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Assessment: attitudes, practices and needs

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Abstract

This project investigated language assessment literacy practices in the classroom. We sought to bring teachers more directly into the assessment literacy debate and provide them with training materials which meet their stated needs.

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs are frequently cited as exerting a powerful role in shaping their decisions, judgements and behaviour (see, for example, Borg, 2006; Kagan, 1992). Therefore, exploring teachers' current levels of assessment literacy may help teacher educators to better understand the factors which promote or prevent effective assessment, and thus contribute to more targeted teacher education. However, an investigation into what is happening in classes may be of little value without exploring why it is happening.

A qualitative approach was adopted and methods used included interviews, observations and focus group discussions. The interviews drew on Davies' (2008) components of assessment literacy which he defined as Skills, Knowledge and Principles. Observations were conducted which focused on teacher assessment practices. Post-observation interviews were conducted with the teachers. The observations and interviews were conducted at the international study centre of a British university. Focus group discussions were held at teaching centres attached to a major international organisation overseas. A workshop was held at an international teacher conference to pilot the online training materials.

The training materials cover five topics:

- CEFR and levelness
- assessing young learners
- assessment for learning
- language assessment for teachers
- assessment resources.

The emphasis in the materials is on practical approaches, but in line with our participants' stated needs it includes a basic introduction to theoretical perspectives.

Glossary

CEFR: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment

CELTA: Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

CPD: continuous/continuing professional development

EFL: English as a foreign language

ELT: English language teaching

IATEFL: International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

IELTS: International English Language Testing System

LAL: language assessment literacy

LTA: language testing and assessment

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1

Introduction

Testing and assessment is an under-taught area in many EFL teacher training programmes and, as a result, many teachers have received little or no training in the subject (Taylor, 2009). However, testing and assessment have become an increasingly important part of classroom practice. The impact of globalisation is felt keenly in the world of language teaching, and English has never been more popular than it is now. Success in high-stakes English examinations can be a passport to study overseas and a conduit to a successful career. Innovations such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) have led to greater focus on standardisation (Hulstijn, 2007). This in turn has led to a greater emphasis on students taking assessments to demonstrate they have reached particular CEFR levels, and therefore teachers are faced with preparing more students to take more examinations. Assessment is even being used as a form of gatekeeping in the area of citizenship, with migrants in some countries required to demonstrate certain levels of language proficiency before they can gain permanent residency (Fulcher, 2012).

The pressure to pass these exams is felt not just by students, but also by teachers. In private language centres, students (or their parents) expect to get what they are paying for, namely exam success. Learning is seen not as an intellectual endeavour, but as a commodity. In both the public and private sectors, teachers may be expected to reach targets related to student achievement. This could be in the form of the numbers of students achieving passes, or even specific grades in examinations. The intense pressure felt by teachers to achieve these targets means that teachers feel the need to engage with techniques commonly associated with the notion of 'teaching to the test' (Stiggens, 2014). This term encompasses any strategies which teachers use to help students perform better in tests. This might include practising specific tasks or language known to feature in the exam, or providing practice tests. Used appropriately, these techniques can help students to prepare effectively for their exam and be used as a form of formative assessment, highlighting both what they can already do, and what they need to improve. However, the impact of teaching to the test can also be negative as teachers 'focus too narrowly on the knowledge necessary to enable learners to pass the test, rather than developing in them an understanding of the subject and its context within the wider field of knowledge' (Wallace, 2009).

As Wallace suggests, the pressure from students, parents and other interested stakeholders may result in teachers offering a restricted curriculum which, by focusing only on test requirements, limits students' overall language development and potential engagement with English.

A teacher's ability to engage with a range of teaching, learning *and* assessment practices is, therefore, essential as effective assessment can support and promote learning. However, many teachers receive little or no training in either the theory or practice of testing and/or assessment (see for example, Hasselgreen et al., 2004, and Taylor, 2009). Moreover, some teachers report feeling afraid of assessment or lacking the resources to engage effectively with it (Coombe et al., 2012). This suggests a need to explore teachers' engagement with assessment more fully, and develop strategies to support teachers' knowledge, skills and confidence in this area.

The aim of this project was to investigate what teachers wanted to know about assessment and to develop a set of training materials for teachers. To achieve this aim, we worked with ELT practitioners from Europe who have experiences teaching across the globe, interviewing them individually and in groups, exploring their views on assessment. In addition, we observed lessons in which teachers assessed students, and interviewed them afterwards. The materials we have designed respond to the stated needs of the teachers who participated in the project. This report provides an overview of the project and locates its findings in relevant literature. The following research questions informed the project:

- What impact does testing have on the classroom?
- How confident do teachers feel to engage in assessment activities?
- What are teacher attitudes to assessment?
- What are the assessment literacy needs of teachers?

This report starts with a literature review. The methodology adopted is then outlined. This section includes descriptions of the context and the participants. The results are then presented. The report concludes with a description of the materials created following evaluations of the findings of this project.

At the start of the project we used the term language assessment literacy to describe teacher knowledge of assessment. More complete definitions of the term will be given in the literature review. The teachers we spoke to did not feel that the term was relevant to them. In this report we will use 'language testing and assessment', or LTA, to describe the topic. This follows an approach adopted by Vogt and Tsagari (2014). In the literature section the term 'language assessment literacy', or LAL, will feature. This is because the term is used so prevalently in the studies of teachers and assessment that any review which avoided using the term would exclude much of the literature on the topic.

2

Literature review

This literature review will focus on two main areas. First, assessment literacy will be discussed. Then research into teacher cognition will be discussed.

2.1 Assessment literacy

Assessment literacy is a topic which has only relatively recently come to be discussed. A consensus is starting to develop around how assessment literacy could be defined. Inbar-Lourie (2008: 389) writes of 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.' This is a widely accepted definition of assessment literacy for English language teachers. Malone (2013: 332) argues that a number of leaders in the fields of language testing and teaching recognise: 'the importance of assessment knowledge among language instructors and suggest that such knowledge must be imparted through more than just pre-service teaching efforts.' She goes on to state that the changing nature of language testing means that teachers need regular updating in the topic.

The increasing importance of assessment literacy can be ascribed to the increasing importance of assessment. Taylor (2009: 21) states that: 'There can be no doubt that testing and assessment are growing in importance and influence around the world today.' She identified two reasons for this growth. The first is globalisation, which leads to a desire to align assessment frameworks with internationally accepted standards. The second is the increasing reliance on test scores in education, the workplace and, perhaps most controversially, in migration and citizenship practice. Vogt and Tsagari (2014) add school leaving exams to the list of pressures. They also note that teachers have a role in advising students which external tests to take and that some schools function as test centres. Thus, more people are taking language tests and more decisions are being taken based on the evidence of test scores. Despite this, teacher education does not appear to have taken into account the increased importance of testing and assessment. As Taylor (2009) notes, many graduate language education programmes devote little or no time to assessment theory or practice. This, it could be argued, has created a situation whereby many language teachers are being asked to engage in assessment activities with insufficient training and understanding of the subject.

It is not appropriate to consider assessment as divorced from other types of knowledge which teachers need to be good teachers. Davies points out that assessment literacy is not purely confined to knowledge of assessment. He posits the opinion that: 'What Lado was keenly aware of was that language teachers need to know about language as well as about language testing' (2008: 330). Teachers need to have a good understanding about the nature of language in order to assess it effectively. Assessment literacy is more than just a series of methods or techniques. Rather, it is a fundamental question of what it is to know a language and then how this knowledge informs both the teaching of English and the assessment of it. It could, therefore, be argued that not only does teacher education fail to develop a knowledge of assessment, it also fails to develop this knowledge of language and is instead overly focused on classroom technique.

Teacher assessment literacy is, as Willis et al. (2013: 32) note: 'a phrase that is often used but rarely defined'. In terms of English language teaching there have been numerous definitions written but there is still some doubt as to exactly what a teacher needs to do or to know in order to be considered language assessment literate. There is also a question as to who confers this title or status to teachers. Can teachers define themselves as language assessment literate? Are they awarded this title by testing experts? There is also debate about whether literacy should be used in the singular or plural. Willis et al. (2013) maintain that using the singular is reductive. The use of the plural would seem to capture the complexity of the topic better. The reasons for these complexities are the varieties of assessment practices used and the motivations for assessment. It would also seem to solve the problem of someone who has little or no literacy in the topic and removes the need for that person to be considered, or to consider themselves, illiterate.

The following definition comes from general education but would seem to be equally applicable to ELT. 'Assessment literacy is a dynamic context-dependent social practice that involves teachers articulating and negotiating classroom and cultural knowledges with one another and with learners, in

the initiation, development and practice of assessment to achieve learning goals of students' (Willis et al., 2013: 242). This definition appeals for two reasons. First, it mentions students, and this group seems to be remarkable by its absence in most definitions. Second, the reason for engaging in developing a better understanding of assessment is to improve student learning. Too often assessment literacy, and its development, is seen either as a goal in itself or is focused on the development of teacher practice without reference to students or any classroom goal.

While there is a great deal of agreement on the general need for teachers to be assessment literate, there has been less discussion about the reasons behind this reluctance. Coombe et al. (2012) have identified four barriers to assessment. The first of these relates to fear of the topic. This may have developed while teachers were at school. Borg (2006) highlights the importance of one's own schooling in the development of a teacher's beliefs about teaching and therefore these early experiences may impact their practice. The second point is identified as the separation of teaching from testing. Testing may have become separate from teaching as much of the research conducted into the subject of testing is published in academic journals which are not easily accessible for teachers. The high cost of academic papers could also be responsible for this separation. Furthermore, the writers of such papers may not consider teachers as part of the audience for their work and may not, therefore, include implications for practice in their work. Third, there a number of organisations such as Cambridge English, Pearson and ETS which focus on the production of English language tests. Some teachers may prefer to use their time to focus on teaching and leave testing to well-known organisations. Finally, the authors note that sufficient resources are not allocated to testing. Teachers cannot work on assessment-related activities without time for such work being included on their timetables.

Despite the perceived importance of assessment literacy, it is crucial that it does not become some type of obligation which is imposed upon teachers. There has been much discussion of how assessment for learning can improve student performance (Wiliam, 2011). The pressures to conform to the requirements of external tests have been well documented. Inbar-Lourie (2008) makes the point that the pressures to incorporate assessment for learning practices into the classroom can be equal if not worse than the pressures to teach to a particular test. In the same way, there is a risk that teachers will feel coerced to engage with assessment literacy, and thus feel alienated further.

2.2 Research into language assessment literacy (LAL)

Survey has been a commonly used strategy in LAL research. Hasselgreen et al. (2004) found in their survey that the teachers who took part carried out most activities related to language testing and assessment without any formal training. This is not the same as saying they were performing these tasks badly, and they may have gained their knowledge from other sources, such as colleagues. One study which goes against the survey trend is Vogt and Tsagari's (2014) mixed-methods study. The quantitative aspect was based on Hasselgreen et al.'s survey discussed above. In the survey the teachers reported that they had received some training in language testing and assessment, but they also expressed a desire for more. The findings from the interviews suggest that the teachers had not received LTA training in pre-service education. Instead, the teachers reported that they relied on textbook materials and learned on the job, and the authors suggest that this learning strategy may stifle innovation in the field as teachers rely on tried-and-tested methods which have been passed from teacher to teacher. Vogt and Tsagari (2014) also found that teachers did not have clear ideas about many aspects of language testing and assessment. For example, the teachers described oral assessment as impressionistic and subjective. They describe that more than half the teachers they interviewed had a 'fuzzy' understanding of assessment. This is not surprising if teachers have not had training in language testing and assessment training in their initial teacher education. It may also suggest that the teachers interviewed do have a strong interest in the topic.

Crusan et al. (2016) have conducted a language assessment literacy survey which focused on writing specifically. This differs from the current research project which covers all aspects of language rather than focusing on one skill. Notwithstanding the difference in focus, some of the reasons they give in support of the notion that teachers should be skilled in testing and assessment can be considered relevant here. Good assessment practices, they contend, support learning and maintain quality in teaching and learning. They go on to point out that students are the ones who could be missing out if teachers are not using best practice in assessment. They (2016: 43) posit the opinion that: 'The consequences of uninformed assessments can be losses for students in time, money, motivation and confidence.' Students may pay to take tests which are not appropriate for them if they are badly advised by teachers. They may spend more time or more money on learning English than necessary if their learning is not supported with assessment for

learning practices. If students score poorly in tests they may become demotivated and never reach their full potential in language learning. Low test scores can make a student feel bad about themselves. These points should not be taken as a criticism of teachers. Rather, it relates to points made elsewhere in this report that in much of the LAL debate at the level of the academy, the voice of the learner is largely absent. The gap between teachers and the academy has been discussed before, but this debate does not focus on how the students may be missing out on the best possible learning environment.

Knowledge of language testing and assessment cannot be separated from the body of knowledge teachers bring to their practice of teaching. Crusan et al. (2016) list a number of factors which could impact on teachers' philosophies and their assessment practices. These include prior language learning experiences and teacher learning. There are links which could be made here to the claims by Vogt and Tsagari (2014) that teachers test the same way in which they themselves were tested. Clearly, there is an interplay here between many different complex factors which include past learning, teaching and assessment practices. The complexity of these factors may be one reason why relying on survey data may not be appropriate. Literacy should not be considered only in terms of lack of knowledge or gaps in knowledge. Rather it should be considered in terms of teachers' philosophies, and these will have started to develop while teachers were at school.

Crusan et al. (2016) conducted a global survey of second language writing teachers. Respondents came from 41 countries across five continents. In a similar way to the surveys of Vogt and Tsagari (2014) and Hasselgreen et al. (2004), the teachers reported good levels of knowledge. The authors speculate that the respondents were keen to claim particular levels of knowledge because people prefer to be seen as knowledgeable than be seen as not knowledgeable. One result which may resonate with readers of this report was that teachers who reported having heavy workloads had more negative attitudes to assessment. They may perceive assessment as an additional and unnecessary burden. This may also suggest that teaching takes precedence over assessment. Where time is limited the teachers in this survey would rather devote time to teaching than assessment. It would seem to suggest that assessment practice is not fully integrated into teaching practice. It is not as Crusan et al. describe it should be: 'enmeshed with teachers' knowledge, beliefs and practices' (2016: 45). This may also reflect a belief that assessment is something which is imposed on the classroom, and some teachers, particularly those with heavy workloads, may come to resent this imposition.

This is a point which is also made by Weigle (2007) in an article where she describes what writing teachers should know about assessment. She characterises teachers as considering assessment as a 'necessary evil'. She contends that this may lead to teachers avoiding assessment both in terms of learning about it or planning how they will assess their students. This negative attitude towards assessment could also, Weigle contends, lead to resentment of large-scale tests such as IELTS, with the consequence that teachers do not engage with such tests and do not seek to understand them. This could mean that those teachers do not help their students to prepare properly for them or explain to students whether or not such tests are appropriate for the students and the possible consequences of a low score in such a test. Teachers need knowledge in order to be 'critical users' (*ibid.*: 195) of large-scale tests.

Some teachers may feel uncomfortable about grading work. Two reasons have been given to account for this feeling (*ibid.*). Teachers may see their role as being one of supporting students first and foremost. So, there is a conflict between being supportive and being evaluative – or it may be due to a lack of clarity of the criteria. The teachers write poor criteria and then struggle to implement them. This could be evidence that teacher resistance to LTA education is actually making life more difficult for teachers than it needs to be.

Many of the studies conducted into LAL have deployed a survey strategy. This has as a possible consequence that only teachers who are interested in assessment may choose to respond to a questionnaire on assessment practices. The other possible weakness with such a survey is that teachers may feel constrained to exaggerate their training needs, as they may fear that it would be unprofessional to state that they had no interest in them. Alternatively, a desire for more training captured on a questionnaire may reflect simple curiosity when faced with a new or unfamiliar topic. It may not be a reflection of a strongly held need or desire to actually receive training in the new topic. If asked the question: 'Would you like to know more about something new?' many people would respond in the affirmative without really considering at length the new topic and/or their level of interest.

Several authors, both from language assessment and broader educational assessment (Weigle, 2007;

Stiggens, 2014), have noted that some teachers place too much confidence in the results of standardised tests. There seems to be a preference to give the responsibility for assessment to others who can be considered experts. This may reflect a lack of confidence in teachers about their knowledge and understanding of assessment. Or it may reflect a desire to shift responsibility to an outsider and thus maintain for the teacher the role of being supporter and not assessor. Stiggens (2014) blames society's over-reliance on standardised tests as the reason for which assessment for learning has not become embedded in classroom practice.

Leong conducted a study of classroom assessment. This study was focused on general education rather than language education. It showed the complexity of the classroom and how teachers can incorporate a range of assessment practices in the same lesson. 'Teachers' intentions can shift dynamically based on circumstances or contexts of teaching and learning' (2014: 76). This reinforces findings from other studies such as those conducted by Rea-Dickins (2007). Here we seem to have a contradictory situation. Teachers are criticised for their lack of knowledge, yet when observed in the classroom teachers display a complex and sophisticated range of assessment practices. Is this due to problems with survey methodology or does it show that we can only really come to understand teaching and assessment practices by being in the classroom?

2.3 Assessment literacy materials

Projects have been undertaken to create assessment literacy materials. Malone (2013) describes a project to create online assessment literacy materials for teachers. Both teachers and language testers reviewed the course and gave feedback. The teachers discussed the clarity of the materials and their presentation while the language testers focused on the content and the accuracy of the definitions. This would seem to suggest there is a gap between how those within the language testing community and those outside it view assessment literacy. Therefore, materials on assessment literacy created by language testers may not best meet the needs of teachers. It should also be noted that the teachers surveyed were not involved in the creation of the materials. Rather, they were simply reviewing them. Fulcher (2012) conducted a survey of teachers to establish levels of assessment literacy and used the data to create online assessment literacy materials. A self-acknowledged weakness of this study was an over-reliance on quantitatively oriented data collection methods. Thus, the current project has found a gap in the literature as it is focusing on the teachers' needs and attitudes. In addition, it is broadening the approach by using qualitatively oriented research methods. Stoynoff (2012: 531) opines: 'survey results need to be complemented with other empirical evidence of the effect of teacher characteristics on assessment practices.' Thus, the current project can be said to answer to Stoynoff's call for research, which goes beyond reliance on survey data.

Jeong (2013) describes a study of the differences between teachers of language assessment courses who are specialists in language testing and those teachers who are not. It was found that the testing specialists focused on testing theory and non-testing specialists focused on classroom assessment and test accommodations. This seems to lend weight to the argument made above that language testers can be too inward looking and overly interested in testing theory. It would also seem to suggest that non-testing specialists are keen to avoid engaging in testing theory even when teaching a language assessment course. Thus, there would appear to be a separation between language testers and other parts of the language teaching community.

2.4 Teacher cognition

The growth in the importance of testing in language teaching, and the issues relating to the level of teachers' assessment literacy described above, highlight the need for high-quality assessment training for teachers. Exploring teachers' current levels of assessment literacy may help teacher educators to better understand the factors which promote or prevent effective assessment, and thus contribute to more targeted teacher education. However, we need to investigate not just what is happening, but why it is happening. Teachers' attitudes and beliefs are often regarded as playing an important role in the development of their decisions and behaviour (see, for example, Borg, 2006; and Kagan, 1992). Research from the field of ELT, as well as education more generally, is consistent in the view that teachers' cognitions, or what they think, know and believe (Borg, 2006) may act as a filter through which new information is interpreted (see, for example, Pajares, 1992). Moreover, these cognitions can become rigid and difficult to change and may negate the impact of teacher training courses (Kagan, 1992). Pajares (1992) posits that teachers' attitudes and beliefs are a strong predictor of a teacher's behaviour, and there is a great deal of empirical literature that highlights the link between teachers' beliefs and teaching practices. In relation to assessment for example, Chang's (2005, cited in Yin, 2010) investigation into college EFL teachers found that teachers' approach to assessment was influenced by their wider beliefs about language learning.

However, there is also evidence that teachers sometimes cannot or do not transform these beliefs into practice and some researchers have reported a lack of alignment between teachers' beliefs and practices (e.g. Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). They state that although teachers' reported practices may appear to relate to their stated beliefs, their actual classroom practices may be inconsistent with these beliefs (Zheng, 2013). Barnard and Burns (2012) suggest that this mismatch between teachers' beliefs and practices relates to the contexts in which they work. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) describe these contexts as complex and dynamic systems in which a variety of factors interact to support or constrain the ability to translate one's beliefs in practice. Barriers which may prevent teachers from teaching or assessing students according to their own beliefs include curriculum, policy, organisational culture or a lack of training within a specific field.

Freeman (2002) argues that research into teachers' mental lives is essential in understanding and advancing teachers' professional practice. However, despite a long tradition of research in the fields of assessment and teacher cognition, there is little empirical research which links the two (Yin, 2010). This research aims to address this gap by investigating teachers' assessment practices, their level of assessment literacy and attitudes to assessment.

In his study of classroom assessment practices Yin (2010) notes that teachers drew upon two different set of cognitions. These were strategic cognitions and interactive cognitions. Strategic cognitions include teaching approach and beliefs about language learning. He suggests that teachers draw on these when planning assessments. Interactive cognitions include assessment principles and knowledge of assessment which is not directly related to language use. Yin argues that these cognitions were mainly used in class while teachers assessed students. He goes on to note the role of practical considerations such as time and class size when making assessment decisions. Thus, Yin makes an explicit connection between classroom assessment practice and teacher cognition.

Xu and Liu (2009) used narrative enquiry to explore teacher assessment knowledge and practice. They made a case study of one person and explored with this teacher the influences on her assessment practice. The authors point to a conflict between teachers' implicit knowledge of assessment and the assessment standards which can be imposed on teachers by authorities. This 'calls for a new methodology to address the uniqueness and individuality of teachers' assessment practices' (2009: 496). They also highlight that teacher capacity building is a slow process and real commitment is needed if we really want to see any change in practices. Scarino argues that we need to recognise: 'the "inner" world of teachers and their personal frameworks of knowledge and understanding and the way these shape their conceptualisations, interpretations, decisions and judgments in assessment' (2013: 316).

3

Methodology

The overall approach used in the project was qualitative. As outlined in the literature review there has been a lack of qualitative research into the topic. Interviews and observations were the main data collection methods. The following research questions informed the project:

- What impact does testing have on the classroom?
- How confident do teachers feel to engage in assessment activities?
- What are teacher attitudes to assessment?
- What are the assessment literacy needs of teachers?

These questions were created after conducting an initial literature review of the topic. There were four main data collection stages. These have been summarised in Table 1, which includes information about the participants and their location.

Table 1: A summary of the four stages of data collection

Data collection stage	Location	Participants
1. Baseline interviews	UK university	Three experienced teachers with a variety of qualifications
2. Observations and interviews	Language centre at a UK university	Three experienced teachers with a variety of qualifications
3. Focus group interviews	English language teaching centres in European capital cities	48 experienced teachers with a variety of qualifications
4. Workshop	IATEFL annual conference, Birmingham	20 people – a diverse group which comprised some practising teachers, some testing and assessment experts, and some students on master's programmes at UK universities

4

Data collection sites

Data was collected at a variety of locations. The interviews were held in the UK with teachers who had taught English in a variety of different countries and contexts. The interviewees all worked at the same UK university. The classroom observations were conducted at a language centre at a UK university. The focus group interviews were held at English language teaching centres in Europe. The fourth and final stage of data collection was a workshop held in Birmingham at the annual IATEFL conference.

5

Participants

As a qualitatively oriented study we were not aiming to speak to large numbers of people. We cannot claim to have spoken to every teacher in the world. We spoke to teachers with a wide variety of experiences and who had entered training through different routes. The overall sampling strategy was convenience. This strategy was appropriate as it enabled us to speak to a range of teachers from a wide variety of countries, which brought a global perspective to a project where the researchers were UK-based. The potential disadvantage of using convenience sampling is that it can also be described as self-selecting. That is to say, only people who have an interest in the topic attend. This is especially true of the workshop as we were entirely dependent on who chose to attend our session. Some of the participants who attended the workshop were testing and assessment experts who were known to us, while others were teachers from a variety of different countries. Biographical information was not taken for all participants as our focus was on what they were telling us rather than making comparisons between the responses of different groups of teacher. This reflects the exploratory nature of the project. The definition of 'teacher', which was used to inform this study, was that of Vogt and Tsagari (2014: 377) which was: '"regular" foreign language teachers who have undergone regular training who teach foreign languages at state tertiary institutions, colleges and schools'. The broad definition allowed us to speak to teachers who had entered through a variety of different routes. The broad definition was also consistent with convenience sampling strategy.

6

Data collection instruments

The baseline interview schedule was developed using Davies' (2008) components of language assessment, which have been discussed in the literature above. In these interviews we developed an understanding of the boundaries of our topic. The interviews were semi-structured. We discussed the participants' routes into teaching and their initial and subsequent teaching training. We asked about the role of assessment in their practice and how confident they felt themselves to be when dealing with assessment.

The observation schedule was inspired by a study of teacher classroom assessment practices undertaken by Colby-Kelly and Turner (2007). They focused on assessment for learning practices, whereas this study wanted to look at assessment practices more broadly. We created a checklist of 16 assessment practices. Every three minutes we ticked which of the practices we were observing and took notes about them. Some three-minute sections contained more than one assessment practice, while others did not contain any examples of the assessment activities included on our checklist. Following the observations, we interviewed the teachers and asked them about practices we had observed. These were semi-structured interviews which also covered the teachers' general experiences of assessment and their training experiences.

The focus group interview schedule was also developed using Davies' (2008) components. Much of the discussions during the focus group interviews were on the training materials – both the form these should take and the contents of them. At the workshop we presented our proposal for the toolkit. We gathered feedback from written comments on Post-it notes and notes taken during the discussions.

7

Results and analysis

The results have been organised according to the research questions. We have focused on the highlights of the data. Space precludes a detailed discussion of all the collected data. The following codes have been applied to the participants. The teachers who participated in the baseline interviews are referred to as IT. Those who were observed and interviewed are referred to as OT. The focus group participants are referred to as FGT. Finally, the workshop participants are referred to as WSP. The participants have been assigned a number. In order to ensure the anonymity of the participants, the pronouns he and she have been used randomly.

7.1 What impact does testing have on the classroom?

The teachers who took part in the focus groups considered tests to have a considerable impact on the classroom. FGT 16 talked about: '...the impact of exams on students' lives – more people need English qualifications.' Students, therefore, are aware of pressures to take exams for work or study reasons. Teachers reported that the students are bringing pressure to bear on teachers to engage with exams as conditions of economic uncertainty drive people to obtain certificates of proficiency in English. Other teachers mentioned that many professionals are now required to demonstrate a particular level of proficiency in English. For example, university teachers in one of the countries where focus groups were held, are required to pass a C1 level English examination or risk losing their position.

OT1 stated that tests do have an impact on the classroom, but she also worries about this impact. She reported: '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.' The teacher seems to be concerned that tests promote a superficial approach to learning. In the lesson we observed she used self-assessment and peer assessment as ways for students to understand what they had wrong on the test and what they needed to do better in order to improve. She used techniques associated with assessment for learning in order to counter-balance the impact of testing in the classroom.

A way to measure the impact of testing in the classroom is to consider the amount of time devoted to preparing the tests. OT2 stated that he could spend a day or two at the start of the course creating essay tasks. He described some of the pressures teachers are under when creating assessments. He stated: 'I'm hourly paid so the extra time has to be claimed for.' Creating tests is a time-intensive activity but the required resources may not be made available to teachers.

OT2 stated that 'Every week we will have a really thorough mark of a test.' This would seem to suggest that testing is a weekly activity and therefore can be described as having considerable impact. At the same time, OT2 claimed that he wanted to keep the classroom light-hearted and that 'doing more stressful assessment is not productive.' Here, there seems to a divide between teaching, which is enjoyable for the students, and assessment, which is stressful. The good guys in the classroom are the teachers and not the assessors.

It seems that the influence of tests can be described as all pervasive. OT1 stated: '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.' So, although we observed this teacher using a range of techniques associated with assessment for learning, the test is still a dominant force in the classroom. This may be due to the nature of the class we observed. The students needed to gain high test scores in order to progress to a university course. This may indicate a conflict between a teacher's stated beliefs about teaching and learning, and imposed institutional requirements.

7.2 How confident do teachers feel about engaging in assessment activities?

One focus group participant expressed her lack of confidence in engaging in assessment activities in rather strong terms. FGT24 stated that she 'felt blindfolded when trying to create assessment tasks.' It would appear that she feels she does not have the knowledge or skills to create assessment tasks. She would seem to be groping around in the dark, and does not have the vision necessary to devise assessments.

It may be the case that a lack of training in the practical aspects of assessment has left teachers feeling a lack of confidence. For example, IT2 stated: 'I would have liked more practical elements in my training about testing and assessment – more situation based.' This would seem to suggest that this teacher feels her training did not adequately prepare her for the types of assessment she engages with as a teacher. We are likely to lack confidence when engaged in an activity we feel unprepared for. In addition, this is a further request for training to be practical rather than theoretical. The teacher, it could be argued, wanted training which would be activity-based and which would provide her with assessment activities which she could incorporate into her teaching practice.

OT1 stated she often engaged in self-assessment and peer assessment activities and that she considered the reflective nature of these activities necessary to be a good language learner. She stated: 'If you are going to be successful as a language learner and in life, you need to reflect.' She was very confident in her assessment practices. She ascribed the source of her confidence and knowledge to be the classroom. She stated: 'It's experience in the classroom that has changed me, rather than experiences.' This would seem to confirm some of the findings by Vogt and Tsagari (2014) that teachers develop their assessment practices through their own experiences. While they see this as a block on innovation, OT1 seems to see this as a positive.

OT2 seemed to be very confident in his assessment practices despite his self-acknowledged lack of training. He stated that he 'assessed students after each activity.' In the observed lesson OT2 simplified an activity as, in his judgement, the activity as originally planned was too difficult for the students. This could be seen as an example of what McKay (2006) classifies as 'on-the-fly' assessment. Again there seems to a contradiction between a stated claim not to have had training in assessment in initial and in-service teacher training and yet being able to successfully deploy a range of assessment activities in the classroom. This would seem to be part of the classroom practice of most teachers even though they may choose not to classify it as assessment. They may prefer to consider it as part of teaching. Like OT1, OT2 was confident in using a range of practices, and discussed using both peer and self-assessment in classes.

Some of those interviewed also expressed confidence in engaging in assessment activities, notwithstanding a lack of training in the subject. IT1 stated: 'You do it

automatically as a teacher but I have never received training in how to do this … we didn't receive training on the ethical aspects.' Assessment is considered to be part of teaching and, as such, it comes naturally to teachers. For this teacher it is not necessary to engage with all three of Davies' (2008) components of language testing knowledge to be confident in assessment. Davies highlights the importance of an understanding of ethical issues in his third component: principles. Further discussion of Davies' work has been included in the literature review.

The majority of the participants in the project reported feeling unconfident about assessment. A manifestation of this lack of confidence was the willingness to assign responsibility for assessment to outside agencies. 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.' These comments are not intended to be a criticism of large-scale exam providers. Rather, it is a sign that the lack of training in assessment leads to teachers disengaging with the subject. Links from these findings can be made to claims that teachers and society as a whole place too much confidence in standardised tests (Stiggens, 2014; Weigle, 2014).

7.3 What are teacher attitudes to assessment?

OT2 perceived knowledge of assessment as being important professionally. He acknowledged that he had not received much training in LTA and stated: 'it would have been nice if there had been more.' When OT2 wanted to obtain promotion he considered it necessary to engage with the topic of assessment: 'I would have really needed to able to develop assessments.' This seems to suggest that assessment knowledge is considered to be necessary to gain promotion. It also reinforces the idea that assessment is a top-down imposition on teachers: the management of the institution creates the assessments, which the teachers implement. This also seems to be evidence that assessment is, as described above, 'a necessary evil'. Classroom teachers are supportive, while managers and language testers are separated or removed from the classroom. Assessment knowledge should be developed for instrumental purposes, i.e. to get a new job, rather than from any intrinsic interest in testing and assessment.

IT3 made a clear difference between teaching, which he was interested in, and testing, which did not interest him. He stated: 'If I have read books about testing it was from the perspective of being interested in researching the language classroom and sometimes in classroom research you need tests.' The classroom is clearly being privileged here, and testing should be subservient to teaching – or testing only has value when it can be used to improve teaching in some way. It would seem that the topic of testing is not considered to be an attractive proposition for teachers.

IT2 made a relevant point about how teachers are often marginalised in the assessment process. She stated: 'In most places testing and assessment is out of the hands of teachers … they are told this is the assessment you are using.' In such situations it is easy to see why teachers disengage from the topic. If the opinions of teachers are not listened to then there would seem to be little incentive for teachers to spend time reading about assessment. This echoes points made by Crusan et al. (2016) that teachers feel assessment is a top-down imposition. It may also reinforce the practices described by Vogt and Tsagari (2014) of using colleagues and the staffroom as the main sources of information on testing and assessment. It would seem natural for colleagues to turn to each other for support and advice when jointly facing a top-down imposed assessment system.

Only three teachers could describe at length their training in testing and assessment. Two gave detailed descriptions of their pre-service training. The third described working in a country with an assessment-focused education system and having attended many CPD sessions which focused on testing and assessment. The other participants did not describe training experiences related to the topic. This may be due to the nature of training courses such as CELTA, which focus mainly on the classroom. It may also be indicative of their attitude to assessment. The training which they may have received on LTA may not live long in the memory of the teachers we spoke to as they are not really interested in the topic.

All the teachers interviewed in the focus groups acknowledged a lack of training in testing and assessment. This led us to wonder how teachers developed their assessment practices. FGT4 stated: '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 would seem that for this teacher, assessment practices developed out of his observations of students. Experience would, thus, be a key factor in learning about assessment. This result is somewhat contradicted

by requests for examples of student language at particular levels. Another focus group participant stated that: 'You bring conceptions of how you were tested at school and you apply them to language learning – a lot of them are not valid.' Past learning experiences seem to play a role in the development of teacher assessment practice. Vogt and Tsagari (2014) make an analogy between teaching how you were taught and testing how you were tested. This project would seem to offer some support for this notion.

One of the focus groups was concerned that language proficiency and gains in language learning could not be captured by a number. They questioned 'the value of assessing language with numbers.' This would seem to echo points made by Weigle (2007) that teachers prefer to see themselves in the role of a supporter of students, rather than as an assessor of students. This would suggest that some participants feel very uncomfortable around assessment and do not perceive it to be part of their role as teacher.

Giving students a score or grade seemed to be an activity which some of the participants found to be problematic. One focus group participant stated: 'When you make speaking assessments you guess the level and give the mark like a 7 or a 9.' This would seem to confirm Vogt and Tsagari's (2014) finding that there can be an element of 'fuzziness' in teacher assessments. This may be due to teachers feeling uncomfortable in the role of assessor, as discussed above. It may be that teachers feel hampered in making judgements due to the lack of training which they have received in assessment. The comment made above suggests that some teachers may lack confidence when assigning a student to a level. It may also be the case that teachers feel uncomfortable about grading work (Weigle, 2007).

During the focus group interviews many teachers acknowledged that testing and assessment training had not featured in their pre-service training. Most, however, did not view this as being problematic. FGT9, when reflecting on her pre-service training, stated: '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 of things I would have wanted more of.' This would seem to indicate that assessment was not a priority for the teachers we spoke to. They wanted more training in matters related to teaching. In addition, it could also be indicative of the divide between teaching and assessment with teaching clearly taking precedence over assessment. FGT3 stated: 'CELTA/Trinity focus on the classroom – assessment is seen as external to the class.' The divide may start at the time when people are engaged in pre-service training.

Some teachers reported feeling excluded from the assessment process. As stated above, many assessment practices are imposed on teachers, and teachers are subject to top-down pressures. One focus group participant keenly felt the division between teaching and assessment. He defined himself as 'a user of assessments, not a creator – literacy is for creators.' For this participant teachers have no need to be assessment literate as they do not create assessments or participate in their creation. This would seem to provide further support for the notion that teachers feel assessment is a top-down imposition (Crusan et al., 2016).

7.4 What are the assessment literacy needs of teachers?

In the focus groups there were some teachers who discussed their perceived need to be assessment literate. FGT22 stated: 'You need to be literate to be critical of the materials you used to assess – to know if it is testing that you want to assess.' Support for this claim came from FGT19, who considered that: 'Understanding principles is quite important – important to be aware of the different types of assessment.' These teachers were, however, in the minority. As will be discussed below, most of the teachers we talked to expressed their needs in terms of requests for activities, and not in terms of theory or principles.

This has echoes in Davies' (2008) critique of Hughes' book on language testing for teachers, which does not include theory. This would suggest, Davies continues, that there is little demand for theory among teachers. This project would seem to support Davies' assertion and suggest that the antipathy to testing theory is longstanding among teachers. If there were demand for it, Hughes would have included it in his book.

Teachers requested materials for assessing skills. This result replicates the findings of Hasselgreen et al.'s (2004) survey of training needs. This may suggest that this is an area of concern which is commonly shared. In addition, this result was also shared by Berry and O'Sullivan's (2014, 2015) survey. Although the groups of teachers who participated in this project were quite diverse, there was a high level of commonality among the stated needs. OT2 requested training materials which focused on the assessment of the four skills. He also wanted criteria to guide his development of new assessments. The teachers in the focus groups also requested information on assessing skills. The following comments were made by focus group participants when asked about the topics which should be included in the training materials. FGT7 stated: 'We'd like speaking tasks – task and criteria.' FGT14

wanted suggestions for assessing live listening. FGT2 wanted objectives for student performance.

A request which was made in a number of focus groups was for examples of level. FGT24 stated a need for 'videos of people in everyday situations using the language.' The focus group participants felt that exam providers had provided useful examples of level relevant for the exams they produce. The teachers wanted examples from non-exam contexts. One participant described the CEFR as 'a universal source of levels.' It could be the case that the participants in this project feel that the CEFR does not help them to perceive or understand level. This may suggest that the way the CEFR is currently being used is not appropriate for teachers.

When discussing their assessment literacy needs teachers in all four groups made the point that they did not want to spend a lot of time engaging in training. They wanted materials to be short and snappy. The teachers responded positively to the suggestion that the materials should be online. This request for brief materials may also be another indication that the teachers we spoke to were not interested in theory. The teachers were not interested in committing the time which would be necessary to read such theory, which can be, at times, rather dense. OT1 stated that she felt that teachers needed more information about fundamental assessment techniques. She stated there needs to be 'The basics with some theory.' This seems to provide yet more evidence that techniques are more important than theory.

8

The materials

As stated at the start of this report, a goal of this project was to create training materials which responded to the stated needs of the teachers who had spoken to us. At every stage of data collection we asked participants what they thought should be included in the training materials in terms of topic and in terms of format. There were two consistent messages from the participants. The materials had to be easily accessible and not require a great investment of time from the user. They also stated that practical ideas were more important than theory. For example, WSP9 stated: 'Assessment literature is very dense, so an accessible series of tips would be useful.' We have threaded practical ideas which relate to the testing of the four language skills throughout the toolkit. This was done to show the inter-dependent nature of all aspects of language assessment. We considered all the suggestions made and have brought together materials which reflect key themes in assessment and the broad needs of the participants.

The materials cover five topics:

- CEFR and levelness
- assessing young learners
- assessment for learning
- language assessment for teaching
- assessment resources.

The materials are designed to be read online. The texts are short and a range of text types has been included. The materials can be used for self-study or used as prompts for discussion in a training session. Opportunities to reflect on practice are included throughout the materials. The resources section offers teachers a range of freely available materials on assessment if they want to develop their knowledge of a particular aspect of the topic.

Not all of the participants were enthusiastic about the concept of online training materials on testing and assessment. One participant stated: 'Lots of teachers don't want to know about assessment, so offering something that people don't want doesn't always lead to delivery of aims.' Given the importance of assessment for promoting learning, we feel that these materials provide a valuable opportunity for teachers to engage with practical and theoretical aspects of assessment. The emphasis in the materials is on practical approaches, but, in line with our participants' stated needs, includes a basic introduction to theoretical perspectives.

9

Conclusions

This study has used a broad definition of 'teacher' and has involved speaking to teachers who have experienced a variety of training routes into teaching, and have worked in countries all over the world. A qualitatively oriented study cannot make claims to generalisability. It must also be borne in mind that assessment is situated practice. By adopting a qualitatively oriented approach, it has been possible to gain insights into the assessment practices and beliefs of four groups of teachers. Some of the results are contradictory in nature. This may reflect the complexities of the topic and of the contexts the teachers work in.

The results of the project confirm those of other researchers (Vogt and Tsagari, 2014; Crusan et al. 2016; Fulcher, 2012; Berry and O'Sullivan, 2014, 2015). Teachers have had little training in issues related to assessment and do not report interest in the theoretical underpinnings of assessment. In contrast to other studies, this study has focused on teacher knowledge and how teachers develop their assessment practices. There is evidence to suggest that assessment practices are rooted in past learning experiences, and through knowledge sharing with colleagues. Fulcher (2016) proposed a guild master and apprenticeship model for teachers to become assessment literate. He argued that this model is appropriate as apprenticeships combine theory and practice, and LAL involves both theory and practice. In addition, apprenticeships focus on the making of a final product, and a testing apprenticeship would centre on the development of testing and assessment products. The findings of this project would seem to suggest that teachers are already engaging in developing their assessment practices by learning from each other.

One of the key findings of this project is that teachers develop their assessment practices through their own experiences. While some have characterised this approach as a brake on innovation (Vogt and Tsagari, 2014), we would argue that it could have the potential to have a positive impact on classroom practice, as teachers can learn strategies which have been successfully deployed. The teachers we observed used a range of assessment practices successfully. Although this represents a small percentage of the sample of teachers in the project, it does indicate that even teachers who have little training in assessment may demonstrate a range of assessment strategies in their repertoire. This may suggest that teacher knowledge should not be underestimated. There appears to be a disconnection between teachers and what can be termed 'the academy', that is to say, people engaged in researching language testing theory.

The observations of practice would suggest that teachers engage in a variety of assessment practices successfully. It would seem that assessment and teaching practices are so intertwined in teaching practice that teachers do not recognise that techniques associated with assessment for learning, or learning-oriented language assessment are part of assessment. Teaching is the focus of their activities and all activities which promote teaching and learning are classified as teaching. This is suggestive of the rift between teaching and assessment. The focus on teaching in pre-service and in-service training seems to have led to a negation of the assessment practices which are a fundamental part of classroom practice. This type of practice is covered in McKay's (2006) description of 'on-the-fly' assessment.

This, like all research projects, has limitations. The sample strategy used was one of convenience and this limits the representativeness of the sample. While the teachers have worked in a number of countries around the world at the time of the project, they were all based in Europe, and this may mean that we have not fully captured the experiences and attitudes of teachers from outside Europe.

Berger (2011: 80) argues that for teacher assessment literacy to improve: 'What is needed on a large scale is the provision of teacher education programmes to educate pre- and in-service practitioners to use the principles and tools of language assessment effectively in their classrooms to promote learning.' The results of this project would suggest that such top-down imposition of assessment training would not be effective. Some of the participants in this project expressed their lack of interest in the topic of assessment, and forcing teachers to engage as a group with the theoretical underpinnings of assessment could be counter-productive in terms of promoting a positive attitude towards assessment among teachers. Rather, training should focus on teachers reflecting on their own experiences of assessment.

The results of this project would seem to suggest the following recommendations for practice and research.

- The academy needs to recognise the levels of knowledge teachers have in assessment, and the debate needs to move away from being framed in terms of lack of knowledge, or deficit.
- Assessment training needs to be developed with the premise that teachers bring considerable knowledge and experience of LTA to any training they may choose to engage with.
- Teacher educators need to consider the role of assessment in initial training and ensure it is a prominent part of teacher education programmes.
- Institutions should encourage staff to explore the CPD options available to them.
- Those working in assessment need to find more innovative ways of engaging with teachers.
- Further, qualitatively oriented research should be undertaken with a focus on observations and how teachers develop their knowledge about assessment and their practices.

The plural of literacies should be adopted and a sociocultural perspective should be brought to the issue. As Willis et al. (2013: 246) write: 'A sociocultural view of assessment literacies thus acknowledges that assessment literacy is not a singular or fixed set of capabilities but a capability that is situated and needs to be understood within the assessment culture and policy.' Thus, there is not one version of assessment literacy which is applicable globally.

A last conclusion would be that anyone wishing to engage with teachers on the topic of assessment should avoid using the term language assessment literacy.

At the end of this project, we would encourage readers to access the materials and engage with them.

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