Teacher cognition and assessment

A toolkit for teacher development

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Teacher cognition and assessment

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- These materials provide an overview of Language Teacher Cognition and its relationship to assessment.
- In this module we discuss how assessment can be used to support the learning process.

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This module is aimed at:

- teachers of English as a foreign language
- pre- and in-service teachers.

Overview

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- This module is an introduction to Language Teacher Cognition and assessment.
- It will help you to develop your knowledge of Language Teacher Cognition and to reflect on your experiences of assessment.
- It assumes little or no knowledge of Language Teacher Cognition or assessment.

Learning outcomes

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By the end of this module you will have developed:

- an understanding of the key elements of Language Teacher Cognition
- an awareness of the relationship between Language Teacher Cognition and assessment.

Introduction

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- Reading these materials and working through the questions will develop your awareness of your own beliefs, feelings and understandings related to assessment.
- You will have a better understanding of classroom-based assessment and of some of the research which has been conducted on the topic.
- This should help you to feel more confident about your own assessment practices and help you to consider what, if any, changes need to be made to your practice.

Definitions

The module begins with definitions of three key terms. These terms are used throughout the materials:

- Language Teacher Cognition
- Assessment ‘credo’
- Teacher Assessment Identity.

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Definitions

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- The term Language Teacher Cognition is used throughout the module.
- Borg (2006) defines cognition as what teachers think, know and believe about a matter.
- To better define cognition for English language teachers, Borg (2015) expanded the term teacher cognition to Language Teacher Cognition. Language teachers, Borg explains, are influenced by their own experiences as language learners and this needs to be recognised when English language teachers are the focus of attention.

Definitions

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- Another term which you will find used later in the module is assessment ‘credo’.
- Here ‘credo’ refers to the beliefs teachers hold about assessment.
- The term was developed by Yin (2010).

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Definitions

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- The final term to be defined in this section is Teacher Assessment Identity.
- Looney, Cumming, van der Kleij and Harris (2017) use this term to describe all the facets of assessment identity.
- These include beliefs, feelings and knowledge of assessment.

Working through the module

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- The quotations used throughout this module have been taken from a project which explored teacher cognition and assessment. A full report of the project can be found here.
- As you read the quotations consider how they relate to classroom assessment practice.
- The quotations are interspersed with commentary sections which include discussion of relevant research.
- The discussion questions are opportunities for you to reflect on your own practice. These can be completed individually or in groups.

1 Assessment experiences

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- This section features quotations from teachers who were talking about their experiences of assessment.
- Consider each quotation and how it relates to classroom assessment practice.

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Quote 1

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- “My teachers liked to give us tests, multiple-choice tests, writing tests … without explaining why we should do those tests, the tests were unreasonable.”

Quote 2

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- "…the grades were shady, you never knew why you got a three or a four, I didn't like that.."

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Commentary

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- The quotes focus on experiences of assessment which the speakers experienced whilst at school.
- Do they reflect any of your experiences of assessment?

Commentary

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- Some scholars have suggested that teachers replicate the assessment practices they experienced as school children.
- This has been described as ‘testing as you were tested’ (Vogt and Tsagari, 2014).
- These authors make the point that such practices could represent a brake on innovation as teachers are not using the most up-to-date assessment techniques.

Discussion

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- Would you consider your approach to assessment to be similar to the one you experienced as a language student at school? Why/why not?
- Do you agree with the idea that teachers 'test as they were tested'? Why/why not?

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2 Training experiences

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- This section features quotations from teachers who were talking about their training experiences.
- Consider each quotation and how it relates to classroom assessment practice.

Quote 1

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- “The teacher training course did not help me at all.”

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Quote 2

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- “I remember very much it was about terminology – validity, reliability, it was more about construct validity and these academic terms …there was nothing practical on the course.”

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Commentary

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- Several survey studies (Fulcher, 2012; Hasselgreen, Carlsen and Helness, 2004; Vogt and Tsagari, 2014) have suggested that teachers are not adequately trained in issues relating to assessment. They suggest that this lack of training could lead to poor assessment practice in the classroom.

- Other scholars (Malone, 2013; Brown and Bailey, 2008) suggest that teachers find assessment courses focus too much on terminology and not enough on practical tasks.

Discussion

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- How much attention was paid to assessment during your teacher training course?
- Did you feel prepared to assess students when you started teaching? Why/why not?
- What was the focus of your assessment training?
- Was terminology discussed more than practical activities? Why/why not?

3 Experiences from practice

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- This section focuses on the relationship between teaching experience and assessment practice.
- Consider each quotation and how it relates to classroom assessment practice.

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Quote 1

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- “I did well [at traditional tests] but I simply realised that was not the best method to evaluate my students.”

Quote 2

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- “So I realised [traditional tests] wasn’t the way to motivate students. I realised I was closing the loop*.”

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*Here, ‘loop’ refers to the communication between teachers and students. This teacher felt that traditional testing approaches discouraged teacher-student dialogues.

Quote 3

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- “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.”

Quote 4

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- “My experience taught me things I should stop doing.”

Commentary

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- There is some research (Coombs, De Luca, La Pointe-McEwan and Chalas 2018; Sheehan and Munro, 2017) which suggests that teaching experience is fundamental to the development of assessment practices.

- It would seem that time in the classroom and reflection on experiences is how teachers develop their assessment practices.

Discussion

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- Has your approach to assessment changed as you have gained more classroom experience? If so, in what ways has it changed?

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Discussion

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- One of the teachers quoted above changed her assessment practice after attending a training course on formative assessment.
- Have you ever had a training experience which led to a complete change in your approach to teaching or assessment?
- What was the training? What changes did you make?
- If you haven't had such an experience, reflect on the courses you have attended and consider why they did not influence your practice.

4 Examiner training

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- This section focuses on the relationship between examiner training and assessment practice.
- Consider each quotation and how it relates to classroom assessment practice.

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Quote 1

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- “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.”

Quote 2

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- “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.”

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Commentary

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- This type of assessment knowledge would seem to form part of the Professional Coursework Element in Borg's (2015) framework of language teacher cognition.

- It would seem that professional training experiences can influence classroom assessment practice.

Discussion

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- Have you trained to be an examiner? If so, how has examiner training influenced your assessment practice?
- Have your experiences of being an examiner changed your approach to marking and correcting written work? If so, how?

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5 Assessment ‘credo’

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- This section focuses on teachers’ assessment ‘credo’.
- The term ‘credo’ has been taken from a study by Yin (2010). He uses it to describe the beliefs which teachers hold about assessment and upon which they base their classroom assessment practice.
- Consider each quotation and how it relates to classroom assessment practice.

Quote 1

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- “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.”

Quote 2

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- “My approach to assessment is like farming apples. I tend my apples every day and monitor each tree every day. At harvest time I assess the quality of the fruit.”

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Commentary

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- Two models of teacher assessment identity have recently been published (Xu and Brown, 2016; Looney, Cumming, van der Kleij and Harris, 2017).
- The model developed by Xu and Brown focuses on teacher identity as assessors.
- The second model includes beliefs and feelings about assessment and how these inform how teachers engage with students.
- In the second model there is greater focus on who teachers are and less on what they do.

6 Language Teacher Cognition and Assessment Identity

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- You will now read two definitions of Language Teacher Cognition and Teacher Assessment Identity.
- These two definitions encapsulate what we have been discussing in this module.
- As you read them, consider what the two definitions have in common. Why is this the case?
- Are there any differences?

Language Teacher Cognition

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Borg provides the following definition of Language Teacher Cognition:

- "…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." (2015:321)

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Teacher Assessment Identity

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Looney et al provide the following definition of Teacher Assessment Identity:

- "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)

Conclusions

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- Language Teacher Cognition and assessment identity are two notions which are intertwined in the classroom on a daily basis.
- Teachers are continually monitoring and assessing their students in order to improve their teaching and the student outcomes.
- Experience and reflection on experiences are the ways in which teacher cognition relating to assessment can be developed.
- Throughout this module you will have consciously reflected on your experiences and developed a better understanding of your Teacher Assessment Identity.

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