



Language Skills Assessment: A Standardized Reference Framework for Burkina Faso

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Abstract

The assessment of language skills plays a crucial role in language teaching and learning. Still, Burkina Faso's absence of a standardized reference framework is a major challenge. This article explores the issues in assessing language skills in this context. We highlight current shortcomings, including the lack of common standards for assessing language skills, which have implications for language teaching. We propose a needs analysis of language skills assessment in Burkina Faso, highlighting the obstacles teachers and learners encounter. We also examine international best practices in language assessment to provide insights into how to develop a framework adapted to the Burkina Faso context. In conclusion, this article argues for developing a standardized reference framework for language skills assessment in Burkina Faso. Such a framework could not only improve the quality of language teaching but also facilitate Burkina Faso's integration into the international language teaching community. This is a crucial step towards strengthening learners' language skills through progress monitoring and feedback mechanisms. This also paves the way for international collaborations and Internationalization at home projects.

Keywords: *Language skills assessment, Standardized reference framework, Burkina Faso, International best practices, language learning*

Introduction

The assessment of language skills plays a crucial role in language teaching. It is a cornerstone for measuring learners' progress, identifying their specific requirements and guiding teaching methods. However, in Burkina Faso, as in many other regions, the lack of a standardized reference framework for language assessment constitutes a significant challenge for teachers, learners and educational institutions.

This lack of a standardized reference framework raises fundamental questions about the relevance, accuracy and fairness of language skills assessment in Burkina Faso. How do teachers assess learners' language skills? To what extent are these assessments reliable and comparable from one institution to another? More importantly, how does this affect language learning in a context where proficiency in English, French and other foreign languages is increasingly essential for academic and professional success?

This article intends to examine the language skills assessment in Burkina Faso comprehensively. We will delve into the distinct difficulties that educators and learners encounter due to the absence of a universally accepted benchmark. Furthermore, we will address the consequences of this deficiency on the fairness and effectiveness of language education within the nation. Lastly, we will investigate potential remedies, such as incorporating or embracing global standards, for this urgent issue in language instruction.

1. Literature Review

Language proficiency assessment is an essential part of language teaching worldwide. It is a process which measures an individual's command of a language, whether in an educational, professional or social context. These assessments' results significantly impact learners' academic and professional careers (1).



Standardization of language assessments is crucial to ensure their validity, reliability and comparability. Standardized reference frameworks, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFRL (2), or, in the United States, the Proficiency Guidelines developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages or ACTFL (3), have been developed to establish common standards for language assessment. They provide clear descriptors of language skills, enabling more accurate and consistent assessment.

In Burkina Faso, the assessment of language skills faces unique challenges. The lack of a standardized frame of reference makes language assessments subjective and heterogeneous (4). Teachers develop their own assessment criteria, leading to bias and inconsistencies in results. Furthermore, this limits the comparability of learners' language performance between educational institutions.

The lack of standardization in language assessment profoundly affects language teaching in Burkina Faso. Teachers find it difficult to define clear learning objectives, and learners can be confused by constantly changing expectations (5). This situation can also affect learners' motivation and confidence in their language skills.

Faced with these challenges, solutions are possible. The adaptation or adoption of international reference frameworks, such as the CEFR, could provide an answer to the question of standardization (6). In addition, in-service teacher training in the principles of language assessment could help improve assessment quality.

2. The current state of language teaching in Burkina Faso and the challenges teachers and students face

The current state of language teaching in Burkina Faso is marked by several challenges concerning the assessment of language skills. These challenges affect teachers and students and impact the country's language teaching quality.

Firstly, it is necessary to note that Burkina Faso is a multilingual country, with several national languages in addition to French, which is the official language. Teaching foreign languages, such as English, is therefore essential to enable students to communicate in a globalized context, which explains why the lack of a standardized reference framework for assessing language skills in these languages is so problematic.

In addition, teachers in Burkina Faso face challenges such as a lack of teaching resources and appropriate assessment tools. They are often forced to use traditional teaching and assessment methods that do not take account of students' specific language skills requirements.

For students, the lack of a standardized reference framework makes it difficult to assess and progress in foreign languages. They need clear benchmarks to understand where they stand in terms of language skills and to monitor their progress (7).

To meet these challenges, it is essential to develop assessment tools adapted to Burkina Faso's context and train teachers in their use. In addition, integrating Information and Communication Technologies in Education (ICTE) can provide more efficient and standardized opportunities for assessing language skills.

3. Needs Analysis of Language Skills Assessment in Burkina Faso

The assessment of language skills plays a crucial role in language teaching. It makes measuring learners' competence levels possible, guides teaching, and directs efforts at continuous improvement. Assessment of language proficiency is an essential practice in language teaching. According to (8), it refers to a systematic process of measuring and evaluating an individual's proficiency in a given language, whether it is the mother tongue or a foreign language. This assessment aims to determine the mastery of linguistic skills, particularly oral and written comprehension, oral and written expression, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.

The main purpose of language proficiency assessment is to provide accurate information about an individual's level of language proficiency (9). This can be used for several purposes, including guiding teachers in their teaching methods, adapting curricula, certifying language proficiency for academic or professional purposes, and measuring the progression of language learning over time (10).

Various methods and tools for language proficiency, from standardized examinations to continuous classroom assessments (11). These methods vary according to the aims of the assessment, the target language, the age and level of the learners, and the resources available (1). The effectiveness of



language assessment lies in its ability to provide accurate and objective information about an individual's level of proficiency, which can guide educational and professional decisions.

Language assessment is given new perspectives today with the democratization of artificial intelligence (AI). When coupled with IA, the existing frameworks such as CEFRL and ACTFL are easy to use both for language teachers and students. For example, ChatGPT will assess the level of any given text according to the CEFRL guidelines and not only indicate the level of the text but also produce a detailed explanation as to why the text conforms to the criteria that the CEFRL framework stipulates

4. Proposal for a Reference Framework for Language Assessment in Burkina Faso

As we confront this issue, one must ask: is it more prudent to create an entirely new assessment system or to draw upon well-established and globally recognized models? Our proposal advocates for the latter, suggesting that the path to improved language assessment in Burkina Faso may lie in adopting proven and widely accepted reference frameworks.

One key consideration in adopting an established framework is the economic factor. Developing a new assessment system from the ground up can be costly. However, there are reputable language assessment models available online and, in some cases, even free. By leveraging these existing resources, Burkina Faso can economize and immediately implement a comprehensive language assessment framework. It is an approach that aligns with the nation's broader efforts to enhance education accessibility and quality (12) (Hines, 2009)

In light of this, we propose to share information concerning the "reference framework for language assessment" more broadly. This implies, for example, posting information concerning conferences in West Africa. It also means putting follow-up initiatives into place, especially initiatives focused on Burkina Faso's needs.

The organization of a dedicated conference within Burkina Faso would bring together experts, educators, and policymakers. This conference would be a platform for discussing adopting a reference framework for language assessment in Burkina Faso. The objective is twofold: to raise awareness about the urgent need for standardized language assessment and to explore viable options for integrating well-established systems into the nation's educational landscape. By fostering dialogue and collaboration, Burkina Faso can move closer to addressing the language assessment gap and ensuring equitable and high-quality language education for all.

Conclusion

Educators and learners in Burkina Faso grapple with the challenges posed by the absence of universally accepted benchmarks, leading to the subjective nature of language assessments. Without standardized criteria, these assessments are conducted with inherent bias, often resulting in incoherent results and the inability to compare learners' language skills across different educational institutions. The repercussions of this lack of standardization extend far beyond the classroom, influencing the broader educational and professional landscape of Burkina Faso.

Addressing this issue is not beyond the realm of possibilities. Adopting established frameworks such as the CEFR or ACTFL standards would allow Burkina Faso to harmonize language assessment practices with global best practices, ensuring that its learners' skills are measured efficiently and recognized internationally. Indeed, rather than embarking on the costly endeavor of developing a new assessment system from scratch, utilizing readily available, well-established, and often accessible language assessment models provides a practical, cost-effective solution. This approach aligns with Burkina Faso's broader objectives of enhancing education accessibility and quality and utilizing existing resources efficiently.

The proposal to organize a conference within Burkina Faso dedicated to adopting a reference framework for language assessment is a pivotal step in this journey. Through this conference and follow-up initiatives, awareness can be raised, solutions can be explored, and collaboration can be



fostered. This journey towards standardization is not just about assessing language skills; it's about opening doors and broadening horizons for the Higher Education system in Burkina; it's about empowering individuals with the tools they need to succeed in a globalized world.

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