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Assessment: attitudes, practices and needs.

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ASSESSMENT: ATTITUDES, PRACTICES, NEEDS.

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Today's talk will have four sections

- Language Assessment Literacy
- Methodology
- Results
- Conclusions

Defining Language Assessment Literacy

- Inbar-Lourie (2008:389) describes assessment literacy as: “having the capacity to ask and answer critical questions about the purpose for assessment, about the fitness of the tool being used, about testing conditions, and about what is going to happen on the basis of the results.”

Many teachers receive little or no training in either the theory or practice of testing and/or assessment (Hasselgreen et al., 2004).

Taylor (2009) reports that there is little focus on testing and assessment in post-graduate courses.

Some teachers feel afraid of assessment or lack the resources to engage successfully with it (Coombe et al., 2012)

- This project investigated language assessment literacy practices in the classroom and explored teacher attitudes to testing and assessment.

The following research questions informed the project:

1. What impact does testing have on the classroom?
2. How confident do teachers feel to engage in assessment activities?
3. What are teacher attitudes to assessment?
4. What are the language assessment literacy needs of teachers?

Survey is the most common method of researching teacher knowledge of assessment.

This study was a multi-method, qualitatively orientated study of teachers' attitudes, practices and training needs in relation to assessment.

This choice of methodology represented a deliberate attempt to move away from the limitations of survey-based research.

Vogt and Tsagari (2014:377) define a teacher as:

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

Our participants taught all ages and levels of students from young learners to adults, including general English and EAP.

Data Collection Stage	Location	Participants
Baseline Interviews	UK University	Three experienced teachers
Observations and Interviews	Language Centre at a UK University	Three experienced teachers
Focus Group Interviews	English language teaching centres in European capital cities	48 experienced teachers
Workshop	IATEFL Annual Conference Birmingham, 2016	20 people – a diverse group comprising practising teachers, LTA experts, MA students

RQ1: What impact does testing have on the classroom?

- *‘Every week we will have a really thorough mark of a test.’*
- *‘Everything I do in class, I’m conscious of how it will help them when they are tested and I always mention that to them as well.’*
- *‘You give exams out and all they are bothered about is the score ... they just fixate on the numbers and they’re not looking at what they’ve done.’*

RQ2: How confident do teachers feel about engaging in assessment activities?

'I felt blindfolded when trying to create assessment tasks'

'I would have liked more practical elements in my training about testing and assessment – more situation based'

- *‘When you make speaking assessments you guess the level and give the mark like a 7 or a 9.’*
- These results reflect Vogt and Tsagari’s (2014) finding that there can be an element of ‘fuzziness’ in teacher assessments.

Participants reported the handing over of testing and assessments to external bodies.

One focus group participant stated that he felt:
“...unconfident about creating test materials and so we defer to Cambridge.”

Another participant described Cambridge as: *“a crutch to lean on”*.

Teachers reported little focus on training in testing and assessment in their initial teacher education courses:

- *“We were not planning and designing assessments we were planning and delivering lessons.”*
- *“We didn’t do it (assessment) in practice on the CELTA”*
- *“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.”*

In observations teachers demonstrated a range of effective assessment techniques such as:

- Peer-assessment and self-assessment
- explicit sharing of criteria
- using test papers for formative assessment and reflection 'on-the-fly' assessment techniques (McKay, 2006)

Assessment seems to be part of the classroom practice of most teachers but they may consider it to be part of teaching rather than assessment

'Assessment requires some level of experience with students'

'You build up your own ideas of assessment just through experience of what your learners are doing – you form an image of levels like that.'

'It's experience in the classroom that has changed me, rather than [training] experiences.'

Past learning experiences seem to play a role in the development of teacher assessment practice and reflects Lortie's (1975) concept of the apprenticeship of observation

'You bring conceptions of how you were tested at school and you apply them to language learning – a lot of them are not valid.'

Vogt and Tsagari (2014) make an analogy between teaching how you were taught and testing how you were tested.

What are teacher attitudes to assessment?

'Understanding principles is quite important – important to be aware of the different types of assessment.'

OT2 described the importance of engaging with the topic of assessment in order to gain promotion:

'I would have really needed to be able to develop assessments.'

Some teachers stated that they were excluded from assessments:

In most places testing and assessment is out of the hands of teachers ... they are told this is the assessment you are using.'

This echoes points made by Crusan et al. (2016) that teachers feel assessment is a top-down imposition.

'a necessary evil'

What are the language assessment literacy needs of teachers?

- Teachers expressed a preference for activities rather than theory or principles
- There was a high level of agreement among teachers about their needs:
 - Assessing skills e.g. speaking tasks and criteria
 - Assessing levelness - examples of level from non-exam classes
 - Short training materials placed online

1. Teachers have had little training in assessment and have little interest in the theoretical underpinnings of assessment.
2. There is evidence to suggest that assessment practices are rooted in both past learning experiences, and through working with an observing students.

Vogt and Tsagari (2014) view this as a brake on innovation but this could have a positive impact on classroom practice, as teachers can learn from the use of successful strategies

3. The teachers we observed used a range of assessment practices successfully. This suggests that teacher knowledge should not be underestimated despite a lack of training.

4. Teachers were not familiar with the term language assessment literacy. Researchers wanting to engage with teachers on this topic may find it useful to avoid this term.

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