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

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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 Tzagari (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

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Thank you!

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