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Exploring Teachers' Language Assessment Literacy: A Social Constructivist Approach to Understanding Effective Practices

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Abstract: Exploring teachers' levels of assessment literacy in terms of their previous assessment experiences may help teacher educators to better understand the factors which promote or prevent effective assessment, thus contributing to more targeted and empowering teacher education.

The research presented in this paper adopts a social constructivist model of learning and meaning-making, with the language classroom representing the community of practice. The first phase of the project consisted of interviews with teachers, in which they were invited to estimate their understanding of individual components of the assessment process and indicate how much they would like to learn about each. Classroom observations then took place followed by post-observation, reflective interviews. Finally, focus group discussions were conducted with further groups of experienced teachers.

Four key findings are presented, highlighting the considerable differences in understanding which exist between teachers and those who research and write about language testing/assessment.

1 Introduction

Jones & Saville (2016) assert that the two key purposes of assessment are to promote learning and to measure and interpret what has been learned. In terms of classroom assessment, this implies that teachers have a central role to play in planning and/or implementing appropriate assessment procedures to monitor and evaluate student progress in their classrooms. But teachers' attitudes and beliefs, based on their own experiences of assessment, exert a powerful role in shaping their decisions, judgements and behaviour (Borg, 2006; Kagan, 1992). Consequently, exploring teachers' levels of assessment literacy in terms of their own assessment experiences may help teacher educators to better understand the factors which promote or prevent effective assessment, thus contributing to more targeted and empowering teacher education.

Assessment literacy has been defined by numerous researchers in broadly similar ways. According to O'Loughlin (2013), language assessment literacy "potentially includes the acquisition of a range of skills related to test production, test score interpretation and use, and test evaluation in conjunction with the development of a critical understanding about the roles and functions of assessment within education and society" (p. 363). Pill & Harding (2013) offer a succinct overview "language assessment literacy may be understood as indicating a repertoire of competences that enable an individual to understand, evaluate and, in some cases, create language tests and analyse test data" (p. 381). Fulcher's definition is more complex and draws to a large extent on Davies' (2008) components of assessment literacy, skills, knowledge and principles. For Fulcher (2012), assessment literacy consists of:

> The knowledge, skills and abilities required to design, develop, maintain or evaluate large-scale standardized and/or classroom based tests, familiarity with test processes, and awareness of principles and concepts that guide and underpin practice, including ethics and codes of practice. The ability to place knowledge, skills, processes, principles and concepts within wider historical, social, political and philosophical frameworks in order understand why practices have arisen as they have, and to evaluate the role and impact of testing on society, institutions, and individuals. (p. 125).

Malone (2011) offers a definition which is specifically relevant to a focus on classroom teachers' 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."

2 Previous research into language assessment literacy

2.1 Survey research

Much previous research into teachers' assessment literacy has relied on survey data (Berry and O'Sullivan, 2014; Brown and Bailey, 2008; Crusan, Plakans and Gebril, 2016; Fulcher, 2012; Hasselgreen, Carlsen and Helness, 2004; Jin, 2010; Kiomrs, Abdolmehdi and Naser; Malone, 2013, inter alia). However, although they provide a valuable tool for collecting large amounts of data quickly, and from a wide geographical constituency if delivered and completed online, survey studies have several limitations.

First, respondents to surveys, especially online surveys, are probably self-selected as those who are interested in the topic in the first place. Second, teachers' responses may reflect what they think they should say, rather than what they actually believe. A corollary to this is that training needs may be exaggerated in the belief that it would appear unprofessional to state that they had no interest in the topic. Also, affirmative answers may be given out of curiosity rather than genuine interest or need to know. And following data collection, interpretation of responses may rely too heavily on quantitative analysis at the expense of individual differences.

2.2 Mixed methods and classroom observation studies

Stoynoff (2012) claims that "survey results need to be complemented with other empirical evidence of the effect of teacher characteristics on assessment practices" (p. 531). Several studies have attempted to address this statement either through the use of mixed methods or through classroom observation (Colby-Kelly and Turner, 2007; Gu, 2014; Jeong, 2013; Lam, 2015; Leong, 2014; Scarino, 2013; Vogt and Tsagari, 2014; Xu and Carless, 2016; Xu and Liu, 2009; Yin, 2010). While attempting to take a more qualitative approach to data collection than survey studies, mixed methods and classroom observation studies also have limitations.

Mixed methods studies generally include initial questionnaire/survey responses as a basis for follow-up interviews. These follow-up interviews usually aim to elicit further insights into responses given to the questionnaires/surveys and therefore all limitations that apply to survey studies are also applicable to mixed methods studies. Responses are also likely to be constrained by the questions asked by the interviewer. Qualitative aspects of mixed methods and, in particular, classroom observation studies are likely to be very small. For example, mixed methods studies usually only ask a small percentage of respondents to participate in follow-up interviews and in the case of Xu and Liu (2009), who used narrative enquiry to explore teacher assessment knowledge and practice, their study was of one person. These small-scale studies make it impossible to generalise the findings beyond the immediate participant population.

3 Methodology

3.1 Aims of the study

Having identified several limitations concerning both survey and mixed methods studies, this study adopts a social constructivist model of learning and meaning-making, with the language classroom representing the community of practice. It focuses on the sociocultural context in relation to actual assessment literacy practices in the language classroom, since an investigation into what is happening in classes may be of little value without exploring why it is happening. With the exception of the case study mentioned above, which followed one Chinese University teacher (Xu and Liu, 2009), no teachers have been asked specifically about their attitudes to assessment or their actual training needs. This study aims to bring teachers more directly into the assessment literacy debate in order to provide them with training materials which meet their actual stated needs.

3.2 Participants in the study

The study consisted of 3 phases. In Phase 1, three experienced international EFL teachers, 2 male + 1 female, age range 30–50 years, were interviewed. In Phase 2, three teachers, 2 female and 1 male, age range 30–40 years, were observed in their classrooms. The observed teachers were not the same as the ones interviewed in Phase 1. In Phase 3, 48 experienced EFL teachers, 25 female, 23 male, age range 25-60 years, participated in 5 focus group discussions.

3.3 Procedures

3.3.1 Phase 1 – interviews

The first phase of the project consisted of a series of interviews with three experienced, international EFL teachers, conducted in the School of Education of a British university. The interviews drew on Davies' (2008) components of assessment literacy which he defined as skills + knowledge but with the important addition of principles. These components can be summarised as technical skills, scores and decision making, language pedagogy, local practices, knowledge of theory, principles and concepts, socio-cultural values, personal beliefs and attitudes.

Teachers were asked about their experiences of assessment and how they had developed their assessment practices. They also discussed their initial teacher training and other training opportunities they had had. In the interviews, teachers were invited to estimate their understanding of the components of the assessment process and indicate how much they would like to learn about each individual component.

3.3.2 Phase 2 – observations and follow-up interviews

In the second phase, observations were conducted in the International Study Centre of a British university which focused on teachers' actual assessment practices in the classroom. Using an observation schedule inspired by Colby-Kelly and Turner's (2007) study of assessment for learning practices, we developed a checklist of 16 assessment practices and every 3 minutes

during the observations, checked which of the practices were being observed and took notes about them. Post-observation interviews were subsequently conducted with the 3 teachers, in which they were asked to reflect on their observed classroom practice and discuss why they had used particular assessment techniques in class.

3.3.3 Phase 3 – focus group discussions

Finally, focus group discussions were held with 48 experienced teachers working at teaching centres attached to a major international organisation in Madrid and Paris. These teachers taught a variety of different English language classes across a range of ages and proficiency, including kindergarten, elementary, secondary and tertiary level students, plus special-purpose classes for commercial organisations. The group interview schedule also drew on Davies' (2008) components. These discussions confirmed the findings from the initial phase of the project, culminating in the creation of a set of online training materials.

4 Findings

The data analysis drew on Davies' (2008) components of assessment literacy as detailed in section 3.3. Three key findings emerged from the analysis relating to teachers' previous training in assessment, attitudes to language testing and assessment in its broader sense and the types of training materials they would like. Regarding the quotations from the teachers below, those who participated in the baseline interviews are referred to as IT, those who were observed and interviewed are referred to as OT and the focus group participants are referred to as FGT.

4.1 Previous training in assessment

Davies' (2008) components, skills + knowledge + principles, was only used as a data code on 12 occasions. In discussion, teachers acknowledged their lack of training, exemplified in the following quotations:

> FGT9: 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 my list
> OT1: We were not planning and designing assessments we were planning and delivering lessons
> IT2: We didn't do it (assessment) in practice on the assessments

It may be the case that the divide between teaching and assessment starts to develop at pre-service training. Teaching is prioritised and assessment is not considered to be important.

4.2 Attitudes to language testing and assessment

In discussion, participants tended to refer to testing rather than assessment. In our questions the word assessment was used. The following are representative quotations:

> IT1: None of my experiences of teaching had any focus on any kind of qualification at the end of it
> FGT20: The idea of grading someone isn't that important
> FGT35: You need to understand the exam techniques to prepare students to take exams
> OT2: In most places testing and assessment is out of the hands of teachers …. they are told 'this is the assessment you are using'
> FGT13: Assessment requires some level of experience with students
> IT3: 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

> FGT4: You build up your own ideas of assessment just through experience of what your students are capable of doing
> FGT24: You bring conceptions of how you were tested at school and you apply them to the language classroom

The lack of engagement with assessment may be a consequence of the limited role some teachers play in the development and creation of assessments. This would seem to provide support for the notion that teachers feel assessment is a top-down imposition (Crusan et al., 2016). In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that testing is only acceptable if it can be used to support or improve teaching in some way. This is a further demonstration of the gap between teaching and assessment as teaching is being privileged. Experience, rather than training, seems to play a pivotal role in the development of assessment practices. This experience develops with time spent in the classroom. There also seems to be evidence to suggest that experiences in the classroom as school children influence how teachers develop practices relating to assessment. This brings notions of the "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 2002) to the fore. All trainee teachers have experienced thousands of hours in the classroom before they start teaching. It is, perhaps, not surprising, that practices experienced as a school child contribute to the formation of assessment practices in teachers as adults. This idea is deemed to be problematic by Vogt and Tsagari (2014). They make the analogy between "teaching as you were taught" and "testing as you were tested". This is characterised as a brake on innovation and a hindrance to the development of effective assessment practices.

4.3 Types of training materials requested

Most of the teachers who participated in the study expressed their training needs in terms of requests for activities and not in terms of theory or principles, thus confirming Davies' (2008) claim that there is little demand for theory among teachers. Teachers mainly requested training materials related to skills, replicating, in the main, the findings of Berry and O'Sullivan (2014) and Hasselgreen et al. (2004), as exemplified in the following quotations:

> FGT7: We'd like speaking tasks – tasks and criteria
> FGT2: We'd like clear criteria for marking speaking and writing
> FGT45: Examples of level – recordings or writings from non-exam classes
> FGT24: Video examples of people in everyday situations using the language
> IT2: I would have liked more practical elements in my training and assessment – more situation based

These quotations suggest that the training they had received did not prepare the teachers for the type of assessments they engage in. They may also be an indication of how busy the teachers are and that they lack time to develop assessments. Coombe, Troudi and Al-Hamly (2012) suggest that teachers avoid engaging with assessment as they do not have access to adequate assessment resources.

4.4 Overall finding

The term Language Assessment Literacy was not popular with teachers and many were not even familiar with it.

> FGT40: I had never heard of it before I was asked to do the interview
> FGT5: I have no idea what it means

The term has been widely used in the language assessment literature but, on the evidence of this project, has not entered into teacher language.

5 Conclusions

It would seem from the interviews, observations and focus group discussions that teachers have minimal training in assessment and have little interest in the theoretical underpinnings of assessment. There is evidence that teachers' assessment practices are rooted in their own past learning experiences, confirming the claims of Borg (2006) and Kagan (1992). Teachers also develop their assessment practices over time by learning from each other.

It may also be that there is a disconnect between teachers' interests and beliefs and those of language assessment professionals and researchers. Our findings suggest that the gap between teachers and those who research and write about language testing is considerable. This project sought to narrow the gap by giving teachers a stronger voice in the debate, which, in turn, may have important implications for the development of future teacher training courses.

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