




Consolidating a Culture of Assessment for Learning: EFL Teachers' Appropriation of an Assessment Policy through a Virtual Community of Practice

Juan Carlos Montoya López¹ 

Edgar Picón Jácome² 

Contributor roles: Juan Carlos Montoya López: Conceptualization, Investigation, Software, Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing-original draft preparation.
Edgar Picón Jácome: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Project administration and supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Validation, Writing-review and editing.

Citation: Montoya, J. C. and Picón, E. (2024). Consolidating a Culture of Assessment for Learning: EFL Teachers' Appropriation of an Assessment Policy through a Virtual Community of Practice. *Colomb. Appl. Linguistic. J.*, 26(2), pp. 102-117.

Received: 07-Aug.-2023 / **Accepted:** 22-Jul.-2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14483/22487085.20961>

Abstract

This participatory action research study inquired about EFL teachers' appropriation of a language education policy through a virtual community of practice on language assessment literacies. From a critical sociocultural perspective, the participants' appropriation was studied aiming at understanding how their discourses and praxes embraced an AfL culture. During the process, teachers inquired and reflected on their lived experiences as they judged the system's rationality, sustainability, and justice. The analysis yielded evidence of the consolidation of the policy through five main findings: (1) The community unlocked space for the participants to develop understandings and propose actions. (2) They openly debated their interpretations of the system tenets and shared their practical knowledge. (3) In doing so, they tested their knowledge, beliefs, and self-declared purposes against the official assessment policy. (4) The interactions permitted to infer their internalization of assessment as a socially constructed practice. (5) The learning gained throughout the process allowed for the adjustment of the evaluation system to maximize its practicality and positive impact.

Keywords: policy appropriation, assessment for learning, community of practice, evaluation system, language assessment literacy, language policy

1 Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia. Grupo de Investigación Acción y Evaluación en Lenguas Extranjeras, GIAE. juan.montoyal@udea.edu.co, Calle 70 No. 52-72, Ciudad Universitaria, Oficina 11-204.

2 Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia. Grupo de Investigación Acción y Evaluación en Lenguas Extranjeras, GIAE. edgar.picon@udea.edu.co, Calle 70 No. 52-21, Edificio San Ignacio – Paraninfo, Oficina 308.



Consolidando una cultura de evaluación para el aprendizaje: la apropiación de una política de evaluación por parte de profesores de ILE a través de una comunidad virtual de practica

Resumen

Esta investigación-acción participativa indagó sobre la apropiación de una política de inglés como lengua extranjera, por parte de profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera, a través de una comunidad virtual de práctica sobre desarrollo profesional en evaluación. Desde una perspectiva sociocultural crítica, se analizó la apropiación de los participantes para comprender cómo sus discursos y praxis incorporan una cultura de la evaluación-para-el-aprendizaje. Los profesores indagaron y reflexionaron sobre sus experiencias vividas mientras evaluaban la racionalidad, sostenibilidad y justicia del sistema. El análisis aportó pruebas que confirman la consolidación de una cultura de evaluación-para-el-aprendizaje, a través de cinco hallazgos principales: (1) Se abrió un espacio para que los participantes desarrollaran entendimientos y propusieran acciones. (2) Los profesores debatieron abiertamente sobre sus interpretaciones de los principios del sistema y compartieron sus conocimientos prácticos. (3) Al hacerlo, pusieron a prueba sus conocimientos, creencias y propósitos auto declarados frente a la política de evaluación oficial. (4) Sus interacciones permitieron inferir una interiorización de la evaluación como práctica socialmente construida. (5) El aprendizaje obtenido en la comunidad permitió ajustar el sistema de evaluación para maximizar su viabilidad e impacto positivo.

Palabras clave: apropiación de políticas, evaluación para el aprendizaje, comunidad de práctica, sistema de evaluación, literacidad en la evaluación del lenguaje, política lingüística

Introduction

Language education policies—such as national bilingual plans and the OECD and World Bank’s 2012 reports—have urged the integration of English instruction in Colombian higher education (Usma *et al.*, 2018). In response to these pressures, a public university in Medellín, Colombia, developed a foreign language (FL) education policy (AA 467, [Universidad de Antioquia, 2014](#)). This policy led to the establishment of an institutional English program consisting of five mandatory courses of 64 hours each, aiming at graduating students with a B1 English language proficiency level ([Council of Europe, 2001](#)).

Drawing on a socio-cognitive approach to second language acquisition ([Atkinson, 2013](#)) and social cognitive perspectives of self-regulated learning ([Bandura, 2001](#)), the program is situated within an English for general academic purposes (EGAP) context ([de Chazal, 2014](#); [Jordan, 1997](#)). Its aim is to support students’ communicative competence development, foster excellence, facilitate interaction with the academic world, and strengthen graduates’ access to the job market. Nevertheless, the five courses constitute a component of considerable weight within the curricula resulting in potential negative impacts on the students’ academic lives.

The FL program evaluative system followed a *multiplism* perspective of *assessment* in its design ([Shohamy & Inbar, 2006](#)). From this perspective, multiple evaluative procedures complement each other to strengthen systemic validity, understood as the coherence among the evaluation purpose, the construct evaluated, the evaluation procedures, the teaching methodology, and actual teachers’ assessment practices ([Arias *et al.*, 2012](#)). Likewise, the program is committed to *assessment for learning* (AfL) ([William, 2011](#)) as its evaluation policy ([Birenbaum *et al.*, 2015](#)).

In language education, evaluation systems themselves often become policy subsystems ([Heck, 2004](#)) as they encompass a normative discourse over the practical guidelines, structure, organization, expectations, inducements, and punishments of language assessment. At the same time, evaluation systems link local practices to macro discourses of how language education should be structured ([Levinson *et al.*, 2020](#)). Consequently, they legitimize the status of the languages taught, working as enforcement mechanisms ([Levinson *et al.*, 2020](#); [Shohamy, 2009](#)).

Language policies are multileveled phenomena that involve processes of creation, interpretation, and appropriation ([Johnson & Jonson, 2014](#); [Miranda *et al.*, 2016](#)). Appropriation occurs as policies result from the intertextual and interdiscursive connections between historical policy texts and circulating discourses ([Levinson & Sutton, 2001](#); [Levinson *et al.*, 2009](#)). Although policies have an impact at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of their structure, stakeholders negotiate the policy discourses instead of merely implementing them ([Johnson & Johnson, 2014](#); [Levinson *et al.*, 2020](#)). Depending on the level stakeholders occupy within the structure, they wield different amounts of power to reinterpret and enact the policy in pursuit of their interests, ideals, and concerns. Even though teachers could only exercise their agency at the ground level, they collectively hold enough power to influence policy planning backward when they coordinate their efforts ([Johnson & Johnson, 2014](#); [Levinson *et al.*, 2020](#); [Usma, 2015](#)).

Recognizing teachers’ agency as regard policy, a participatory action research study was undertaken to support teachers’ appropriation of the evaluation system and facilitate the consolidation of an AfL culture at a public university in Medellín. To achieve this, the study implemented a strategy focused on creating a virtual community of practice dedicated to language assessment literacy (LAL). This community provided a dynamic space for presentations, discussions, and workshops, enabling participating teachers to share their knowledge, feelings, and experiences throughout three action cycles. Consequently, the study explored the following two research questions:

1. How does teachers’ appropriation of the evaluative system take place within a community of practice on LAL?
2. How can teachers’ appropriation process within such a context contribute to consolidating an AfL culture?

The following sections outline the approach taken to address these research questions. First, we define the concepts that guided the study. Second, we expand upon the methodological procedures followed. Then, we will present the answers to the questions and discuss them. Finally, we conclude the article with insights on the scope and limitations of the community of practice to impact the consolidation of an AfL culture.

Theoretical Framework

This study drew on a critical sociocultural perspective of language policy ([Levinson & Sutton 2001](#); [Levinson et al. 2009](#)). From this perspective, stakeholders critique, question, adapt, contest, or even reject policies to align with contextual needs and to advance their principles, values, and ideals. ([Levinson et al., 2020](#)). In light of these theories, we analyzed teachers' policy appropriation to understand how their discourses and assessment practices embraced a culture of AfL. Key concepts will be expanded in this section.

Policy appropriation

Policy appropriation refers to the sensemaking process through which stakeholders interpret, negotiate, and transform policies once official discourses start circulating ([Levinson et al., 2020](#); [Levinson & Sutton, 2001](#)). This process implies stakeholders' recreation and enactment of the official policy at various levels within the institutional structure to address contextual demands and to align with their own purposes ([Levinson & Sutton, 2001](#); [Johnson & Johnson, 2014](#)). To do so, each stakeholder becomes a policymaker at their micro-level. At multiple levels, policy creation becomes a multilayered phenomenon where stakeholders spontaneously make unofficial policies in their everyday practice, diverging from the official proposal ([McCarty & May, 2017](#); [Peláez & Usma, 2017](#); [Levinson et al., 2020](#)). The reification of these new unofficial policies results in social practice, as stakeholders' creative and unique interpretation of the official discourse influences it ([McCarty & May, 2017](#); [Peláez & Usma, 2017](#)).

Consequently, the same policy can transform in various ways depending on the local sociolinguistic and sociocultural conditions that either support or challenge the official intent ([Johnson & Johnson, 2014](#)). The alignment of the enacted policy with the core objective of the official one hinges on stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes toward the initial policy discourses ([Peláez & Usma, 2017](#)). When official discourses diverge from stakeholders' value boundaries, their appropriation of the official policy reflects resistance and rejection. Consequently, the enacted policy objective deviates from the original intent. On the contrary, when official discourses converge with stakeholders' value boundaries, they smoothly negotiate the policy without challenging and contesting it as much.

Stakeholders' value boundaries can also be negotiated when institutions mediate between policy discourses and local cultural patterns, thereby shaping how local stakeholders' response to policies. The stability or conflict of policy enactment at the micro-level depends on the institutional capacity to mediate between local cultures, groups, or individuals, and higher-level normative documents and discourses ([Sundusiyah, 2019](#)).

At the micro-level, stakeholders' participation in communities of practice can mediate their re-signification of policy within a large institutional structure ([Levinson et al., 2009](#)). At the meso- and macro-level, teachers' influence in transforming policies may seem insignificant compared to that of official policymakers ([Johnson & Johnson, 2014](#); [Levinson et al., 2020](#)). But at the micro-level, collegial involvement, community commitment, and participatory action help teachers gain ownership of their discourse and knowledge about teaching, learning, and class dynamics ([Levinson et al., 2009](#); [Quintero & Guerrero, 2013](#)). Choosing to engage in policy appropriation reveals teachers' perceptions of their experiences and professional vulnerabilities, as they rework and restage their power through social practice to influence local conditions despite social and individual constraints ([Darvin & Norton, 2015](#); [Lasky, 2005](#)). In brief, policy appropriation entails recognizing the agency of policy actors, especially in their micro-context and demands acknowledging the institution's role in mediating stakeholders' response to a policy.

AfL culture

Assessment is an umbrella term in evaluation that encompasses a number of procedures, including but not limited to quizzes, journals, portfolios, self-assessments, and tests. Assessment implies an ongoing process, mostly embedded in classroom practices, in which both formal procedures and informal impromptu feedback take place ([Brown, 2004](#), p. 4). Likewise, assessment procedures can facilitate the judgment of learners' command of the language for administrative or instructional purposes and serve either summative or formative objectives ([Shohamy & Inbar, 2006](#)).

By the same token, assessment for learning (AfL) refers to an assessment approach where learning is the main purpose. In AfL, feedback is utilized to adjust instruction in response to students' needs, regardless of the assessment type. Assessments are carefully designed, and information is collected from multiple sources and used intentionally to plan strategies that advance students' learning ([William, 2011](#)).

AfL is recognized for fostering students' development of autonomy because students are expected to be (1) introduced to learning objectives and assessment criteria, (2) involved in self- and peer-assessment, and (3) encouraged to reflect upon their learning process. Consequently, they learn how to plan, self-monitor, and self-evaluate their performance supported by teachers' feedback ([Lamb, 2010](#)). Students thus become part of a self-regulation loop that entails teachers applying and students learning how to use feedback to adjust, adapt, or change the learning strategies they are using. This is what some authors conceptualize as *assessment as learning* ([Earl, 2006, 2013](#)).

[Picón-Jácome \(2012, 2021\)](#) highlights how AfL can enhance student autonomy on both psychological and political levels ([Benson, 1997](#)). The psychological dimension is reinforced by dynamic evaluation methods ([Poehner et al., 2017](#)), which incorporate social interaction and collaborative assessments between peers and teachers. In such approaches, mediation aids students in developing critical thinking, responsibility, and a sense of ownership over their learning process ([Picón-Jácome, 2012](#)). The political dimension emerges as students engage in decision-making processes, particularly when teachers involve them in setting assessment criteria and providing descriptive feedback ([Gipps, 1999, 2002](#); [Picón-Jácome, 2013](#)). Consequently, the development of student autonomy is anticipated as a positive outcome of the assessment system in this study.

Culture is a concept increasingly used in various areas of educational assessment ([Inbar-Lourie, 2008b](#)). It results from complex interactions among multiple stakeholders at multiple levels within an institution, leading to a set of shared beliefs and knowledge capable of strengthening their relationships ([Birenbaum, 2014](#)). It reflects a mindset shared by people whose perceptions and actions respond to an implicit theory constructed jointly and influenced by their interactions with their environment, which includes policy, syllabi, support materials, teacher education programs, professional communities, and professional development strategies ([Birenbaum, 2014](#); [Birenbaum et al., 2015](#)). Accordingly, *AfL culture* refers to a community of evaluation practices, founded on constructivist theories, which acknowledge the social and interpretative role of assessment. It implies regarding knowledge, teaching, and learning as dynamic; evaluation as formative; students as agents of their learning process; and the teacher-student relationship as negotiation ([Gipps, 1999, 2002](#)).

Fostering an AfL culture among educators, rooted in constructivist theories and emphasizing the social and interpretative role of assessment, aligns with the notion of culture as a dynamic framework shaped by interactions within educational institutions ([Birenbaum, 2014](#)). It also underscores the pivotal role of teachers in fostering student autonomy through collaborative assessment practices.

Creating a culture of AfL implies institutions to set goals, adapt to specific needs, and appropriate external demands for accountability to monitor and regulate internally. It should guarantee an institutional environment where every stakeholder understands learning as the goal and takes active steps toward achieving it. This endeavor requires language teachers to develop language assessment literacy to cultivate the competence and knowledge needed to scaffold students' learning under the conditions described above ([Coombe et al., 2020](#); [Inbar-Lourie, 2008a, 2017](#)). Consequently, its consolidation entails teachers' professional development and classroom learning interacting to support a community of practice where knowledge, knowing, and cognition are seen from a constructivist perspective ([Birenbaum, 2014](#); [Scarino, 2017](#)).

Communities of practice

Communities of practice represent the social environment of learning, offering ample opportunities for educators to enhance their assessment literacy and professional growth. As envisioned by [Wenger \(2000\)](#), these communities serve as incubators for shared expertise, where professionals with a common interest converge to collaboratively navigate the intricacies of assessment practices ([Min et al., 2017](#)). Through sustained interaction and collective endeavor, members develop their skills and refine their understanding of assessment principles and strategies. By

engaging in collaborative planning, reflective dialogue, and the exchange of instructional cases, teachers cultivate a culture of mutual support and inquiry within these communities ([Feola et al., 2022](#); [Min et al., 2017](#)). Moreover, the establishment of shared norms, values, and a focus on student learning fosters a sense of collective responsibility and purpose, further enriching the professional landscape and driving continuous improvement in assessment practices ([Min et al., 2017](#)).

The essence of communities of practice extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills; it encompasses fostering a shared identity and ethos among participants ([Wenger et al. 2002](#)). As highlighted by [Wenger \(1999\)](#), the intrinsic motivation stemming from the community's camaraderie, sense of accomplishment, and increased self-efficacy serves as a catalyst for individual growth and the development of an evaluator's identity ([Feola et al., 2022](#)). Through the exchange of experiences, generation of new knowledge, and dissemination of best practices, members contribute to the collective advancement of assessment literacy within the broader educational landscape. Thus, providing opportunities for educators to actively engage with communities of practice not only enriches their professional journey but also enhances the evolution of assessment practices. This engagement ensures that assessment practices remain aligned with the changing needs of learners and the educational ecosystem ([Min et al., 2017](#)).

A community of practice would open space for the sharing of *experience* as a path for transformation and the development of pedagogical knowledge and practical wisdom, understood as the ability to make sound judgments and decisions in real-life situations based on reflective praxis ([Contreras, 2016](#); [Larrosa, 2009](#); [Murillo, 2019](#)). Within such an environment, a rich dialogue would facilitate teachers to tailor instruction to meet students' needs and help them plan and monitor their own learning. In conclusion, this study explored teachers' appropriation within a virtual community of practice on LAL. It examined how the actions planned by community members would mediate their interpretation and enactment of the policy, and support the consolidation of an AfL culture.

Method

This study drew on participatory action research (PAR), emphasizing cooperation ([Morales, 2016](#); [Selener, 1997](#)), and employing a virtual community of practice on language assessment literacy (LAL) as its action strategy. PAR is known for improving educational practice and contributing to teachers' professional development by actively involving practitioners in understanding and addressing their day-to-day issues ([Selener, 1997](#)). It starts with the identification of a starting point, continues with the planning of action strategies, and cycles of observation, reflection, and evaluation for further planning.

The starting point

This study began with the recognition of teachers' concerns about the *usefulness* of the evaluation system ([Bachman & Palmer, 1996](#)) and some reactions against its formative focus. This was inquired in a previous instrumental case study on the system implementation, which provided insights into both its achievements and challenges. The most important challenges identified included a negative impact of the evaluative system on teaching due to the time that formative assessment demanded and difficulties to integrate evaluation to teaching practices in general terms ([Picón-Jácome, 2021](#)). The corroboration and clarification of those challenges thus became the first cycle of the study.

Context and participants

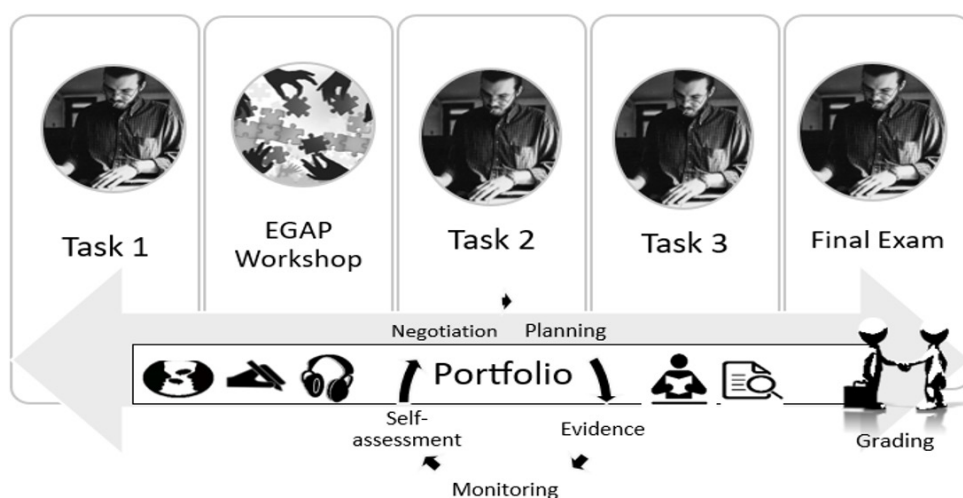
This study takes place in the EFL program of a Colombian public university. The program is administrated by the School of Languages and serves EFL teaching to all undergraduate programs of the institution. The community consisted of a core team, an active group, and occasional members ([Khalid et al., 2013](#)). All members registered on Google Classroom and participated in meetings conducted via Google Meet or Zoom, depending on the purpose of the encounter. The core team included seven researchers: two tenured faculty members, three full-time adjunct professors, a part-time adjunct professor, and a novice EFL instructor. They met weekly on Google Meet to plan events

and organize the logistics³. Two of them were not teaching in the EFL program but belonged to the foreign language teaching program of the School of Languages. The novice teacher had recently graduated and was working full-time for a local high school. The active group included about ten adjunct teachers who constantly participated in virtual encounters that took place through a Zoom account, provided by the University, according to a schedule of events per semester that lasted two hours each; all of them were part of the EFL program faculty. The number of occasional members, who also taught in the EFL program, fluctuated from 24 to 29. In total, the community comprised 46 EFL teachers registered on Google Classroom, with diverse expertise in teaching, assessment, and the institutional English program. All members joined the community voluntarily after a public invitation.

The evaluative system

The evaluative system that constitutes the object of this study drew on a multiplism perspective of assessment (Shohamy & Inbar, 2006), articulating four procedures (Figure 1): three performance-based tasks to meet the task-based instruction curriculum; an English for academic purposes (EGAP) workshop⁴ that emphasizes on dynamic assessment; a traditional standardized test to assess learning at the end of the course; and an assessment portfolio to integrate the other procedures promoting self-assessment, student reflection on their commitment towards the process, and grading negotiation through a teacher-student-partnership approach (Picón-Jácome, 2012). The system was intended to promote assessment *for*, *as* and *of* learning (Earl, 2006).

Figure 1. Evaluative System



Action strategy and data collection

The central strategy in this PAR was the creation of a virtual community of practice for the teachers to participate in the formulation and implementation of practical strategies to tackle the challenges posed by the evaluation system. Teachers were expected to engage in communicative action to legitimize and validate their participation. The community facilitated research, dialogue, and reflection (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). Within the community, teachers voluntarily shared knowledge, feelings, and experiences, in their own terms and language, regarding issues that matter to them in their everyday practice (Looi *et al.*, 2008; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014; Reaburn & McDonald, 2017). Practices on assessment constituted the focus of the community matching the purposes of the participatory action research design (Reaburn & McDonald, 2017). Teachers and researchers engaged in *vivencia*, *praxis*, and *conscientization* (Glassman & Erdem, 2014), as they inquired and reflected on

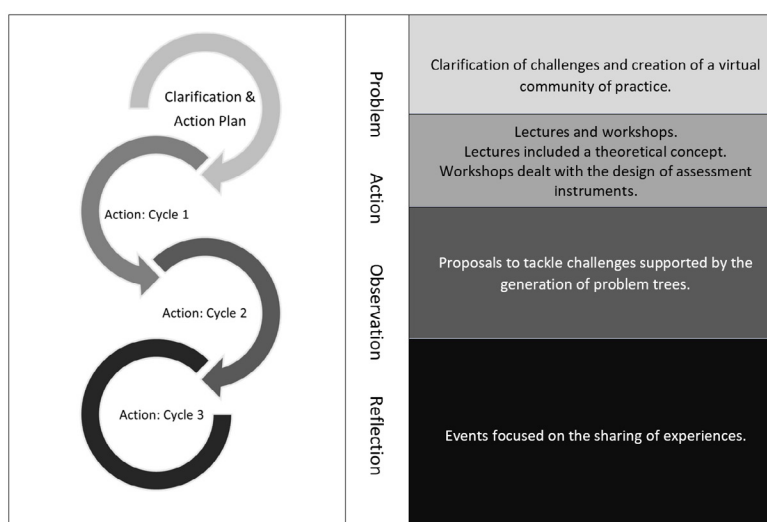
³ The initials of this study occurred during the 2020 pandemic and both the core-team encounters and the events planned took place virtually throughout the whole project.

⁴ The EGAP workshop is one of the evaluative procedures that composed the system. It is focused on an academic topic expected to be transversal throughout the development of a given course.

their lived experiences, judging the system's rationality, sustainability, and justice (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). From this viewpoint, this research study positioned teachers as transformative intellectuals (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

The design, planning and implementation of the action involved four stages. Along the process, the researchers engaged in data collection through qualitative soft methods, which included video recordings of the events, problem trees created by the participants, and written interactions, reflections, and comments collected on the ICT tools and the forum (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Cycles in the Implementation of the Action



Note. Own work.

The first stage involved clarifying the starting point with the core team and encompassed discussions about the theoretical concepts that underpin the study, the creation of the virtual community of practice, and the planning of the first cycle. During this stage, data was collected through video recordings and proceedings.

In the following stage, a cycle of interactive presentations was conducted. This included lectures by the core team members followed by participation of the audience using ICT tools. The presentations explored issues related to the theoretical concepts such as fair assessment, assessment-as-learning, and dynamic assessment. They were followed by four workshops focused on the creation of items and the design of assessments rubrics. The presentations and workshops occurred through synchronous online meetings in Zoom that were recorded.

Next, there was a cycle of problem tree creation focused on collecting participants' perceptions of the challenges of the system and their proposals to tackle them. Problem trees are interactive techniques in which participants, based on the representation of a tree, raise awareness of the characteristics of a problem through the analysis of its components and the relationships among them. In that sense, the roots would represent the problem, the trunk the effects, and the branches and leaves the alternatives or possible solutions (Quiroz *et al.*, 2002).

During three two-hour synchronous online encounters, researchers submitted the tasks, the EGAP workshop, and the portfolio for problem analysis. Participant teachers and researchers worked in small groups to create and share their problem trees. At the end of each session, teachers shared, validated, and reflected on the information they wrote on their trees.

Finally, a cycle was conducted via Zoom, during which participants shared their experiences implementing the system. This included discussions on building of the assessment portfolio, using Excel for tracking students' progress, scaffolding the tasks, the form of feedback implemented, strategies for promoting students' autonomy, and the adjustments made to the EGAP workshop to promote dynamic assessment.

In parallel, the participants and researchers joined discussions on Google Classroom forums about policy appropriation, assessment as learning, the strengths and limitations of the evaluative system, fair assessment practices, teachers' role in assessment practices to promote autonomy, and teachers' perceptions of students' understanding of assessment as learning. Recordings of each event were posted on the platform for all the members to have access to them.

Data analysis

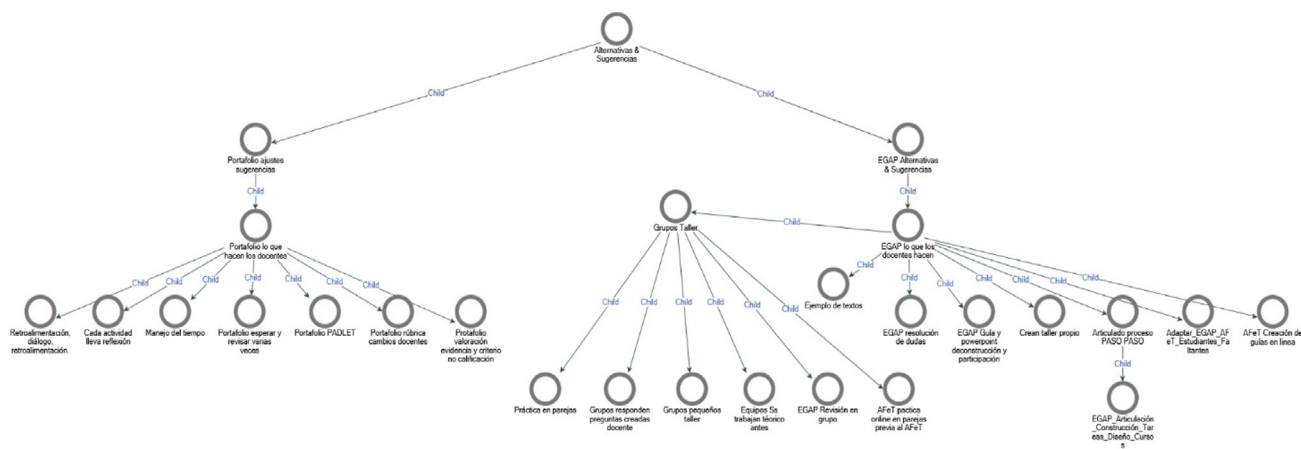
For the data analysis, the researchers drew on the action research techniques proposed by [Burns \(1999\)](#). In this sense, we followed the analysis process of five stages described by the author: assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building interpretations, and reporting the outcomes.

We assembled the data collected and started to code it from an initial superficial reading supported by the theoretical background of the study. Different sources yielded initial codes and broad patterns in relation to specific matters. For instance, video recordings and written evidence from the interactive presentations helped us to identify teacher's misconceptions and their conceptualizations regarding the theoretical concepts that underpinned the system. Evidence from the workshops provided information about participants' development of LAL. The problem trees and video recordings of the events in this cycle revealed teachers' critical stances towards the qualities of certain procedures, helped us to explore their understanding of evaluation principles, and permitted collecting their suggestions for practical actions to tackle the problem. Finally, experience-sharing events allowed us to observe practical knowledge and wisdom in action.

The codification process involved several readings that refined initial codes through an inductive-deductive process. Constant comparison of the codes generated initial categories, which again were compared among them and reflected upon the literature on assessment and the video recordings. At this point, first-level categories started at a general level as challenges, effects and consequences, and proposed solutions; second-level categories comprehended the most commented assessment procedures; and third-level categories referred to specific issues regarding their qualities.

In the following stage, we began to interpret the data by making connections between patterns and the research questions. We reviewed the data several times to extract ideas that would help answer the research questions. All of this resulted in interpretative theoretical categories related to policy appropriation and AfL. Finally, we discussed the findings considering the literature and validated them with the community of practice to enhance credibility and participation ([Chevalier & Buckles, 2019](#); [Kemmis et al., 2014](#)). In this process, we used the software NVivo12 for qualitative data analysis, as shown in [Figure 3](#).

Figure 3. Sample of a project map using NVivo



Ethical considerations

To ensure the ethical treatment of the information, researchers prepared informed consent forms outlining the study's design, strategies for protecting participants' identities, potential risks of participation, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. All data were securely stored on the principal researcher's OneDrive, with access limited to two members of the research team. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants whose testimonies are being reported to further safeguard their identities. Furthermore, data are being reported in aggregate form rather than individually to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally, we have disseminated the findings back to the community through committees and teachers' meetings to validate them, fostering transparency and ensuring that the results accurately reflect the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

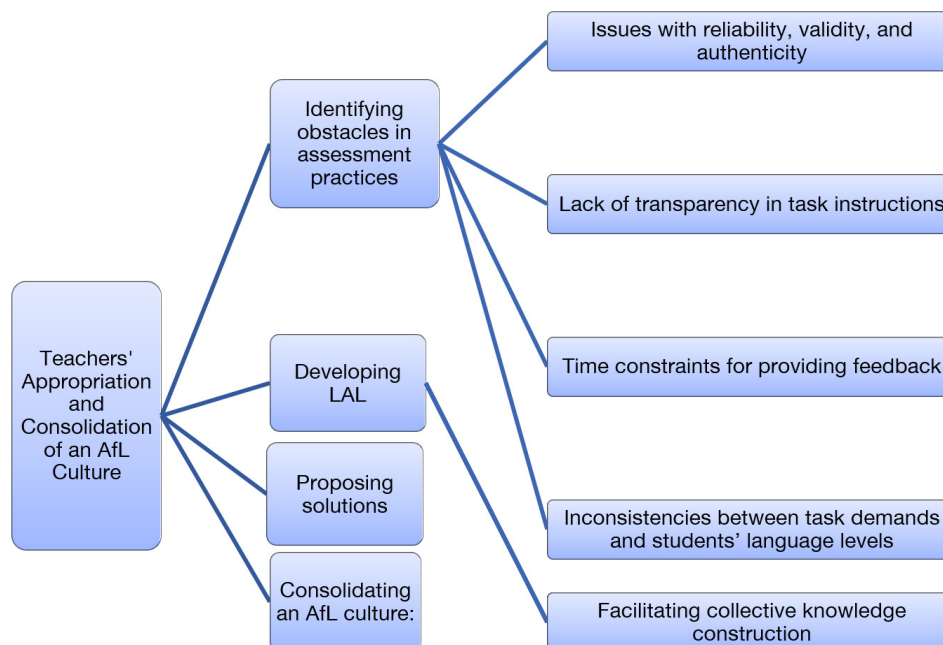
Findings and Discussion

Data analysis disclosed the participant teachers appropriation of the assessment policy within the community of practice and permitted classifying its process in three main categories, namely identifying obstacles in assessment practices, developing assessment literacies, and proposing solutions out of practical knowledge. Throughout this complex process, AfL rationale and practices emerged in the participants' discourses. As they exchanged ideas and experiences, a framework of practical knowledge and theories seemed to lay the groundwork for AfL practices to grow as a culture (Figure 4). The following paragraphs expand on the appropriation and consolidation processes.

Identifying obstacles in assessment practices

Teachers identified various challenges when using the evaluation system. In doing so, they tested their knowledge, beliefs, and self-declared purposes against the official proposal and technological resources available (Johnson & Johnson, 2014; Levinson *et al.*, 2020; Paredes-Mendez *et al.*, 2021). Challenges became *obstacles* to guarantee reliability, validity, and authenticity, which resemble previous findings and validate the rationale for this study (Picón-Jácome, 2021).

Figure 4. *Appropriation and consolidation processes*



Note. Own work.

As an example, teachers identified potential reliability issues with the system. First, the rubrics for oral performance tasks in the online version of the program lacked clarity in its construct definition and instructions. Similarly, some rubrics offered no guidelines to assess teamwork, even though certain evaluative tasks required students to work in teams. Teachers pointed out that this lack of specificity, in addition to a very tight assessment agenda, affected their task scaffolding, reducing opportunities to provide individual detailed feedback before grading students' performance, and preventing them to provide accurate marks. The following testimony exemplifies a teacher's concern in this regard:

"You can't spend that much time. The job may not be well done at times. There is so much to mark. [The assessment can become] superficial. There may be a lack of rigor" (Costa, Problem Tree, March 25, 2022).⁵

In their discourse, the teacher makes sense of the policy, understands its original intent, but also critiques its contradictions while defending their beliefs about assessment ([Levinson & Sutton, 2001](#); [Johnson & Johnson, 2014](#)). By the same token, teachers identified challenges regarding the validity of some evaluative procedures. For instance, vague modeling or insufficient time to analyze text structure affected the instruction quality for some evaluative tasks, resulting in students being assessed on texts they had superficially explored. In some other procedures, teachers questioned their interactivity and purpose, as it is evident in the testimony below:

The face-to-face [EGAP] workshop always seemed dense, complex, stressful, and not necessarily linked to the tasks of the program. Then, it became the explanation of a dense linguistic topic in the middle of a course with a different topic and methodology. (Itagüí, Workshop, April 8, 2022)

Finally, the participant teachers expressed concerns about the authenticity and interactivity of certain assessment procedures. They either shared their struggles to make the portfolio meaningful for students, rather instead of a nonsense collection of links, screenshots, and forced reflections, or questioned the relationship between some evaluative tasks and students' personal or academic life. Those concerns are illustrated in the following testimony:

"In some tasks, authenticity is affected. I consider that the tasks should be more connected to the academic lives of the students" (Copacabana, Problem Tree, March 25, 2022).

The participant teachers' use of technical language, recognition of the program's theoretical foundations, and interpretations of the assessment principles affected all reflect aspects of policy appropriation. In other words, the teachers incorporated the policy discourse to question certain assessment procedures ([McCarty & May, 2017](#); [Peláez & Usma, 2017](#)). Their critiques come from their lived experiences and are supported by their teaching beliefs, which makes evident the role of teachers' experience and formation in the appropriation process ([Levinson & Sutton, 2001](#); [Johnson & Johnson, 2014](#); [Quintero & Guerrero, 2013](#)).

Developing assessment literacies

The analysis revealed that the participant teachers in this study developed their assessment literacies as they applied assessment knowledge and skills to their teaching practices. It indicated both (1) their accurate understanding of assessment principles at the time they pointed out obstacles, and (2) their skills to overcome those obstacles in practice. For instance, they questioned the fuzziness of the construct in the EGAP workshop, because of its focus on reading, and pointed out the workshop's lack of articulation with the evaluative tasks of the course. However, they articulated reading strategies, academic topics, and text genres in the construction of the tasks to overcome the issue.

In a similar manner, the teachers found ways to guarantee mediation for dynamic assessment to take place during the procedure. They understood the need for didactic sequences to facilitate a collective construction of knowledge among peers and warned that the abilities taught to students should be used throughout the units.

⁵ All quotes from participants were translated by the researchers from Spanish only for publication purposes.

The following reflection from a teacher illustrates how she integrated academic elements into the evaluative tasks:

Honestly, I still doubt a bit when I plan my course because, in reality, I do not only think about the EGAP workshop. Its components must be included in the task construction process. I address some components during the construction of the task: textual genres, textual analysis, and linguistic features of the texts that [students] must construct. (Itagüí, Workshop, April 8, 2022)

This teacher underwent negotiation with the procedure and used her agency to pursue the policy original intent. She decided to administrate the workshop, despite its flaws, and took action to meet the official expectations for teaching and assessment. Yet, the exercise of her agency may position her as vulnerable: “I still doubt a bit when I plan my course ...” (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Lasky, 2005).

Proposing solutions through practical knowledge

Having identified challenges and incorporated some of the AfL tenets to exercise their agency, the participant teachers proposed possible solutions. Some of these proposals were already in practice or under consideration. Since the most critical challenges surfaced in the portfolio and EGAP workshop, teachers primarily concentrated on enhancing their practicality, reliability, validity, transparency, and authenticity.

For the portfolio to be practical, for example, the teachers proposed establishing a weekly review routine to prevent the accumulation of evidence at the end of the unit. To guarantee reliability, teachers recommended maintaining student-teacher conferences to discuss the learning evidence, construct feedback, validate students' self-evaluation, and suggest learning strategies. For the sake of transparency, teachers recommended that the evaluation system designers should rewrite the checklist and scoring scale used to assess the portfolio, as the language in the descriptors of both instruments was complex, technical, and written in English (Problem Tree, March 25, 2022).

Regarding authenticity, some teachers suggested letting students use digital resources such as PADLET or CANVA, instead of Google Drive, arguing that it would allow learners to personalize their portfolios and share them with their peers. One of the teachers claimed that the portfolio should reflect students' personalities and advocated for the recognition of students' portfolios as cultural artifacts (Problem Tree, March 25, 2022). Another teacher demonstrated how she centered the portfolio on students' interests, instead of on the construction of the evaluative tasks. She accompanied them in three moments: building the portfolio, exploring their interests in English, and helping them to develop autonomous work. Each moment respectively allowed students to diagnose themselves; set SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based); and create a final product that accounted both for an academic topic of their interest and their language learning process (Workshop, October 21, 2022). Both teachers believed in the value of an assessment portfolio for students' learning. Nevertheless, none of them used the policy resources as proposed; instead, they implemented their own versions, exercising their micro-agency to reclaim ownership of their discourse and knowledge about teaching. They also reasserted their ability to act and transform their environment by adopting strategies to accomplish their purposes (Quintero & Guerrero, 2013, Usma, 2015).

In the same way, the participant teachers continued to exchange ideas and share their experiences in overcoming the obstacles. Regarding the EGAP workshop, for example, they offered recommendations to strengthen its reliability, validity, and authenticity. These recommendations included creating slide presentations and activities to prepare students and conducting collaborative and group work strategies they had already implemented in their classes. In the following testimony, a teacher recounts how she designed the EGAP workshop to articulate it to the evaluative tasks of the course:

For example, in the face-to-face level-3 workshop, I chose for the EGAP workshop to be the textual and linguistic analysis of a biography, since this was the task [Students] had to do. In this way, I articulated the workshop to the task in such a way that it would help them to build their task. (Itagüí, Workshop, April 8, 2022)

This testimony shows how the participant teacher negotiated, interpreted, and transformed the procedure by exercising her agency in favor of the original intent of the workshop ([Darvin & Norton, 2015](#); [Lasky, 2005](#); [Paredes-Mendez et al., 2010](#)). First, she contested the existing workshop resources and decided not to use them. Second, despite her rejection, she agreed that the workshop was important, so she designed her own resources focusing on academic language and a specific text genre. Third, she used the assessment procedure for teaching and supporting students learning.

Appropriation constitutes an intricate process because the official discourse and original intent may meet the teachers' value boundaries ([Peláez & Usma, 2017](#); [Sundusiyah, 2019](#)). In this study, we have underscored how participant teachers reject some available mediational means because their practice has equipped them with the lived experience to reflect on the format and the structure ([Chevalier & Buckles, 2019](#); [Darvin & Norton, 2015](#); [Lasky, 2005](#)). Despite their rejection of some official practices and resources, the ways they appropriated the assessment policy contributed to the consolidation of an AfL culture as it is expanded below.

Consolidating an AfL culture

Data analysis suggests that the processes of policy appropriation and consolidation of an AfL culture occurred organically. Teachers participated in collegial dialogue, sharing their interpretations of fundamental concepts and the purpose of assessment procedures, which influenced each other's beliefs and practices ([McCarty & May, 2017](#); [Peláez & Usma, 2017](#)). The community of practice allowed them to internalize assessment as a "social practice and product" by creating spaces for debate on key assessment concepts, thereby enhancing their literacies in support of AfL. They shared their worries about the possible negative impacts of assessment on students' learning and academic lives and figured out solutions together using assessment to move learning forward and foster learners' autonomy.

In brief, EFL teachers' appropriation of the policy contributed to the consolidation of an AfL culture throughout a dynamic in which its tenets were openly debated and questioned from the participants' experience and assessment literacy. The mindset embodied by this culture was evident in the EFL teachers' discourses and examples of their practices, as can be observed in the following piece of evidence:

I do not grade the portfolio. I validate students' self-assessment of their performance in light of the evaluation criteria and the significance of the learning evidence presented in the portfolio. The portfolio endorses students' self-assessment.
(Santa Elena, Problem Tree, March 25, 2022)

Conclusions

This study explored EFL teachers' appropriation of a foreign language education policy through a virtual community of practice and its contribution to the consolidation of an AfL culture in higher education. The community of practice, centered on LAL, provided a dynamic platform for teachers to share insights and experiences through presentations, discussions, and workshops across three action cycles.

The analysis showed that the participant teachers appropriated the policy through a process classified into three categories. (1) They recognized obstacles to achieve assessment quality, testing their knowledge against official proposals and technological resources. (2) They engaged in LAL development, grappling with assessment procedures and striving to integrate theoretical concepts into teaching practices. And (3) they proposed solutions based on their practical knowledge to enhance the quality of assessment.

Likewise, the evidence suggests that teachers' appropriation of the policy contributed organically to the consolidation of an AfL culture. The participants' discourses indicated that their interactions and collegial dialogue favored the internalization of the theoretical tenets, enhanced their commitment towards AfL practices, and supported the community's collaborative construction of practical theories.

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