
Name of Member of Supervisory Committee: Dr. Ramiza Binti Darmi

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The English language has become a universally accepted language of networking and communication. Students in this communication and information age will not be able to participate effectively and efficiently in the local and global dissemination of knowledge if they do not master the English language well. In addition, countries are developing closer social and political relationships, where the command of English as a language of international understanding and communication is becoming essential for promoting collaboration, peace and friendly relations. In this regard, Singh et al. (2002) noted, "the emerging workforce needs to be able to listen, speak, read and write persuasively, critically interpret and analyze information in English, carry out complex negotiations and collaborations in English." (Pandian, 2008:288).

Thus, in recent years, there has been an increasing interest in tertiary educational institutions as a vital component of today's infrastructure. These institutions are considered essential for fueling economic development and sustainable growth. Students who take up courses in public and private higher education institutions, aim for a wide array of job opportunities that will enable them to be a part of the competitive workplace which will grant them social well-being and future prosperity (Kaur and Pandian, 2010). However, in the last two decades, there had been an increase in unemployment, especially among graduates of public universities. In this light, higher education today, faces greater challenges to produce graduates who can cope with the new global workplace needs. In line with such needs, the 21st century economies and knowledge societies appear to urge for new forms of knowledge and competencies for graduates to acquire from institutions of higher learning (Kaur and Pandian, 2010).

As part of its reaction to current needs, The Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia launched a study on university curricula and workplace literacy (MOHE, 2008). The study found that unemployment among graduates was related to several dimensions highlighted in the employability skills framework needed in the 21st century. One of the dimensions was basic literacy skills including that of language. Unemployed Malaysian graduates were reported to be weak in English proficiency and had difficulty in presenting themselves during job interviews (Kaur and Pandian, 2010). The lack of English language proficiency among graduates is one factor that appears to suppress the aspirations of the graduates and produces negative reactions in the recruiter.

The awareness of the decline in the command of the English language has led to increased efforts to educate and train students in communicating in the language in order to help those secure jobs upon graduation. In the Malaysian education system, English is taught as a subject in the school curriculum at both the Primary and Secondary level and obtaining a pass in English is not a requirement for proceeding to a higher level. This means that even if students failed the English paper, they could still get through the major exams held during secondary three and five (Mohaida Mohin, 2006). However, at tertiary level, students must be proficient in English in order to gain access to most academic texts and research materials, which are mainly written in English. This does not only hold true for local students but also for international students studying in these universities.

In Malaysia, the medium of instruction in schools is the Malay language (also known as Bahasa Malaysia) but the linguistic reality is towards multilingualism with English as an important second language. The significance of English certainly cannot be denied. In the Malaysian context, an individual cannot do without English when dealing with the international community (Norizan Md et al., 2010). In short, a knowledgeable and competent Malaysian individual must be proficient in *Bahasa Malaysia* and at the same time, he/she must be equally adept at using international languages [English] in line with current needs.

In the Malaysian educational context, the development of human capital aims to ensure that her citizens possess the knowledge and expertise to enable them to participate in various types of employment. (*Rancangan Malaysia Ke-9 Pelan Induk Pembangunan Pendidikan 2006-2010, 2006) (THE NINTH MALAYSIA PLAN – EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT MASTER PLAN 2006-2010, 2006).* To develop human capital for the country, higher education institutions have developed various programs for their undergraduates and postgraduates to contribute to nation. For this purpose, there is a need to continually enhance and strengthen the curriculum at higher education institutions (Norizan Md et al., 2010).

Implementers of curriculum inevitably are the academic staff who can be considered as an integral resource that is a corner stone for the achievements of an institution. Higher education institutions that aspire to achieve world-class ranking need to recruit and retain the best instructors (Norizan Md et al., 2010). Distinctive and reputable instructors are those who can contribute to the development of their field of study, develop the pedagogy or innovate in teaching and learning. Their academic leadership must also be relevant to the vision and strategic objectives of the institution that they are working in.

In carrying out their duties, assessment knowledge and training are essential parts of their experience especially when they take on the role of custodians of quality performance of their students. Therefore, an instructor's assessment knowledge and competence can be influencing factors in undermining or

encouraging students' learning in the classroom. With such a prominent role, assessment and testing issues have begun to witness increasing emphasis in the agenda of higher educational institutions around the world. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in public accountability, standards and the imposition of more stringent reporting requirements to ensure quality and to meet the educational objectives.

It has become increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that higher educational institutions have introduced a variety of testing and assessment procedures in order to make decisions on selection, clarification and achievement (Brindley, 2001). These range from the use of standardized proficiency tests to outcome-based learning systems, which require university instructors to report on learners' progress and achievement against predetermined attainment targets.

1.2 Problem Statement

Currently, there is an increasing recognition that changes are necessary in the educational higher institutions. This is clearly reflected in their focus on the need for accountability system of assessment.

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), far too little attention has been paid to the assessment practices used by instructors in the teaching of English proficiency courses, though, it is a topic of concern to those involved in education and can be a valuable tool for giving information regarding language teaching. Assessment, therefore, provides insights into goals for language teaching as well as language learning.

Most research to date has tended to focus on the assessment practices used by teachers in regular school classrooms (e.g. Brown, 2006; Remesal, 2007; Karp and Woods, 2008; Harris and Brown, 2009; Davis and Neitzel, 2011; Barnes, Fives & Dacey, 2015; Azis, 2012, 2014, 2015) and prospective teachers (Wang et al., 2010; Leighton et al. 2010; Brown and Remesal, 2012; Dayal & Lingam, 2015) rather than by university instructors. Interestingly, however, the studies on assessment beliefs and practices employed by instructors at the tertiary level are relatively increasing in the last few years (e.g. Zubairi, Sarudin & Nordin, 2008, Brown and Remesal, 2012; Postareff et al, 2012; Matovu & Zubairi, 2014, 2015). In fact, there is a dearth of research on how EFL/ESL university instructors view and practice assessment (e.g. Muñoz, Palacio & Escobar, 2012).

Given the importance of assessment that has undergone much change, there are important issues that warrant investigation. During the last two decades, some important changes have been identified in the literature on how assessment has changed in higher education (White, 2009). Holroyd (2000) summarized the general patterns of change in seven key findings. The first is

the growing concern of how to enhance assessment learning purposes instead of accountability and certification purposes. Next comes an increasing emphasis on formative aspects of assessment rather than end-of-course assessment. The third is the focus on a standardized model for assessment using criterion-referenced assessment and being less focused on a measurement that contains norm-referenced assessment. Another important point is the focus on giving constructive feedback rather than just awarding marks, grades and summary labels. Using multiple methods of assessment rather than depending on one main method– summative assessment- is also an evident change. In addition to this is the use of self and peer assessment rather than depending on assessment by teaching staff alone. The conclusive remark is to consider assessment as part of the teaching process rather than an activity-taking place at the end of teaching (White, 2009). Thus, the current study was an attempt to investigate the English language instructors' assessment beliefs and practices compliance with those current and improved trends in assessment in the Malaysian higher education context.

A number of recent research strands in second language learning have heightened the need for conducting studies that are interested in instructors' beliefs and practices (Shohamy et.al, 2008). Accordingly, the interest to conduct this study originated from the following strands. First, there is an increasing recognition of the need to connect theories of second language learning to the application of testing as part of learning (Bachman & Cohen, 1998). Second, regarding classroom and formative assessment, there is an increasing focus on the importance of incorporating learning and assessment and to the teacher's double role as instructor and assessor (Leung, 2004; Rea-Dickens, 2008).

With the above in mind, this study attempts to bring together these emerging research areas to find out the connections between theories and concepts of English language proficiency on the one hand, and teachers' assessment beliefs and practices on the other. The main aim of this study is to explore English language instructors' assessment beliefs and practices in the Malaysian tertiary context. In addition, none of the studies done on assessment practices has been directed towards analyzing institutional and personal factors influencing assessment practices among English language instructors in Malaysian universities.

Therefore, the researcher believes that there is a critical and pressing need for conducting this study, which aims to fill the gap in research on English language instructors' assessment beliefs and practices for two main reasons. First, research is still lacking in the field of assessment of EFL/ESL at tertiary education. The last two decades have seen the evolution of a new form of research in applied linguistics that are focused on second language teachers' cognition (Borg, 2006; Freeman, 2002). Language teachers' beliefs and their influence on teachers' practices are one strand that has evolved from the new focus on teacher cognition (Borg, 2006). In this respect, Johnson (1994:439) predicted that, "research on teachers' beliefs would ultimately become one of

the most valuable psychological constructs for teaching and teacher education". Second, regarding the Malaysian context, this study will add to the literature that specifically addresses the area of English language instructors' assessment beliefs and practices in the tertiary context.

Empirical research on teachers' beliefs and perceptions aims to study beliefs in a wide variety of contexts and to discover the underlying factors that constrain or facilitate these beliefs to be translated into practice. In line with this, cross-cultural research suggest that teachers' conceptions of assessment differ across contexts and these differences reflect teachers' internalization of their society's cultural priorities and practices (Brown and Harris, 2009; Brown, Lake, & Matters, 2009, 2011 and Barnes, Fives & Dacey, 2015). Thus, it appears that understanding assessment in the Malaysian tertiary context may help to explain cross-cultural differences in teachers' conceptions of assessment noted in the literature.

Moreover, specifically, the existing research on second language (L2) teachers' beliefs has been limited in several ways. One limitation is the context of such research. Much of the research have been carried out in Western or developed countries with teachers who speak the target language as their home language. Another limitation according to literature is the classroom setting which consists mostly of small groups of motivated adult students (Borg, 2006; Andrews, 2007).

Therefore, due to such contextual gaps in the literature, Borg (2006) asserts that there is an imperative need for research into the beliefs of teachers in less developed, non-Western contexts, and teachers who are non-native speakers of the target language and who teach large classes of mixed ability learners.

Furthermore, according to recent studies in the field of assessment, a number of significant factors were attributed as influencing assessment practices of the teachers: subject area or specialization of the academic staff (Dunca & Noonan, 2007; Koloi-Keaikitse, 2012); academic staff qualifications or years of experience (Noordin & Jusoff, 2009; Masole, 2011; Matovu and Zubairi, 2014, 2015; Sato *et al*., 2008); class size (Graue *et al*., 2007; Bennel & Molwane, 2008; Masole, 2011) and finally assessment training (Duncan & Noonan, 2007; Masole, 2009; Phamotse *et al*., 2011; Matovu and Zubairi, 2014, 2015). However, in most of these studies primary and secondary schools' teachers were investigated. None of these studies has been directed towards analyzing the factors influencing assessment practices and beliefs among English language instructors in the tertiary context particularly in Malaysian universities. Therefore, there was a need to conduct a study in this field of assessment. Thus, one hypothesis may be that the beliefs held and practices applied by participants in the current study were influenced by those factors.

Hence, it is anticipated that this study would assist in addressing this gap in the literature. It takes place within a Malaysian tertiary context. Malaysian English language instructors' beliefs about assessment and the impact of these beliefs upon their classroom practices related to the learning of the English language for proficiency purposes are investigated. This is important in light of the consensus in ESL/EFL teacher research literature that teachers' beliefs have a critical impact on their practice in the classroom (Borg, 2006; Flores, 2005; Phipps & Borg, 2009).

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The main intent of the current study is to explore English language instructors' assessment beliefs about assessment and their classroom practices in the Malaysian tertiary context. It is intended that this study would clearly identify these beliefs and practices in the Malaysian tertiary context. The research objectives of this study center on exploring the beliefs about assessment that English language instructors have and identifying the practices of those English language instructors in their students' assessment. Specifically, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

1) What are English language instructors' beliefs about language assessment in the Malaysian tertiary context?

2) What are the assessment practices carried out by English language instructors in assessing language use in the Malaysian tertiary context?

3) To what extent do English language instructors' assessment beliefs correspond to their practices in the Malaysian tertiary context?

4) Is there a significant difference in the assessment beliefs of the English language instructors by:
   a. TESL qualification,
   b. years of work experience,
   c. number of courses taught per week,
   d. number of students in class, and
   e. source of prior assessment training.

5) Is there a significant difference in the assessment practices of the English language instructors by:
   a. TESL qualification,
   b. years of work experience,
   c. number of courses taught per week,
   d. number of students in class, and
   e. source of prior assessment training.

1.4 Theoretical Underpinning

When discussing assessment and English language proficiency, it is integral to review relevant language learning theories, mainly, second language acquisition. This is important to figure out how to evaluate and assess progress and proficiency for students at different levels of ability (Rasmussen, 2008). However, since language acquisition has its roots in learning theory, it, therefore, must be part of the discussion.

1.4.1 Learning Theory

Some notable learning theories have been developed from the work of Skinner, who looked at learning behavior as responding to external stimulus, along with Piaget and Vygotsky who provided different perspectives as to how children learn. Those learning theories can be characterized very simply in two contrasting traditions that can be described as "Scientific Management" and "Progressivism" (Wink & Putney, 2002:3). The Scientific Management school of thought looked at the classroom as a workplace, emphasizing efficiency and receptive skills for students, such as listening and responding with appropriate behavior. Learning is understood as a response to outside stimulus in this viewpoint. Outcomes-based education, standards, and assessments that yield quantifiable information, are typically viewed as programs based on these theories. "The historical roots of the management approach eventually took on other names in schools: behaviorism, positivism, traditional and back-to-basics" (Wink & Putney, 2002:3).

On the other hand, Progressivism was popularized at the turn of the last century, primarily because of the work of Dewey (1944), and contrasts with the scientific management school of thought in that it focuses on the child's role in learning. Progressivism supports an approach to learning that emphasizes collaboration and discovery. Dewey considered community and social interactions as important aspects of learning for children. He restructured classrooms to allow students to interact, work cooperatively and explore learning activities together.

Interestingly, constructivism has its roots in progressivism, which looks at learning as highly complex and multifaceted. Constructivists see learning and language development as, first, a very human activity. Yet, there is much in growth and development that cannot necessarily be predicted, determined, or completely understood. Thus, the need to understand the student as an individual, who learns through his or her own unique skills, abilities, and way of constructing meaning, is integral to an understanding of learning. "The most important contribution of the constructivist model to instruction is its focus on the learner's active participation in constructing meaning rather than passive acquisition of reading and composition skills and knowledge" (Dixon-Krauss, 1996:18).

Vygotsky, a pioneer in social constructivist theory, proposed an interactive viewpoint of learning reminiscent of Dewey's emphasis on the importance of experience and community in language development. Contradictory to a more technological and behaviorist point of view characterized by the Scientific Management theories, Vygotsky believed that the child's reason was socially constructed through interaction with adults and peers. The development of higher cognitive functions was a mediated activity, which occurred first during social interaction and that language "carries with it the meanings and intentionality of those who came before us and who now use the same tool to make meaning with us" (Wink & Putney, 2002:3).

This social constructivist view of learning and language acquisition looks at child development holistically and emphasizes the problem solving and discovery that children carry out individually and within a group. In other words, this view emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cooperative learning in constructing both cognitive and emotional images of reality (Brown, 2007:12).

Assessment and Constructivism

Regarding the social constructivist view of the assessment position in the course design, the educational psychologist John Biggs has formulated a model known as the 'Constructive alignment model'. In his book, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (1999:11), Biggs stated that the essential principle of constructive alignment is that "a good teaching system aligns teaching method and assessment to the learning activities stated in the objectives so that all aspects of this system are in accord in supporting appropriate student learning". This indicates that different aspects of this framework are integrated in a coherent system to support effective learning for the students. He claimed that when designed and applied in a proper way, the assessment framework became an essential part of a course and helped to maximize and support student learning.

Moreover, Biggs (2003) claimed that it was constructive because it was based on the constructive theory that learners used their own activity to construct their knowledge or other outcome. The ‘alignment’ in constructive alignment reflects the fact that the learning activity in the intended outcomes, expressed as a verb, needs to be activated in the teaching if the outcome is to be achieved, and in the assessment task to verify that the outcome has in fact been achieved (Biggs and Tang, 2007).

The idea of aligning assessment tasks with what it is intended that students should learn is very old – and obvious. It is called “criterion-referenced assessment’ in the jargon and it is what anyone outside an educational institution does when teaching anyone else anything. They conclude that “constructive alignment is a marriage between a constructivism understanding of the nature of learning and an aligned design for teaching that is designed to lock students into deep learning”.(p.248)

In this 'constructive alignment' theory, learning is constructed as a result of the learner's activities. Activities that are appropriate to achieving the curriculum objectives result in a deep approach to learning. Good teaching provides appropriate activities, thereby encouraging students to adopt a deep approach to learning.

In contrast, poor teaching and assessment result in a surface approach, where students use inappropriate and lower-order learning activities leading to negative wash back effects of assessments. Thus, Biggs and Tang (2007) proposed that a good teaching system aligns teaching method and assessment to the learning activities stated in the objectives, so that all aspects of this system act in accord to support appropriate learning. This system is called constructive alignment, based on the twin principles of constructivism in learning and alignment in teaching.

This model of 'constructive alignment' has become a prominent framework in higher education institutions. It describes the way that teachers can follow to get their students involved in learning and to enhance the quality of their learning. The sound implication for this is the result encountered in getting a close alignment between teaching, learning outcomes and assessment: better student learning, along with positive wash back effects of assessment (White, 2009).

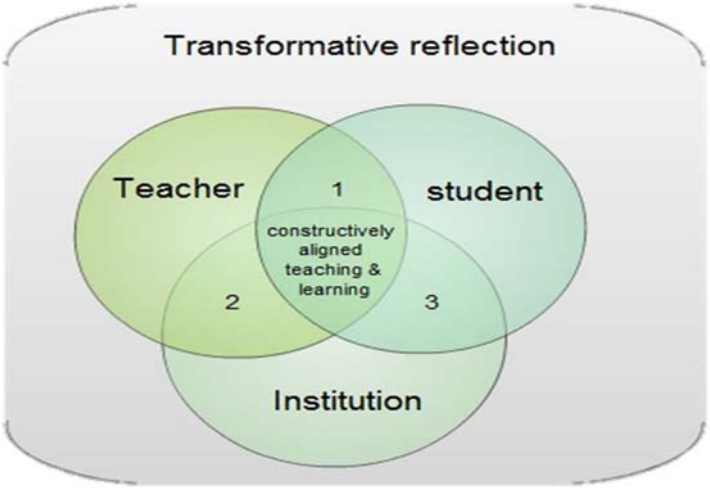

Figure 1.1 : Three domains of interacting in implementing constructively aligned teaching and learning
(Source: Biggs and Tang, 2007)

There are two systems in the constructive alignment model: the teaching system, which is what the teacher constructs, and the learning system, which is how the student reacts (Biggs, 2003). Once the objectives have been sorted out, designing teaching / learning activities come next to encourage learners to engage in the activities.

Assessment tasks are selected depending on the level of assessment literacy. These tasks inform whether and how well each student can meet the criteria stated in the objectives. Hence, objectives, teaching and assessment are aligned. If a teacher is assessment literate, the possibility of sound assessment is evident. The learning activities elicited by students would be of intricate relation to the type of assessment, which is the positive wash back effect. The learning activities, thus, produce an outcome: that is then matched via the assessment to the objectives.

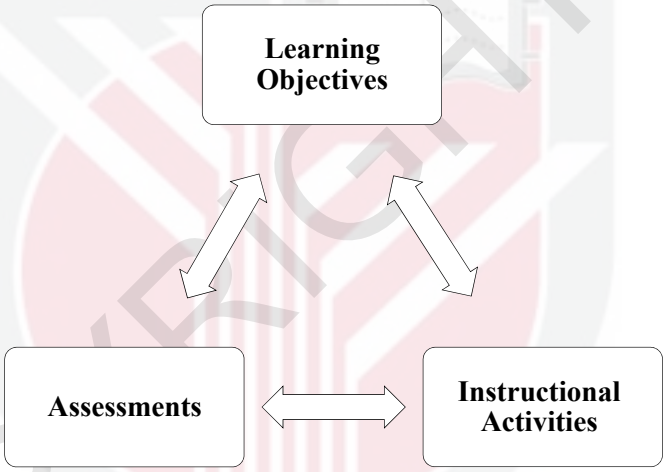

Figure 1.2 : Constructive Alignment Model of Course Design
(Source: White, 2009)

In the preface of the latest edition of their book, however, Biggs and Tang (2011) state that they have been asked for consultation on the implementation of constructive alignment in Australia, Hong Kong, Ireland and Malaysia". They added that in the last few years their experience has broaden from implementation in and beyond the classroom to implementation-institution-wide and "in the case of Malaysia, the beginning steps to its implementation nationwide".

1.4.2 Second Language Acquisition

Another consideration for the theoretical underpinning of the study is the concept of second language acquisition. Second language acquisition is influenced by many factors, including age, motivation, personality, cognitive ability, learning styles, cultural background. Some of these factors, such as personality and cognitive ability, can be found in first language acquisition. Other factors, such as age, motivation and previous experience learning language are unique to those learning additional languages.

Constructivist theory supports the multiple factors that are involved in second language acquisition. Constructivist perspectives involve a variety of understandings, including grammar, processing of information, use of memory and intelligence along with the social activities related with dialog and conversation (Brown, 2007).

In particular, Vygotsky's theories of language development and learning are applicable to second language acquisition because of his emphasis on social interaction and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD can be defined as the distance between the actual developmental level of a child as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under a teacher, another adult, or peers (Chaiklin, 2004; Vygotsky, 1986).

However, second language acquisition continues to be a controversial area to research because so much is yet unknown. As Lightbown and Spada (2007:49-50) explain: “Research that has theory development as its goal has important long-term significance for language teaching and learning, but agreement on a 'complete' theory of language acquisition is probably, at best, a long way off ”.

1.4.3 English Language Proficiency

Intrinsic to an understanding of second language acquisition and development is an understanding of what it means to be proficient in a language. At a certain point, a student who is learning English must be considered to have mastered sufficient areas of the language for his age or grade level. Just as understanding the subject of how languages are learned is complex, the issue of language proficiency is also complicated.

The issue of proficiency in English becomes more difficult when considering adults. Currently, the issue that complicates researchers' understanding of proficiency in the English language is our changing world; the needs of the work force have changed due to advances in technology. Our understanding of competency for all English users has changed from the past. This change has been greater in the area of reading and writing. The understanding of what it

means to be literate in the 21st century has changed as the modern technological, communication-driven workforce requires complex literacy skills as compared to the past (Rasmussen, 2008).

As the need for higher levels of literacy grew for all people, the understanding of proficiency in English for second language learners evolved (ibid). Research has demonstrated that basic, context reduced language was learned more easily than abstract language. For instance, Cummins (1984) first made the distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) for social interaction and the cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) needed for success in the classroom. He explained that his purpose was to make a point that "it takes language minority students considerably longer to attain grade/age appropriate levels of English academic skills than it does in English face-to-face communicative skills" (p. 152).

Later, however, Gottlieb (2003) adds to the discussion of language proficiency; explaining the differences between basic English language proficiency and proficiency that also encompasses academic language skills. "Overall, language proficiency represents general knowledge and language use in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing" (p. 12). To illustrate this, she used a visual chart to express the blending of language proficiency and academic achievement to produce a system for English language proficiency. Figure 1.3 demonstrates how the concept of academic language proficiency includes both elements from traditional concepts of language proficiency and the language needed to succeed academically.

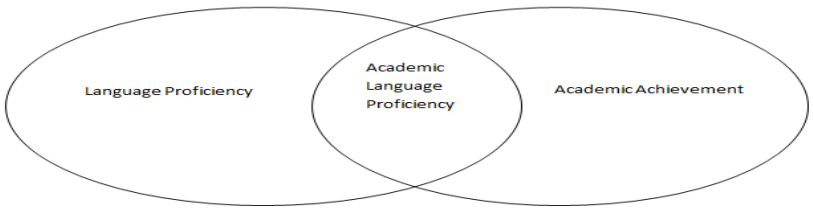

Figure 1.3 : Gottlieb View of Academic Language Proficiency (2003:12) cited in (Rasmussen, 2008: 47)

At the same time, researchers are struggling to attain a valid definition of English language proficiency that encompasses language learning theory and the needs of individuals in the world today. Educators are making decisions on a daily basis on whether students have attained proficiency or not. One of the most comprehensive definitions can be traced back to Francis and Rivera who summarized many of the definitions as "Language proficiency involves the effective use of language to accomplish different objectives of importance to the

language use, and reflects linguistic competencies in multiple dimensions" (2007: 18).

Overall, English language proficiency from a social constructivist point of view involves a complex picture of an individual who has acquired a set of skills and strategies in oral and written language that allows him or her to access knowledge to be successful in the classroom. A definition of language proficiency would involve creatively using problem-solving strategies for language in different circumstances. It would include the use of language in a group or community situation as well as the integration of the individual's background and culture and role in his or her current environment.

1.4.4 Educational Assessment

Educational assessment is a broad field, encompassing a variety of learning theories, concepts and practices including that of literacy and English language proficiency. Assessment practices have changed along with the times. They now reflect a social progressive view of instruction or a technological, behavioral approach to instruction. Standardized, norm-referenced testing primarily developed from a behaviorist model (Rasmussen, 2008).

In addition, assessment varies according to needs and purposes. It can be large-scale or individual. It can be considered high-stakes if the results have significant ramifications for an individual or group. Typically, large-scale and high-stakes assessment includes some form of testing. The use and purpose of assessment reflect the positions of learning theories and philosophies and specifically there is an assessment theory that could explain the use, purpose and practice of assessment.

1.4.5 Assessment Theory

The theoretical basis of the educational program influences how assessment is used. Assessment conducted in a setting that supports social constructivist language acquisition theories would include holistic, student-centered activities and activities that reflect the subtle varieties of language use in different domains of society, culture, and modes of learning. The assessment system would include not only skills that students have mastered, but also language knowledge, and competencies that they are in the process of developing. It would involve assessing emergent and potential language, along with mastered language (Rasmussen, 2008).

Assessment theorists seem to agree that instruction and assessment are cyclical in nature (Gardner, 2006; Nicol, 2007; Popham, 2001). According to Erwin (1991:15), assessment theory is:

> ... the systematic basis for making inferences about the learning and development of students. More specifically, assessment is the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students' learning and development.

The primary purpose of classroom testing is to collect information about student learning. Students' responses to classroom assessments allow teachers to choose more effective instructional strategies, thereby increasing the likelihood of student understanding (Popham, 2001). Understanding the purpose of assessment is critical when analyzing results. Sometimes assessment results are used to make a point for which the assessment is not suited. Popham (2001) suggested four guiding principles, which naturally align with assessment theory, for assessment to increase instructional effectiveness and student achievement within the classroom. These four guiding principles provide a framework for considering the quality of assessment that classroom teachers may encounter. They are: (a) test only indisputably important learner outcomes and formally test infrequently; (b) use a variety of assessment methods to pinpoint characteristics of learner outcomes; (c) use student responses to inform future instruction; and (d) use affective assessment to make group-focused inferences for instruction.

In line with Popham, Tierney's (2005) principles of assessment that come from theory and research summarize an understanding of assessment in this context. In his thirteen principles of assessment, Tierney elaborated the main characteristics of sound assessment that should be in classrooms (see Appendix A).

1.4.6 English Language Proficiency Assessment

The assessment of English language proficiency has followed general trends in assessment and education as a whole. An increased understanding of second language acquisition and language proficiency has allowed for the development of better assessment tools.

Essentially, the assessment of English language proficiency can be seen as the gathering of information of a students' competency or level of proficiency in the English language. It usually involves all modalities of English. Depending on the theoretical basis of the assessment, it would involve English usage in different registers and domains.

The difficulty in assessing English language proficiency is related to the evolution of the concept of English language proficiency. As greater awareness of the need for students to develop academic language proficiency increases, assessment measures need to accommodate this new understanding. English language proficiency tests need to be a valid and reliable measure of academic English language proficiency.

To conclude, English language proficiency assessment must provide information on a student's capability in the language. It must be based on a theory and philosophy of language acquisition and development. It must include a definition of proficiency and provide information on where a student stands in relation to that definition. It must give the teacher and the student a picture of where the student is at in terms of the definitive goals of full English language proficiency.

To investigate the dimensions of English language proficiency assessment including the *what* and *how* for this study, the construction of the questionnaire (see Appendix B) will reveal the domains of concern based on the theoretical underpinning discussed above.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Language assessment is an increasingly important area in educational applied linguistics. Thus, it was intended that this study would benefit:

- The English centers/units at tertiary institutions: this study will supply them with feedback to improve the quality of the programs offered by knowing the assessment beliefs and practices of their staff.
- Researchers: this study will present a genuine piece of knowledge in this field regarding the Malaysian context. Moreover, it will attract Malaysian researchers' attention to conduct other studies in this critical field.
- English instructors who are teaching proficiency courses: this will focus their attention on this issue and make them aware of dealing with language instruction for improving their students' skills and not just for passing tests.

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

The following definitions have been adopted for this study:

English Language Instructors are those teachers with a bachelor or master degree in any of the English language studies and are teaching English proficiency courses in the language center or unit in the six surveyed universities in the state of Selangor.

English Language Proficiency is a concept that is complex and varied according to theory and point of view. For the purposes of my research, language proficiency is defined as "the ability to use a language effectively and appropriately throughout the range of social, personal, school and work situations required for daily living." For our purposes as educators, we want our students to become competent in four language processes: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Peregoy and Boyle, 2008:34).

Assessment: While a variety of definitions of the term assessment has been suggested, this study will use the definition chosen by Rasmussen (2008) which he quoted from a document published by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. In this document 'assessment' is defined as "a broad term that involves the collection and maintenance of various types of data about students' [learning and growth] including norm-referenced tests, criterion-referenced test, classroom-based assessments of various types, and performance-based tasks." (p.26)

Beliefs: Pajares (1992:307) described beliefs as a "messy construct" because they lacked a standard definition that made the investigation of teachers' beliefs a complex endeavor. However, throughout this study, the term *beliefs* was used to refer to "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe and think in relation to their work" (Borg, 2003:81).

Assessment Practices: are the ways in which teachers award grades, analyze them, and how they use assessment results demonstrated by apprentices to enhance the learning process (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006)

Malaysian Tertiary Context*:* This refers specifically to six universities in the State of Selangor.

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