

ELT Research Papers 18.05

Classroom assessment: the development of teachers' cognitions

Susan Sheehan and Sonia Munro

ELT Research Papers 18.05

Classroom assessment: the development of teachers' cognitions

Susan Sheehan and Sonia Munro

ISBN 978-0-86355-9280

© **British Council 2019** Design/J175

10 Spring Gardens
London SW1A 2BN, UK

www.britishcouncil.org

About the authors

Susan Sheehan is a Senior Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Huddersfield. Her research interests include assessment, language assessment literacy and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. She worked at the British Council before coming to Huddersfield, where she is course leader for the BA TESOL.

Sonia Munro is a Senior Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Huddersfield, where she is course leader for the MA TESOL. She has been involved with TESOL and teacher education for nearly 20 years, working in a variety of contexts both in the UK and overseas. Her research interests include teacher education, materials development and the use of technology in language learning.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the teachers who participated in each stage of the project. We are grateful for their generosity of time and willingness to share their thoughts and experiences with us. We are especially grateful to the teachers who allowed us to observe their lessons at a time when they had very full teaching timetables.

Finally, we gratefully acknowledge the support of the British Council.

Abstract

This project investigated teacher cognitions and assessment. We sought to understand how teachers develop their cognitions and how these cognitions influence classroom practice. We wanted to provide a counter-balance to studies that have focused on presumed gaps in teachers' knowledge of assessment.

Teachers' cognitions and beliefs are frequently cited as exerting a powerful role in shaping their decisions, judgements and behaviour (see, for example, Borg, 2006; Kagan, 1992). Therefore, exploring teachers' cognitions may help teacher educators to better understand the factors that promote or prevent effective assessment, and thus contribute to more targeted teacher education.

A qualitative approach was adopted, and methods used included questionnaire, interview and observation with follow-up interview. The questionnaire focused on experiences of assessment and currently held beliefs relating to assessment.

The questionnaire was inspired by Borg and Burns' (2008) survey of teacher beliefs about teaching grammar. In order to enrich the questionnaire data, ten follow-up interviews were held to explore the reasoning behind the responses given on the questionnaire. The third method used was observation and interview; five classroom observations were conducted, with a follow-up interview with the teacher after each observation. The observations focused on classroom-based assessment practices.

We found that experiences of assessment at school influenced the teachers' assessment practices but not in the way we had expected. Rather than replicating the assessment types they had experienced, which included traditional pen-and-paper grammar tests, the teachers made a conscious decision to use other assessment activities that were more learner-centred.

Contents

1	Introduction.....	3
2	Literature review.....	5
3	Methodology and participants.....	7
4	Results.....	9
	Conclusions.....	15
	References.....	16

1

Introduction

The stimulus for the project described in this report was a finding from a previous British Council-funded study which sought to investigate the attitudes, practices and training needs of teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in the area of assessment (Sheehan and Munro, 2017). Working with experienced EFL teachers, we explored teachers' views on assessment and their training needs. To achieve this, we used a qualitatively oriented, multi-method approach involving focus groups, interviews and classroom observations, and our findings informed a set of self-study teacher education materials which were published on the British Council's website.*

Participants in the study claimed to know little about assessment and to have little interest in the topic, yet during the classroom observations we observed the teachers successfully deploying a range of assessment techniques. This tension between teachers' reported and actual knowledge and practices was explained in follow-up interviews in which they characterised their classroom assessment practices as being part of teaching and not as assessment; in teachers' minds teaching and assessment practices were so intrinsically linked that any and all activities which promote learning are seen as part of teaching, rather than as assessment.

It seemed to us that the teachers in the 2017 project thought about assessment in a way which was very different from what we had expected based on our reading of literature related to language assessment literacy. This sparked for us the idea that teachers and their understandings of assessment needed to be conceptualised differently and with a new research focus which centres around teachers' *cognitions* about assessment. We use the term cognition here following Borg's definition of what teachers think, know and believe about a matter (Borg, 2006).

There is a wealth of literature that highlights the influence of beliefs on teachers' classroom practices. Williams and Burden (1997: 56–57) claim that beliefs 'affect everything that [teachers] do in the classroom'. This view is shared by Pajares (1992), who suggests that beliefs are one of the strongest predictors of a teacher's behaviour. These views may be formed as early as childhood and be linked to one's own experiences of schooling (Lortie, 1975), and can therefore be highly resistant to change (Pickering, 2005) and/or the effects of teacher education programmes (Kagan, 1992). However, there is also evidence to suggest that teachers may not always be able to translate their beliefs into practice and that contextual factors play a role in influencing the extent to which a mismatch between beliefs and practices may occur (Barnard and Burns, 2012).

There are three reasons why it is important to understand teacher beliefs and knowledge relating to assessment. First, teachers are required to engage in a large range of assessment-related activities. Teachers prepare students for school-leaving certificate examinations and for internationally recognised examinations such as IELTS (Vogt and Tsagari, 2014). Programmes such as No Child Left Behind have increased the amount of testing of school children, and English language testing is increasingly used for migration purposes (Fulcher, 2012). Inbar-Lourie (2008) posits the view that the increased focus on assessment for learning increases the pressure on teachers to engage with assessment. Second, Looney et al. (2018) suggest that assessment is the instrument through which curriculum reform is enacted. So, teachers are in some way compelled to undertake particular assessment tasks. Finally, a number of survey projects have been published (Fulcher, 2012; Hasselgreen et al., 2004; Vogt and Tsagari, 2014) that have sought to establish levels of assessment literacy among teachers. These projects have tended to report assessment literacy levels as concerningly low. As discussed above we found that the teachers who participated in our project considered teaching and assessment to be distinct activities and that they were only engaged in teaching activities.

* <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/assessment-attitudes-practices-needs>

It is, therefore, important to understand teachers' knowledge and beliefs in order to prevent them from being unfairly characterised as lacking in assessment knowledge. Moreover, teachers' beliefs can act as a filter through which new information and experiences are interpreted (Pajares, 1992), and therefore understanding these cognitions helps us to make sense of how teachers interpret and operationalise the requirements of their curriculum. The aim of this project is to examine teachers' cognitions and practices in relation to assessment. It will answer the following research questions listed below. The third question includes the term assessment 'credo'. This term is taken from a study conducted by Yin (2010). His project explored the classroom assessment practices of two teachers. He created the term *assessment 'credo'* to encapsulate what teachers think, know and believe about assessment.

1. How do teachers develop their identity as assessors?
2. What role do teachers' experiences of assessment, both in their own schooling, and as teachers, play in the development of their assessment practices?
3. How do teachers put their assessment 'credo' into practice?

The next section of the report is a review of literature related to teacher cognition and language assessment literacy, as both aspects are relevant to this project. Malone (2011) has proposed the following definition of *language assessment literacy*:

Assessment literacy is an understanding of the measurement basics related directly to classroom learning; language assessment literacy extends this definition to issues specific to language classrooms.

Then the methodology is outlined and a description of the participants is provided. The results and analysis are then presented. The final section of this report contains the conclusions and recommendations for practice.

2

Literature review

The literature review includes discussion of four themes. These are:

- teacher cognition
- school experiences
- conflict between the roles of language assessor and language facilitator
- teacher education.

When we conducted the literature review these were the issues that were most commonly written about.

Teacher cognition

The following definition of teacher cognition, written by Borg, who is one of the leading researchers in the field, informed the project:

... teacher cognition as an inclusive term referring to the complex, practically-orientated, personalised, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs that language teachers draw on in their work. (Borg, 2015: 321)

This definition was chosen as it acknowledges the complex nature of teacher cognition and it differentiates between knowledge and beliefs. Teachers can acquire knowledge through teacher training courses and other forms of ongoing training. This knowledge may not match, or it may even contradict the thoughts and beliefs that teachers also draw on. Some of those beliefs may have their origins in classroom experiences that occurred before an individual had any notion that teaching would become their profession (Lortie, 1975). This definition also takes into consideration the impact that context can have on teacher cognition. Policy, and in particular assessment policy, may oblige teachers to engage in practices which are not in alignment with their thoughts and beliefs. As will be discussed below, teacher cognition is a complex proposition that can also include notions of teacher identity and the origins of this identity.

Teacher cognition research developed out of research that sought to identify which teaching activities would best promote successful learning. It had been hoped that by identifying such practice it would be possible to raise teaching standards overall. So, trainee teachers, for example, would be trained to use the most effective activities and this would lead

to students gaining better test scores. Verloop et al. (2001) note that such research was criticised by teachers for being reductive and this led to teaching research that focused on teacher cognitions and beliefs and not, as previously had been the case, research that focused on teacher behaviour. This shift in research focus meant that teacher knowledge came to be considered as an important component of the educational process. They go on to suggest that some teacher knowledge could be common to all teachers or to large groups of teachers, and make the claim that:

The basic assumption underlying this type of study is that the findings concerning common elements in teacher knowledge can, if codified adequately, become part of the overall knowledge base of teaching. (Verloop et al., 2001: 443–444)

In terms of our project, a common core of teacher knowledge relating to assessment may exist for EFL teachers.

As stated above, Borg's definition has informed the project. He makes a distinction between teacher cognition and language teacher cognition. He argues that: 'Teachers of foreign and second languages, in particular, possess conceptions of their work which are influenced by their own experiences of language learning' (2015: 325). Teachers of English have experienced both sides of the teaching and learning experience. So, when a person starts to teach English they already have a wealth of experience on which to draw. The literature we reviewed suggests that these experiences can be both a help and hindrance in the development of effective classroom assessment practices (Beijaard et al., 2004; Ell et al., 2012; Vogt and Tsagari, 2014).

School experiences

There is some agreement among those who write about teacher cognition and related issues such as teacher identity that school experiences from childhood can have a profound influence on how teachers operate in the classroom. Beijaard et al. (2004) characterise these perspectives on teaching as 'lay theories'. They write that: 'Lay theories are tacit or unarticulated and lead to forms of professional identity formation that differ from forms of professional identity formation which derive from research based theories of teaching' (2004: 114).

They go on to suggest that the existence of these lay theories can undermine the effectiveness of teacher training as trainee teachers can fail to engage with training that may conflict with their lay theories. Ell et al. (2012) make the point that prior knowledge is often seen as a hindrance as it can lead to teachers repeating the practices which they experienced themselves as students. In the language assessment literature this replication of assessment practices experienced while at school has been characterised by Vogt and Tsagari (2014) as ‘testing as you were tested.’ This could be problematic as the teacher’s assessment practice could fail to take into account the developments which have taken place in assessment in the time between being a school pupil and being a teacher.

Role conflict

Teachers may experience conflict between their dual roles of being a language facilitator and a language assessor (Rea-Dickins, 2004). This conflict may be at the heart of the difficulties that some teachers experience when engaged in assessment activities. Looney et al. (2018) write that:

The tensions of this dual role, the demands of responding to the complex dispositions of learners in the assessment process, and a recognition of the ontological as well as the epistemological dimensions of learning all contribute to our conceptualisations of teacher assessment identity.

This is an important reminder of the presence of the learner and the focus of the teacher on the learner. In much of the debate around teacher cognition and assessment literacy, the learner can often seem to be lost. They go on to state that teachers can have ‘mixed feelings’ about assessment that can be based on their feelings or experiences but that also depends on their view of their role as teacher and if they are being asked or forced to engage with assessment activities that they feel are not part of their role as teacher.

Classroom assessment practice is a relatively under-researched area, and the complexity of the situation that teachers face can sometimes be underestimated. One study that explored this topic was conducted by Yin. He observed and interviewed two teachers of English for academic purposes over a number of lessons. Yin (2010: 193) writes that teachers ‘must constantly make decisions related to assessment in the midst of conflicting demands and numerous considerations.’ This links to points made by Scarino (2013) of the conflicts teachers find themselves in relating to assessment. Some of these are external and can be created by management and managerialism (Yin, 2010). Others are internal and

relate to the teachers’ own understanding of learning and teaching. Weigle (2007) posits the view that teachers feel assessment is a ‘necessary evil’. This may be because assessment policies are often imposed on teachers in a top-down fashion (Sheehan and Munro, 2017) or it could be the case that teachers see themselves as people who help learners and not people who judge learners. They may feel ethically conflicted about their role as an assessor.

The link between teacher cognition and language assessment literacy is made by Levy-Vered and Nasser-Abu Alhija (2015). They state:

Assessment literacy is dependent on a combination of cognitive traits (i.e. knowledge, ability) belief systems (i.e. conception of assessment), and an exposure to modelling (by teacher educators) throughout their training, as well as aspects relating to beginning teachers’ personal and professional conceptions and the context in which they function. (2015: 395)

Their use of terms such as knowledge, beliefs and context is reminiscent of the definition of teacher cognition that informed this project. There are also links between assessment literacy and the influence of teacher education and the beliefs with which trainee teachers entered teacher education.

Teacher education

Teacher education has also been investigated to discover what teachers are being taught about assessment. In both the fields of general education and EFL, studies have reported a gap between the teacher educators and the teachers (Malone, 2013; Brown and Bailey, 2008). The authors suggest that those teaching assessment courses tend to be assessment experts who place great value on the study of the theoretical underpinnings of assessment. While the student teachers on those courses emphasise their interest in learning more about classroom assessment with a focus on practical matters. A study of EFL teacher assessment training needs (Sheehan and Munro, 2017) also found teachers expressing a clear desire for practical activities and no interest in theory. In addition, Xu and Brown (2016) report that a review of studies of teacher efficacy have revealed that teachers want to study alternative assessment methods, whereas the university staff want to focus on test analysis and statistics.

In the literature review we explored language teacher cognitions and how they relate to assessment. The next section of the report covers the project methodology and includes a description of the participants.

3

Methodology and participants

The project focused on the following research questions:

- How do teachers develop their identity as assessors?
- What role do teachers' experiences of assessment, both in their own schooling, and as teachers, play in the development of their assessment practices?

- How do teachers put their assessment 'credo' into practice?

Table 1 summarises the stages of data collection. The stages are described in more detail in the following section of the report.

Table 1: A summary of the four stages of data collection

Data collection stage	Participants	Location
Questionnaire	261 participants	Worldwide, with participants from 57 different countries
Interviews	Ten interviews	Worldwide
Observations and follow-up interviews	Five experienced teachers with a range of qualifications	Language centre at a UK university

We adopted a qualitatively oriented multi-method strategy to data collection. Borg (2015: 328) notes that: 'No one approach to studying language cognition will be free of problems and this is reflected in the range of studies which have adopted multi-method strategies...' Our project had three data collection methods: questionnaire, interview and observation with follow-up interviews.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire focused on experiences of assessment and currently held beliefs relating to assessment. The questionnaire was inspired by Borg and Burns' (2008) survey of teacher beliefs about teaching grammar. It did not follow the route adopted by many assessment literacy researchers such as Fulcher (2012), who have used questionnaires to ask teachers about their level of assessment knowledge or to ask teachers which assessment topics they would be interested in receiving more information about. Rather, the questionnaire explored teacher experiences of assessment and how these experiences have shaped their cognitions.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section contained questions about how the participants were assessed when they were at school. The second section focused on the participants' assessment training experiences. The third and final section covered the participants' assessment practices and their assessment 'credo'.

The questionnaire was first piloted with MA TESOL students and doctoral candidates who were experienced EFL teachers. It was then distributed and promoted through British Council websites and teacher networks. We wanted the sample to reflect the range and diversity of EFL teachers in terms of training experiences and types of employment. As the participants who completed the questionnaire and then volunteered to be interviewed were self-selecting, there are limits to any claims to be made about the representativeness of the sample.

The online questionnaire, for which we used BOS, was promoted by the British Council on a number of websites including TeachingEnglish. BOS is an online survey tool created for use by researchers in UK universities. We also promoted the questionnaire through our networks. The questionnaire was completed by 261 teachers from 57 different countries in all continents. India was the country from which we received most completed questionnaires. This may simply be a reflection of the total size of the population and the reach of British Council websites. In the case of some countries, such as Nepal, Uruguay, Namibia and Iraq, there was only one participant. Our questionnaire attracted responses from around the globe and in that sense can be considered to reflect the experiences of teachers working in a variety of different contexts. The participants can be described as experienced English teachers with 81.5 per cent having worked in the profession for more than five years. They can also be characterised as well-qualified teachers with 34.1 per cent having master's degrees and 22.2 per cent having other postgraduate qualifications. A doctorate was held by 7.3 per cent of participants. Most of the participants reported that they worked most often in state institutions. EFL teachers can work for a variety of institutions so we asked them about the institution in which they worked most often. The participants stated that they worked in a variety of institution types including language schools and secondary schools. Private lessons and online teaching were also mentioned as the places where the teachers worked.

Interviews

In order to enrich the questionnaire data, ten follow-up interviews were held to explore the reasoning behind the responses given on the questionnaire. Those questionnaire respondents who were willing to be interviewed left an email address at the end of the questionnaire. We then contacted them to arrange an interview. The interviews were conducted through the video conferencing software Zoom. The interviews lasted between one and two hours.

It should be noted here that for both the questionnaire and the interviews we asked the participants to state the country in which they were currently working. We did not ask for any information about nationality. In some cases, the country of work was not the same as the participant's nationality. We interviewed, for example, a Dutch woman who taught English in Spain but who had also taught in Israel and South America. This reflects the varied career paths of some EFL teachers. The interviewed teachers were given pseudonyms. More women than men were interviewed but this may reflect the typical balance of the teaching profession.

Observation and interview

The third data collection method was observations and interviews. Five classroom observations were conducted, with a follow-up interview with the teacher after each observation. The observations were conducted at a language centre associated with a university in northern England and used an observation schedule which had been developed as part of a previous research project (Sheehan and Munro, 2017). The schedule, which was influenced by research into teacher classroom assessment practices undertaken by Colby-Kelly and Turner (2007), contained a list of 16 assessment activities. For periods of three minutes, ticks were recorded against observed assessment activities, with additional notes written about the observed activities. Every three minutes a fresh sheet was started. A 60-minute observation generated 20 sheets. The follow-up interviews were semi-structured and focused on particular aspects of the observation. Their primary function was to explore teachers' thinking during parts of the lesson. We also asked the teachers how they planned their assessment activities and how they have developed their assessment practices. Furthermore, the interviews allowed us the opportunity to ensure that the teachers agreed with our classification of an activity.

The five teachers were highly experienced and held a range of qualifications including master's degrees in TESOL or Applied Linguistics. They were all working in the UK at the time of the project but their teaching experiences were not limited to the UK. All of the teachers had experience of working in a variety of EFL settings and had worked with students of all ages. In order to ensure the anonymity of the teachers they have been given pseudonyms. More women than men participated in the project but again this would seem to reflect the typical gender balance of the teaching profession. Given the overall qualitative nature of the project, we were interested in talking to teachers who reflected the diverse nature of the profession and we think we were successful in this.

Data analysis

The interview data was analysed using ATLAS.ti. The questionnaire data was analysed using BOS. A deductive approach to data analysis was adopted, and Borg's framework for language teacher cognition informed the analysis.

4

Results

The results will be presented in order of research question, with questionnaire and interview data being presented alongside data from the observations and interviews. Limitations of space mean that only highlights of the data will be presented here. The code IT plus a number is used to refer to the interviewed teachers. The code OT plus a number indicates the teachers who we observed and then interviewed.

How do teachers develop their identity as assessors?

One of the most striking results was that 74.4 per cent of the questionnaire participants disagreed with the notion that they used the same assessment techniques with their students as they had experienced from teachers in their own schooling. As discussed earlier, several studies (Vogt and Tsagari, 2014; Xu and Brown, 2016; Ell et al., 2012) have suggested that teachers test as they had been tested. In the interviews the participants stated that while their teachers had relied primarily on tests, especially ones that focused on spelling and grammar, they themselves used a broader range of assessment activities. In the observed lessons the teachers used a range of assessment practices that are associated with assessment for learning. It would seem that the participants developed their identity as assessors by rejecting the assessment practices that they had experienced as school children.

IT1 stated that her first experience of formal training in assessment: ‘... came through Cambridge exams.’ She said this was an important source of training for her on issues relating to testing and assessment. She was influenced by the interactive nature of the oral exams and tried to introduce similarly interactive exams in the schools where she held management positions. Some teachers indicated that training to be an examiner for international examinations such as those provided by Cambridge Assessment changed their assessment practices in the classroom and their identity as an assessor. For IT3 for example, training to be an examiner made her aware of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and this prompted her to read more about assessment. Examiner training also made her more conscious of her classroom assessment practices.

IT3 stated: ‘Being an examiner I became more aware of what we do in the classroom ... the type of things we correct, we emphasise, what to correct in essays.’ This point was echoed by IT9. He talked about how the process of training to be an IELTS examiner had influenced his teaching practice. He stated: ‘That training was quite helpful to assess my students in a more informal way. I become more analytical about assessing the quality of my students’ speaking.’ He qualified this statement by suggesting that while this knowledge was helpful, it was not essential for teaching speaking. He implies that this training in assessment could be considered as an enrichment to his practice, but that people who have not trained to be examiners are not less good at teaching speaking than those who had gone through this experience. This type of assessment knowledge relates to the professional coursework element in Borg’s framework, and indicates that training from professional bodies can influence a teacher’s cognitions about assessment.

Initial teacher training does not seem to have played a strong role in the teachers’ development as assessors. IT7, in common with many of the other participants in this project, stated that: ‘The teacher training course did not help me much at all.’ According to the participants, assessment was not covered in detail on their teacher training courses. None of the participants stated that their assessment practices were commented on during their teaching practice sessions. The most common response to questions about their experiences of teacher training was that the courses focused on the techniques and methods of teaching, and that assessment was not given much attention. This would seem to correspond with the findings of our first project (Sheehan and Munro, 2017).

Some of the participants had undertaken degree courses to be a teacher (20.3 per cent) while others talked about their experiences on shorter teaching courses such as Delta or CELTA. IT9 felt his experiences of assessment training had had little influence on his assessment practice. He recalled that the exam module of the version of Delta he had taken had included a question on assessment.

He stated that: 'I remember very much it was about terminology – validity, reliability, it was more about construct validity and these academic terms rather than the mechanics of writing test items – there was nothing practical on the course.' So, here we have an explicit rejection of a theoretical-based approach to assessment and a clear privileging of practical experience over the type of learning included in training courses. As discussed in the literature above the over-emphasis on the theoretical aspects of assessment is off-putting for teachers. This echoes Malone (2013), who highlights the mismatched expectations of trainers who are experts in assessment and those of trainee teachers.

The development of an identity as an assessor does not seem to be a straightforward process. The participants in the project were all experienced teachers but many expressed disquiet at the idea of assessing students. IT10 spoke at length about her struggles with grading students. She stated that: 'Grading is still uncomfortable even after so many years of teaching. The kids are so sensitive, if they get a grade they don't want they can be hurt; it's like judging them.' She went on to state that she would prefer it if someone else could perform the end-of-year assessments for her. She felt the children were under a lot of pressure from their parents to achieve good grades, and when she gave a student a poor grade she felt bad about it both for the student and herself. So, even though she went through the process of assessing the students she clearly felt conflicted about her identity as an assessor. This finding would seem to replicate that of Rea-Dickins (2004) and be consistent with challenges of assessment discussed by Looney et al. (2018).

What role do experiences of assessment play in assessment practice?

Nearly half (48.5 per cent) of the questionnaire respondents stated that they had not experienced self-assessment or similar activities when they were students themselves, but stated that they used them as teachers. In addition, we observed such practices being deployed in all of the five observed lessons. So, perhaps, these teachers are compensating for a perceived lack in their own experiences. It could be the case that experiences of an over-reliance on testing has led the teachers to use a broader range of assessments. The interviews suggested that there was a strong awareness of the limitations of the assessment practices they had experienced themselves, even though they often scored high marks in tests and exams. IT1 acknowledged that she had become adept at developing strategies to

obtain high scores but that she soon forgot the material after taking the exam. She contrasted this experience with creating a portfolio of artwork. She stated that she had loved the process of assembling the portfolio. She stated: 'I remember this as a very positive experience. I can remember all the things I made for that exhibition but I can't remember what I learnt for tests and put in essays so maybe that has influenced me.' Even though she was successful in passing exams, she was aware of their limitations and wanted to assess her students in a different way. These findings echo those reported in our first project (Sheehan and Munro, 2017). We found that the teachers in that project regularly used peer and self-assessment in the classroom. The teachers stated that such practices promoted a more holistic approach to language learning that encouraged learners to focus on developing their level of language proficiency and not on test scores.

For some of the participants, general experiences in the classroom brought about change in their assessment practice. For others, a particular experience was the catalyst for change. IT2 stated that for the first 15 years of her career she was happy to follow the same assessment practices which she had experienced herself as a teacher. She had been successful at school and she had not considered that there had been limitations to that approach to assessment. Her assessment practices were revolutionised by attending a course on formative assessment offered by the Peace Corps. Once she had learned about formative assessment she realised it was the way to motivate students. Previously she had thought tests had motivated students to study regularly. She stated: 'So I realised it wasn't the way to motivate students. I realised I was closing the loop.' In a similar vein, IT3 stated: 'At the beginning I reproduced what I was exposed to. It was only when I started having exposure to different ideas I realised that I could do something different.' So, we have the pattern of initial replication of the assessment practices which she was exposed to at school, and then a rejection of those practices as teaching experience and increased knowledge of assessment leads to the development of a new set of assessment practices. This links to a finding of our previous research project, which found teaching experience was fundamental to the development of assessment practice (Sheehan and Munro, 2017).

The participants' experiences, both as teachers and students, seem to have led them to explore alternative assessment practices. This contrasts with points made by Vogt and Tsagari (2014) and others that teachers replicate the assessment

practices that they had experienced as school children. IT4's experiences of assessment led her to make a conscious decision to test in a way which is different from the way she experienced at school. She stated that: 'My teachers liked to give us tests, multiple-choice tests, writing tests ... without explaining why we should do those tests, the tests were unreasonable.' She stated that due to her negative experiences she does not like testing and she does not like giving students marks. Her experiences have led her to assess in a way that puts little stress on her students. She stated she tried her best not to make the students feel nervous and that she would use tests that the children may not perceive as being tests. There is a clear desire to break away from a fear-inspiring approach to assessment to one in which the students are made to feel as little stress as possible. In terms of the tensions between the role of language assessor and language facilitator described by Rea-Dickins (2004) the role of facilitator is more important.

IT10 was clear that her assessment experiences at school were not satisfactory and this had created in her a desire to use different assessment practices. She stated that at school the assessment process was opaque to her: '... the grades were shady, you never knew why you got a three or a four, I didn't like that so we always explain to the students which grades they got.' She stressed the importance of sharing the criteria with students and then using them for self- and peer assessment. She complained the system she experienced did not provide her with indications about how she could improve her performance in order to improve her grade. She feels that sharing criteria is part of the process of helping students to reflect on performance to identify concrete strategies to get better. Once again we see that being a language facilitator is more important than being a language assessor.

The questionnaire respondents indicated that they had done well in assessments at school, with 57.6 per cent stating they had been top of the class. Notwithstanding this success, many of the participants expressed the idea that the assessments lacked clarity and little feedback was provided. IT5 was one of those who had done well in traditional tests but still had come to the conclusion that other approaches would work better. She stated that: 'I did well but I simply realised that was not the best method to evaluate my students.' She wanted to move away from pen-and-paper testing and towards a more communicative approach of testing that focused on using the language rather than learning

lists of irregular verbs. IT6 made a similar point about her experiences. She stated: 'My experience taught me the things I should stop doing.' She wanted to assess her students in a way that promoted communication and what she referred to as fluency. She was also keen to assess students in a way that the students would find motivational. So, she wants to inspire the students to want to learn the language and not to make them learn through fear of being tested. This point seems to relate to points made by Looney et al. (2018) on the importance of beliefs and feelings in teacher assessment practice. These teachers were expressing their beliefs about the best approach to assessment and their feelings about their assessment experiences.

IT10 spoke about how her experiences of writing assessments had developed her assessment practice. She stated that: 'I can see I made very many mistakes in the beginning but over the years I've tried to develop myself and this has had some impact on assessment too.' So, she learned from writing tests that were poorly designed. She also mentioned that her teaching experience meant that she had become better at writing tests that were pitched at the right level for her students. She talked about differentiated assessments in which she asked more challenging questions to bright students and easier ones to the weak students. Her experience of teaching, therefore, and her more nuanced understanding of level informs her task selection, and her understanding of her students allowed her to pitch those tasks at the right level. This relates to points made by Looney et al. (2018) about confidence. IT10 has grown in confidence about her assessment activities over time and having reflected on her practice. This sense of confidence enables her to use more sophisticated assessment tasks.

How do teachers put their assessment 'credo' into practice?

All of the teachers were observed using peer assessment. Questionnaire data indicated that peer assessment was widely used by teachers, with 66.8 per cent of respondents reporting its use. OT4 was most vocal about his use of peer assessment. He stated:

I use peer assessment all the time, the power relationship is more symmetrical and they are more inclined talk to each other so that lowers the filter and all that. It encourages negotiation and clarification, encourages noticing and critical thinking, and it encourages a more student centred approach.

It would seem that assessment is being used here as a means to achieve broader language and learning aims. A great deal of consideration has been given to how language is acquired and how peer assessment can support language learning. During OT4's observed lesson, students wrote sentences on the board that were then analysed by peers. Other teachers used peer checking and peer assessment in smaller groups or peers. This was facilitated by the layout of the classrooms as the tables were in islands. Some of OT4's comments would seem to relate to the coursework element of Borg's (2015) framework. For example, his mention of the filter would seem to be a reference to the theorist Krashen and these theories are often discussed on language teacher-training courses.

Self-assessment was important to both the interviewed teachers and the ones whose lessons were observed. IT3 stated:

Everything starts with assessment – it took me a long time to learn this – we start thinking with good achievement and this is how assessment is part of planning, assessment is part of teaching, so in thinking about how I'm going to assess I decided how to teach and plan a topic, how it will be assessed throughout the lessons ... I cannot think about teaching without thinking about assessment.

Her 'credo' is applied throughout all stages of planning and teaching. The teaching serves to achieve the assessment goals, and assessment is used to determine what achievement looks like and how to teach the students in order to reach the specified goal. One of the ways in which IT3 puts her 'credo' into practice is sharing the marking criteria with her students and asking them to engage in self-assessment. She stated that the students find using the criteria to be a useful experience as they think the criteria are positively worded and reward content in written work rather than penalising students for making mistakes. The way in which IT3 has formulated the criteria is an example of putting her 'credo' into practice. She wants the students to focus on achievement and substantial developments in their understanding. The process of engaging in self-assessment helps IT3's students to understand the criteria and to understand what achievement looks like. Her process would seem to correspond to the model of teacher assessment identity as proposed by Looney et al. (2018). They write that:

This reconceptualisation of teacher assessment identity encompasses not only a range of assessment strategies and skills, and even confidence and self-efficacy in undertaking

assessment, but also the beliefs and feelings about assessment that will inform how teachers engage in assessment work with students, and focuses not simply on what teachers do, but on who they are. (2017: 456)

IT3 is demonstrating how her teacher assessment identity has become totally enmeshed with her identity and practice as a teacher.

The theme of using assessment as a way to support the learners to reach their full potential was common in all the interviews. Learner-centred teaching was also important to the teachers. OT1 stated: 'I'm interested in finding what each person can do.' She went on to state: 'You've got to be good at assessing and adapting, so that everyone can gain.' She seems to be suggesting that she is continually assessing her students and adjusting her teaching plans based on this information. There is a real concern that all the students in the class should get the most out of the session. She summarised her teaching and assessment philosophy thus: 'You can't have one without the other.' The questionnaire data supports this conceptualisation as 80.2 per cent of respondents stated they used information from assessments to plan teaching. OT2 highlighted the continuous nature of classroom assessments. She stated: 'You are always assessing students the minute they walk through the door, maybe not formally but informally.' Again this seems to provide evidence of the teachers using assessment to support their development holistically. So, as the students walk through the door the teacher can assess mood and group dynamics. Assessment relates to more than linguistic issues. Such views of assessment seem to be absent from much of the literature relating to language assessment literacy. This may indicate that survey-based investigations of levels of teacher assessment knowledge (Fulcher, 2012 for example) have failed to recognise these facets of language teacher cognition.

While marking can be an onerous task, the way in which the teachers discussed their approach to marking is also revealing about their assessment 'credo'. IT3 stated: 'I've just done a load of essays and I literally write point for point why this has gone down and even if it is a very low mark I always write about the good points too, that means they have got something to build upon.' The amount of care which has gone into this marking is remarkable. She is keen that even those learners with low scores feel that they are capable of improvement and that they understand the problematic aspects of their work. IT3 is not being a Pollyanna. She stated: 'I have to

be positive but I have to show them where they have gone wrong and give them a way to go forward.’ She mentioned that the group she was teaching at the time of the observation was a weak one and she was very concerned about their chances of passing the final assessments. It would seem her optimism was tempered by a dose of realism. Again, there is more emphasis being placed on the role of language facilitator than language assessor.

IT6 considered assessment to be a form of dialogue with her students and she stressed that only by understanding her students and using information from them could she teach them effectively. She stated that: ‘When you show your honesty the student will see that you are taking him seriously, first of all you have to know your students so you have to analyse them.’ She talked about the uniqueness of every student and the need to find the right teaching approach in terms of the student’s learning style and pace of learning. She concluded that: ‘If you know your students you will be able to assess them individually.’ She put her ‘credo’ into practice by keeping detailed notes of her students. She makes a note of how they participated in lessons as well as how they have mastered any new material presented to them. She also used the notes she kept on students as a way of evaluating her own teaching. She used this as a basis for reflection on her own practice. She located reflection as the centre of her teaching and assessment philosophy. This could be considered as a ‘profession-related insight.’ Verloop et al. (2001) use this term to describe insights that inform teaching activity.

Note-taking was often mentioned as a way of regularly assessing students in a way in which might not have been obvious to the students. IT9, for example, stated: ‘On a day-to-day level I just make notes about their performance ... I jot down little utterances.’ IT9 uses these notes as a basis for planning future teaching sessions. He also stated that he used these notes to inform the grades he awarded the students at the end of course. So, this is a low pressure on the student way of assessing students and arriving at a final grade. IT9 was clear that such notes were preferable to a poorly written test produced by a teacher who had little knowledge of testing and assessment. Contrary to what we had been led to expect from the literature, it would seem that some teachers are very confident in their assessment practices and were happy to award students grades based on their own judgement. Vogt and Tsagari (2014) described such teacher judgements as ‘fuzzy’.

All of the teachers were observed to monitor their students throughout the lesson. They all considered it to be a vital part of classroom-based assessment. OT5 stated: ‘When I monitor I’m looking for if the tasks are going to be completed and also the weaker students who need assistance either from the teacher or perhaps they can get it from their peers.’ She went on to state that monitoring was necessary for learning. This was a point made by all of the observed teachers. Together with monitoring, the teachers were all observed to frequently praise their students. OT2 stated: ‘When I monitor I want to see whether the students are grasping what is going on and gaining something from it.’ Again we see the focus on the individual student and using assessment information, in this case from monitoring, to ensure that all students are benefiting as much as possible from the activity. OT5 said: ‘I think praising a student makes the student feel better because negative comments will immediately put off a student but praising is a good way of motivating them.’ It seemed to be important for all the teachers to engender a positive learning atmosphere and to use assessment in a positive fashion. The focus here seems to be on the teacher as language facilitator and not language assessor (Rea-Dickins, 2004).

One of the interviewees mentioned that she kept an orchard and used this as a metaphor for her approach to assessment and to explain her assessment ‘credo’. IT1 compared her approach to assessment to her approach to looking after the apples she grew in her orchard. She said she monitors her apples every day to see how well they are growing and to check if there have been any changes to the environment. When she harvests the apples she assesses the quality of the fruit. So, here we have the idea of assessment as supporting and developing the student through to the end of course. Assessment providing the teacher with the information to make the best environment to enable the students to reach their full potential.

Responsiveness to the student needs is a theme that recurred in many interviews and would seem to be an important part of assessment ‘credo’. IT2 stated that: ‘I don’t think there is one magical set of magical assessment activities for everyone.’ So, personalisation and individualisation are important in assessment. IT4 was very much concerned that her students, who are schoolchildren, should not feel stressed by the assessment process. She stated that children learn through playing and she used the same approach to assessment: ‘Gamification is the best way to help the children learn so even when I assess I try to do it in some interesting ways.’

I believe the tasks are interesting for them.' IT4 is ensuring that her approach to assessment is consistent with her approach to teaching. She wants the children to feel the same levels of interest and enjoyment when they are being assessed as they experience during her lessons. IT5 stated that: 'My assessment philosophy is I try to encourage my students ... I don't want them to lose motivation so I say don't worry you can do it. I try always to encourage students.' So, this is another example of putting the emotional well-being of students at the centre of the teaching and assessment practice. IT7 talked about the need to take into account the individual child in the assessment process. She wanted to bring out the best in all her students. She stated: 'I'll take the positive points and encourage him and at the same time point out his mistakes and him to encourage on that. Encouragement is very important for a child.' Thus, we can see that the focus of the teacher is on bringing out the best of each individual student. This corresponds to Rea-Dickins' (2004) view of the teacher as a language facilitator.

The final part of assessment 'credo' to be explored in this section of the report is the role of assessment in teacher reflection. IT8 emphasised the closeness of the relationship between reflection and assessment.

She stated: 'Now, I'm constantly doing assessment and I'm constantly trying to figure how to help them understand what they haven't understood in class – I need to know if what I'm doing is helping them or not.' The ever-present nature of assessment is important to note here. She is always assessing so as to be able to ensure or assess the effectiveness of her teaching. The information gathered through assessment is used to improve teaching. She also stated that she uses information from assessment as guidance for when she needs to teach something again or to teach it in a different way. Yin (2010) suggested that teachers used two different types of assessment knowledge. One was used for planning assessments and the other was used in the classroom for spontaneous assessments. It would appear from IT8's comment among others that this distinction does not represent their practice. Instead, classroom assessment is used to inform reflection, which in turn informs classroom planning, which then leads to more classroom-based assessment.

Conclusions

The review of relevant literature had led us to expect that the participants' experiences of assessment as language learners would be highly influential on their assessment practices as teachers. In one sense this was the case but not in the way in which we had expected. The participant teachers did not, on the whole, replicate the assessment practices they had experienced themselves as language learners. Rather, they made a conscious decision not to replicate them as they were aware of the shortcomings of pen-and-paper tests even though they had tended to score high marks on such tests. For some teachers this desire for change grew out of their classroom experiences. There seemed to have been a growing awareness that other approaches to assessment were productive in terms of positive learner outcomes. For others there seems to have been a particular turning point, such as attending a course, which resulted in the adoption of new approaches to assessment. Whatever the route, the participants made a move away from what could be characterised as more traditional forms of assessment and towards assessment practices that tend to be associated with assessment for learning.

Assessment was challenging for teachers and there was a sense that their identity as an assessor was in some way in conflict with that of being a teacher. Participants complained of feeling extremely uncomfortable when required to grade students. We would argue that this sense of discomfort is not caused by a lack of assessment knowledge as the results of survey studies would tend to suggest (Fulcher, 2012; Hasselgreen et al., 2004; Vogt and Tsagari, 2014). Rather it is, we would contend, based on awareness of the limitations of assessments they were required to use. The participants felt that there were other, perhaps better, ways of assessing their students.

The assessment 'credo' was based on supporting individual learners to achieve their best. This was mainly achieved through the use of activities associated with assessment for learning such as self- and peer assessment and the sharing of criteria with students. From the review of literature, we had expected to see more conflicts within the assessment 'credo' of the participants. One such conflict could be between the roles of language assessor and language facilitator. Another conflict could be between the type of assessment knowledge used when planning an assessment and when in the classroom. Our data, on the other hand, did not seem to include instances of these types of conflict. The teachers were focused on the learners and ensuring they were making as much progress as possible. The learner would seem to be at the core of the 'credo'.

We conclude this report with four recommendations for practice:

- teachers should be encouraged to reflect on their own experiences of assessment and reflect on how these have influenced their assessment practice
- teachers should be encouraged to share their assessment practices with colleagues
- teacher-training courses should focus more on classroom assessment activities
- trainee teachers' assessment practices should be discussed during feedback on teaching practice sessions.

References

- Barnard, R and Burns, A (2012) *Researching Language Teacher Cognition and Practice: International Case Studies*. Multilingual Matters.
- Beijaard, D, Meijer, PC and Verloop, N (2004) Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 20/2: 107–128.
- Borg, S (2006) *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. London: Continuum.
- Borg, S (2015) *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Borg, S and Burns, A (2008) Integrating grammar in adult TESOL classrooms. *Applied Linguistics* 29/3: 456–482.
- Brown, JD and Bailey, KM (2008) Language testing courses: What are they in 2007? *Language Testing* 25/3: 349–383.
- Colby-Kelly, C and Turner, CE (2007) AFL Research in the L2 Classroom and Evidence of Usefulness: Taking Formative Assessment to the Next Level. *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 64/1: 9–37.
- Ell, F, Hill, M and Grudnoff, L (2012) Finding out more about teacher candidates' prior knowledge: Implications for teacher educators. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 40/1: 55–65.
- Fulcher, G (2012) Assessment Literacy for the Language Classroom. *Language Assessment Quarterly* 9/2: 113–132.
- Hasselgreen, A, Carlsen, C and Helness, H (2004) European Survey of Language Testing and Assessment Needs. General Findings. Available online at: www.ealta.eu.org/resources.htm
- Inbar-Lourie, O (2008) Constructing a language assessment knowledge base: A focus on language assessment courses. *Language Testing* 25/3: 385–402.
- Kagan, DM (1992) Implications of research on teacher beliefs. *Educational Psychologist* 27/1: 65–90.
- Levy-Vered, A and Nasser-Abu Alhija, F (2015) Modelling beginning teachers' assessment literacy: The contribution of training, self-efficacy, and conceptions of assessment. *Educational Research and Evaluation* 21/5–6: 378–406.
- Looney, A, Cumming, J, van Der Kleij, F and Harris, K (2018) Reconceptualising the role of teachers as assessors: teacher assessment identity. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 25/5: 442–467.
- Lortie, D (1975) *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Malone, ME (2011) Assessment Literacy for Language Educators. *CAL Digest October 2011*. Available online at: www.cal.org/content/download/1516/15923/file/AssessmentLiteracyforLanguageEducators.pdf
- Malone, ME (2013) The essentials of assessment literacy: Contrasts between testers and users. *Language Testing* 30/3: 329–344.
- Pickering, A (2005) 'Harnessing influences for change: some implications from research for teacher educators', in Clandfield, L (ed) *Affect and Self-esteem in Teacher Education*. Whitstable: IATEFL, 17–26.
- Pajares, F (1992) Teachers' beliefs and educational research: clearing up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research* 62/2: 307–332.
- Rea-Dickins, P (2004) Understanding teachers as agents of assessment. *Language Testing* 21/3: 249–258.
- Scarino, A (2013) Language assessment literacy as self-awareness: Understanding the role of interpretation in assessment and in teacher learning. *Language Testing* 30/3: 309–327.
- Sheehan, S and Munro, S (2017) *Assessment: attitudes, practices and needs*. British Council.
- Verloop, N, van Driel, J and Meijer, P (2001) Teacher knowledge and the knowledge base of teaching. *International Journal of Educational Research* 35/5: 441–461.
- Vogt, K and Tsagari, D (2014) Assessment Literacy of Foreign Language Teachers: Findings of a European Study. *Language Assessment Quarterly* 11/4: 374–402.
- Xu, Y and Brown, GTL (2016) Teacher assessment literacy in practice: A reconceptualization. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 58.
- Weigle, SC (2007) Teaching writing teachers about assessment. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 16/3: 194–209.
- Williams, M and Burden, R (1997) *Psychology for Language Teachers*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England.
- Yin, M (2010) Understanding Classroom Language Assessment Through Teacher Thinking Research. *Language Assessment Quarterly* 7/2: 175–194.

ISBN 978-0-86355-928

© **British Council 2019 / J175**

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.