

PBLA: Moving Towards Sustainability

The introduction of Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) in Canada has been a major national initiative – unique in breadth and scope.

PBLA was initially undertaken by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) in response to several studies on language training in Canada which recommended that a teacher-based assessment protocol be introduced in federally-funded language training programs. Through this initiative, and managed through the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CCLB), classroom-based assessment related to the CLB standards is currently being introduced into Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classrooms across Canada. The province of Ontario has joined the initiative, supporting the introduction of PBLA into their adult ESL programs through funding from the Ministry of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade. At the time of writing, the project is at a midpoint in the initial introduction of PBLA into ESL classrooms.

While the Canadian PBLA initiative is unique, requiring us to “make the road by walking”, we benefit from the experiences of other international initiatives as we now move from the introduction of PBLA in classrooms, to the sustainability of the initiative over the coming years.

Looking Back: The Foundations

In 2009, at the outset of the federal initiative, CIC determined that they wanted an assessment approach that would benefit learners and support better learning results in the classroom. They

also wanted to bring teachers to a common standard of practice and improve CIC's ability to measure the impact of language training. To accomplish these goals, CIC seconded Joanne Pettis from Manitoba Labour and Immigration to develop a portfolio language assessment approach modeled on Manitoba's successful use of Collaborative Language Portfolio Assessment (CLPA). In the assessment literature, "portfolio-based language assessment" is widely used to describe an approach to assessment; in this paper, Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) is used to describe the specific approach being introduced through this CIC-supported national initiative.

In Canada, PBLA is a comprehensive, systematic, and collaborative approach to language assessment referenced to the principles and standards of the Canadian Language Benchmarks. It has been informed by theoretical developments in classroom and teacher-based assessment, and incorporates both formative and summative assessment purposes. It has specific fundamental features: needs assessments, baseline personal information collection, classroom learning and assessment tasks, self-assessment and reflection activities, end of term portfolio reviews, progress reports, and learner progress conferences. The approach draws heavily on Assessment for Learning (AfL) research and principles.

Referencing the Canadian Language Benchmarks

PBLA is consistent with the principles that underlie the CLB, and as such is

- Learner-centred – with tasks based on the needs and goals of learners, as determined by the needs assessment activities built into PBLA protocols.

- Task-based – based on communicative “real world” instances of language use, to accomplish specific purposes in particular contexts.
- Competency-based – focused on what learners can do in English.
- Context-based – embedded in the community, study, and work-related themes and topics identified by learners as relevant.

Encompassing both Formative and Summative Purposes

Traditionally, formative and summative assessment practices have had discrete purposes. Formative assessment has been conducted as an ongoing, frequently informal process of assessment for learning. Learners use feedback from formative assessment to modify their learning strategies, and instructors use it to adjust their teaching strategies and plans. Summative assessment has traditionally been used to determine the result of the learning process, typically through a formal process at the end of a period of instruction, often using assessment tasks developed by external experts

Current conceptions of assessment see formative and summative assessment as interrelated. In 1989, a voluntary group of U.K. researchers, later known as the Assessment Reform Group, came together to ensure that assessment policy and practice were based on relevant research evidence. Two members of this group, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, reviewed over 250 quantitative research studies, in a seminal study that concluded that innovative formative assessment practices can raise standards and promote effective lifelong learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The study initiated the current view that all assessment should be formative.

During the development of PBLA, we approached formative and summative assessment as interrelated, following many of the classroom-based Assessment for Learning (AfL) principles that developed in the discussions that followed Black and William's original work.

Incorporating Key Assessment for Learning (AfL) Strategies

Assessment reformers have made the case for a strong link between assessment and instruction, arguing that assessment has great potential for improving both teaching and learning when embedded directly in instructional practice. Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, and Wiliam (2005) identified five key Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies, based on extensive research and work with classroom instructors. These strategies were key to the development and implementation of PBLA:

- *Strategy 1: Clarify learning intents and criteria for success.* In PBLA, instructors articulate learning goals for all tasks, along with criteria for success, which are shared with learners and later used for both learner and instructor feedback.
- *Strategy 2: Incorporate classroom activities that elicit evidence of learning.* In PBLA, instructors actively gather information on learning, as a basis for conversation with individual learners, and for use in adjusting instruction.
- *Strategy 3: Provide action-oriented feedback that moves learners forward.* In PBLA, feedback addresses what the learner needs to do to improve, and provides opportunities for learners to act on the information.

- *Strategy 4: Activate learners to become instructional resources for one another.* In PBLA, we look for ways to engage learners in supporting one another, including peer-assessment of learning.
- *Strategy 5: Activate learners to become owners of their learning.* In PBLA, learners use agreed-on criteria for self-assessment and learning reflection.

These and other understandings of AfL introduced by members of the Assessment Reform Group led to a profusion of international initiatives. From 2006 – 2008, the group further advanced the discussion of AfL, through their involvement in the Analysis and Review of Innovations in Assessment (ARIA) project, which brought together over 200 experts to discuss key issues relating to AfL initiatives. Their discussions revealed a number of principles for the ongoing development of AfL, including the need for widely agreed-upon standards (Harlen & Gardner, pp.48-51), a need explored later in this paper, as we consider directions for PBLA moving forward.

Recognizing the Dependability of Classroom-Based Assessment

The increased emphasis on AfL strategies, along with the focus on the interrelationship of formative and summative assessment, led to further research of the advantages of classroom-based assessment, and the professional role of instructors in that assessment (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2003; Davison & Leung, 2009; Gardner, Harlen, Hayward and Stobart, 2010; Leahy and Wiliam, 2011; Harlen, 2004, 2005; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2014).

Part of this discussion has focused on the dependability of classroom-based assessment. In 2004, Wynne Harlen of the University of Cambridge undertook a systematic review of 30

papers for the EPPI Centre of the University of London, England, in order to provide research evidence for the dependability of summative assessment by instructors. The study also explored the conditions that affect the reliability and validity of instructors' summative assessments. It found that assessments by instructors had the potential to provide accurate summative information when specific conditions were met.

Additionally, in the longitudinal King's Oxfordshire Summative Assessment Project (KOSAP), teacher educators/researchers collaborated with a group of 18 teachers over a period of two and a half years, to explore strategies that could enhance the quality of teachers' summative assessments and to promote a positive interaction between formative and summative assessment practices (Black, Harrison, Hodgen, Marshall & Serret, 2011). Together, the two studies suggest a number of conditions for quality classroom-based assessment.

Both studies found that the task design process was key to reliable assessment. Designing the task gave teachers a deep understanding of learning goals and criteria, and this understanding was in turn key to task and assessment validity. For this reason, Harlen argues that programs should support teachers in the development of tasks and criteria, rather than merely developing standardized assessment tasks (Harlen, 2005, p. 267). The KOSAP study found that the careful implementation of tasks was key to effective assessment, including how tasks and criteria were introduced in the class, the amount of scaffolding provided, and the use of peer assessment. Instructors in the KOSAP study specifically explored how summative assessment could be embedded in classroom work and how learner portfolios could be structured to include a range of tasks appropriate to the learning goals.

Both studies also found that the dependability of the summative results lay in a shared interpretation of assessment criteria. Both emphasized the value of moderation sessions in which instructors look at learner work together, as an important step in developing a shared understanding of learning goals and related assessment criteria.

To foster both task and assessment dependability, we integrate many of these measures in PBLA. Instructors develop tasks and criteria that align with CLB standards and learner-identified interests and goals, they share criteria with learners, they encourage learner self-assessment and learning reflection, and they collect a balance and range of tasks in portfolios.

PBLA Today: Implementation

The introduction of PBLA into all LINC programs nationwide, and into provincially-funded ESL programs in Ontario, has been and continues to be an ambitious endeavour. Our roll-out plan incorporated learning from two pilot projects, the first in 2010-2011 with Ottawa LINC programs, and the second in 2011-2012 with LINC programs in Edmonton and New Brunswick. The national rollout of PBLA following these pilot projects has used a train-the-trainer or ‘cascade’ approach, in three phases:

- *PBLA Foundations*: Lead instructors complete an intensive online course,
- *Application Phase*: Lead instructors introduce PBLA in their own classrooms,
- *Implementation Phase*: Lead instructors introduce PBLA to their colleagues and provide ongoing support.

Based on findings from the ARIA study, Harlen (2010) suggests that pilot and roll-out or cascade approaches may have initial success in the development phase of large scale innovations

such as PBLA, but that this development phase needs to be carefully supported to maximize genuine participation and ensure long term integration of key understandings (p.102). The goal is the transformation of practice rather than mere transmission of good practices (Gardner, p. 9). To facilitate this sort of long term and in-depth integration of classroom assessment practices, our implementation team is led by two project leads, and supported by twelve regional coaches, selected for their expertise in using the CLB and portfolios for classroom planning and assessment.

The roll-out began with regional coaches piloting the online PBLA Foundations course, to develop shared understandings of the goals and expectations, and to provide input for subsequent revisions. The coaches have since initiated the deep exploration of assessment practices at the regional and local levels, by facilitating the PBLA Foundation courses for lead instructors, and by supporting lead instructors through all phases of implementation in classrooms and programs.

Supporting Change of Practice: Lead Instructors

In the early stages of local implementation, PBLA is introduced to program administrators through a one-hour webinar. Administrators can also access the *PBLA Guide for Teachers and Programs* for additional information about key PBLA principles and protocols, and for answers to common implementation questions. Following this introduction, administrators nominate lead instructors from within their programs, based on their classroom teaching skills, expertise in using the CLB, and informal leadership qualities.

Because the lead instructor's role is to introduce PBLA and support colleagues through implementation, we aim for a ratio of one lead instructor for approximately 10 classroom instructors, although all programs, regardless of size, are allocated at least one lead instructor. From the time lead instructors begin their professional learning, they are compensated the equivalent of five hours per week.

In the U.K., ARIA project researchers concluded that attempts to change practice in education must aim for a change in understanding rather than a superficial change in teaching techniques, with John Gardner cautioning strongly against “the misleading allure of classroom strategies and a failure to harness teachers’ beliefs and commitment” (Gardner, 2010, p. 9). To foster committed learning, the 12-week online PBLA Foundations course introduces lead instructors to core PBLA principles and practices through a variety of readings, videos, application activities, and discussions. Lead instructors complete and get feedback on several assignments, each inviting a deep analysis of assessment principles through review and reflection opportunities. Assignments include the development of needs assessment and goal setting activities, learner reflection activities, task-based module plans, and assessment tasks that have clear criteria related to the CLB standards and are supported by learner samples showing evidence of learner self-assessment and action-oriented feedback to learners.

After completing the course, lead instructors begin the Application Phase in which they 1) introduce PBLA in their own classrooms for a period of 12 to 14 weeks, 2) complete further work-in-progress submissions and reflections, and 3) submit a learner portfolio and get feedback from their regional coach. They are further supported through an online forum, where they can ask questions and engage in discussions with their regional coach and other lead instructors.

Upon successful completion of the PBLA Foundations course and the Application Phase, they are certified as lead instructors.

Supporting Change of Practice: Instructors and Programs

Large scale dissemination programs such as PBLA tend out of necessity to be ‘top-down’ rather than ‘bottom up’, resulting in fewer opportunities to tailor experiences to individual needs. However, Harlen (2010) suggests that even in large scale initiatives, reflective and practice-relevant content and structure can support collaborative learning that enables instructors to put new ideas into practice in their own schools and classrooms. In the implementation of PBLA in individual programs and classrooms, therefore, our goal has been genuine participation by all stakeholders in the exploration of AfL principles, applied in practice in different classroom contexts.

The introduction of PBLA to classroom instructors takes place over several months. Lead instructors and local program administrators are provided with a set of workshop resources based on materials used in the PBLA Foundations course, including materials on facilitating change. After reviewing the materials, they spend a day with the regional coach, planning implementation for their program. Lead instructors then introduce PBLA to colleagues over a period of five to seven months, via workshops requiring the equivalent of four full days of PD. Classes are cancelled to accommodate the workshops, generally scheduled in half day blocks.

Each session introduces a key PBLA principle or practice, and includes opportunities for instructors to discuss the implications for their own teaching context. Between sessions, instructors try out strategies in their own classrooms and share learning and reflections. During

this period, lead instructors are again supported through an online forum in which they can ask questions and discuss challenges with regional coaches and other lead instructors from across the country.

Once the workshops have been completed, classroom instructors introduce PBLA in their classrooms. For the first full year of implementation, further opportunities to deepen learning are provided through end-of-semester portfolio review sessions which focus on assessment issues, portfolio evaluations, learner conferences, and progress reports.

At the time of writing, three cohorts of lead instructors have completed the initial PBLA Foundations course. In Cohort One, approximately 90 lead instructors have been certified, and have introduced PBLA to approximately 550 classroom instructors, who began using PBLA in their classrooms in April 2015. By September 2015, a further 215 lead instructors in Cohorts Two and Three will be certified, ready to introduce PBLA to approximately 1250 classroom instructors. Cohort Four will begin the PBLA Foundations course in September 2015, adding up to 135 additional lead instructors.

Looking forward: Sustainability

Long term sustainability has been a goal of the PBLA project from the outset. In *Developing Teacher Assessment*, a book reporting on understandings arising from the ARIA project, Gardner, Harlen, Hayward, and Stobart (2010) present a model of sustainability (Figure 1) that seems well-suited to inform the PBLA initiative as it moves forward. They suggest that several elements in the change process interact in a “complex, interwoven and interdependent manner” (Gardner, p. 8).

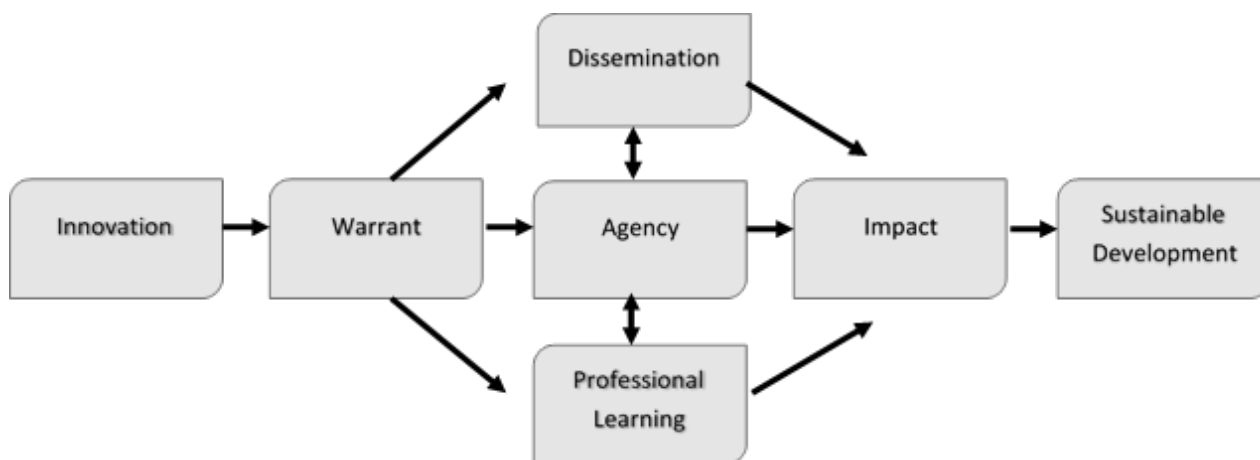


Figure 1: Model for Sustainability (Gardner, p.8)

If we use the model to interpret the PBLA initiative, the full range of PBLA practices and protocols introduced would constitute the first element, innovation. The strong evidence that supports teacher-based assessment as a viable and powerful classroom process – evidence that starts with the 1998 Black and Wiliam study and includes the many others that have followed – would constitute the warrant. Our approach in rolling out the PBLA initiative fits as the dissemination element. As such, PBLA might be described as an innovation in the midst of dissemination, or nearing the end of the dissemination process. We might now turn our thoughts to the remaining elements of the model and their importance for sustainability.

Professional Learning and Self-Agency

Unless instructors are committed through self-agency to a particular change, the likelihood of successful integration of an innovation is low (Holmes, Gardner & Galanouli, 2007). Holmes, Gardner and Galanouli suggest that, if this commitment is to develop, instructors must be aware of the change being proposed, and the evidence for its impact on learner motivation and achievement. Instructors must also perceive that the change will support their teaching. Only then will instructors be open to learning and implementing new ideas, and to reflecting on how

these ideas might change their own practice. This learning and reflection process requires external resources (time for professional development, collaboration with colleagues), but brings with it the benefit of a revitalized and dependable assessment process, grounded in both research and practice.

The national PBLA implementation process has begun to facilitate this sort of instructor engagement in and commitment to professional learning and change. For PBLA practice to be sustained through evolving classroom and system realities, however, ongoing support will be required for three key professional learning components:

- Professional learning experiences that encourage instructors to continue to deepen their understanding of assessment principles and to try out new strategies in their classrooms.
- Local and online spaces where instructors can 1) reflect on practice, including their experimentation with new ideas and strategies, and 2) collaborate with other instructors who share their engagement in classroom-based assessment.
- Protection of systemic support of professional learning, by including administrators in professional learning about assessment innovation, and by seeking continued funding and other evidence of official support for change.

Impact

For any innovative program to continue, it must demonstrate effectiveness to those involved in the change, and to those looking on: funders, policy makers, and researchers in the field. The program must both have an impact and be seen to have an impact.

In the ARIA study, many of the projects reviewed had multiple goals, with broad aims and very general outcomes, and in most cases, the evidence of change or improvement was reported by instructors. Stobart (2010) argues that, while instructor advocacy for the effectiveness of a classroom innovation is powerful, it may not provide sufficient evidence for external policy makers and researchers. He suggests projects should provide systematic information about the impact of change, and proposes an evaluative framework with several components:

- Baseline descriptors of pre-innovation practices and standards
- Statements of intended outcomes
- Evidence of outcomes
- Unintended consequences
- Interpretations including alternative explanations (Stobart, 2010, p. 145).

Stobart also provides guidelines for how a project like PBLA might gather evidence of successful change: by clearly identifying the intended outcomes and criteria for success, triangulating multiple lines of evidence that point in the same direction, and incorporating strategies, such as surveys, to minimize the burden that impact studies put on participants.

Sustainable Development

The context in which an innovation is introduced is never static. Good assessment practice requires ongoing response to dynamic and ever-changing contexts. Instructors must have the opportunity to review their assessment practices as their needs and the needs of learners change over time.

Harlen and Hayward (2010) draw on the work of Cullingford (2004) who suggests that sustainability has two dimensions, scientific and moral. The scientific aspect would be sustaining assessment practices that are based on research evidence and contextualized in classroom experience. The moral aspect recognizes that all of us who are involved in assessment are affected by each other's actions, and that sustaining an initiative requires negotiating across competing interests and values.

The moral aspect of sustainability also recognizes that while collaboration is essential (Cullingford, 2004, p.247), the provision of the best possible learning experiences to learners remains central. Instructors have a responsibility to focus on learning and learners, and beyond that, to work with 1) the research community to create an environment in which practice is consistent with evidence-based research, and 2) policy makers in the use of assessment information for accountability purposes. Researchers have a responsibility to work with instructors and policy makers to deepen understanding of assessment research and the implications of findings. Policy makers have a responsibility to work with instructors and researchers to make educationally sound decisions.

Sustainability of PBLA will be a complex process, but one that will benefit from maintaining the core values of AfL and from keeping specific research learnings in mind, in the contexts of both national and regional applications. Harlen and Hayward (2010, p.157) suggest several values that can help maintain flexibility and relevance in our national assessment process as we move forward. These values are attached to three broadly defined groups: reflective practitioners who direct their own learning and collaborate to develop learner-responsive activities; active learners who are engaged in their own learning; and administrators, advisors,

and policy makers who are committed to effective pedagogical practices and an assessment system flexible enough to allow all practitioners to adapt it to their own contexts without losing key features (Harlen and Hayward 2010, p.157).

AfL studies have also provided a number of specific understandings that have implications for PBLA (Harlen & Hayward, 2010, pp.168-169). These understandings are summarized below, with implications for the sustainability of PBLA.

1. *Instructors, lead instructors and others need regular opportunities to discuss their assessment practices and to learn from each other; professional development must be continuous, recognizing that effective work requires ongoing commitment.*
 - a. Going forward, ongoing opportunities for professional learning that provide time for instructors to talk through ideas and reflect on their assessment practices should be maintained.
 - b. Additionally, ongoing, bottom-up collaborative initiatives such as the development of resources by and for classroom instructors should be initiated, to maximize the “energizing effect of participative models of development” (Harlen & Hayward, p.170).
2. *Instructors must see what they are doing as worthwhile and consistent with their own and national goals for learning. Instructors and others must have evidence of positive impact on learning. To sustain change, PBLA should support a range of research initiatives:*
 - a. Instructor action-research studies to enhance engagement and deepen professional learning.

- b. Impact studies that focus on the dependability of instructor-based assessment.
 - c. Research studies that focus on the impact of PBLA on language learners.
3. *The information provided through assessment needs to be useful to and valued by those receiving it; learners need to be aware of their role in assessment.* Studies that gather feedback from learners about the impact of PBLA on their engagement in learning should be supported.
4. *There should be consistency between different parts within the whole assessment system.*
- a. Going forward, broad standards should be developed and agreed upon by all stakeholders – classroom instructors, administrators, policy makers, and researchers. This will enhance shared understandings of the principles of PBLA and criteria for successful application in specific classroom contexts.
 - b. Processes for reviewing PBLA guidelines and protocols to meet changing contexts and to ensure adherence to agreed-upon standards should be established.
 - c. PBLA should also introduce ongoing moderation sessions to support the dependability of instructor summative assessment and to ensure consistency in interpreting the CLB standards.

- d. Additionally, TESL education programs should incorporate the development of assessment competence (including AfL principles, and the use of the CLB framework) in all TESL programs.
5. *The necessary resources must be available to sustain and develop practice.* In the years ahead, external support needs to be maintained for ongoing professional learning, a PBLA community of practice, and the development of materials and resources consistent with PBLA principles to meet changing contexts.

Conclusion

The implementation of PBLA has been 1) geographically dispersed across a wide range of Canadian programs and classes, 2) systemically complex, and yet 3) rooted in best practices, as suggested by evidence-based research. At this point, dissemination is ongoing, and we should soon see an impact on learning, manifested in ways that reflect the wide range of learning contexts across the country. As we move forward, sustainability of the PBLA initiative will be key, but will bring another layer of challenges. To ensure that this important national initiative achieves its potential to improve assessment practices and enhance learning in adult ESL classes across the country, we will need support for ongoing professional learning and classroom resources, development of agreed-upon standards and moderation sessions to ensure consistent application of these standards, and initiation of research to measure the impact of PBLA.

References

- Black, P., Harrison, C., Hodgen, J., Marshall, B., & Serret, N. (2011). Can teachers' summative assessments produce dependable results and also enhance classroom learning? *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 18 (4), 451-469.
- Black, P., Harrison, C. Lee, C., Marshall, B. & Wiliam, D. (2003). *Assessment for learning: Putting it into practice*. Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998). *Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment*. London, UK: King's College London School of Education.
- Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (2012). *Canadian Language Benchmarks: ESL for adults*. Ottawa, ON.
- Cullingford, C. (2004). The future: Is sustainability sustainable? In J. Blewitt & C. Cullingford (Eds.) *The Sustainability Curriculum* (pp. 245-52). London, UK: Earthscan.
- Davison, C. & Leung, C. (2009). Current issues in English language teacher-based assessment. *TESOL Quarterly*, 43(3), 393-415.
- Gardner, J. (2010). Developing teacher assessment: an introduction. In J. Gardner, W. Harlen, L. Hayward, & G. Stobart, *Developing teacher assessment* (pp. 1-11). Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Gardner, J, Harlen, W., Hayward, L. & Stobart, G. (2010). *Developing teacher assessment*. Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Harlen, W. (2004). A systematic review of the evidence of reliability and validity of assessment by teachers used for summative purposes. In *Research evidence in education library*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, and Institute of Education.
- Harlen, W. (2005). Trusting teachers' judgement: research evidence of the reliability and validity of teachers' assessment used for summative purposes. *Research Papers in Education*, 20(3), 245-270.
- Harlen, W. (2010). Professional learning to support teacher assessment. In J. Gardner, W. Harlen, L. Hayward, & G. Stobart, *Developing teacher assessment* (pp.100-129). Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Harlen, W. & Gardner, J. (2010). Assessment to support learning. In J. Gardner, W. Harlen, L. Hayward, & G. Stobart, *Developing teacher assessment* (pp. 15-28). Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Holmes, B., Gardner, J. & Galanouli, D. (2007). Striking the right chord and sustaining successful professional development in ICT. *Journal of In-Service Education*, 33(4), 389-404.

- Klenowski, V. & Wyatt-Smith, C. (2014). *Assessment for education: Standards, judgement and moderation*. London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Leahy, S., Lyon, C., Thompson, M., & Wiliam, D. (2005). Classroom assessment: Minute-by-minute and day-by-day. *Educational Leadership*, 63(3), 19-24.
- Leahy, S., & Wiliam, D. (2011). From teachers to schools: Scaling up professional development for formative assessment. In J. Gardner (Ed.), *Assessment and learning* (2nd ed.). London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Pettis, J. (2014). *Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA): Guide for teachers and programs*. Ottawa ON: Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks.
- Stobart, G. (2010). Making a difference: evaluating the impact of innovations in assessment. In J. Gardner, W. Harlen, L. Hayward, & G. Stobart, *Developing teacher assessment*. Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.