

# Assessing oral teachers' proficiency: for a pluricentric approach

*Avaliando a proficiência oral docente: por uma abordagem pluricêntrica*

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**Abstract:** The Proficiency Examination for Foreign Language Teachers (EPPLE) is an assessment tool currently under development that aims to assess the linguistic proficiency of foreign language teachers and enhance the quality of language teaching in both public and private schools. This paper discusses the norms underlying the criteria used to assess teachers' oral proficiency, based on pluricentric language principles. Relying on a systematic review of studies available in online databases, we identified how the EPPLE's oral proficiency criteria are operationalized around the figure of an ideal native speaker, particularly in descriptors related to pronunciation, grammatical accuracy and vocabulary. We therefore propose a revision of the criteria used to define high and low levels of oral performance in the exam, in light of their potential to reinforce monocentric views of linguistic norms and idealized notions of what constitutes a proficient foreign language speaker.

**Keywords:** Language teacher assessment; Oral proficiency; Proficiency Examination for Foreign Language Teachers (EPPLE).

**Resumo:** O Exame de Proficiência para Professores de Línguas Estrangeiras (EPPLE) é um instrumento de avaliação em desenvolvimento que tem como objetivo avaliar a proficiência linguística de professores de línguas estrangeiras e contribuir para a melhoria do ensino de línguas em escolas públicas e privadas. Este artigo discute as normas que fundamentam os critérios de avaliação da proficiência oral desses professores, baseados em princípios pluricêntricos. Com base em uma revisão sistemática de estudos disponíveis em bases de dados online, identificamos como os critérios de proficiência oral no EPPLE são operacionalizados a partir da figura de um falante nativo ideal, especialmente nos descritores relacionados à pronúncia, à correção gramatical e ao vocabulário. Propomos, assim, uma revisão dos critérios que definem os níveis mais e menos proficientes de desempenho oral no exame, considerando seu potencial de reforçar visões monocêntricas sobre as normas linguísticas e sobre os traços que caracterizam um falante proficiente de língua estrangeira.

**Palavras-chave:** Avaliação de professores de línguas; Proficiência oral; Exame de Proficiência para Professores de Línguas Estrangeiras.

## Introduction

The Proficiency Examination for Foreign Language Teachers (EPPLE) is an assessment tool currently being developed in Brazil to assess the linguistic proficiency of language teachers in training and in service. While the exam aims to ensure quality teaching by establishing clear benchmarks for teachers' proficiency, it also raises important questions about which norms are being privileged in its assessment criteria, especially in relation to oral performances. As the teaching and learning of foreign languages become increasingly influenced by transnational mobility and linguistic diversity, we consider important to examine whether such large-scale assessment tools

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reflect the complex, pluricentric nature of language use, or whether they reinforce a monocentric views rooted in native speaker idealizations.

This paper presents a systematic review of eleven studies that analyze different dimensions of the EPPLÉ exam: its development, implementation and assessment criteria. These studies were selected from online academic databases based on publication dates and relevance to for the description of the assessment criteria for oral proficiency. Through a systematic analysis, we examine how the EPPLÉ exam operationalizes constructs such as pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and vocabulary, and to what extent these constructs are implicitly or explicitly modeled on an idealized native speaker.

The theoretical framework for this study draws on literature related to linguistic pluricentrism and its implications for language education and assessment. We take into consideration authors such as Clyne (1992), Lo Bianco (2014), and Busch (2012), who argue for the recognition of multiple legitimate norms within a given language, especially in educational contexts marked by linguistic diversity. Within foreign language teacher education, a pluricentric perspective challenges monolingual, native-speaker-based standards and instead promotes a more inclusive, context-sensitive understanding of what it means to be linguistically proficient.

Considering the objectives, methodology and theoretical background, we have organized this study into four main sections. The first section gives a brief introduction to the EPPLÉ exam. The second section presents ideas related to pluricentrism in language education contexts. The third section presents the methodology adopted and, finally, the fourth section discusses the results.

Therefore, the first section, entitled *The EPPLÉ exam and the issue of (low) language proficiency*, introduces the EPPLÉ exam, discussing its history and current structure.

### **The EPPLÉ exam and the issue of (low) language proficiency**

In Brazil, during the latter part of the 20th century and the initial years of the 21st century, discussions and proposals addressing the issue of low language proficiency among language teachers started to emerge. Attentive to this scenario, Consolo (2004)

provides a picture of undergraduate language students on their English language proficiency level:

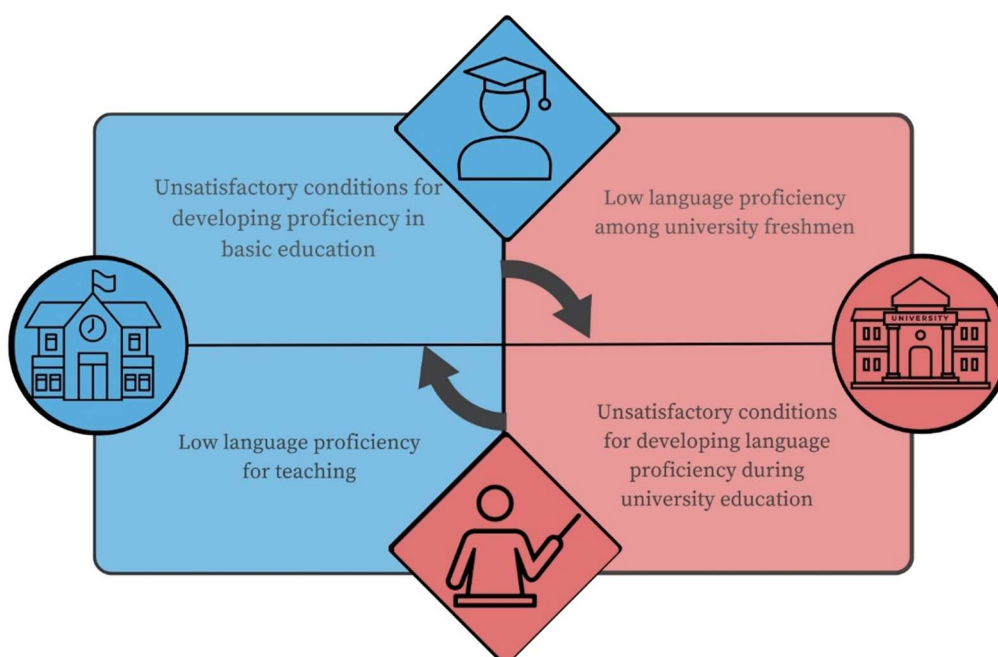
[...] the (dis)beliefs and (in)competences of students entering courses in Letras are largely the result of experiences and deficiencies in primary and secondary education; of students graduating from university and related experiences, for example, in teaching internships in secondary schools, mainly in the public sector, or in certain private language schools. There are also cases where students graduating from certain language courses can be labelled as not being adequately proficient as English speakers and users, and preference is given when hiring professionals from private sector schools to teachers who are 'native' speakers, who have lived or studied in English-speaking countries or who have certificates from internationally recognized exams<sup>2</sup> (Consolo, 2004, p. 266-267).

As we can observe, Consolo (2004) identifies social variables that have direct impact on future language teachers' performances, like the low quality of language education during primary and secondary school and the commodification of teaching. A decade later, Barretto (2015) would discuss the persistence of the social issues described by Consolo (2004), reinforcing the idea of a permanent stagnation of language proficiency levels among teacher foreign language teachers in Brazil.

The panorama of (dis)beliefs and (in)competencies, as outlined by Consolo (2004), assumes the form of a perpetual low proficiency cycle: freshmen entering language programs with insufficient proficiency struggle to attain the necessary levels for language teaching. Subsequently, once they become working professionals in education institutions, they face challenges in enhancing their students' proficiency (Consolo, 2017). Taking this scenario into account, figure 1 below illustrates the low proficiency cycle described by Consolo (2017).

<sup>2</sup> In the original: [...] as (des)crenças e as (in)competências dos alunos ingressantes nos cursos de Letras decorrem, em larga escala, das experiências e deficiências do ensino Fundamental e Médio; dos alunos formando, das experiências na universidade e a ela vinculadas, por exemplo, nos estágios docência em escolas secundárias, principalmente do setor público, ou em determinadas escolas particulares de línguas. Verifica-se também, em alguns casos, que o aluno egresso de determinados cursos de Letras pode ser rotulado como não adequadamente proficiente enquanto falante-usuário da língua inglesa, dando-se preferência, na contratação de profissionais de escolas do setor privado, a professores que sejam falantes 'nativos', que tenham vivido ou estudado em países onde se fala inglês ou que possuam certificados de exames internacionalmente reconhecidos (CONSOLO, 2004, p. 266-267).

Figure 1: Consolo's cycle of low language proficiency



Source: Elaborated by the author.

As figure 1 illustrates, the cycle of low language proficiency feeds on unsatisfactory conditions for developing proficiency at school and university. Faced with this reality, applied linguists proposed the EPPLE as an instrument capable of mapping and potentially reversing the low proficiency panorama observed since the 20th century in language education in Brazil. According to Consolo et al. (2009)

The project (EPPLE) aims at departing from theoretical and experimental subsidies, from data of the literature on existing tests of proficiency in the scope of the Brazilian scenario and in the international scene, to produce an exam called 'Exame de Proficiência para Professores de Língua Estrangeira' (Examination of Proficiency for Foreign Language Teachers), henceforth EPPLE. [...] We also aim at establishing, amongst the language aspects and the different factors that constitute and influence the 'linguistic-communicative ability' [...], criteria for the characterization of the FL proficiency of these teachers, mainly in contexts of language education in Brazil (in the contexts of regular school, namely Ensino Fundamental and Ensino Médio, in university courses and in private language schools).

Taking into account the scenario elucidated by Consolo (2004) and Consolo's et al. (2009) demands for an assessment tool encompassing both general proficiency and

specific language proficiency for language teaching, Brazilian researchers introduced the EPPL exam in the late 1990s with the intention of widespread implementation in Brazil (Consolo; Silva, 2016). While currently focused on assessing teaching proficiency in English, applied linguists aspire to expand its scope to include other languages, also incorporating teacher's proficiency in Portuguese as a foreign language certification (Detomini, 2018).

It is important to bear in mind that the EPPL exam assumes features of a language policy, since a considerable part of its developers aim for its nationwide implementation, in order to serve as a benchmark for language degree programs<sup>3</sup>. These programs would then reconstruct their curricula based on the criteria set by the exam construct. Consequently, researches envision the EPPL exam to exert a retroactive influence on teacher education. As an academic initiative, numerous studies posit a positive impact of language assessment on teacher education and professional development (Cialdini, 2023; Cunha, 2021; Consolo, 2017).

Considering the general information presented about the EPPL exam, the next section discusses the ideas that underline pluricentrism and pluricentric practices in language education contexts.

### **Pluricentrism and foreign language education**

In general, pluricentric ideas questions the traditional notion that a foreign language must be taught and assessed based on a single, standardized variety (usually spoken by the economic, cultural and intellectual elite of a given society). In contrast to monocentric approaches, which often idealize the norms of a dominant nation-state or social group, pluricentric frameworks emphasize that many languages, such as English, are spoken across multiple countries and communities, each contributing to the construction of norms and constitution of varieties.

In this sense, Clyne (1992) defines a pluricentric language as one that has several interacting centers, each with its own norms for usage, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. According to Clyne (1992), ignoring these multiple centers can lead to the

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<sup>3</sup> According to Justina, Santos e Schweikart (2021), there is a consensus that the main purpose of the EPPL exam is to map the challenges faced by language teachers in Brazil, despite the fact that other studies produced in recent decades indicates that its initial purpose was to contain access to the teaching profession by assessing the proficiency of foreign language teachers.

marginalization of speakers from non-dominant regions. In the context of foreign language education, such marginalization is often reproduced through curricular choices and assessment criteria that prioritize the linguistic norms of a single center, typically related to with the geopolitical power of a country (Clyne, 1992; Clyne & Kretzenbacher, 2001).

In addition, Gogolin (2002) argues that linguistic diversity in classrooms must be understood as a resource for learning. A pluricentric perspective in teaching not only validates diverse varieties of the target language, but also supports the development of critical language awareness among both teachers and learners. This approach is especially relevant in the context of globalization and migration, where linguistic boundaries are increasingly fluid, and speakers are frequently exposed to multiple linguistic varieties.

With regard to pedagogical practices in language teaching and learning contexts, Bianco (2014) emphasizes the importance of norm awareness: the ability of teachers to recognize and navigate different linguistic norms rather than simply adhere to a single standard. In this sense, Bianco (2014) warns that when assessment tools and teacher training programs rely exclusively on idealized native-speaker models, they risk undermining the communicative realities of multilingual classrooms.

With regard to assessment dynamics, Piller (2016) comments on the ideological frameworks of language assessment tools that privilege native-speaker norms. According to Piller (2016), such assessments often operate under a guise of objectivity and neutrality, while in practice they reinforce social hierarchies by valuing certain accents, registers, or grammatical forms in detriment of others. In this context, pluricentric models can act as counterweights to this bias by recognizing the legitimacy of multiple language norms, particularly in high-stakes educational contexts. In the case of English, for instance, Jenkins (2006) introduces the concept of English as a *Lingua Franca* (ELF), arguing that the language used among non-native speakers in international contexts should be understood as a legitimate variety in its own right, rather than constantly measured against native-speaker standards.

Despite the growing body of literature advocating for pluricentric approaches, educational policy and large-scale language assessments have been slow to incorporate these perspectives. Many standardized tests and curricula continue to reflect a monocentric bias, often privileging varieties associated with political and economic powers. As Shohamy (2001) notes, language tests are not neutral instruments, once they

are deeply ideological tools that can shape and control language practices. The failure to acknowledge pluricentric norms in such assessment tools risks perpetuating inequality in access to education and professional opportunities.

Taking into account the ideas raised, the next section explores the methodological approach adopted for this study.

## Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is qualitative. It takes the form of a systematic review that examines perspectives on teacher assessment within the EPPL exam literature. The systematic literature review, akin to a narrative review, addresses the necessity of contextualizing and critically analyzing research questions that demand a multidisciplinary approach (Picheth, 2007). In this instance, the focus is on language teacher assessment, an area of interest for specialists in both education and applied linguistics.

The adoption of a systematic review in this study enables the identification of prevailing trends in scientific outputs related to the EPPL exam within the Brazilian context. Furthermore, a systematic literature review serves as a valuable tool for establishing theoretical foundations in the interpretation of data. In this particular case, it facilitates drawing inferences regarding the spectrum of language and teacher education policies proposed in the existing literature.

This study follows the protocol outlined by Abreu, Nascimento, and Nascimento (2015) for conducting literature review, which, in turn, is an adaptation of the protocol originally developed by Sampaio and Mancini (2007). Table 1 presents the stages that constitute the methodological approach of this research.



Table 1: Description of the stages of the systematic review

Stage			Description
1	Identifying the problem		Research problem: How does the EPPLÉ exam literature deal with the social implications of language teacher assessment?
2	Developing a protocol		Research protocol: Detailed description of the study
3	Constructing the database		Database: Locating specialized literature on the EPPLÉ exam
4	Establishing criteria		Inclusion and exclusion criteria: Limiting the literature to be investigated
5	Assessing literature		Analysis, critique and assessment: Validity of studies on language teachers assessment
6	Drafting the summary		Summarizing: synthesis of perspectives on metathesis
7	Grouping evidence		Identification of evidence: grouping studies according to similarity
8	Trendsetting		Conclusion and scope of the evidence found

Source: Elaborated by the author.

As outlined in Table 1, the first step involved establishing the research problem that guides the literature review: How do academic studies within the EPPLÉ exam literature address the social implications of teacher assessment? Subsequently, inclusion and exclusion criteria for the database were formulated to address this research question. Hence, criteria such as the type of scientific study, production period, and language were employed to define the scope of studies included in this investigation.

In order to elucidate the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied in the literature review, table 2 delineates the criteria for including and excluding studies on teacher assessment in the EPPLÉ exam literature.



Table 2: Adopted inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria		Exclusion criteria	
1	Master's dissertations, doctoral thesis, research reports.	1	Productions that do not meet the inclusion criteria.
2	Articles published in journals with a selective editorial policy, articles published in annals of scientific events, books and book chapters, which have had an editorial committee.		
3	Publications in Portuguese and English.		
4	Empirical and theoretical studies.		
5	Productions published in the last decade.		
6	Digitally available scientific papers.		

Source: Elaborated by the author.

The databases utilized to construct the analyzed dataset included *Periódicos Capes*, Google Scholar, and the Institutional Repository of São Paulo State University (UNESP). We selected these databases for their extensive coverage of academic studies at the higher education level nationwide. Notably, UNESP's Institutional Repository houses a collection of scholarly productions dedicated to the EPPLÉ exam, given that some researchers engaged in discussions on language teacher assessment are affiliated with the university. Apart from the inclusion and exclusion criteria, we employed the following search descriptors to choose the scientific productions: "EPPLÉ", "EPPLÉ exam", "Exame EPPLÉ", "Exame de Proficiência para Professores de Línguas". We excluded studies that included "EPPLÉ" but were not relevant to the specific exam of interest in this research.

Given the chosen methodological approach for conducting the systematic review of EPPLÉ exam literature, Table 3 displays the selected studies that constitute the database for this investigation.

Table 3: Studies included in this research

Code	Study reference	Type
S1	CIALDINI, M. M. <i>Uma proposta de aprimoramentos para faixas de proficiência destinadas à avaliação da pronúncia em um exame para professores de línguas estrangeiras</i> : um produto da análise dos seus critérios avaliativos e da pronúncia dos sons /θ/, /ð/ e [t] em falas de (futuros) professores de língua inglesa. 2023. 269 f. Dissertação (Mestrado) – Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho, Instituto de Biociências, Letras e Ciências Exatas, 2023.	Doctoral thesis
S2	CUNHA, J. R. O. <i>Critérios de avaliação em faixas de proficiência nas habilidades escritas do professor de língua estrangeira</i> . 2021. 167 f. Dissertação (Mestrado) – Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho, Instituto de Biociências, Letras e Ciências Exatas, 2021.	Master's dissertation
S3	CUNHA, J. N. C. <i>O pré-teste ao EPPLE (Exame de Proficiência para Professores de Línguas Estrangeiras)</i> : validade e desafios tecnológicos. <i>Estudos Linguísticos</i> (São Paulo. 1978), v. 48, n. 2, p. 766–785, 2019.	Journal article
S4	CONSOLO, D. A.; AGUENA, D. M. <i>Pré-testagem ao Exame de Proficiência para professores de língua estrangeira (EPPLE)</i> : desenho e desafios tecnológicos para avaliação de proficiência oral em dispositivos tecnológicos móveis. <i>Polifonia</i> , [S. l.], v. 24, n. 35/2, p. 30–49, 2018.	Journal article
S5	DETOINI, A. C. S. M. <i>Dúvidas linguísticas de aprendizes de PLE</i> : contribuição para avaliação de proficiência oral de professores no EPPLE-PLE. 2018. 92f. Dissertação (Mestrado) – Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho, Instituto de Biociências, Letras e Ciências Exatas, 2018.	Master's dissertation
S6	QUEIROZ, R. N.; CONSOLO, D. O efeito retroativo de um exame de proficiência para professores. <i>Estudos em Avaliação Educacional</i> , vol.29, n.72, pp.832-857, 2018.	Journal article
S7	ANCHIETA, P. P. O EPPLE como instrumento de avaliação de proficiência para professores de língua estrangeira: um processo de validação. <i>Revista do GELNE</i> , [S. l.], v. 19, n. 1, p. 147–160, 2017.	Journal article
S8	CONSOLO, D.; SILVA, V. L. T. Foreign language teachers' proficiency: The implementation of the EPPLE examination in Brazil. In: GITSAKI, C.; COOMBE, C. <i>Current Issues in Language Evaluation, Assessment and Testing: Research and Practice</i> . Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016.	Book chapter
S9	CONSOLO, D. A.; SILVA, V. L. T. <i>Em defesa de uma formação linguística de qualidade para professores de línguas estrangeiras: o exame EPPLE</i> . <i>Revista Horizontes De Linguística Aplicada</i> , v. 13, n. 1, 2015.	Journal article
S10	ANCHIETA, P. P. <i>Relações entre o construto e as características do teste escrito do EPPLE eletrônico: um processo de validação</i> . 2015. 255 f. Tese (doutorado) - Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho, Instituto de Biociências, Letras e Ciências Exatas, 2015.	Doctoral thesis
S11	ANDRELINO, P. J. <i>Análise da estrutura genérica das instruções na fala do professor de inglês</i> : contribuições para o teste oral do EPPLE. 2014. 358 f. Tese (doutorado) - Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho, Instituto de Biociências, Letras e Ciências Exatas, 2014.	Doctoral thesis

Source: Elaborated by the author.

In view of the methodological aspects involved in this investigation, the next section presents the findings and tendencies obtained through the systematic review of the literature.

## Analysis

The criteria used in the EPPL exam to assess oral proficiency relies for the most part, on a single, idealized model of linguistic competence, especially those concerning pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary and fluency. We consider that the documents analyzed reveal an underlying bias toward monocentric and native-speaker norms, which contraposes pluricentric perspectives on language teaching and assessment. Table 4 below shows the criteria used to assess pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary and fluency.

Table 4: Criteria for assessing pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary and fluency in the EPPL exam

Category	Description of the most proficient performance	Description of less proficient performance
<b>Pronunciation</b>	They display pronunciation patterns very similar to competent speakers of the foreign language, with no marked influences from the patterns of their mother tongue, without causing any discomfort or incomprehension on the part of the interlocutor.	They have a distinctly different pronunciation, in terms of sounds and intonation patterns, from foreign language speakers, with marked interference from their mother tongue, which can cause incomprehension and discomfort for the interlocutor.
<b>Grammatical accuracy and vocabulary</b>	Provides information about present and past experiences clearly, and uses linguistic structures (e.g. past tense verb forms) and vocabulary, including lexical expressions ("the year before") appropriate and specific to the needs of oral production.	Provides information about present and past experiences using simple linguistic structures and little lexical variety, and makes structural errors that impair their oral expression.
<b>Fluency</b>	Fully achieves verbal communication objectives, showing fluency in speed and rhythm of speech.	Does not satisfactorily meet verbal communication objectives, showing a lack of fluency and competence in oral production.

Source: Elaborated by the author.

As can be observed in table 4, regarding pronunciation, criteria emphasize proximity to the pronunciation of "competent speakers," explicitly associating satisfactory oral performances with the absence of influence from other languages spoken by the candidate. As Clyne (1992) argues, languages do not have a single authoritative norm, but rather multiple legitimate centers of variation. In the context of English as a lingua franca, Jenkins (2006) contends that intelligibility, not native-like pronunciation, should be

prioritized in assessing pronunciation. Penalizing “deviations” caused by the interference of other languages spoken by the candidate reinforces exclusionary ideologies.

In terms of grammatical accuracy and lexical control, criteria are similarly framed around an implicit standard norm, suggesting that deviation from it indicates lesser competence. However, as Bianco (2014) notes, rigid grammatical standards often ignore the reality of multilingual speakers, who may draw on a broader range of communicative strategies (paraphrase, word coinage, restructuring, among other achievement strategies). In addition, Piller (2016) questions how language education and assessment frequently embed ideological assumptions in the guise of objectivity, rewarding elite forms of language while devaluing legitimate variation.

In turn, fluency is described primarily in terms of rhythm and speed, implying that slow or hesitant speech is inherently less proficient. Considering Clyne’s (1992) ideas, fluency should also encompass functional communicative competence, including pauses for planning, reformulation, or intercultural negotiation, features common in multilingual interaction.

Regarding the criteria for assessing listening comprehension, assess comprehension based on “normal speed” standards, without clarifying what defines a natural or normal rate of speech implies an idealization of what a competent speaker is. As Shohamy (2001) points out, such assumptions can invisibly enforce dominant norms and marginalize speakers who are more familiar with non-standard or non-central varieties of the target language.

In summary, these criteria suggest a model of proficiency that is idealized and values conformity to a single linguistic standard and is very limited in terms of recognition of the legitimate diversity of pluricentric language practices. A pluricentric framework would call for descriptors that describe communicative effectiveness and intercultural competence over formal similarity to a native speaker model.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the EPPL exam's literature reveals assessment practices of oral proficiency based on a monolithic and idealized model of linguistic competence, based on monocentric norms over pluricentric diversity. As demonstrated, the criteria for pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, and fluency equate satisfactory

performance with proximity to competent speakers, while penalizing legitimate variations arising from multilingualism or intercultural communication.

This approach, as discussed, not only overlooks the reality of English as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2006) but also reinforces exclusionary language hierarchies (Shohamy, 2001; Piller, 2016). Fluency, for instance, is simply measured by speed and rhythm, disregarding essential communicative strategies in multilingual interactions, such as pauses for planning or intercultural negotiation (Clyne, 1992).

In order to move toward a more equitable assessment practices, it is crucial to reconsider the EPPLE exam criteria, replacing native-speaker ideals with criteria that assess communicative effectiveness and intercultural competence. Future research must explore alternative assessment models capable of embracing linguistic diversity without compromising assessment validity.

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