

Becoming more literate about assessment literacy



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A growing number of higher education (HE) institutions in non-English-dominant contexts, such as Denmark, have adopted English as a medium of instruction (EMI) because of internationalization efforts. Given the expectations that EMI students study in English, which is not their first language (L1), research in these contexts has particularly focused on issues related to the assessment of students' English proficiency and the extent to which their English skills affect their ability to display content knowledge (Dimova and Kling, 2022).

This focus on English proficiency tends to overlook the reality that multilingual students use multiple languages during their disciplinary learning. Some scholars believe that allowing multilingual students to use all their linguistic resources, both when learning and during assessment, enables them to better communicate content knowledge, minimizes linguistic bias, and helps improve educational outcomes (Cenoz, 2023). Although different pedagogical approaches to integrating content and language in higher education have been discussed in the literature, few studies address the integration of content and language in assessment practices, and even fewer

focus on the role of multiple linguistic resources in formative or summative classroom-based assessment of disciplinary content (Tiongson et al., 2026).

In this paper, we argue that the lack of documented multilingual assessment points not only to monolingual ideologies but also to a limited understanding about how content functions within current frameworks for language and content assessment literacy (Dimova and Kling, 2022). In other words, despite the multilingual realities of classrooms, we still rely on one language (e.g., English *or* Danish) in disciplinary teaching and learning -- even more so when it comes to assessment.

Integration of content and language(s) in assessment

Many will recognize the following scenario, illustrated in extracts 1-3, which is based on data from the project *Towards a new model of communicative competence in multilingual higher education* and is common in EMI courses in Denmark. In this example, Master's level students in a course in physics are divided in small groups to solve exercises during class. During these group discussions, students often draw on shared L1s, depending on the linguistic backgrounds of those working together and their language preferences. As shown in extract 1, the students discuss the task primarily in Danish while working through a disciplinary problem together:

- FS11: It doesn't make sense. Så vi har at den hedder jo bare e e plus g g plus e g plus e e plus e g ikke? Det må være vores density og så siger vi så h o s med
- FS12: Jeg ved ikke. Det tror jeg jeg er lidt forvirret over det der. Hvor kender [...]
- FS11: Det er jo bare- vi har bare et two-level system. Det er jo bare
- FS12: Men men skal der ikke nogen nogen konstanter foran de forskellige
- FS11: Jo det skal der. Det- jo jo det skal der
- FS12: Fordi g g er vel nul eller hvad?
- FS11: Men jeg tænker bare du kan næsten du kan jo stadigvæk- vi får jo bare dem her plus nogle konstanter. Det er jo mere i forhold til om de kommuterer kommuterer med begge så jeg tænker bare man kan bruge ortogonalitet og så se. Jeg ved ikke lige hvorfor l1 i hans eksempel der er den bare væk
- FS12: Der er den bare væk. Der er den bare gone.

Extract 1. Group work (student-student interaction).

FS11 (student, Danish background), FS12 (student, Danish background)

When the students at some point ask the instructor for assistance, they switch to English:

- FS11: So, we have a question of what to do with the commutator.
- FS12: Yes, well I heard there were several other [...] but I had-
- I3: Yes, okay, so essentially what is given to you down here is [...] let's say let's say that you don't have a [state...] which means that [it's a still description] a more generalized description of the

quantum system. I don't give you a specific [...] with components to go in and check how the how the [...] change right but I tell you have a density matrix which will have information about the population of the states and the coherence [of the off-diagonal]

Extract 2. Group work (student-teacher interaction).

FS11 (student, Danish background), FS12 (student, Danish background), I3 (TA, Greek background)

However, despite the multilingual communication in the classroom, the assessment remains only in English. This is typically justified by the language policy of the course, the study program, or the university. In the example discussed here, the question of examination language was only mentioned explicitly once: during a brief exchange part of a question-and-answer session just before the exam, shown in extract 3.

FS5: It is then okay that we do it in Danish?

I1: Fine with me. Just don't tell anybody officially {students laugh}. In principle we are not allowed to speak a single word of Danish... also during teaching ... why? {students laugh}, and also not a single word of Chinese or...

Extract 3. Whole class discussion.

F5 (Danish background), I1 (course responsible lecturer, Danish background)

This scenario is not something new. Nissen (2018), for example, also found that not only did students use both languages during instruction, they were also allowed to respond in Danish to English exam questions to maximize the potential to display their knowledge. This raises an important question - is such a multilingual approach to assessment in content courses acceptable?

In many internationalized universities, the primary learning goal is content knowledge although through engagement with disciplinary discourses, students are also expected to develop disciplinary literacy, i.e. "ability to appropriately participate in the communicative practices of a discipline" (Airey, 2011: 3). Language plays a central role, in development of both. Arguably, if students are allowed to use both their first and second language, they will be able to develop content knowledge in both languages. When it comes to assessment, however, students may understandably prefer the language with which they are most comfortable. If the exam is expected to measure students' content knowledge, then allowing them to use all their linguistic resources to demonstrate their knowledge seems reasonable.

In other contexts, an English-only policy tends to be implemented in both instruction and assessment also because English proficiency is a learning goal alongside content. In such contexts, lecturers need to strike a balance between the role of content knowledge and language proficiency in the students' ability to develop and display disciplinary knowledge. Although some lecturers claim that they include language in their assessment rubrics, many assess language intuitively or implicitly (Gronchi, 2024). Focus on content remains a priority, though,

because content lecturers lack training to assess language and because they take into consideration the fact that students are L2 users of English (Otto and Estrada Chichón, 2021).

Interestingly, research suggests that content lecturers may implement multilingual accommodation strategies for students regardless of English-only policies. For instance, lecturers provide students with text translation and allow translanguaging during examination to help students optimize their assessment performance (Otto and Estrada Chichón, 2021; Sahan and Şahan, 2022).

Given that decisions regarding multilingual assessment tend to be intuitive rather than governed by explicit methodological considerations, Inbar-Lourie (2022) emphasizes the importance of developing content lecturers' language assessment literacy specifically for EMI contexts.

What is language assessment literacy?

Language assessment literacy (LAL) represents the theoretical knowledge and practical skills in language assessment that are embedded within a particular educational context (Dimova et al., 2022). Although content is not a common dimension in LAL models, scholars that focus on content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in relation to elementary and secondary education as well as EMI in university contexts have emphasized the importance of its inclusion in theoretical models (Inbar-Lourie, 2022; Liu and Lo, 2025).

Current models underline that lecturers should have 1) specific assessment knowledge of assessment purpose (focus on content, language, or both), 2) an understanding of content and language integration practices, and 3) an awareness of the educational and language policies in the particular educational context. These three dimensions contribute to lecturers' ability to identify whether content-learning issues arise from disciplinary content, the medium of instruction, or other academic or cultural shortcomings in the case of international students. Multilingualism, here, is an essential component, particularly in relation to the role of multiple languages in EMI students' development of disciplinary literacy. However, the current models need refinement to raise awareness about the purpose, the methods, and the outcomes of multilingual assessment in university courses.

How about multilingual assessment literacy with content integration?

As the classroom example above shows, some EMI content lecturers may intuitively experiment with assessments that integrate multiple languages and disciplinary content. However, deliberate implementation of multilingual assessment approaches requires structured university pedagogical training. To support multilingual assessment, lecturer training should include an extended multi-LAL model that draws on the existing frameworks. Such a model would involve the following competences:

1. Understanding of the contextual factors and educational policies, including the linguistic and cultural background of students and lecturers, as well as the extent to which multiple languages are present in curricula, learning environments, and educational policies
2. Awareness of the different assessment purposes relevant for the local educational context, with emphasis on the role of multilingual scaffolding and feedback in assessment for learning
3. Theoretical knowledge regarding assessment constructs (e.g., disciplinary literacy, multilingual communication, and content knowledge)
4. Ability to employ the fundamental assessment principles in the design of assessment tasks and assessment criteria by integrating content, multilingual, and multimodal assessment categories
5. Ability to interpret assessment results in relation to students' multilingual and disciplinary needs

By raising theoretical, methodological, and practical awareness of the role of multilingualism in content knowledge development (learning) and display (exams), multi-LAL training would provide EMI content lecturers with an extended assessment literacy, which can allow them to make informed decisions about their teaching and assessment practices.

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