

# An Investigation of Chinese University English Teachers' Assessment Literacy under the Background of CSE

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## Abstract

Assessment literacy of Chinese university English teachers has become one of the most discussed topics under the background of implementation of China's Standards of English Language Ability. The purpose of this study is to find the status quo of Chinese university English teachers' assessment literacy and locate factors which may influence the development of assessment literacy. Findings indicate that teachers' own cognition and implementation make a great difference in assessment literacy development and while-employment training helps a lot. Accordingly, it is advisable to take into teachers' personal background and apply a hierarchical model of training in developing university English teachers' assessment literacy.

## Keywords

Assessment literacy; CSE; Chinese university English teachers.

## 1. Introduction

In 2014, the State Council of China issued "The Opinions on Implementation of Deepening the Reform of Examination and Enrollment System", which proposed to strengthen the construction of foreign language ability assessment system, and put forward clear requirements for the comprehensive reform of foreign language assessment from the national level for the first time. The construction of foreign language ability assessment system strengthens the orientation of education, pays attention to the examination and cultivation of ability, and advocates formative assessment in order to promote learning through assessment (Lin Huiqing, 2016). As the basis of the whole assessment system, China's Standards of English Language Ability (hereinafter referred to as CSE) was officially issued by the Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission on February 12, 2018, and began to be implemented nationwide on June 1, 2018. CSE provides a multi-level description of English ability, constructs a complete theoretical system of Chinese English learning, teaching and assessment and a national unified English ability standard, and provides a set of ability reference standards suitable for China's national conditions for China's English curriculum, English teaching and English examination (Liu Jianda, 2015).

Studies on CSE show that CSE can help English teachers formulate scientific and reasonable formative assessment standards, effectively test learners' phased language ability and improve the quality of formative assessment (He Lianzhen, Zhang Huiyu, 2017). Besides, CSE helps learners to set reasonable learning goals and carry out self-assessment (Liu Jianda, 2017). Most importantly, the ability description of CSE runs through one main line, which is very consistent with the dynamic characteristics of formative assessment. In this context, university English teachers are expected to have higher assessment literacy. They should not only be familiar with the standards and procedures of language proficiency assessment, but also be able to provide appropriate feedback to help the assessed achieve the expected learning objectives (Inbar Lourie O., 2013). Paying attention to the key point of improving the assessment literacy of College English teachers is not only a policy guidance, but also a realistic call.

## 2. Literature Review

Researchers, such as Popham (2004), Stiggins (2002), Mertler & Campell (2005) have tried to define assessment literacy. According to these researchers, assessment literacy is defined as “the knowledge and skills about how to assess what students know and can do, interpret the results of these assessments, and apply these results to improve student learning and program effectiveness”. Chinese scholars, Zheng Donghui (2009) and Zhao Xuejing (2014) enriched the definition of assessment literacy with two more dimensions of assessment attitude and assessment awareness. This study adopts the four dimensions of assessment literacy, which covers assessment attitude, assessment awareness, assessment knowledge and assessment skills.

Since the 1990s, with the gradual prevalence of "standard-based reform" in the world and the transformation of educational assessment paradigm, educators are required to pay more attention to the accumulation of assessment knowledge and the development and application of assessment skills in both theoretical and practical fields. Popham (2004) once mentioned that “teachers' lack of assessment literacy is equal to professional suicide”, which shows the importance of assessment literacy. However, empirical studies on teacher assessment at home and abroad have found that the overall situation of teachers' assessment literacy is not optimistic (Mertler, 2005; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014; Xu Ying et al., 2016; Feng Li et al., 2018; Jiang Jinlin, 2019), which is not enough to play the proper learning promotion function of assessment. Reviewing the literature on CSE and assessment literacy at home and abroad, we can find the following research gaps. First, at present, the number of domestic research on CSE is increasing year by year, but most of the findings are theoretical but lack of practical implications. Research mainly covers the research on the construction of the overall standard and the construction of the sub-standards, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation, interpretation, pragmatics and organization. The research on CSE is insufficient and unbalanced. There are few studies on the application of CSE in assessment practice. Only Wang Weiwei (2017) and others talked about the application of the scale in English teaching and testing. The research of the application of CSE in assessment practice needs to be strengthened.

Second, most studies on College English teachers' assessment literacy were done before the release of CSE, and teachers' assessment literacy is a dynamic construct, which is affected by social development, political culture and other factors. Under the background of the CSE, the policy orientation and practical call of what kind of assessment literacy university English teachers should have have already changed. However, there is a lack of theoretical guidance and practical ideas in the assessment practice, which makes the assessment literacy of university English teachers superficial and neglected in theory and practice.

Third, the research on the development of university English teachers' assessment literacy under the background of CSE is still in the exploratory stage, and there are few paradigms for reference and use. That is, under the background of the current implementation of CSE, the assessment objectives of university English teachers are not clear, the assessment contents are not specific, the assessment methods are lack of variety, and the application of the assessment results is not effective, which is far from the assessment responsibilities and expectations given to university English teachers by CSE. To better bridge the gaps in research and reality, it is of significance to investigate the status quo of the assessment literacy of university English teachers in China. Accordingly, two research questions are raised in this study.

RQ1: What is the status quo of Chinese university English teachers' assessment literacy?

RQ2: What demographic characteristics of university English teachers influence their assessment literacy?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

Before formal survey, a pilot study was conducted among 170 university English teachers. Based on the result of it, several items in the questionnaire were deleted and revised. After that, a formal questionnaire survey was conducted among 578 participants from 15 universities in Anhui Province, Zhejiang Province, Shandong Province and Shanghai City.

Demographic information about their gender, degree, age, teaching experience, professional title, pre-employment learning experience about assessment and while-employment learning experience about assessment is covered in the questionnaire.

#### 3.2. Instrument

The questionnaire used in this research is adopted from Zhao Xuejing's (2014) Chinese Secondary Education Teacher Assessment Literacy Questionnaire. To better fit the university English education scenarios, four items that are specific to secondary education context are revised, and three items concerning parents' requirement of accountability are deleted.

This self-report questionnaire is designed with reference to Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students (AFT, NCME, NEA, 1990), Teacher Assessment Literacy Questionnaire (Plake, Impara & Fager, 1993), Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory (Mertler, 2005), and Primary and Secondary Education Teacher Assessment Literacy Questionnaire (Zheng Donghui, 2009).

The questionnaire includes two parts. The first part is about demographic information of the participants. The second part is the status quo of assessment literacy, which covers four dimensions of assessment literacy, that is, assessment attitude, assessment awareness, assessment knowledge, and assessment skills.

#### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaires were printed and handed out to teachers by an entrusted teacher in each university. Teachers are required to finish the questionnaire within given time and then questionnaires will be collected on the spot. After data cleaning, 543 valid data were used in this study. In data processing, IBM SPSS Statistics 24 was used for statistical analysis.

### 4. Results

Based on the analysis of the 543 valid data, the major findings of this study are summarized as follows.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of Assessment Literacy

Scale	M	SD	Min.	Max.
Assessment awareness	3.838	.724	1.220	5.000
Assessment knowledge	2.987	1.235	1.000	5.000
Assessment skills	3.939	.568	1.210	6.860
Assessment attitude	3.646	.583	1.220	5.000
Assessment literacy	3.628	.763	1.164	5.620

Note. N=543

First, to answer the first research question, that is, the status quo of Chinese university English teachers' assessment literacy, results are as follows. Among the four dimensions of assessment literacy, assessment awareness, assessment knowledge, assessment skills, and assessment attitude, Chinese university English teachers score highest in assessment skills, and score

lowest in assessment knowledge, with assessment awareness as the second, and assessment attitude as the third.

To locate their more specific needs, descriptive statistics of the four sub-scales of assessment literacy are done respectively. As for assessment skills, which university English teachers score highest in, they do well in “avoiding assessment misuse and bias”, while they are weak in “interpreting and communicating assessment results”. As for assessment knowledge, which university English teachers score lowest in, they do well in “knowledge about assessment procedures” but they are lack of “knowledge about assessment methods”. Assessment awareness, which ranks the second among the four dimensions, results show that most teachers have assessment awareness, but they are lack of assessment practice. And as for assessment attitude, which ranks the third among the four dimensions, results indicate that although most university teachers think that assessment is very important in university English teaching but they are reluctant to conduct assessment in their teaching practice.

Second, to answer the second research question, descriptive statistics of different groups and comparison between different groups with different demographic features are conducted. Results of the descriptive statistics are presented in the following table.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of the Two Gender Groups

Scale		n	M	SD	SE	95% CI		Min.	Max.
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Assessment awareness	M	158	3.766	.764	.061	3.646	3.886	1.220	5.000
	F	385	3.868	.706	.036	3.798	3.940	1.560	5.000
	Total	543	3.839	.724	.031	3.778	3.900	1.220	5.000
Assessment knowledge	M	158	3.033	.784	.062	2.910	3.156	1.000	5.000
	F	385	2.968	.777	.040	2.890	3.046	1.000	5.000
	Total	543	2.987	.779	.033	2.921	3.053	1.000	5.000
Assessment skills	M	158	3.925	.595	.047	3.831	4.018	1.210	5.000
	F	385	3.946	.558	.028	3.890	4.002	1.860	6.860
	Total	543	3.940	.568	.024	3.892	3.988	1.210	6.860
Assessment attitude	M	158	3.731	.642	.051	3.630	3.832	1.220	5.000
	F	385	3.612	.554	.028	3.556	3.667	2.220	5.000
	Total	543	3.646	.583	.025	3.597	3.696	1.220	5.000

**Table 3.** ANOVA Statistics of the Two Gender Groups

Scale		SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Assessment awareness	Between Groups	1.185	1	1.185	2.264	.133
	Within Groups	283.265	541	.524		
	Total	284.450	542			
Assessment knowledge	Between Groups	.467	1	.467	.770	.381
	Within Groups	328.362	541	.607		
	Total	328.830	542			
Assessment skills	Between Groups	.052	1	.052	.160	.689
	Within Groups	174.987	541	.323		
	Total	175.039	542			
Assessment attitude	Between Groups	1.582	1	1.582	4.681	.031
	Within Groups	182.800	541	.338		
	Total	184.382	542			

Further comparison between the two gender groups show that male teachers perform better than female teachers in assessment attitude but there are no significant differences in other dimensions of assessment awareness, assessment knowledge, and assessment skills.

As for the second demographic characteristic, educational level, it doesn't affect university English teachers' assessment literacy in all dimensions. When it comes to the third factor, age, it does influence university English teachers' assessment literacy. Generally speaking, the more advanced the teachers are in age, the better they perform in the four dimensions of assessment literacy respectively and the overall assessment literacy. Here in table 4.4, results are presented.

**Table 4.** Descriptive Statistics of the Groups at Different Ages

Scale	Category	n	M	SD	SE	95% CI		Min.	Max.
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Assessment awareness	≤30	47	3.790	.762	.111	3.566	4.013	1.220	5.000
	31-40	325	3.779	.704	.039	3.702	3.855	1.560	5.000
	41-50	137	3.898	.775	.066	3.767	4.029	1.330	5.000
	≥51	34	4.245	.502	.086	4.070	4.420	3.330	5.000
	Total	543	3.839	.724	.031	3.778	3.900	1.220	5.000
Assessment knowledge	≤30	47	2.736	.719	.104	2.525	2.947	1.000	3.800
	31-40	325	2.958	.820	.045	2.868	3.047	1.000	5.000
	41-50	137	3.075	.712	.061	2.954	3.195	1.000	4.300
	≥51	34	3.262	.588	.101	3.057	3.467	2.300	4.200
	Total	543	2.987	.779	.033	2.921	3.053	1.000	5.000
Assessment skills	≤30	47	3.816	.641	.093	3.628	4.004	1.210	4.790
	31-40	325	3.906	.572	.032	3.843	3.968	1.860	6.860
	41-50	137	4.022	.527	.045	3.933	4.111	2.360	5.000
	≥51	34	4.105	.536	.092	3.918	4.292	2.930	5.000
	Total	543	3.940	.568	.024	3.892	3.988	1.210	6.860
Assessment attitude	≤30	47	3.511	.630	.092	3.326	3.696	1.220	4.890
	31-40	325	3.610	.587	.033	3.546	3.674	2.220	5.000
	41-50	137	3.752	.549	.047	3.659	3.845	2.560	5.000
	≥51	34	3.758	.556	.095	3.564	3.952	2.780	5.000
	Total	543	3.646	.583	.025	3.597	3.696	1.220	5.000

Teaching experience does influence teachers in their assessment awareness, but exerts no significant difference in other three dimensions of assessment knowledge, assessment skills, and assessment attitude. With further exploration, it is found that those with longer years of teaching experience do better in assessment awareness. Professional title doesn't make a disparity on different groups in assessment skills and knowledge but does make a significant difference in their assessment awareness and assessment attitude. Having pre-employment learning experience concerning assessment or not does not make a difference in teachers' assessment attitude but make significant difference in other three dimensions of assessment awareness, assessment knowledge, and assessment skills.

However, the last factor, while-employment experience concerning assessment does affect teachers' assessment literacy in all sub-dimensions of assessment awareness, assessment knowledge, assessment skills, and assessment attitude. Results are presented in table 4.5.

**Table 5.** Descriptive Statistics of the Groups with Different While-employment Learning Experiences

Scale		n	M	SD	SE	95% CI		Min.	Max.
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Assessment awareness	Yes	160	4.027	.758	.059	3.909	4.146	1.220	5.000
	No	383	3.759	.695	.035	3.689	3.829	1.330	5.000
	Total	543	3.838	.724	.031	3.777	3.899	1.220	5.000
Assessment knowledge	Yes	160	3.233	.680	.053	3.127	3.339	1.000	5.000
	No	383	2.884	.795	.040	2.804	2.964	1.000	5.000
	Total	543	2.987	.778	.033	2.921	3.052	1.000	5.000
Assessment skills	Yes	160	4.081	.554	.043	3.994	4.167	1.210	5.000
	No	383	3.880	.564	.028	3.824	3.937	2.290	6.860
	Total	543	3.939	.568	.024	3.891	3.987	1.210	6.860
Assessment attitude	Yes	160	3.781	.604	.047	3.687	3.876	1.220	5.000
	No	383	3.589	.565	.028	3.533	3.646	2.220	5.000
	Total	543	3.646	.583	.025	3.597	3.695	1.220	5.000

ANOVA statistics show that those who ever attended study related to educational evaluation or assessment during profession had higher assessment literacy in the four sub-scales than those who had not studied relevant courses during profession.

**Table 6.** ANOVA Statistics of the Groups with Different While-employment Learning Experiences

	Scale	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Assessment awareness	Between Groups	8.105	1	8.105	15.867	.000
	Within Groups	276.345	541	.511		
	Total	284.450	542			
Assessment knowledge	Between Groups	13.799	1	13.799	23.697	.000
	Within Groups	315.031	541	.582		
	Total	328.830	542			
Assessment skills	Between Groups	4.542	1	4.542	14.411	.000
	Within Groups	170.498	541	.315		
	Total	175.039	542			
Assessment attitude	Between Groups	4.167	1	4.167	12.509	.000
	Within Groups	180.215	541	.333		
	Total	184.382	542			

## 5. Discussion

From the above analysis, it can be found that assessment literacy for university English teachers is a matter of cognition and implementation, which can be enhanced with advance of teacher's age, promotion of professional title, enrichment of teaching experience, learning experience, and training experience.

However, university English teachers' educational background or gender are not so important in assessment literacy development. Results show that training and learning are essential, and that development of assessment literacy relies heavily on teachers' intrinsic motivation and willingness of implementation.

In particular, the assessment practice on micro-level of classroom assessment should be highlighted with reference to CSE. Moreover, since assessment is a complex process integrating many facets of psychology, philosophy, pedagogy, and culture, hierarchical development of assessment literacy for different groups needs to be taken into account.

## 6. Limitations and Implications

Due to privacy of university teachers, the graduated university was left out in the later analysis of the factors that may affect teachers' assessment literacy.

Moreover, since the items of the questionnaire take the form of self-report 5-point Likert scales, it is likely that some participants may choose the answers that may seem to be better for their personal image. Therefore, the responses they gave may not be so objective to represent their actual level of assessment literacy, which may cause a little damage to the reliability of the data.

Based on the limitations listed above, implications for further research on assessment literacy of Chinese university English teachers' assessment literacy are as follows. Firstly, a larger sample from universities in different provinces and at different levels could be investigated. It is significant to examine whether university level and geographical difference are the factors that may affect the assessment literacy of university English teachers and then find gaps to put forward approaches accordingly. Secondly, future research may use class observation to take into consideration of details of the interaction between teachers and their students in actual assessment practice with reference to CSE. Besides, the non-verbal assessment of university English teachers in classroom assessment also needs attention. In addition, since there exist weaknesses in self-report questionnaire survey, future research can take more diversified forms to design the research instrument, such as creating authentic context and using multiple choices and question-and-answer to directly test the assessment literacy of university English teachers.

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