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Exploring teachers’ language assessment literacy: a social constructivist approach to understanding effective practices

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The views expressed in this presentation are those of the presenters and do not represent those of the British Council or the University of Huddersfield
INTRODUCTION

Today’s talk will have 4 sections:

1. Introduction to language assessment literacy (LAL)
2. Previous research into LAL
   - survey studies
   - mixed-methods and classroom observations
3. British Council - University of Huddersfield study
4. Findings and conclusions
1. INTRODUCTION TO LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT LITERACY (LAL)
What is Language Assessment Literacy?

Malone (2011) proposes the following definition:

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.
Components of Assessment Literacy
Skills + Knowledge + Principles (Davies 2008)

- Technical skills
- Scores and decision-making
- Language pedagogy
- Local practices
- Knowledge of theory
- Principles and concepts
- Socio-cultural values
- Personal beliefs/attitudes
Assessment literacy for teachers involves developing...

- **Skills** in identifying and evaluating appropriate assessments for specific purposes within specific contexts
- **Skills** in analysing empirical data in order to improve one’s own instructional and assessment practices
- The **knowledge** required to assess learners effectively and maximise learning
- The **knowledge** and understanding to interpret and apply assessment results in appropriate ways
- An understanding of the **principles** and practice of sound assessment
- The wisdom to be able to integrate assessment and its outcomes into the overall pedagogic process
2. RESEARCH INTO LAL - Survey studies

Berry & O’Sullivan (2014); Brown & Bailey (2008); Crusan, Plakans & Gebril (2016); Fulcher (2012); Hasselgreen, Carlsen & Helness (2004); Jin (2010); Kiomrs Abdolmehdi & Naser (2011); Malone (2013)
Limitations of survey studies:

- Respondents to online surveys are probably self-selected as those interested in the topic.
- Responses may reflect what teachers think they should say, rather than what they actually believe.
- They may exaggerate their training needs in the belief it would appear unprofessional to state they had no interest in a topic.
- Answers may be in the affirmative out of curiosity rather than genuine interest or need to know.
- Interpretation of responses may rely too heavily on quantitative analysis.
2. RESEARCH INTO LAL - mixed-methods and classroom observation studies

Colby-Kelly & Turner (2007; Gu (2014); Jeong (2014); Lam (2015); Leong (2014); Scarino (2014); Vogt & Tsagari (2014); Xu & Liu (2009); Xu & Carless (2016); Yin (2010)
Limitations of mixed-methods and classroom observation studies:

- Mixed-methods generally include initial questionnaire/survey responses, often with a follow-up interview.
- Follow-up interviews usually aim to gain further insights into responses to questionnaires/surveys.
- Therefore all limitations of survey studies also apply to mixed-methods studies.
- Qualitative aspects of mixed-methods studies are generally very small-scale.
3. THE BRITISH COUNCIL - UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD LAL FOR TEACHERS PROJECT
Definition of ‘teacher’

Following Vogt and Tsagari (2014:377) we adopt this definition of a teacher:

- Someone who is a practising EFL teacher who has undergone regular training to teach English as a foreign language at state or private tertiary institutions, colleges or schools
The Project

- Purpose of the research
- Qualitatively orientated study of teachers’ knowledge of assessment and training needs
- 3 stages of data collection
  - Initial baseline interviews
  - Observations and follow-up interviews
  - Focus group interviews
Initial baseline interviews:

- Conducted in School of Education of British University with 3 experienced EFL teachers
- Asked teachers about their experiences of assessment and how they had developed their assessment practices
- Discussed initial teacher training and other training opportunities they had had
Questions included:

- Was assessment included in your initial teacher training?
- If, yes, what kinds of topics were included?
Classroom observations and follow-up interviews:

- Conducted in International Study Centre of British University with 3 experienced teachers
- Checklist observations
- Teachers reflected on why they had used particular assessment techniques in class
Focus group discussions:

- Conducted in teaching centres in Madrid and Paris with 48 experienced teachers
- Taught general English and EAP to all proficiency levels; all ages of students from kindergarten to adults
- Teachers discussed how they used assessment in their classes
4. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- The data analysis drew on Davies’ (2008) components of assessment literacy: Skills, Knowledge, Principles
FINDINGS:

3 main findings are presented here today:

1. Teachers discussed their lack of training in assessment but felt the topics they had studied were of greater relevance to them in the classroom.

2. Testing was discussed more often than assessment.

3. There was a need for practical ideas and activities - teachers did not express an interest in theory.
Findings (1):

In terms of Davies’ (2008) components, *skills + knowledge + principles* was used as a data code on only 12 occasions. In discussion teachers acknowledged their lack of training:

- *There are so many things that I didn’t have a clue about how to do so I wouldn’t put assessment at the top of the list*
- *We were not planning and designing assessments we were planning and delivering lessons*
- *We didn’t do it (assessment) in practice on the CELTA*
Findings (1- cont.):

- In most places testing and assessment is out of the hands of teachers... They are told this is the assessment you are using.
- Assessment requires some level of experience with students.
- If I have read any books about language testing it was from the perspective of being interested in researching the language classroom and sometimes in classroom research you need tests.
Findings (1- cont.):

- You build up your own ideas of assessment just through experience of what your students are capable of doing.
- You bring conceptions of how you were tested at school and you apply them to the language classroom.
Findings (2):

In discussion participants tended to refer to testing rather than assessment:

- *None of my experiences of teaching had any focus on any kind of qualification at the end of it*
- *The idea of grading someone isn’t that important*
- *You need to understand the exam techniques to prepare students to take exams*
Findings (3):

Teachers commented on the types of training materials they would like:

- We’d like speaking tasks - task and criteria
- We’d like clear criteria for marking speaking and writing
- Examples of level - recording or writings for non-exam classes
- Video examples of people in everyday situations using the language
Findings (3 - cont.):

- I would have liked more practical elements in my training and assessment - more situation based
Overall finding:

The term **Language Assessment Literacy** was not popular with teachers and many were not even familiar with the term:

- *I had never heard of it before I was asked to do the interview*
- *I have no idea what it means*
CONCLUSIONS:

- Teachers have little training in assessment and have little interest in the theoretical underpinnings of assessment.
- There is evidence that assessment practices are rooted in teachers’ own past learning experiences.
- Teachers also engage in developing their assessment practices by learning from each other.
- There may be a disconnect between teachers’ interests and beliefs and those of language assessment professionals and researchers.
References


References (cont.)

References (cont.)


Thank you!

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