The complexities of implementing learning-oriented assessment among limited-proficiency EFL students

What this research was about and why it is important
Learning-oriented assessment (LOA) has been promoted in various educational contexts around the globe. Despite extensive discussions on the effectiveness of various types of LOA, studies on the implementation of LOA in authentic language classrooms, especially in an exam-dominant culture, are limited. Even less attention has been paid to the potential challenges of implementing LOA in such a context with learners of limited proficiency. Thus, in this case study, we investigated a language teacher’s practices and struggles in the process of implementing LOA with limited-proficiency students in an exam-oriented EFL context, together with students’ perceptions of and engagement with such practices in that particular context. The findings provide plausible strategies that may support LOA implementation in similar EFL classrooms with similar students.

What the researchers did
- Participants included one English teacher and three first-year EFL undergraduates with various levels of activeness and performance levels in a general English class.
- Classroom observation was carried out to document the teacher’s assessment practices and the students’ general responses to and engagement with such practices.
- Interviews were conducted with the teacher to explore her rationales for specific LOA implementation practices and the difficulties she experienced during that process, and with the students to further learn about their perceptions of and engagement with the teacher’s LOA practices.

What the researchers found
- The following table presents the challenges faced by the language teacher and her LOA implementation endeavors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Students’ lack of autonomy in learning.</td>
<td>Breaking down the teacher-student power hierarchy by encouraging and scaffolding students’ independent thinking, dialogic meaning making, and critical reflection.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students’ limited cognitive ability and proficiency to understand and use evaluative criteria.</td>
<td>Providing cognitive scaffolding and linguistic support with tailor-made LOA tasks and assessment criteria that align with students’ current proficiency level.</td>
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<td>Students’ limited engagement with or interest in ungraded informal LOA tasks.</td>
<td>Offering affective support to engage students with interesting and intellectually stimulating LOA tasks.</td>
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- Students overall showed positive attitudes towards the teacher’s LOA practices. However, different students with different performance levels reacted differently to the teacher’s attempts to promote dialogic meaning negotiation and the provision of affective support.

Things to consider
Although the findings of this small-scale case study are not generalizable beyond this context, they help reveal how students’ language proficiency, cognitive ability, affective responses, as well as their attitude toward and perceptions of assessment activities may together influence LOA implementation practices. The following dimensions need to be considered for better LOA implementation that facilitates language learning:
- The Contextual Dimension: When implementing LOA in language classrooms, teachers need to pay attention to local sociocultural norms and educational culture that may influence students’ perceptions of assessment and learning.
- The Learning Dimension and the Proficiency Dimension: Teachers should also learn to customize instruments and assessment approaches to fit their students’ current level of linguistic and cognitive ability.
- The Interational Dimension and the Affective Dimension: Teachers should seek to support self-regulated learning and incorporate intellectually stimulating tasks into their LOA design so as to engage students more meaningfully and make assessment activities truly learning-oriented.

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