Exploring Teachers' Beliefs about Diagnostic Language Assessment Practices in a Large-Scale Assessment Program

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Abstract : In Australia, like other parts of the world, the debate on how to enhance teachers using assessment data to inform teaching and learning of English as an Additional Language (EAL, Australia) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL, United States) have occupied the centre of academic scholarship. Traditionally, this approach was conceptualised as 'Formative Assessment' and, in recent times, 'Assessment for Learning (AfL)'. The central problem is that teacher-made tests are limited in providing data that can inform teaching and learning due to variability of classroom assessments, which are hindered by teachers' characteristics and assessment literacy. To address this concern, scholars in language education and testing have proposed a uniformed large-scale computer-based assessment program to meet the needs of teachers and promote AfL in language education. In Australia, for instance, the Victoria state government commissioned a large-scale project called 'Tools to Enhance Assessment Literacy (TEAL) for Teachers of English as an additional language'. As part of the TEAL project, a tool called 'Reading and Vocabulary assessment for English as an Additional Language (RVEAL)', as a diagnostic language assessment (DLA), was developed by language experts at the University of New South Wales for teachers in Victorian schools to guide EAL pedagogy in the classroom. Therefore, this study aims to provide qualitative evidence for understanding beliefs about the diagnostic language assessment (DLA) among EAL teachers in primary and secondary schools in Victoria, Australia. To realize this goal, this study raises the following questions: (a) How do teachers use large-scale assessment data for diagnostic purposes? (b) What skills do language teachers think are necessary for using assessment data for instruction in the classroom? and (c) What factors, if any, contribute to teachers' beliefs about diagnostic assessment in a large-scale assessment? Semi-structured interview method was used to collect data from at least 15 professional teachers who were selected through a purposeful sampling. The findings from the resulting data analysis (thematic analysis) provide an understanding of teachers' beliefs about DLA in a classroom context and identify how these beliefs are crystallised in language teachers. The discussion shows how the findings can be used to inform professional development processes for language teachers as well as informing important factor of teacher cognition in the pedagogic processes of language assessment. This, hopefully, will help test developers and testing organisations to align the outcome of this study with their test development processes to design assessment that can enhance AfL in language education.

Keywords : beliefs, diagnostic language assessment, English as an additional language, teacher cognition