

# **An overview from different perspectives: Culturally competent assessment in a multi-cultural environment**

Tahera Afrin  
International College of Linguistics

**Abstract: There are a number of private training providers in Auckland that contain a multi-cultural environment. Participation from different ethnic groups is a common feature in these institutes. Their academic participations are evaluated through formative and summative assessments. From this background, the researcher attempts to explore the concept of ‘culturally competent assessment’. The aim of the research is to examine the concept of ‘culturally competent assessment’, considering the views from three different sources, academic practitioners (teachers), academic participants (students) and national and institutional documents. Two Private Training Establishments (PTE) of Auckland were selected by purposive sampling. With a qualitative approach, stratified sampling was applied for the teachers and the students. Selected documents were analyzed. The major finding of the research projected consensus among different perspectives. Perceived concepts of culturally competent assessment included the dimensions of fairness, inclusiveness, comparability, global suitability and standard efficiency. The views obtained from the research-participants and the documents supported multi-cultural inclusion. The research finding was useful to examine the similarities and differences in perspectives and it recommend a contextual approach to assess standard competencies among the learners in the Private Training Establishments.**

**Key-words: Private Training Establishments (PTEs), Multi-cultural environment, Cultural competency, Assessment.**

The study has a background of the researcher's understanding of competency as a pedagogic term and the inter-relations between competencies, culture and education. The first section of this paper will reveal this understanding and the later part will share the study with the readers.

Competency as a pedagogic term stands for the accumulated outcomes from a level of learning. Competencies can be conceptualized as 'complex ability constructs that are closely related to performance in real-life situations' (Hartig, Klieme & Leutner, 2008: v). So, the term competency is related to both the education system and real-life scenerios which takes place in a socio-cultural context. The inter-relationship between education and culture is evident in the academic literature of all time. John Dewey identified education as a “mode of life” (Dewey, 1929:75). And culture is often identified as a way of life. Education is considered as social institution guiding the transmission of knowledge, job skills, cultural norms and values (Wadham, Pudsey & Boyd, 2007). Education is influenced by the culture and vice versa. Competencies in an education system are determined by the cultural setting. On the other hand, competencies we achieve through education make us fit for a limited or wider cultural setting and enable us to contribute into the society.

From the above discussion, we can see that a major and influential part of competencies that we learn from the education system can be regarded as cultural competencies. Cultural competencies are often defined differently. According to some, cultural competencies are the

congruent behaviours, knowledge and attitudes that enable effective interactions in a cross-cultural framework (Cross, Bazron, Dennis & Issacs 1989). To explain cultural competency, some emphasize a respectful and effective response (Cross Cultural Health Care Program, 1999), some emphasize on the ability to see the world through different cultural lenses (Fitzgerald, 1999).

Similar concept can be found in PISA (Programme for International Students Assessment) that every three years, assesses how far students have acquired some of the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in the society (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). The programme taken by Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also aimed for monitoring the results in education, within an agreed framework, allowing for valid international comparisons. Thoughts over assessing competencies comparatively can lead towards the concept of culturally competent assessment.

Culturally competent assessment is a newer terminology in the field of education. A distinctive approach is required to analyze culturally competent assessment rather than treating it as synonymous of culturally appropriate assessment. In this study, culturally competent assessment means the assessment practices that enable the learners to fit into a particular cultural setting in a desired way. The particular cultural setting, for this study, refers to the contexts of New Zealand. Considering this, certain implications such as Treaty of Waitangi, kiwiana, globalization, privatization of education and increasing trend of multi-ethnic representation are important. The Treaty of Waitangi established the importance of practising Maori culture in Aotearoa / New Zealand (Orange, 1987). This encourages bi-cultural achievements of competencies. However, an increasing trend of population growth from different ethnic groups creates a multi-cultural environment here. 2006 Census shows that there are 3.2 million European descents, 624,300 Maori, 404,400 Asians, 301,600 Pacific Islanders and 38,600 people from the Middle East, Latin America and Africa (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). Being the commercial hub, Auckland is now very much multi-cultural. This is the social aspect of this study.

On the other hand, the economic aspect of society causes a market-focused education system. As a part of this process, a number of private training providers play an important role in the adult education sector. Participation from different ethnic groups is a common feature in these institutes, especially in the PTEs of Auckland city. There are PTEs where majority of the students are international students, whose first language is other than English. The academic participation of these students is evaluated through formative and summative assessments. They are assessed of certain cultural competencies set within the New Zealand educational context. This background encourages the researcher for an intensive study which will reflect the dimensions of 'culturally competent assessment'. Some studies are already conducted on cultural competencies for particular disciplines such as nursing and mental health (Eisenbruch, 2000), but no evidence of research on

the concept of culturally competent assessment was found (by the researcher).

The general objective of the research was to explore different dimensions of 'culturally competent assessment'. The specific objectives were determined to explore the views of academic practitioners (teachers/lecturers) and academic participants (students) towards 'culturally competent assessment'. The research also aimed to analyze selected significant documents. Different sources were examined with an expectancy of deducing comparative analysis.

For examining the sources or perspectives, a qualitative research design was planned. The Private Training Establishments (PTE) in New Zealand was the population of this research. The sample area comprised the providers in Auckland. Purposive sampling was used and two private training establishments from Auckland were selected for the study. The participant teachers and students were from three courses of studies: English language, Early Childhood Education and Business. Courses from Early Childhood and Business are Certificates/Diplomas on (National Qualifications Framework) NQF whereas English language courses are aimed to increase the international student's proficiency in English as a second language.

Documents were also analysed to gain ideas. From a range of available documents from the Ministry of Education (MoE), one particular document was purposively selected for the research. This was the Tertiary Education Strategy 2007-2012 (New Zealand Government 2006). It was chosen because of its significance in setting education priorities for all Tertiary Education Organisations (TEOs).

Among the institutional documents, the Quality Management System (QMS) was purposively selected because of its importance at all level of policy implementation within the institutes.

Ethical approval was taken from the institute's ethic approval authority and a letter of authorisation was issued for collection of data from the institutes.

From the discussion on methodology, it can be understood that the research design covered some primary data sources such as teachers and students and some secondary data sources such as national and institutional documents.

Characteristics of primary data sources or research participants are important points to discuss for this study. Fourteen academic practitioners from the two PTEs participated in the study. They were mostly from New Zealand, Australia and United Kingdom (UK). Few of them were from Asia including the countries India, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. The ethnic representation among the teachers was as follows:

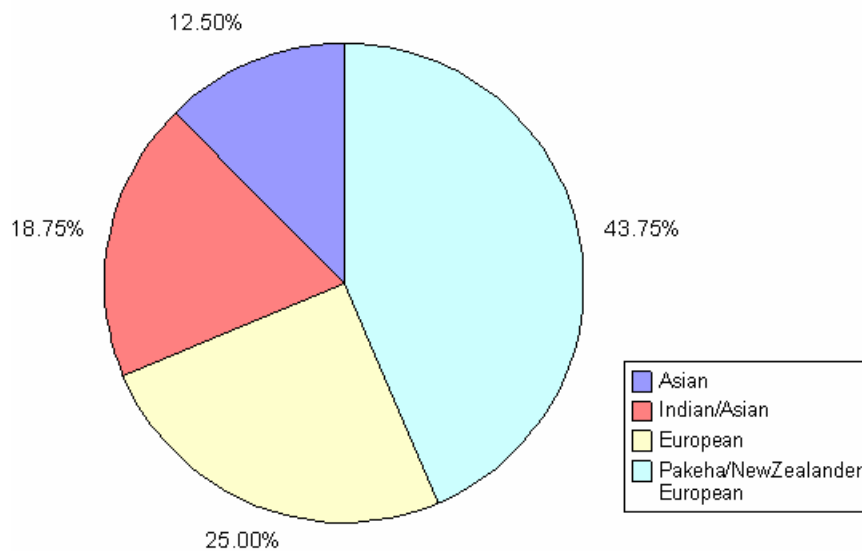


Figure 1. Ethnic representation among academic practitioners

All the teachers were either by-born New Zealanders or long-term settlers (5 to 55+ years) in New Zealand. Thirty-eight students from three divisions participated in the research. The country of origin among the students included China, Korea, Taiwan and Japan. The APs were short-term settlers (1 month to 2 years) in New Zealand; however most of them had an intension to stay for a long term (68.4 %).

Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and questionnaire were used as research tools for the teachers and the students. For the documents, checklists were used.

The queries of the research can be organised in three different sections- i) Primary research question ii) Warm-up questions and iii) Key research questions. The primary research question of the study was to explore the concept of 'culturally competent assessment' and to find out some dimensions to explain it. There were some warm-up questions on culture and cultural symbolism. And based on the primary concept, key research questions were designed as follows:

- What does the term 'culturally competent assessment' imply to the academic practitioners?
- What does the term 'culturally competent assessment' imply to the academic participants?
- How does the selected national document reflect cultural competencies?
- How does the authoritative institutional document reflect cultural competencies?
- What are the similarities among different perspectives?
- What are the differences among different perspectives?

- Where is the point of consensus located in explaining 'culturally competent assessment'?

Firstly, from the views of academic practitioners (teachers) and academic participants (students) and from the analysis of the documents, the concept of culturally competent assessment was summarized. The research found the following dimensions to explain 'culturally competent assessment' in a multi-cultural environment:

1. Fairness: The assessments should not undermine any particular culture. Assessments undermining students' culture is always refused by them and cannot be successful in gaining any kind of competencies.
2. Inclusion: The assessments should enable the students to include reflection of their own culture. This helps to relate their prior knowledge to the new knowledge and helps them to acquire competencies selected by New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA).
3. Diversity: The assessments should be varied in different formats (group-work, presentation, individual project, verbal and written examinations, essay and short questions) so that students from all cultures who may have comfort in different pedagogic practices feel confident to take part in the assessments. Limited varieties of assessments make the students feel uncomfortable to achieve competencies and success in the course.
4. Multi-cultural reflection: The assessments should include opportunities for the students to practise knowledge, skills and techniques from different culture. This makes the teaching-learning interesting and helps them to acquire the set competencies with enjoyment.
5. Global suitability: The assessments should enable the learners to achieve diversified abilities that will fit them internationally.
6. Comparability: The assessments should provide opportunities to have comparative analysis between the learner's own culture and the culture of New Zealand. This creates an opportunity for in-depth insight and leads them to achieve the desired competencies.
7. Standard efficiency: The assessments should fit the learners to suit in New Zealand culture and also should make them fit to compete in New Zealand job-market.
8. Specific emphasis (Maori and Pacific): The assessments should provide scopes to know about Maori or Maori and Pasifika culture. Related competencies are well-accepted and encouraged as a part of standard efficiency in New Zealand.

Secondly, the warm-up research questions led the following findings:

1. Most of the participants perceived culture as the way of life of a community. A few research participants (2 out of 54) defined culture as a process or as combination of artistic expressions.
2. Most of the participants explained symbolism in relation to their own culture. However, a

good number of them explained it from general perspectives. A list of 27 symbols used by the AP and APR was prepared that contained All Blacks, bamboo. Beard, beer, boomerang, burqa, characters from Chinese alphabet, characters of Korean alphabet, famous building of a country, flag of China, flag of Korea, flag of New Zealand, Great wall of China, gumboots, hanbok, historical event of a nation, Kiwi, monogram of ICL (International College of Linguistics), Pohotukawa tree, racing, respect for elderly, rose of sharon, rugby, silver fern, taeguk, teachers and learners from different cultures and Tian-an-men square.

Thirdly, the followings were the findings for the key-research questions:

1. By the term 'culturally competent assessment', the academic practitioners meant the characteristics of fairness, inclusiveness, diversity, global suitability, standard efficiency, multi-cultural reflection and specific emphasis.
2. The academic participants (students) explained culturally competent assessment as fair, inclusive, comparable, diversified, standard, multi-cultural, global and specifically emphasized (Maori & Pacific).
3. The selected national-level document, Tertiary Education Strategy 2007-12 (TES) reflected the education priorities that suggested culturally competent assessment to be fair, standard, diversified, multi-cultural and global. TES analysis significantly emphasized Maori and Pacific culture.
4. The QMS from the institute accorded importance to reflection of Maori culture. It also regarded fairness to be a characteristic for maintaining all the academic practices including assessments.
5. All three perspectives were found similarly to conceptualize culturally competent assessment. Fairness and specific emphasis (Maori) are the two common dimensions from all three perspectives.
6. There were a few differences reflected from different data sources. These were:-
  - The academic participants mentioned comparability as a quality in culturally competent assessment that was neither evident in the APR's view nor in document analysis.
  - The academic practitioners mentioned creating a spiritual bondage between learner's identity and learning. The learners did not reflect this aspect.
  - Particular emphasis on Maori cultural competencies was reflected in both the documents, TES and QMS. Among the primary data sources, only the students and teachers of ECE agreed about regular assessments relating Maori cultures. The AP and APR from other departments, equally willing to regularize this aspect, needed to find scopes to do so.
  - Both the AP and APR agreed the importance of inclusion. Inclusion meant the scopes

for the learners to reflect their own cultures in classroom assessments. However, the rationale behind this inclusion varied. The APRs said they did it to make the subject-matter easier for the learners and also to value the students' cultures. The APs thought the teachers did it to make it easier for them and to create an attractive learning environment in the classroom. They did not assume that to respect their cultures was also a reason.

- Except the ECE APRs (teachers of Early Childhood Education), all APRs said that they find difficulty in applying group work, pair work or class presentation as assessment tool. However, students from no group agreed with that.

7. The point of consensus was located in the following two aspects:-

- The assessments were desired to be multi-cultural, diversified, fair, inclusive and global with a focus on standard efficiency.
- The learners did want to have assessment practices where they would be valued, included and respected, but they preferred to acquire competencies that were culturally suitable for New Zealand working contexts.

As the 'other' findings from the research, one point can be added as the researcher thinks it might create a debate and can be investigated further. All groups of students in FGD mentioned that diversified teaching staffs were helpful for them to achieve the competencies. The teachers who were New Zealander/ European could help them to acquire local cultural competencies. At the same time, the teachers who were from the same culture (broadly, Asian) could understand them better and could help them to make a link between two cultural dimensions. However, the teachers did not mention anything about this.

These dimensions of culturally competent assessment, as found in the research, are also supported by the related literature. Diversity in applying assessment tools is not only required for the differences in learners' ethnic cultures, but also for individual preferences of learning styles (McCombs & Miller, 2007). For assessing culturally and linguistically diversified learners, identifying diversity in environment, using variety of formal and authentic methods and implementing preferred interventions are the suggested essential tasks by the professionals (Hoover, Klingner, Baca & Paton, 2008).

### **Recommendations:**

Research usually results new knowledge that helps to recommend for changes and improvements (Benseman, 1996). The recommendations based on this study can be summarized as follows:

- PTEs should evaluate the learners with a multi-cultural inclusion.

- Standard efficiency should be the primary focus.
- The institutional policy documents for PTEs should be broader. These documents should include details of assessment practices suitable for the learners.
- When selecting textbooks for a particular programme, the market may be explored for a better multi-cultural inclusion. Books of recent times contain more multi-cultural components than the books published in the last decade or before.
- Multi-ethnic representation among the teaching staff can be considered.
- Focus on Maori culture may be added into the programmes with more attention.
- Further studies may be conducted with a larger sample size.
- Central policy of assessment practices for international students can be considered (based on further research).

The research was useful to find out similarities and differences in perspectives. A multi-cultural environment in societies demands additional attributes in every sphere. The research finds that a culturally competent assessment should be a combination of different dimensions, such as, global suitability, fairness, standard efficiency, inclusion, and diversity. Particular dimensions may have higher importance for a particular context. Depending on the context, the PTEs may take decisions on the required cultural competencies of a programme and can utilize the hard and soft components of curriculum accordingly.

**Correspondence:** Tahera Afrin, Department of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECE), International College of Linguistics (ICL), 71-77 Customs Street East, Auckland, New Zealand.

E-mail: [tahera@icl.ac.nz](mailto:tahera@icl.ac.nz) , [rinis9@yahoo.com](mailto:rinis9@yahoo.com)

**Acknowledgements:** Ewen Mckenzie-Bowie, Nathalie Mackenzie-Bowie, John Mathhews, Pip Judge, Syed Mohammad Masud Jamali & teachers and students of International College of Linguistics and ICL Business School.



## References:

- Benseman, J. (1996). Research and evaluation. In J. Benseman, B. Findsen & M. Scott (eds.). *The fourth sector- Adult and community education in Aotearoa/ New Zealand*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press. pp. 313-324.
- Cross Cultural Health Care Program (1999). Cultural competency curriculum. Retrieved as on 13 November 2008 from <http://www.xculture.org/whatiscc.php>
- Cross, T., Bazron, B. Dennis, K. & Issacs, M. (1989). *Towards a culturally competent system of care: A monograph on effective services for minority children who are severely emotionally disturbed*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Child Development Center
- Dewey, J. (1929). *The sources of a science of education*. New York: Horace Liveright.
- Eisenbrich, M. (2000). National review of nursing: Multi-cultural nursing education. New South Wales: Higher Education Division. Retrieved as on 13 November 2008 from [http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/nursing/pubs/multi\\_cultural/1.htm#contents](http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/nursing/pubs/multi_cultural/1.htm#contents)
- Fitzgerald, M. H. (1999). Establishing cultural competence for mental health professionals. In V. Sskutans & J. L. Cox (eds.). *Anthropological approaches to psychological medicine*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Hartig, J., Klieme, E. & Leutner, D. (2008). Preface in J. Hartig, E. Klieme & D. Leutner (eds). *Assessment of competencies in educational contexts*. Cambridge: Hogrefe.
- Hoover, J. J., Klingner, J. K. , Baca, L. M. & Patton, J.M. (2008). *Methods of teaching culturally and linguistically exceptional learners*. New Jersey: Pearson Education.
- ICL Business School and International College of Linguistics. Quality Management System, v 13, May 2008.
- McCombs, B. L. & Miller, L. (2007). *Learner-centered classroom practices and assessments: Maximizing student motivation, learning and achievement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- New Zealand Government (2006). *Tertiary Education Strategy 2007-2012*. Wellington: Ministry of Education. [www.minedu.govt.nz](http://www.minedu.govt.nz)
- Orange, C. (1987). *The Treaty of Waitangi*. Wellington: Unwin.
- Organisation of Economic Co-operation & Development (2006). *PISA- The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment*. Retrieved as on 8 November, 2008 from <http://www.pisa.oecd.org/dataoecd/51/27/37474503.pdf>
- Wadham, B., Pudsey, J. & Boyd, R. (2007). *Culture and education*. NSW: Pearson Education Australia.

Cultural Continuity as a Multicultural Competence. Enlisting Cultural Informants as a Cultural Competence. Seeing Students Holistically as a Cultural Competence. IV. Summary. Section I provides an overview and rationale for cultural competence. Definitions are provided to create a common language and mutual understanding for users. Section II displays models of cultural competence, awareness domain competencies and covers topics related to oppression, responding to racism and privilege. Section III explores racial identity models and culturally distinct groups. perspective and reality of another along with the commitment to act on behalf of the other. Rationale.