Teachers' beliefs about assessment and reflective practice: a prod to Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

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Introduction

Being part of the ProPIC Project in 2019 not only enriched my ICT skills, but it also boosted my own self-regulation and made me more autonomous as a teacher, in line with my Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Reflecting upon my teaching practices was not new for me, since I had already been working on my reflective e-portfolio within my master's degree to become a teacher of Spanish as a Foreign Language (SFL). The goal of it was basically to register my evolution by selecting relevant samples and accompanying them with a reflection. At the beginning of my portfolio I showed my initial beliefs about the didactic process, but I did not discuss my beliefs about assessment that much. It was only when I began my master's degree thesis, defended in July 2020, that I started focusing on them. My main objective was to analyze pre-service, in-service and teacher trainers' beliefs about SFL assessment.

The idea to conduct this study came from my first formal contact with assessment. I realized that I had always thought that assessment lay merely in doing an exam, because of my own assessment experiences as a pupil. My perspective shifted notoriously thanks to formal knowledge, and when I was considering options for my thesis this curiosity to explore my colleagues' beliefs about assessment arose. Regarding its interest, beliefs are a small part of teachers' thought that, although not easily accessible, can affect teacher assessment practices. Exploring them can help me understand how teachers conceive this inseparable part of the didactic process, but also delve into my own assessment activity.

Theoretical framework

According to Ramos (2005), beliefs are relatively stable ideas that we held on a certain subject, forged through our personal experience under the influence of a social construction process, grouped forming networks in our minds and of their veracity we are convinced. Moreover, they can act as a filter through which we perceive and interpret the world around us, making our decisions accordingly (Ramos, 2005). There is a discussion on whether beliefs are stable or dynamic, and on their relationship with teacher practices. What we could agree on is that teachers' beliefs about assessment, can have multiple origins: our own assessment experiences as language learners or teachers, the teaching context, etc. Since they may potentially affect the way teachers perceive and conduct assessment, studying them could make us understand certain assessment practices in the classroom and promote our own self-reflection, in consonance with reflective practice and our CPD.

In relation to assessment, we understand it as the systematic gathering of information in order to make decisions regarding the learning process (Weiss, 1972). In our piece of work we used López' (2001) classification of assessment types, according to the implementation time (*initial*, *continuous* or *final assessment*), its main purposes (*formative* or *summative*), the referent taken to assess (*norm-* and *criterion-referenced*) and the assessment agent (*self-*, *peer-* and *hetero-assessment*). Concerning our topic, there is a research gap of studies that either contrast the three types of teacher or focus on teachers' beliefs about SFL assessment. Nonetheless, we found three investigations that because of their methodology could be compared with ours in the discussion.[1]

Methodology and data collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews to collect the informants' beliefs about distinct aspects of assessment, such as self-assessment. We also created a questionnaire to compose the teaching profile of each informant in which we asked, inter alia, their formation in assessment. Data were collected from the end of December 2019 to the end of January 2020, and before that we pilot tested our research instruments. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Our participants were three pre-service teachers,

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[1] Buendía et al., 1999; Sikka et al., 2007; Martínez Reyes, 2013

three in-service teachers and three teacher trainers, whose teaching profiles were quite different, specially concerning their experience in teaching SFL.[2]

Findings and discussion

Our findings showed that all the teachers report changes in their beliefs, either as a result of training or because of their teaching experiences, and that the teaching context and the assessment experiences as language learners were related to their beliefs. Some informants disclosed that training helped them reflecting upon their own assessment practices and experiences as language learners or teachers. In general, we found more similarities in the beliefs of teachers from different groups than within a specific group. Concerning teacher training in assessment, there were similarities in teachers of distinct groups, yet within a specific group each participant offered their own perspective. A third of them emphasized the need to train teachers in assessment, in congruence with Buendía's et al. (1999) and Sikka's et al. (2007) findings. There was also a variety of beliefs about the situation of SFL assessment.

In the two most frequent definitions of *assessment* teachers understood it as either a verification or a way of measuring knowledges or as a guide. In contrast, in Buendía's et al. (1999) and Martínez Reyes' (2013) studies most of the participants believed that assessment consisted merely in assessing students' knowledge. The only assessment tool considered the most adequate by all the teachers was feedback. Moreover, many of them selected essays on the second place, in conformity with Sikka et al. (2007), whose participants were teaching in a high-stakes assessment context. Virtually all the informants believed that assessment should take place at the beginning, during and at the end of the didactic process, and that formative and summative assessment are compatible. Moreover, all nine teachers held that self-assessment and peer-assessment have benefits for the learning process and that the instructor should act as a guide in both modalities. Finally, one of the participants detected a contradiction in his beliefs: he explained that when defining *assessment* his perspective was summative, but when talking about peer-assessment it was formative.

Conclusions

Taking the findings into account, our first conclusion was that informants' assessment experiences, as well as the teaching context and formal knowledge, could cause changes on their beliefs about assessment or could be related to them. However, what teachers articulated could not correspond to their actual beliefs or practices, and at this point reflective practice (RP) stands as a possible solution to this issue. It would be interesting to carry out an investigation based on RP to make teachers think about their beliefs and assessment practices in the classroom (Esteve & Carandell, 2009). With that, we could strengthen teachers' CPD and contribute to RP's main goal: to enhance teachers' pedagogical task.

After carrying out our investigation we were able not only to explore our colleagues' beliefs about assessment, but also to gain an insight into our perspective. We became more aware of, e.g., the fact that each assessment procedure has its purpose. In addition, we consider that it is crucial to take beliefs into account, especially during formative periods, since they evolve along with our teaching skills and experiences and are, therefore, a part of our CPD. In that sense, we encourage teachers to delve into their own beliefs about assessment and share them with their colleagues. Reflecting upon our beliefs and practices is relevant, but expressing them in a portfolio or discussing them with others is fundamental to our development.

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[2] My thesis is now available online under the following link: http://diposit.ub.edu/dspace/handle/2445/172415

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