1 Learning Oriented Assessment: An overview

'It requires troublesome work to undertake the alteration of old beliefs.'

How We Think (John Dewey 1933:29–30)

Learning a language is one of the first things we do in life. It is a natural and wholly engaging process. However, approaches to the formal teaching of language have in many contexts made it an unnatural, frustrating and remarkably inefficient one. Evidence for this was provided by the European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC) in 2012. In half of the 16 participating jurisdictions, about half of the students or more achieved only Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) Level A1 in the first foreign language at the end of lower secondary education, or failed to achieve even that. To have spent up to six years of study to achieve so little indicates that in many countries something is seriously wrong in language education.

Assessment is also a natural process, and one intimately connected with learning. Think of the expression 'learning by experience': it denotes a largely unconscious process in which some task is engaged with, the outcomes are noted and evaluated, and the experience provides feedback on how to do better next time. This basic cycle – task performance, observation, evaluation and feedback – is common to all assessment, of one's own performance or of others, formal or informal. But educational assessment, particularly as conducted through the mechanisms of large-scale standardised testing, has become systematised in ways which, even where they are intended to promote learning, often fail to do so effectively. The country which performed worst of all in the ESLC went on to achieve results in a national exam the following summer which on paper appeared creditable, and which were indeed acclaimed as 'impressive' by a language teachers' association. Clearly, the communicative language competence which the ESLC set out to measure is not what these students were learning, or what their exam was testing.

We could do better. Learning Oriented Assessment as presented in this volume offers a vision of radical change and far more effective learning. It is written from the perspective of an assessment body, but it looks to both formal assessment and classroom assessment, seeking to exploit the synergies between them: it is *systemic*.

There are two key purposes of assessment: to promote learning, and to measure and interpret what has been learned. In some contexts additional

duties are imposed on assessment, notably that of holding schools to account for their performance. This has been observed to work against achievement of the key purposes, because it provides 'perverse incentives' for schools to teach to the test, to the detriment of learning. This identifies a further feature of Learning Oriented Assessment: it must be *ecological*, ensuring that all aspects of the system work in harmony to serve the most important goals.

The twin goals of promoting and measuring learning have been characterised as *formative* and *summative* respectively, but this familiar distinction is one which Learning Oriented Assessment must challenge, because it represents these two purposes as fundamentally at odds with each other. A systemic and ecological approach seeks complementarity: informal classroom assessment and formal large-scale assessment should both contribute to the two key purposes of assessment: to provide evidence *of* learning and evidence *for* learning.

Learning Oriented Assessment is presented in Figure 1.1 in terms of two complementary dimensions. Large-scale, standardised assessment provides the vertical dimension, describing progression through lower to higher levels of proficiency. It is primarily *quantitative*, addressing the question: *how far have students progressed?* But in answering that question it must do more than simply rank students from better to worse – that is the quickest way to demotivate students and lead them to adopt defective learning strategies. What is crucial is that it should provide an *interpretation* of performance, which directs the attention of students, teachers and society in general towards the important goals of language learning. The CEFR levels shown in Figure 1.1 represent that vital interpretive framework.

The horizontal dimension depicts the *qualitative* differences between learners, addressing the question: *how can each learner be helped to progress?* It groups learners who are all at the same global proficiency level but differ in terms of their cognition, their experience, and their learning needs. Understanding students' particular characteristics is essential to individualising teaching and learning.

The vertical, quantitative dimension is the primary domain of assessment experts, if only because the construction and interpretation of a scale of language proficiency is a highly technical issue. The horizontal, qualitative dimension is the primary domain of the classroom and the teacher. But there is complementarity and overlap. Quantitative evidence can help identify the skills profiles of individual learners, as well as their current overall level. Qualitative evidence promotes learning gains that are reflected in quantitative measures. Positive evidence of learning motivates students to further learning.

The aim of this systemic model of Learning Oriented Assessment is not to promote test-based teaching or impose more large-scale assessment on

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Figure 1.1   A complementary relationship between large-scale and classroom assessment
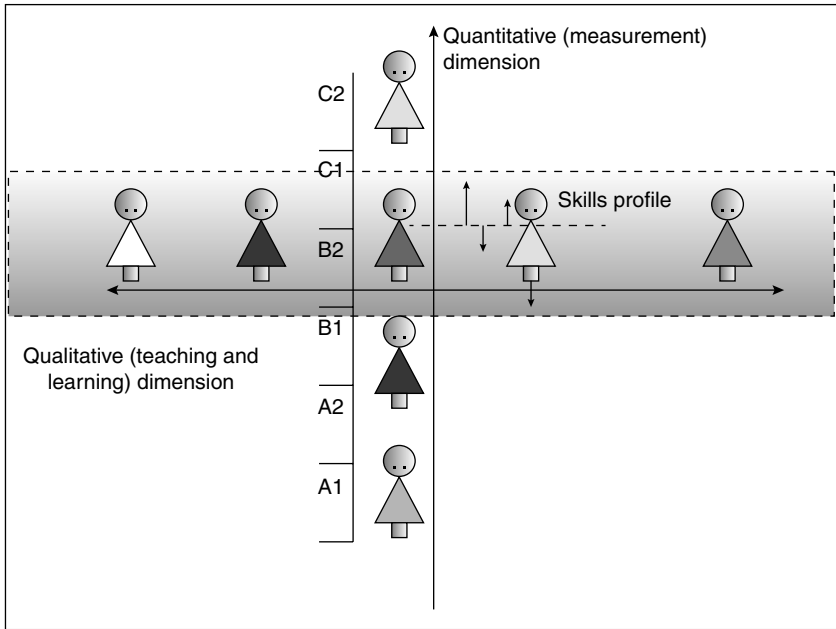

the classroom – an unwelcome recent trend in many contexts – but rather to define fully complementary, coherent roles for the expertise of teachers and assessment professionals, providing a supporting framework for learning, but where essential responsibilities still remain with teachers and students in the classroom. Implementing Learning Oriented Assessment as presented here is a task for both educationalists and assessment experts.

Another systemic view is offered by Figure 1.2, which shows 'four worlds' of learning: the personal world, concerned with the individual's developing cognition; the social world, which rewards the acquisition of both social and professional language skills; the world of education, which organises learning into subjects and curriculum objectives; and the world of assessment, whose task is essentially to link the other worlds together, by providing constructs of language ability which enable meaningful measurement of learners, documentation of skills which are of value in the social world, targets for schools to achieve through their teaching, and evidence of how effective that teaching has been.

In other words, it is assessment which is able to bring the other worlds together, enabling them to pursue common goals which have social value. This may be seen as its proper role.

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Figure 1.2 Four worlds of learning
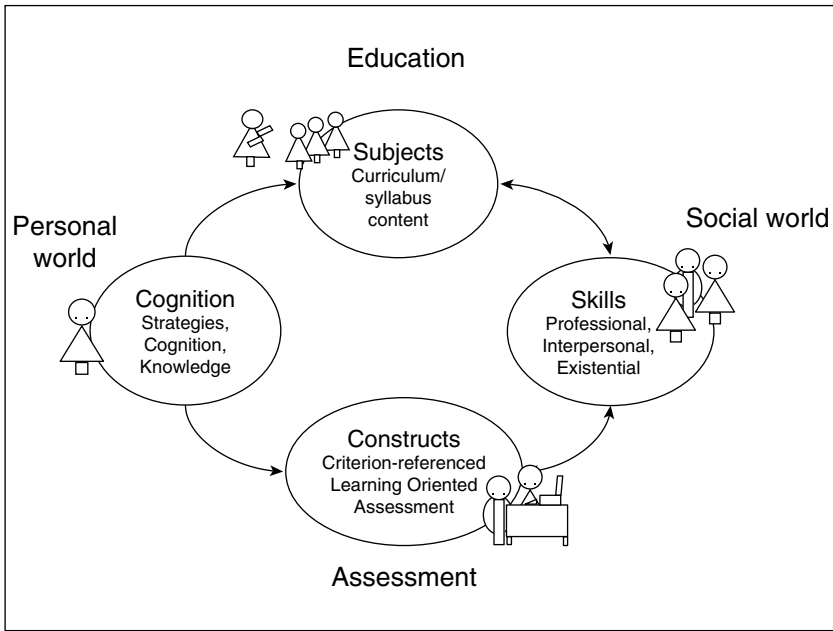
Common goals require a common focus. Figure 1.3 links the worlds through a learning cycle based on the performance of a task, observation, and feedback.

Tasks are placed at the centre because they have relevance to each of the worlds. They provide a context for classroom exercises and an approach to organising formal education. The social world values skilled performance on tasks. The individual's cognition, as we will explain, develops through engagement with tasks. Assessment uses tasks as the basis of measures.

Putting tasks at the centre is not primarily a methodological claim (although as presented in section 3.3.1, tasks are a basic element in organising teaching), but rather highlights the importance for the cognitive development of learners of engagement in meaningful communication, and, what follows, the practical utility of tasks for aligning the different worlds around a common focus which has social value.

Figure 1.3 shows tasks leading to learning in two ways: through natural acquisition by engaging with tasks in the real world, as well as through the route of formal learning. That natural acquisition may play a part in an individual's second language learning is, again, not primarily a methodological claim, but further underlines the primacy of meaningful communication.

Figure 1.3 is returned to in Chapter 8, where it plays an important part in

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Figure 1.3 The four worlds linked by a focus on task
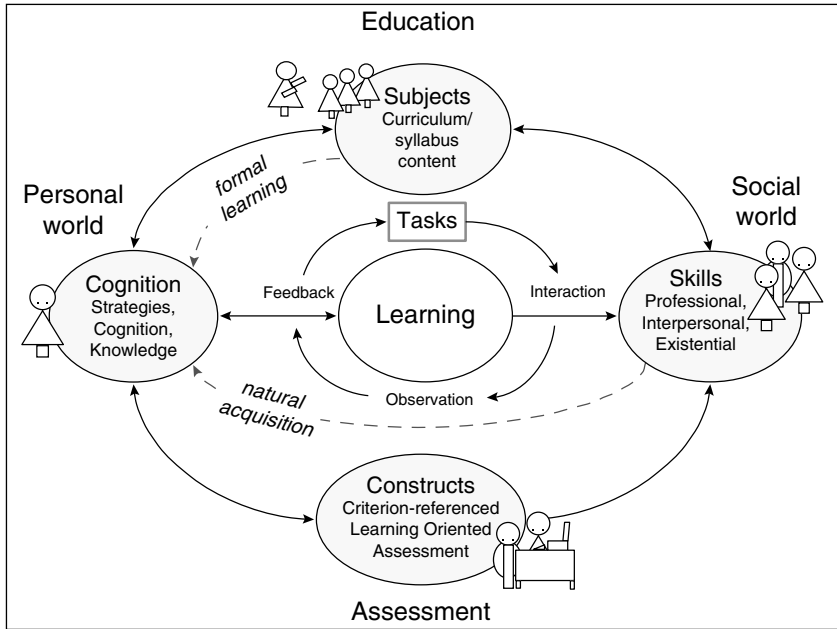
presenting our approach to aligning classroom and assessment data in order to fulfil the twin goals of Learning Oriented Assessment: to provide evidence *of* learning and *for* learning.

The purpose of this volume is not to provide detailed prescriptions for classroom activities (even if some readers may be disappointed by this). Rather, it sets out from a theoretical perspective, with the aim of developing a coherent model of how assessment can impact positively on learning, based on a broad exploration of the literature on learning and assessment. To add structure we will present findings as answers to three fundamental questions:

- What is learning? This addresses the personal world, individual cognition.
- What is to be learned? This addresses organised education, and how it meets the needs of society.
- What is the role of assessment in learning? This addresses the complementary roles of large-scale assessment and classroom assessment.

The answers to these questions will support claims for how all levels of assessment can be made to work together to achieve radically better learning outcomes.

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What is the intended audience for this volume? We hope it will contribute firstly to discussion within the language assessment community of how their role within education should develop in future. Thus it is also a kind of manifesto, hopefully of interest to those who directly use assessment services. But above all the volume targets the wider audience who have a professional or personal interest in the issue of education and how better to make it serve its role in society.

1.1 The organisation of this volume

This chapter sets out in summary the argument for Learning Oriented Assessment, entailing a number of claims and assertions which will not be immediately supported, though references are provided to subsequent chapters, where each aspect of the argument is treated in detail. The intention is to lay out the key elements of Learning Oriented Assessment, and provide signposting to the later chapters. This approach means that some material in this chapter is repeated and expanded upon in the later ones.

Chapter 2 sets the scene by providing a historical account of how learning-oriented concepts of assessment have developed in a range of contexts and in response to a range of issues.

Chapter 8 is the point towards which the text leads, as it draws together from the earlier chapters a model that aligns large-scale assessment and classroom learning-oriented assessment around shared goals and a common interpretive framework.

Finally, Chapter 9 brings the volume to a close by considering various issues of implementation to be addressed by Learning Oriented Assessment: educational policy-making, lessons from the formative assessment literature and the Asset Languages project, and the crucial role of technology. It also presents a case study of the impact of Cambridge English exams in a particular context, which is included to indicate how the monitoring and evaluation of Learning Oriented Assessment may be undertaken. The last section of Chapter 9 offers a conclusion.

This volume presents a model of learning-oriented assessment developed by Cambridge English Language Assessment, an exam board within Cambridge Assessment, which is part of the University of Cambridge. The model is referred to in the text as Learning Oriented Assessment (with initial capitals). In this text the term 'Cambridge English' is used as shorthand for Cambridge English Language Assessment.

The quotations that head each chapter are taken from the writings of John Dewey (1859–1952), the American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer. In Shepard's (2000:12) presentation of social constructivism she comments that 'John Dewey anticipated all of these ideas 100 years ago.' Norris (2009, 2015) also recognises Dewey's influence. The quotations

are a reminder that while the proposals in this volume have the authority that comes with age, they also present challenges that have defeated the best efforts of several generations. But we will argue in our conclusions that Learning Oriented Assessment is an idea whose time has finally come.

1.2 What is learning?

This section largely summarises Chapter 3, and at its centre is the learner.

1.2.1 Social constructivism

It is important for the argument to be developed in this text that we should adopt an explicit model of learning. The model which Learning Oriented Assessment adopts is a *social constructivist* one (see section 3.1). Social constructivism sees learning and meaning-making as an intrinsically social process. Learning is dialogue. It proceeds within communities of discourse and practice, and learning is mediated through the shared practices of the community: the tools, signs, models, methods and theories which they construct. A classroom is a community of practice, and so is each school subject.

Social constructivism may be distinguished from cognitive constructivism. The latter focuses on the nature of an individual's cognition and is associated with the work of Piaget (1896–1980), while the emphasis on the social context of cognitive development is associated with the work of Vygotsky (1896–1934). These are differences of emphasis within an overall conception of *situated cognition,* which places the development of individual cognition within the larger physical and social context of interactions (see section 3.1.1).

Vygotsky states that interaction is fundamental to development. It is not just a context for learning: it *is* learning. But to bring about change interaction must stretch the learner: 'the only good learning is that which is in advance of development' (Vygotsky 1978:89).

The concept of situated cognition is also coherent with the *socio-cognitive* approach to construct definition implemented by Cambridge English, as presented in section 6.6.

1.2.2 Classroom concepts

The literature on learning-oriented assessment identifies a number of concepts which describe classroom interactions, identify conditions which favour learning, or distinguish the quality of learning. It is interesting to observe that they are increasingly understood in social constructivist terms (see section 3.3). Basic elements of classroom interaction include *tasks*, *goals*, *scaffolding*, *feedback* and *emergence*.

Tasks are activities designed to elicit learning interactions (see section 3.3.1). The concept of task plays an important part in the Learning Oriented Assessment model, as it is common to all of the 'four worlds' identified above. Thus it potentially provides a link between performance in the classroom, the social world, and in large-scale assessments. For Learning Oriented Assessment we define a learning task as one which leads to the *purposeful use of language to communicate personally significant meanings*.

Goals are what learners have in mind when engaging with a task. Several scholars have identified a distinction between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* goals (using a variety of terms). Intrinsic goals focus on completing the task at hand – they are meaning focused – while extrinsic goals focus on other incentives, such as winning praise (so may be less effective for learning).

Scaffolding is the term frequently used to describe the support given to learners performing a task. In a social constructivist view scaffolding ensures that genuine task-focused interaction is enabled at a level of challenge which will lead to learning.

Feedback concerns the insight which the learner gains from engaging with a task (see section 3.3.3). There is extensive literature on the features of feedback which favour or disfavour learning. A social constructivist view sees feedback as akin to scaffolding, in that it describes the rapid sequence of turns (teacher–student or student–student) which constitute engagement with an interactive task.

Emergence concerns the process whereby a learner comes to speak a language. It captures the insight that communicative language ability is an outcome of learning which is qualitatively different from and at a higher level to conscious study of the inputs (see section 3.3.5).

1.3 What is language learning?

This section largely summarises Chapter 4.

The Learning Oriented Assessment model is essentially subject neutral, but this volume places a particular focus on languages. In education languages play several roles:

- as '*first'* languages
- as '*foreign'* languages
- as the *language of schooling*.

Any intervention in a particular context of language learning should recognise these several aspects of languages across and beyond the curriculum.

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1.3.1 Second Language Acquisition studies

Learning Oriented Assessment for languages can also turn for insight to the branch of applied linguistics concerned with Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

- The review of SLA included here is brief and selective, looking at models of learning relevant to the socio-cognitive approach adopted in this volume (see section 4.4). The key topics are listed below.

- *Processing accounts* (see section 4.4.1) study why learners do not always pick up grammatical features present in oral or written input.

- *Complexity theory* (see section 4.4.2) provides support for the idea that language is a *complex adaptive system* which emerges from the interactions of speakers communicating with one another, rather than the learning of rules. This is closer to the social constructivist view.

- *Frequency-based accounts* (see section 4.4.3) inform approaches to introducing and sequencing learning material: more frequently encountered forms and collocations are likely to be learned before less frequently encountered ones.

- *Complex Adaptive System Principles (CASP)* (see section 4.4.4) use empirical data to model how the need to communicate drives dual strategies: maximising communicative power while minimising cognitive effort. This demonstrates in compelling fashion the link between learning and satisfying the need to communicate, which is at the heart of the learning-oriented model.

1.4 What is to be learned?

This section summarises Chapter 5, and at its centre is formal education.

1.4.1 The desired outcomes of learning

Turning to our second question: in the case of language learning most would agree that the main objective should be to achieve a useful communicative competence in one or more languages. But in a social constructivist view that objective is best achieved and maintained through life as part of a transformation of the learner's dispositions, attitudes and practical learning skills. A very positive outcome of learning would thus be that students acquire the valuable dispositions and life skills that enable them to continue learning throughout life. Whether or not this *outcome* can or should be made an explicit curricular *objective* is an important question to address later.

1.4.2 Language proficiency: Construct definition

A second aspect to the question 'what is to be learned?' concerns how we define 'language proficiency' in order to test or teach it. We must define a specific *construct*: a theory or model of what knowing a language entails (see section 5.2).

1.4.3 The content of learning: Curricular objectives

Constructs relate to the communicative competences which are the desired *outcome* of learning. The third aspect to the question 'what is to be learned?' concerns curricular objectives: the *inputs* to learning (see section 5.3). Understanding how inputs relate to outputs requires us to address the important concept of *emergence*: communicative competence is a 'higher-order skill' qualitatively different to the conscious study of elements of content (see section 3.3.5). This will lead the Learning Oriented Assessment model to make a distinction between *learner-centred* and *curriculum-centred* views of classroom interaction.

1.5 The roles of assessment in learning

This section summarises Chapters 6 and 7, and at its centre are the complementary roles of large-scale and classroom assessment.

Classroom assessment and large-scale assessment play complementary roles in Learning Oriented Assessment, but share the same basic process: they are centred on tasks, which stimulate language activity, in conditions enabling observation, evaluation, feedback and learning.

These two dimensions of assessment produce different kinds of *evidence,* complementary to each other and contributing to the dual purposes of assessment: to provide evidence *for* learning and *of* learning.

1.5.1 Proficiency and achievement testing: Measurement and meaning

Learning Oriented Assessment's primary requirement of large-scale assessment is that it should test *proficiency*, that is, should be *criterion referenced* to uses of language in the real world. This involves firstly identifying where students are in their learning, on a path from beginner to advanced, and secondly describing what it means to be there (see section 6.1).

There is also a place in Learning Oriented Assessment for a simpler kind of interpretation: tests to measure *achievement* of curricular objectives may be useful and necessary.

The distinction between proficiency and achievement parallels that between treating language as a skill or as a body of knowledge – focusing

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