

Understanding classroom-based assessment practices: a precondition for teacher assessment literacy

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The research suggests that while language teachers recognise the importance of developing their assessment literacy, they often have difficulty when it comes to articulating and prioritising their needs (Fulcher, 2012; Tsagari & Vogt, this issue). One explanation for this might be that they lack the means for reflecting in any systematic way on the nature of their classroom-based assessment (CBA) practices. In other words, teachers need to develop a better understanding of what they already do before they can start to think about which aspects of their CBA practices could be developed. This paper will describe a framework designed to help teachers identify and analyse their existing CBA practices as a precursor to reflecting on their professional development needs.

Discussion of language teacher assessment literacy has tended to focus on the more planned and formal types of assessment. However, it is now widely recognised that classroom teachers are involved in a more or less continuous process of appraisal and, moreover, that the feedback provided in these more incidental and embedded forms of assessment can have a powerful effect on learning (Hattie, 2009). Hence, the framework described in this article attempts to present a view of CBA which encompasses the full spectrum of assessment practices, including the types of assessment which occur spontaneously in the course of routine classroom interactions (Leung, 2005; Purpura, Liu, Tsutagawa & Woodson, 2014).

The starting point for this was an existing framework, based on an ethnographic study of CBA in language classrooms, designed to help researchers identify and make sense of observed CBA practices (Hill, 2012; Hill & McNamara, 2012). This framework was extended and elaborated with reference to principles of TAL as well as to the research on CBA more generally and reframed as a tool to help teachers make sense of their own assessment practices, which, it is

argued, represents an essential pre-condition for developing assessment literacy.

Keywords: Language assessment; classroom-based assessment; teacher assessment literacy

Introduction

Since the publication of Black and Wiliam's (1998) seminal article on classroom formative assessment, there has been a growing interest in classroom-based assessment (CBA) and its potential for enhancing learning. Despite increasing recognition of the centrality of learners in assessment (Andrade, 2010), it is nonetheless acknowledged that teachers still have an important role to play. This role has come under increasing scrutiny in recent decades as a result, inter alia, of a trend towards using assessment for accountability purposes (Leung, 2014; Malone, 2008) as well as the widespread introduction of policies to implement assessment-for-learning principles in curriculum and assessment (Fulcher, 2012; Leung, 2014). These developments have focused attention on teachers' capacity to deliver assessment reforms, with teacher assessment literacy (TAL) identified as a critical factor in improving student learning (Wiliam & Thompson, 2007; Hattie, 2009).

Until recently, discussion of TAL has tended to focus on the more planned and formal types of assessment. For example, Fulcher's (2012) definition of TAL refers exclusively to 'tests' and 'test processes':

The knowledge, skills and abilities required to design, develop, maintain or evaluate, large-scale standardized and/or classroom based **tests**, familiarity with **test processes**, and awareness of principles and concepts that guide and underpin practice, including ethics and codes of practice... [and the ability to contextualise these] within wider historical, social, political and philosophical frameworks... and to evaluate the role and impact of **testing** on society, institutions, and individuals (p. 125) [emphasis added].

However, there is now a growing awareness that classroom-based *tests* are only one element of the range of practices constituting CBA. Hill and McNamara (2012), for example, have defined CBA as:

[a]ny reflection by teachers (and/or learners) on the qualities of a learner's (or group of learners') work and the use of that information by teachers (and/or learners) for teaching, learning (feedback), reporting, management or socialisation purposes (p. 397).

It is therefore essential, I would argue, that any conceptualisation of TAL takes account of the more embedded, informal and incidental types of assessment, given these have the potential to have a powerful effect on learning (Hattie, 2009).

Hill and McNamara (2012) introduced the notion of the 'assessment opportunity' as a way of characterising the less 'visible' types of assessment which occur spontaneously, in 'real time', during routine classroom interactions. Wiliam (2009) has described this aspect of CBA as 'moments of contingency' comprising, for example, 'an immediate intervention in the flow of classroom discussion...' (p. 26). The notion of the 'assessment opportunity' is intended to highlight, and validate, the reality that teachers (and learners) are engaged in a more or less continual process of appraisal (Katz & Gottlieb, 2012; Leung, 2005, 2014; Purpura, 2014; Rea-Dickins, 2001). This phenomenon is clearly illustrated by a teacher in Hill's (2012) study when asked how she was able to assign grades in the absence of any visible forms of assessment:

It's all like you've got antennae sticking out of your ears and it all comes in... You're constantly processing it, you're constantly building up, I mean I just know just sitting in class, you know, you become aware of who's got the answer or who's gonna have a go at it ... So but, there's that but there's also, there's their identity in the class and there's all sorts of things (Hill, 2012 p. 128).

While teachers readily accept the need for professional development in the area of assessment (Tzagari, 2011), they appear to struggle when it comes to articulating and prioritising their needs. For example, an international survey of teachers' assessment training needs found that respondents tended to rank everything as equally important and that qualitative responses often simply reproduced the language used in the survey itself (Fulcher, 2012). Similarly, in interviews conducted as part of a large-scale survey study of language teacher assessment literacy in Europe, participants were described as 'vague' when it came to specifying their professional development needs (Tzagari & Vogt, this issue). One explanation for why teachers might experience difficulty identify needs is they lack the skills or means for systematic reflection on the nature and quality of their existing CBA practices.

This paper will describe a framework designed to help teachers identify and analyse their CBA practices as a precursor to thinking about how these might be improved. The starting point was an existing framework, based on an ethnographic study of CBA practices in language classrooms, designed to help *researchers* identify and make sense of observed CBA practices (Hill, 2012; Hill & McNamara, 2012). This framework was organised around with four main questions:

1. *What do teachers do?*
2. *What do teachers look for?*

3. *What theories and standards do they use?*
4. *What are learners' understandings of assessment?*

This framework, with its grounding in CBA practices, was then extended and elaborated with reference to principles of TAL as well as to the research on CBA more generally and reframed as a tool to help *teachers* make sense of their own assessment practices.

While increasing numbers of educational systems around the globe are introducing policies to promote assessment-for-learning principles, research has shown that teachers' capacity to implement these reforms is very often frustrated by a combination of local as well as macro-level forces (Cheng, 2011). Hence it is important for teachers to develop an understanding of the situated nature of CBA and how political, social, cultural-historical and institutional factors might combine to shape their practice (Fulcher, 2012; Norris, 2014; Scarino, 2013). At the same time, teachers need to reflect on their own capacity to effect change as well as of how their assessment practices might impact 'on society, institutions, and individuals' (Fulcher, 2012 p. 125). These considerations motivated the addition of a fifth question:

5. *How does the context for teaching shape assessment practices?*

The relationship between these questions and the three dimensions of TAL ('practice', 'concepts' and 'context') outlined in Fulcher's (2012) definition is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Relationship of framing questions to dimensions of TAL

Practice	1.	What do teachers do?
	2.	What do teachers look for?
Concepts	3.	What theories and standards do they use?
Context	4.	What are learners' understandings of and orientations to assessment?
	5.	How does the context for teaching shape assessment practices?

The final framework is presented in Figure 1. Organised around the five framing questions, it comprises a series of questions to teachers, designed to highlight key concepts and issues in CBA a simple and accessible way. The next section will detail the ways in which the design of the framework was informed by principles of TAL as well as the research on CBA more generally.

1. What do you do?	
1.1 Planning assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does planned assessment relate to teaching & the intended learnings (including relevant curriculum standards & frameworks)? • How are learners' existing knowledge, language background, capabilities, and interests taken into account? • How are learners' social, emotional & psychological attributes taken into account? • What role do learners have in setting learning goals and making decisions about when, how & why they will be assessed?
1.2 Framing assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do learners become aware of when, how & why they will be assessed?
1.3 Conducting assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who carries out assessment (<i>teacher, student, peers, others</i>) & whose judgement 'counts' in grading decisions? • What proportion of assessment is planned & formal and what proportion is unplanned & incidental (<i>e.g., observation</i>)? • What evidence of learning is provided by routine classroom activities & interactions (<i>e.g., class discussions</i>)? • Who is the main target of informal (incidental) assessment (<i>the whole class, groups/pairs, individual students</i>)? • Does formal & informal assessment focus on <i>processes</i> and well as <i>products</i>, <i>e.g.</i>, are learners encouraged to discuss the basis for their responses? • Where do formal assessment activities come from (<i>e.g., textbook, self-designed, other teachers</i>) & how well do they fit the intended purpose (see 1.4) in terms of nature, scope & level? • Do you use a range of assessment methods and is the method appropriate for the intended purpose (see 1.4)? • How do you ensure the fairness, quality & reliability (trustworthiness) of assessment activities and processes? • Is assessment conducted in an ethical manner (<i>e.g., preserving student confidentiality</i>)?
1.4 Using assessment	To document growth in learning
	To judge & grade students
	To report to stakeholders (<i>student, parents, school, external authorities</i>)
	To prepare students for exams
	To inform teaching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is assessment used to diagnose needs & plan teaching? • How is assessment used to evaluate teaching?
	To enhance learning, motivation & self-regulation by providing quality feedback <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does feedback focus on features of performance (<i>rather than on innate qualities e.g., 'intelligence'</i>)?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does feedback explain which aspects were done well? e.g., ‘You used a good variety of vocab & sentence structures’ • Does feedback tell the student how to improve? e.g., ‘You need to review the work we did last week on use of the passive form’ • Does the timing (<i>immediate/delayed</i>) & format of feedback (e.g., <i>comments only vs. marks</i>) encourage learner uptake? <p>To manage teaching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is assessment used to discipline learners or to encourage them to work harder? • Is assessment used to socialize learners into a new assessment culture (e.g., <i>using assessment rubrics, preparing for high stakes exams</i>)
<p>2. What do you look for?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the balance of skills (<i>listening, speaking, reading, writing</i>), knowledge (<i>vocab, grammar, cultural</i>) and abilities addressed in assessment? Does this reflect the relevant curriculum priorities? • What are the valued qualities (e.g., <i>accuracy, fluency, variety</i>), behaviours (e.g., <i>effort, presentation, attendance</i>) & student-centred factors (e.g., <i>well-being</i>) communicated in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ written or verbal instructions, ○ written or verbal feedback, and ○ formal reporting? <p>Are these qualities consistent with the intended learnings (including relevant curriculum standards & frameworks)?</p>	
<p>3. What beliefs or understandings do you use?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your beliefs and understandings about <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ the nature of the subject (the nature of language; relationship of language & culture) ○ how students learn a second language ○ how language should be taught, & ○ how language should be assessed (e.g., learner agency, appropriate uses of assessment)? • What is the basis for these beliefs & understandings? • How do these beliefs & understandings influence your assessment practices? 	
<p>4. What are your learner’s understandings?</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you ensure students understand the focus & purpose of assessment? • How do students perceive their role in planning, conducting & judging assessment? • How do you ensure students have understood & engaged with feedback? 	

5. How does the context for teaching shape your assessment practices?

- Who influences decisions about content & methods in your assessment (school, supervisors, students, external authorities)?
- What other factors do you need to take into account when planning & conducting assessment (e.g., class size, learner characteristics, external examinations, student & parental expectations)?
- What is the impact of testing and assessment practices both locally and in the broader context and what is your capacity to influence change?

Figure 1. Reflective Framework**Question 1. What do you do?**

Following Hill and McNamara (2012) the question of ‘what teachers do’ in CBA has been characterised in terms of *planning*, *framing*, *conducting* and *using* assessment respectively.

Planning assessment

The first question in this section is designed to focus attention on the intended relationship of assessment to instruction as well as to the intended learnings, e.g., as reflected in the relevant curriculum standards and frameworks (Turner & Purpura, 2016). Teachers are also asked to reflect on how assessment planning takes account of a range of learner factors including prior language instruction, language background, learning needs and interests (Alonzo, 2013) as well as their social, emotional and psychological characteristics (Iranmanesh, 2014; Norris, 2014).

Finally, as increasing learner responsibility and self-regulation is central to improved learning outcomes (Andrade 2010; Oxford, 2011; Purpura, 2013; Purpura et al, 2014), teachers are asked to consider the level of learner involvement in decisions about when, how and why they will be assessed (Stiggins, 2005; Tarnanen & Huhta, 2011).

Framing assessment

The second element of ‘what teachers do’ invites teachers to reflect on how (or whether) assessment is ‘framed’, or foregrounded, to learners. This becomes particularly important where assessment is embedded in instruction as learners are likely to approach the task differently (e.g., take it more seriously) if they are aware that they are being assessed (Rea-Dickins, 2006).

Conducting assessment

Teachers' understandings of the type of activities constituting CBA tend to be limited to the more planned and formal end of the spectrum. However, given the ubiquity and importance of the more embedded and incidental forms of assessment (Leung, 2014; Purpura et al, 2014; Torrance & Pryor, 1998) the questions in this section are designed to draw attention to the quality of the evidence for assessing learning afforded by routine classroom interactions and 'other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding' (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 8). For example, the initiation-response-feedback (IRF) sequences (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975), the 'DNA' of classroom interactions, are more often used to elicit a series of predetermined responses rather than probe deeper understanding (Torrance & Pryor, 1998). Questions tend to require simple recall rather than higher level processing and provide limited opportunities for learners to 'express the basis of their answers' (Leung, 2014, p. 6). Teachers are also asked to reflect on whether they are monitoring the group's or individual's understanding during these exchanges, which may actually leave the teacher 'out of touch with the understanding of most of the class' (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 144).

Another important point for reflection is the quality and appropriateness of the methods used for the more formal types of assessment (Alonzo, 2013). Sourcing assessment tasks online, from textbooks, or from other teachers, for example, raises issues of task quality and fitness to purpose (e.g., in terms of nature, scope and level) a (Leung, 2014; Wiliam, 2009).

Finally, the questions highlight the need for consistency and reliability of assessment across time as well as in relation to external standards and whether it is conducted in an ethical manner, (e.g., maintaining confidentiality and avoiding inappropriate uses of assessment) (Alonzo, 2013; Popham, 1991).

Using assessment

The final set of questions in this section is designed to heighten teachers' awareness of how assessment-related information is used, which is fundamental to issues of validity and consequential validity (McNamara & Roever, 2006).

There are no questions attached to the first four categories of use (i.e., 'documenting learning', 'grading and reporting' and 'preparing students for high stakes exams') as these represent the most commonly understood purposes for assessment and are taken to be self-evident.

To inform teaching.

This section asks about the most common teaching-related purposes for assessment including *diagnosis* and *placement, planning, and evaluating teaching*, or a combination of these.

To enhance learning, motivation & self-regulation by providing quality feedback.

The questions about feedback practices are designed to reflect the sustained interest over the past two decades in the potential for feedback to improve learning. The first question focuses on the 'target' of feedback, with feedback relating to task performance, including processing and self-regulation, shown to be far more effective than feedback about the student 'as a person' (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 91) and to have a positive effect on goal orientation and motivation (Dweck, 1989; Vispoel & Austin, 1995). The next question focuses on the need for feedback to be explicit and actionable; telling learners how to improve rather than simply what was done wrong (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wiliam, 2009). The final question highlights the finding that the timing of feedback can also have an impact on its effectiveness (although the requirements differ slightly between *task-* versus *process-*focussed feedback) (Hattie & Timperley, 2007 p. 19). Specifically, as feedback needs to be acted upon in order to promote learning (Sadler, 1989), it needs to be timed in a way that gives learners both opportunity and incentive to exploit it.

To manage teaching.

The inclusion of this category was designed to increase teachers' awareness of the common use assessment for management purposes (Brookhart, 2004). This includes using assessment to control or reinforce behaviour (Lewkowicz & Zawadowska-Kittel, 2011) or 'to make... students work harder' (Cheng, 2011, p. 195). The second question highlights the role assessment can play in 'socializing' learners into a new teaching and assessment culture, for example modelling assessment in junior years on the types of high-stakes assessments students will need to take at the end of high school (Cheng, 2011).

Question 2. What do you look for?

The question of '*what teachers look*' for also falls within the '*practice*' dimension of TAL (Fulcher, 2012). Considerations for teachers include whether an appropriate balance of different aspects of the curriculum is represented in assessment (content validity) and whether the skills, knowledge and behaviours comprising the focus of assessment are consistent with the intended learnings (construct relevance). Research has shown that teachers often draw on criteria from outside the official level curriculum

documents, e.g., based on experience and knowledge of the student (Leung, 2014; Leung & Teasdale, 1997a, 1997b). 'Effort' as measured, for example, by completion of homework, classroom participation, and motivation (Tarnanen & Huhta, 2011), is probably the most commonly cited behavioural focus in assessment. However, a number of studies have also noted the use of 'social' considerations, such as 'wellbeing', in assessment decisions (Hill, 2012).

Question 3. What beliefs or understandings do you use?

The questions in this section fall under the '*conceptual*' dimension of TAL (Fulcher, 2012, p. 125). A number of researchers have found evidence suggesting a close correspondence between teachers' beliefs and their teaching and assessment practices (e.g. James, 2006; Leung, 2005, 2014). Yet teachers' beliefs are often implicit and unarticulated (Rea-Dickins, 2008) and based on a combination of intuition and experience rather than any formal theories of learning and cognition (Turner & Purpura, 2016, p. 10). Blair, Moe and Barsnes (2011), for example, documented a widely-held belief amongst Norwegian teachers that 'well-being facilitate[s] learning' and that this was achieved through a focus on 'fun' activities such as games and songs (p. 123).

Key areas for teacher reflection include beliefs and understandings about the subject (or content) area and beliefs about second language learning, teaching and assessment respectively (Hill, 2012; Leung, 2014). Beliefs in relation to the subject area include notions of the target construct. This includes the teacher's beliefs about the nature of language (Leung, 2014) and, in line with the recent focus on the intercultural aspect of language teaching and learning, of the relationship between language, culture and learning (Scarino, 2013, this issue).

Question 4. What are your learners' understandings?

As 'what the learner hears and interprets is not necessarily what the teacher intended to convey' (Black & Wiliam, 2009 p.12) it is important for teachers to explore learners' understandings of different aspects of CBA. Tarnanen and Huhta (2011), for example, identified significant differences in teachers' and students' perceptions regarding the degree and nature of learner agency in assessment (Question 1).

To improve their academic performance students need to have the same understandings of quality and standards as their teachers (Sadler, 1989; Leung, 2014). Hence it is important to explore and address incongruous beliefs and understandings about the intended learning outcomes and success criteria in advance of assessment

(Wiliam, 2009) as these can bias how learners engage with feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2008) (Question 2). Engaging with their understandings of criteria and standards equips students to take greater responsibility for their learning and, potentially, activates them 'as instructional resources for one another' (Wiliam, 2009, p. 31).

Finally, it is also critical for teachers to appreciate that feedback can only promote learning if the learner actually engages with it (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Sadler, 1989) (Question 3). Leung (2014), for example, found postgraduate students' orientations to feedback ranged from unquestioning acceptance to outright rejection.

Question 5. How does the context for teaching shape your assessment practices?

The final part of the framework, relating to context, corresponds with the third dimension of TAL as characterised by Fulcher (2012). These questions in this section ask teachers to reflect on the impact of both local and external contextual factors on their CBA (Tsagari, 2011; Turner & Purpura, 2016).

Local factors include the school assessment culture, teacher (e.g., training and experience) and learner attributes (e.g., first language), and student and parental expectations and beliefs about education and learning (Cheng, 2011). This section also acknowledges the more practical constraints on CBA practices such as the physical classroom environment and class size. (The teachers in Cheng's (2011) study, for example, were expected to manage classes of up to 70 students). Relevant external factors the influence of high-stakes external assessment on local practices (Cheng, 2011).

The final question reflects Fulcher's (2012) suggestion for assessment-literate teachers to reflect on the potential for their assessment practices to impact (positively or negatively) on the broader context as well as on individual students.

Discussion

It could be argued that completion of the various surveys of CBA and TAL could also serve to increase teachers' awareness of their CBA practices. However, the primary motivation for these surveys, which typically comprise a series of checklists, is mapping teachers' practices and/or identifying training needs, leaving respondents none the wiser about the validity of reported practices. For example, Tarnanen & Huhta's (2011) survey asked teachers to identify the most important features addressed in CBA without asking whether these reflected the relevant learning

priorities (p. 135). In contrast, while not its primary purpose, the new framework attempts to be suggestive of good practice. For example, the question, '*What responsibility do learners have for setting learning goals and making decisions about when, how & why they will be assessed?*' is intended to act both as a point for reflection and as a device for drawing teachers' attention to the importance of learner agency in assessment.

Furthermore, the framework is based on a definition of CBA designed to encompass the full spectrum of assessment practices including embedded, incidental forms of assessment, not currently captured in other approaches. This focus is reflected, *inter alia*, in the following questions:

What proportion of assessment is planned & formal and what proportion is unplanned & incidental (*e.g., observation*)?

What evidence of learning is provided by routine classroom activities & interactions (*e.g., class discussions*)?

Who is the main target of informal (incidental) assessment (*the whole class, groups/pairs, individual students*)?

Black, et al. (2002) noted the effectiveness of the teachers in their study despite any formal understanding of the psychology of learning. Indeed, there is growing recognition of the need for researchers to both acknowledge and attempt to learn from teachers' 'native' expertise (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2002; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Tsagari, 2011). Blair et al, (2011, p. 112) and others have lamented the continuing existence of a 'dividing line between practitioners and policy makers', calling for educators, researchers and policy makers to take greater account of teachers' professional experience, perspectives and knowledge (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Leung, 2005, 2014). Some have taken this further to argue for a dialectical relationship between theory and practice whereby theory and practice are seen as mutually informing (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). With its grounding in a study of what teachers actually do in CBA (Hill, 2012), it is hoped the framework could serve not only to help teachers develop greater insight into their existing practices but also validate the skills and experience they themselves bring to the process (Davison, 2004; McKay & Brindley, 2007) thereby for building teacher confidence (Stiggins, 2005).

Finally, whereas the vast majority of studies in second language (as opposed to general education) contexts have focused on CBA in English as a foreign language (EFL) or content and language integrated learning (CLIL) classrooms, the framework also seeks to address issues of CBA as relevant to modern foreign language (MFL) teaching. In the Australian context, for example, MFL teachers need to address the

intercultural, as well as linguistic aspects of language learning in teaching and assessment (see Scarino, this issue).

Conclusion

This paper has described a framework designed as a tool to assist teachers to reflect in a systematic way on their existing assessment practices. The framework attempts to address the full scope of assessment practices, including the less 'visible' types of assessment that take place in the context of routine classroom interactions. It also attempts to guide practice (for example, by emphasising learner involvement and agency and by linking feedback type explicitly to motivation and goal orientation), and to acknowledge the situated nature of CBA as well as the inevitable gap between policy and practice. It is also hoped the framework will enable teachers to develop greater insight into what they already do well and permit a framing of TAL development as building on existing good teacher practice.

Initial applications of the framework include a study of feedback practices which used it to facilitate a collaborative dialogue (following Scarino, 2013) between teacher and researcher (Hill & Ducasse, 2016). Other possible uses of the framework include use as an observational tool for pre-service teachers as well as to facilitate reflection for practising teachers.

In summary, the framework proposed in this paper offers a simple and accessible heuristic, emerging from practice and informed by research, for raising teachers' consciousness about their assessment practices, helping them to 'see', which it is argued, is a necessary condition for developing teacher assessment literacy.

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