Mind the gap – bringing teachers into the language literacy debate

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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

- ▶ Training needs may be exaggerated 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

- ▶ Responses may be constrained by the questions asked

- ▶ Qualitative aspects of mixed-methods and classroom observation studies are generally very small-scale

3. THE BRITISH COUNCIL-UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD LAL FOR TEACHERS PROJECT

Definition of 'teacher'

Following Vogt and Tsagari (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

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Initial baseline interviews:

- ▶ Conducted in School of Education of British University with 3 experienced EFL teachers, 1 female + 2 male, age range 30-50 years

- ▶ 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 different experienced teachers, 2 female + 1 male, age range 30-40 years

▶ Checklist of 16 observations, every 3 minutes.

▶ 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, 25 female + 23 male, age range 25-60 years

- ▶ 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 minimal 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

Thank you!

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