

Factors Affecting English Language Teachers' Classroom Assessment Practices

A case study at Singapore secondary schools

Shih Chih-Min and Wang Li-Yi

THE PURPOSE of the research was to examine factors that swayed English Language teachers' choices of assessment methods. Borg's model of teacher cognitions was adopted to serve as the theoretical foundation for this study. Secondary school English Language teachers with diverse backgrounds were involved in the study. Results showed that educational context, professional coursework or training, classroom practice including practice teaching, and schooling history were all significant factors that shaped teachers' cognitions and affected their assessment practices. Each of the four factors imposed a different level of impact on teachers' assessment practices. The educational context was the most influential factor while the schooling history was the least influential factor.

INTRODUCTION

Classroom assessment practices have been examined in general education for decades, but not in language education until recent years. In the past decade, several studies have focused on how English teachers at primary schools and universities in the English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) contexts conduct classroom assessment. Surprisingly, very little research has investigated on how secondary school English Language teachers administer classroom assessment. The study intends to fill this research gap in Singapore.

The importance of this study is twofold. First, there is a need to better understand teachers' classroom assessment practices. In his article published in *Language Assessment Quarterly*, Cumming (2004) noted that a resounding number of journal articles and

KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Teachers should be provided with professional trainings on assessment from time to time because the impact of the training seemed to decrease over time.
- School leaders may consider rearranging physical space of classrooms to enable teachers to better deliver their assessments.

books focused on formal language testing, rather than routine classroom assessment practices. Although the former had played an increasingly important role in language education, teachers need to be cognizant about sound classroom assessment practices and improve their assessment skills. He therefore opined, “surely we need more studies that simply describe educators actually doing language assessment as well as critical analyses of the principles and variables these practices entail” (Cumming, 2004, p. 7).

Second, assessment has drawn attention from researchers partly because it is universally acknowledged that improved classroom assessment practices can contribute to students’ better learning outcomes. In recent years, the idea of “assessment for learning” has been introduced (e.g., see Harlen & Winter, 2004). As Singapore’s Ministry of Education strives to enhance students’ learning outcomes, an in-depth understanding regarding English Language teachers’ classroom assessment is the first step. An investigation on this topic will cast light on why English Language teachers administer assessment in certain ways. The results of the study will have implications for teacher education programmes to train prospective teachers or in-service teachers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Forty English teachers were involved in the study. These teacher-participants had at least 1 year of teaching experience in Singapore so they had some experiences of conducting assessments in the local context, and have the fundamental understanding of the local educational contexts.

Guided by an interview schedule, the researchers interviewed each participant in English once. All interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder, and were later fully transcribed regardless of the grammatical errors. After the interviews, 5 out of the 40 interviewed teachers were selected for classroom observations. Since the interview data showed that contextual factors were the most critical factors in shaping teachers’ assessment practices, the researchers chose teachers who were teaching in different contexts, namely, two at government schools, and one each at a government-aided, an independent and an international school. The researchers observed and video-recorded 10

sessions of each teacher’s teaching. The observed lessons were later fully transcribed for data analysis. Teachers’ teaching materials and examination papers were collected for analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

Our findings suggest that the four components in Borg’s (2003) model of teacher cognition including schooling, contextual factors, professional coursework, and classroom practices all affected the participants’ assessment practice, but with different degrees of impact in Singapore educational context.

Contextual Factors

High-stakes examinations

Of the 40 participants, 35 claimed that high-stakes examinations had a great impact on their assessment practice. They geared their assessment methods and test-paper formats close to high-stakes testing such as the GCE “A”, “O” and “N” level exams. They followed prescribed band descriptors and rubrics, studied the Cambridge examiners’ reports, and tailored their assessment methods and test papers to fit these examinations.

High-stakes examinations are particularly influential to those expatriate teachers who had taught in different educational contexts before they came to Singapore. Tom (P01) is from India and he described the high-stakes examinations as “the biggest influence” to his thinking and practice of assessment. In his hometown, his assessment was more a process of interaction. In Singapore, however, the assessment is a “totally different ball game”, because it is a completely product-oriented practice. A similar perception was reported by Noah (P24), who mentioned that when he was teaching in the UK, his assessment was a very formative and process-focused practice before the students reached the examination year. He found it difficult to maintain his assessment practice in Singapore.

School management

Of the 40 participants, 35 indicated that school management—referred to a school’s internal policies and school leaders’ decisions—has affected their assessment practice. Hutch (P21) taught English in a government school and he described the school’s policy on assessment as “a very top-down approach”. He could not do alternative assessment,

thus making his assessment simply a preparation for the examination.

Physical environment and facilities

Over half of the participants (24 out of 40) claimed that classroom facilities affected their assessment practice. Kit (P10) mentioned that his classroom was always noisy and hot because it was open to the corridor, making it a very non-conducive environment to assess students' speaking and listening skills. Louise (P31) also mentioned that, because her classroom was not air-conditioned, she did more of her assessment earlier in the morning when it was cooler.

In addition, the arrangement of tables and chairs, and the size of the space also made it difficult for some teachers to conduct certain kinds of assessment such as self-assessment and peer-assessment, and to give clear feedback on students' performance.

Parents

Of the 40 participants, 12 indicated that parents' involvement was another issue affecting their assessment practices. It is interesting to note that parents' influence seemed to show in different aspects of teachers' assessment practices in different types of schools. Teachers serving at government or government-aided schools reported more pressure from parents regarding the assessment methods they used. Teachers at independent schools reported greater pressure from parents on their marking. In response, they placed more effort by giving more comments on certain pupils' work.

Professional coursework

Of the 40 participants, 23 teachers claimed that their professional coursework has affected their assessment practices. The data further suggested that the impact was on various aspects, including becoming more conscious of how to include quick regular systematic checks on progress, learning how to standardize and moderate assignments for assessment, and learning differentiated assessments but was most evident in terms of the teachers' understanding and application of alternative assessment.

The professional training increased teachers' awareness on the various modes of assessments besides merely the written form. The courses encouraged these teachers to attempt alternative assessment methods by showing them that these methods can not only test students on the skills required, but also help teachers themselves gain better understanding on the extent of their students' progress.

Classroom practice

The majority of the participants (32 out of 40) claimed that their assessment practice has changed because of their classroom practice experience. For example, Ruth (P08) has been an English Language teacher for 16 years and when she started teaching, and her assessment was mainly summative. Later on, she realized that this was not a very accurate assessment of her students' learning and she started trying other assessment methods that could help her understand more about her students' learning progress. Other major changes identified by the participants included giving students more autonomy, making the marking criteria more explicit to students, and increasing the willingness to try out alternative assessment.

Schooling History

The vast majority of the participants (34 out of 40) claimed that their schooling experience did not affect their current assessment practices. Some of them could not remember the details about how they were assessed, and others did not perceive that the assessment imposed on them was appropriate for the current practice. It was mentioned that the impact of the schooling experience only occurred in the very early stage of their teaching career.

IMPLICATIONS

For Teacher Training

The results of this study suggest that, although most teachers claimed that their training did have a certain impact on their assessment practices, the changes occurred mostly while the teachers were novice teachers. In conjunction with the teachers' increased experience, the impact of their professional training decreased. This finding indicates that teachers are

required to attend workshops or courses to acquire updated assessment knowledge from time to time. Teacher training programs can equip teachers with assessment knowledge by offering assessment courses to pre-service teachers and assessment workshops to in-service teachers.

For School Leaders

As teachers said in the interviews, the arrangement of tables and chairs, and the size of the allowed space made it difficult to conduct certain kinds of assessment such as self-assessment and peer-assessment, and give clear feedback on students' performance. School leaders can consider changing or arranging tables and chairs to facilitate teachers' administration of assessment in the class.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

SHIH Chih-Min and WANG Li-Yi are with the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Contact Chih-Min at chihmin.shih@nie.edu.sg for more information about the project.

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