Teachers’ Beliefs towards Oral Language Assessment in Taiwan Collegiate EFL Classrooms
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Abstract
This study aims to investigate the underlying beliefs of teachers concerning oral language assessment in the classrooms of Taiwan’s colleges and universities.

Three research tools, namely classroom observation, interview and documentation were employed for this study. A series of tape-recorded classroom observations of lessons conducted by the four teachers were carried out. Ethnographic interviews conducted with 13 teachers were employed using a semi-structured approach. Data from each instrument were analysed following the methods of data analysis in qualitative research suggested by Taylor and Bodgan (1998). Then, the results were discussed in relation to the literature.

The findings revealed that the participating teachers believe that they can better capture a holistic view of student oral language ability through the varied use of oral language assessment. Most teachers see assessment as an extension of instruction and as having an important effect on student engagement and motivation. Thus, thinking about how assessments will enhance student learning heavily influence teachers’ decision making. Teachers based their decision regarding assessment practices on what would result in the greatest amount of student engagement and motivation.

Finally, implications are made for EFL oral language assessment practices based on the outcome of this study as well as recommendations for more future research into this.

Keywords: Oral language assessment; teacher beliefs; classroom assessment

1. Introduction

Assessment requirements have been shown to have a powerful influence on students’ learning (Scouller, 1999), but little is known about the beliefs of teachers concerning assessment and how they justify the assessment they use. The focus of most research is a teacher’s preferred instrument for classroom assessment (Salmon-Cox, 1981; Stiggins & Bridgeford, 1985; Mavrommatis, 1997) and a teacher’s grading practice (Impara, Plake & Fager, 1993; Brookhart, 1994). There is little literature which explores the beliefs of teachers that underlies the design, implementation, and evaluation of their oral language assessment practices. In Taiwan few attempts have been made to investigate the relationship between the beliefs of teachers and their classroom assessment. Exceptions are a study by Chang (2002) into the teaching approach of instructors teaching English conversation in the English/Foreign Language Department at universities in Taiwan, and one by Lu (2003) into the assessment beliefs and practices of two university English instructors regarding reading and writing in English. However, no studies that I am aware of, have considered the beliefs
and practices of teachers regarding the nature, function, and use of assessment with a special focus on oral language assessment. This study seeks to do precisely that. Within this inquiry I hope to achieve an understanding of how teachers make sense of their oral language assessment practices. To do this I aim to depict the process of meaning-making, and describe how teachers interpret what they experience in their oral language assessment practices within the context of their classroom and their college. The following served as the general research question: What are the underlying beliefs of teachers concerning oral language assessment (OLA)?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework I adopted underpins this study both from the point of view of understanding beliefs as well as understanding the socially constituted nature of assessment processes and practices. Following Gonzalez (1997), to understand the beliefs of teachers, a sociocultural framework is assumed in which knowledge is seen as being constructed and mediated within a sociocultural context.

Recent discussions on issues relating to assessment (Black & William, 1998a) have highlighted the fact that all assessment processes are fundamentally social in character, i.e., they take place in social settings, conducted by, on and for social actors. Classroom-based assessment is not an objective, technical activity, but rather, one that is embedded in the teaching and learning cycle, and is situated in the local school context. Assuming a socio-cultural framework, I see oral language assessment as being embedded in classroom practices, but in classrooms that are not isolated and decontextualized units. This assumes that teachers are professionals—not autonomous individuals, and that they are social actors whose assessment decisions are grounded in complexity and conflict. The use of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory serves to explore the contested and complex nature of classroom-based oral language assessment.

Sociocultural theory emphasizes that learning takes place within a cultural, social, and historical context, and it provides a framework for understanding the “underlying assumptions of a given social context”, such as those behind minority student learning or teacher-student interactions in the classroom (Rueda, Gallego, and Moll, 2000). Differences between the sociocultural experiences of the student and the teacher can be disruptive to the learning process (Valdes, 1997). Stefanakis (1998) found that teachers bring their own sociocultural lens to teaching, and that the judgements of teachers in assessment are influential in determining the course of a student’s academic and placement outcomes. A sociocultural approach to assessment can reveal whether teachers are providing an “interface”
between their students’ home knowledge/cultural concepts and classroom instruction, which would make instruction more effective (Gallimore and Tharp, 1990).

Within the framework of sociocultural theory, I see assessment as an interactive, dynamic and collaborative activity. Rather than being external and formal in its implementation, it should be integral to the teaching process and embedded in the social and cultural life of the classroom. Such an approach is constructive and enabling because of its focus on assessing the process of learning, its attempt to elicit elaborate performance, and its emphasis on collaborative activity, whether the collaboration is with the teacher or a group of peers.

2.2 Teacher Beliefs about Assessment

2.2.1 Working definition of teacher beliefs

Research on teachers’ beliefs constitutes the latest in the studies on teachers’ cognitions that have flourished over the past two decades. In an overview of the research, Pajares (1992) points out that terms such as beliefs, values, attitudes, judgements, opinions, ideologies, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, perceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, personal theories, and perspectives are frequently being used almost interchangeably.

Despite the different nuances in the meaning of these terms, they do share a common premise: “a teacher’s cognitive and other behaviours are guided by, and made sense of, in relation to a personally held system of beliefs, values, and principles” (Clark & Peterson, 1986:287).

In this study the beliefs of EFL teachers can be understood by the following assumptions:

- EFL teachers’ beliefs are not detached from or unconnected to a broader belief system (Richards, et al., 1992).
- EFL teachers’ beliefs about language, language learning, and their roles in a language classroom constitute sub-sets of their global sets of educational beliefs (Gimenez, 1994).
- The history of teachers as learners is an important component of their pedagogical theories. The beliefs of teachers can best be understood by examining their experiences, (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). In this sense, teachers’ beliefs are formulated as a result of their experiences and interaction with their social and cultural context.
- Teachers’ beliefs strongly affect their behaviours (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992).

2.2.2 Teachers’ beliefs about assessment

There are very few studies concerning the manner in which teachers assess their students’ foreign language skills while they are in the process of teaching and learning. The mental ‘steps’ a teacher takes when assessing a student’s progress remain largely unexplored. Assessment requirements have been shown to have a powerful influence on students’
learning (Scouller, 1999), yet little is know about the beliefs of EFL teachers regarding assessment, and how they justify the assessment method they use. Exceptions include studies by Teasdale and Leung (2000) whose research was linked to teacher assessment of spoken English as an additional language in mainstream education classrooms, and in particular, on the need to clarify the epistemological bases of different types of assessment.

Shepard (1991) interviewed 50 directors of educational testing in the United States and reported that their beliefs about the relationship between testing and the school curriculum could be distributed along a bipolar continuum. At one extreme were beliefs that teaching-to-the-test is appropriate because the test is referenced to the desired achievement criteria. At the other extreme were beliefs that testing should monitor but not drive the curriculum. Based mainly on evidence from the teaching-to-the-test followers, Shepard conjectured that differences in beliefs about the role of assessment were attributable to differences in the implicit theories of learning.

Wilson and Wineburg (1993) described the approaches adopted by two history teachers for three tasks: assessment of students’ essays, the use of documentary materials in teaching, and analysis of a textbook with a view to its adoption. The results indicated that the two teachers differed in several aspects: (a) in beliefs about what teaching comprises; (b) in their theories of learning; (c) in their beliefs about the nature of historical knowledge as well as their beliefs about the importance of historical enquiry; (d) in the knowledge valued in essays; and (e) in their knowledge about how curriculum resources can be used. Wilson and Wineburg’s (1993) study did suggest that assessment practices may be related to beliefs about the knowledge that students should acquire as well as to beliefs about the way such knowledge should be taught and learned.

In the context of a university level language course, Spence-Brown (2001: 463) investigated the construct of authenticity in an assessment activity designed to “optimise authenticity”. Through interviews with students she identified a range of factors that comprised the authenticity of learning tasks when used for the purpose of assessment, leading her to the conclusion that authenticity must be viewed in terms of an activity as well as a function of its design. Edelenbos and Kubanek-German (2004) introduced the notion of “diagnostic competence” and highlighted what had been taken for granted or not considered at all, i.e. the skills required for and demonstrated by teachers when assessing the language abilities of their learners. Their study reflects the growing concern with teacher based assessment, which is to understand the means by which teachers assess the English language development of their students. Some studies indicate that teachers find themselves at the confluence of different assessment practices: sometimes torn between their roles as facilitator and monitor of language development and that of assessor and judge of language performance as an achievement (Brindley, 2001; McNamara, 2001; Rea-Dickins, 2001; Arkoudis & O’Loughlin, 2004).
Recently, studies investigating classroom-based assessment practices within the ESL/EFL school contexts have begun to appear. For example, Pelly & Allison (2000) explored and characterized an important insider perspective that of primary school teachers, on the assessment of the use of English language in Singapore, and the impact of their assessment on their teaching experiences. A review of related literature focuses on the importance of research into teachers’ views on curriculum and assessment issues, in addition to, and in light of, their own classroom experiences. This exploratory study elicited the views of teachers on assessment in the form of questionnaire responses (n=58) and semi-structured in-depth interviews with four participants. The findings indicated that participating teachers are strongly aware of the prevailing examination culture; that they are not against formal tests in principle, but that they see the need to supplement them with other kinds of assessment; and that they are markedly divided and uncertain in their views of the efficacy of current tests.

Cumming (2001) interviewed 48 highly experienced ESL/EFL teachers about their writing assessments, and he found that the teachers’ conceptualization of student assessment varied depending on whether the courses were for general or specific purpose for learning English. His study indicated a clear linkage of instructional and assessment purposes in relation to the teachers’ assessment practices.

In Taiwan, Lu (2003) investigated the beliefs and practice of assessment by two university instructors of English. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and other related documents. The results showed that there was a high consistency and a very slight inconsistency between the instructors’ beliefs and their assessment practices. These beliefs could not be successfully realized in the classroom due to several constraints, including lack of time, institutional requirements, negative suggestions from colleagues, and others. In the selection of coping strategies in face of constraints, both instructors followed two general principles: the observance of the instructional schedule and the observance of course objectives. While exploring the instructors’ grading practices, it showed that the two instructors used many objective and subjective instruments to assess students in the classroom. In addition to students’ academic performance, they took into account students’ non-academic performance such as efforts, improvements, and participation in class when grading.

The process of making an assessment begins with the construction of a reality: “Reality construction is the product of meaning making shaped by the traditions and by a culture’s toolkit of ways of thoughts” (Bruner, 1996:19). The teacher’s cultural toolkit in this case will contain a range of criteria for success along with a conception of which aspects of the work are to be taken into account and which are to be left out.

Davison’s (2004) research focused on the beliefs of teachers and their reported understanding of assessment within different national contexts (Hong Kong and Australia).
She investigated how teachers make their assessment decisions, which enabled her to posit different teacher assessment orientations. Her research highlights the importance of creating opportunities for teacher interaction about assessment issues through which teachers not only develop a greater understanding of particular assessment frameworks and criteria, but also explore their often implicit constructs and interpretations of learner performance. The finding of this study suggests a middle ground and an alternative approach to teacher-based assessments by teachers that take into account not only the common assessment criteria and community constructs, but also include the learner and the context.

Finally, Cheng, Rogers and Hu (2004) presented a report of some of their findings from a comparative survey of teacher assessment practices in three different tertiary institutional contexts: Canada, Hong Kong, and China. Their research demonstrated the range of procedures that teachers reportedly use when making decisions about their students’ language abilities, and it reinforces some of the complexities at play. Cheng et al. show the range of information that is captured through a survey, but they also identify its limitations and the need to engage with a multi-layered approach. In this regard it is my belief that ethnographic studies have considerable potential for elucidating the means by which teachers make assessment decisions and implement assessments in their classroom.

The teacher as the assessor both engages with and creates discourse of assessment at different levels: the individual teacher(s), the cultural context of the classroom, at professional and institutional levels, all of which, in turn, reflect the different political as well as social contexts in which teachers work. These interactions may be seen as potentially productive and facilitative as well as inhibiting effective classroom assessment.

2.3 Classroom-based oral language assessment

The way we see learning taking place is crucial to how we construe teaching as an activity, but it is also crucial to how we construe assessment. There is a growing realisation that assessment is not an isolated activity operating independently of, and therefore without impact on, teaching. On the contrary, teaching, learning and assessment are inextricably interrelated. However, Cheng, Rogers & Hu (2004) point out that research on the assessment practices of ESL/EFL teachers and their instructions is somewhat limited. The role of the teacher-assessor in classroom-based oral language assessment has received relatively little attention in the research literature on English language education.

2.3.1 Definitions of classroom assessment

Airasian (1991) defines classroom assessment as “all the processes used by teachers for collecting information and for making interpretations and decisions based on this information on a daily basis in the classroom in order to improve teaching and learning” (cited in
Mavrommatis, 1997:381). In this sense, what teachers do in classroom assessment is to make
decisions in the hope of facilitating learning and teaching. Herman and Aschbacher and
Winters (1992) point out that the decisions of teachers based on the information provided by
classroom assessment include “what students have learned, what grades are deserved,
whether students should pass on to the next grade, what groups they should be assigned to,
what help they need, what areas of classroom instruction need revamping, where the school
curriculum needs bolstering, and so forth” (p.95). Stiggins (1991) states that classroom
assessments serve at least three sets of purposes. First, it serves as a tool for making informed
decisions, and these decisions include diagnosing students’ needs, grouping students for
instructions, and assigning grades, etc. Second, it serves as a teaching tool. For example,
through classroom assessment, teachers can communicate their expectations of a student’s
performance with that student, and provide students with a chance to practice, and have them
engage in self-or peer-evaluation so as to help them become better performers. Third, it
serves as a tool of classroom management and for keeping students in line (Stiggins, 1991).
From these definitions and the uses of classroom assessment, we can see that classroom
assessment is not simply assigning a grade, and that it permeates all stages of instruction
(Brookhart, 1997). The above confirms that classroom observation is a useful way to capture
the complexity of the OLA practices of teachers.

2.3.2 Dimensions of classroom assessment

Educational assessments fall into two general categories, summative assessment and
formative assessment. Summative assessment was defined by Rolfe and McPherson (1995) as
“mandatory, formal, and given at the end of a prescribed period of instruction” (p.837). They
then went on to indicate that a summative assessment requires students to demonstrate their
“sum” of knowledge acquired over a period of time. Biggs (1998) however, suggests that a
summative assessment should also be seen as formative. That is, used as a learning tool, not
simply viewed as the final part of the learning cycle for students.

The second category of educational assessment is formative assessment. A search of the
literature revealed a plethora of terms and methods used to indicate the activity of measuring
student learning that provides feedback to students during the learning cycle. Some of those
terms include: classroom assessment (Brookhart, 1997; Shepard, 2000), embedded
assessment (Gallagher, 2000), formative evaluation (Fuchs, 1995), and alternative assessment
(Chen & Martin, 2000). The defining difference in summative and formative assessments is
that a formative assessment in its purest form is an assessment that occurs during learning,
provides non-judgmental feedback to students, and helps narrow the gap between what a
student knows and what the intended objectives of learning are (Black & William, 1998a,
1998b). The above discussions indicate to me that the scope of my classroom observations
should not be limited to the summative ones. Therefore assessment in this study refers to both
summative and formative assessment which, following Stiggins (2002), can be seen as assessment of learning and assessment for learning.

2.3.3 The definition of oral language assessment

Lado (1961:239) wrote: “…testing the ability to speak a foreign language is perhaps the least developed and the least practiced in the language testing field”. He argued that this was because of “a clear lack of understanding of what constitutes speaking ability or oral production”. He proposed the “trait theory” approach to solve the problem of speaking construct under-definition. However, recently there has been a tendency to acknowledge that it may be more appropriate to include contextual factors in the construct definition (Chapelle, 1999). Fulcher (2003) points out that the test purpose should also inform the definition of the construct, its range and generalisability. That is to say, since no operational construct definition can ever capture the richness of what happens in a process as complex as human communication, the constructs we use in the testing of speaking should be those which are useful for the testing purpose. Fulcher (2003) also points out that since there is little methodological research that we can draw upon to make any firm statements about the effectiveness of any particular approach or technique in how best to test speaking, it is important to define the constructs for speaking tests in ways that are relevant and meaningful for learners. The important implication for research is that it is necessary to establish the purpose why teachers undertake language assessments.

2.3.4 Difficulties in testing oral language

Generally speaking, literature suggests that testing oral ability is more challenging than testing other skills for three main reasons. First, because testing speaking has an intrinsically subjective nature, achieving reliability in speaking tests is difficult (Alderson, Chapham & Wall, 1995, Brown & Hudson, 2002; Carroll & Hall, 1985; Hughes, 1989; Weir, 1990). The problematic nature of reliability in oral assessment may stem from inconsistencies among raters; yet using more than one rater contributes to the reliability of oral ability testing. To ensure the reliability of oral assessment, asking two or more raters to assess the same student performances and combine the grades they assigned to the same student is seen as advisable (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown & Hudson, 2002; Genesee & Upshur, 1996; Hughes, 1989; Madsen & Jones, 1981; Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998; Underhill, 1987; Weir, 1990).

Second, rating scales used for assessing oral performance present difficulties related to the number and clarity of the categories in the scale. As Davies et al. (1999) explain, a rating scale is a framework that serves as a “scale for the description of language proficiency consisting of a series of constructed levels against which a language learner’s performance is judged” (p.53). In order to minimize the possibility of different interpretations of scale
descriptors by different raters (Alderson, et al., 1995), language categories should be clearly defined. Moreover, the categories included in a rating scale and the different weights awarded to different categories should depend on which categories are regarded as relatively more important than the others according to a particular language program (Brown, 1995; Carroll & Hall, 1985; Hughes, 1989; Underhill, 1987). In assessing oral performance, establishing a clear assessment procedure and using explicit criteria are essential to increased reliability (Hughes, 1989; Underhill, 1987; Weir, 1995).

Third, components of oral ability itself are not defined clearly (Hughes, 2002; Madsen, 1983), which leads to problems in choosing components to measure, and using the test to provide feedback to students. When designing oral assessment tasks, it is essential that each speaking test should have a clear purpose (Alderson et al., 1995; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown, 1995; Carroll & Hall, 1985; Cohen, 1994; 2001; Hughes 1989; Weir, 1995); therefore, the nature of the assessment criteria to be used depends on the purpose of a test. Among the general purposes of assessment, such as assessing progress, proficiency, and achievement, three common assessment purposes in speaking tests are important in this study, namely, distinguishing among strong and weak students, giving instructors feedback on the effectiveness of their instruction, and giving students feedback on their learning process. Brown (1995) asserts that tests whose contents are the main language focus in language classes let raters receive feedback on effectiveness of their instruction and give their students feedback on their learning process. Thus, raters are likely to find rating scale categories whose objectives are taught in their classes more assessable, and therefore more important than those objectives that do not reflect course content. Moreover, assessment of oral ability can be negatively affected by the discrepancy between test content and instruction. That is to say, instruction and tests should be in harmony with each other, and assessment criteria should be incorporated into the syllabus and considered in lesson planning procedures (Hughes, 2002; O’Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996).

Having outlined the themes and issues from the literature that frame this study of teachers’ beliefs and practices towards oral language assessment in EFL classroom in Taiwan, the following section will describe this study’s methodology, and report on the methods selected for data collection and analysis.

3. Methodology

The selected methodology for this study is guided by a set of general principles and theoretical constructs that are grounded in the ethnographic approach. Ethnography is a research method whereby the researcher attempts to enter the culture of a particular group, and reports on its activities and values from the inside. Describing a culture in its own cultural terms and from the point of view of the insider dominates early ethnographic field
studies. This has been termed an emic approach, in contrast to an etic one. As Damen (1987:60) states, an emic approach encourages closer listening to and rejection of foregone ethnocentric interpretations, classifications, and evaluations of different behaviour, verbal and nonverbal. According to Dufon (2002), ethnographic research focuses on the behaviours (including the linguistic behaviours) of the members of a particular community, by studying them in naturally occurring, ongoing settings, typically while they participate in mundane day-to-day events.

To understand my reasons for employing an ethnographic approach as the main research structure in this study, it is necessary to clarify my own perspective on oral language assessment. Greene and Hunter (1993) are among those who define the EFL classroom as a special culture:

*If ‘culture’ can be loosely defined as a particular system of actions and assumptions within a social setting, the oral language learning and teaching which occur within an EFL classroom is a culture.* (Greene and Hunter, 1993:9)

Following Greene and Hunter’s definition of the EFL classroom, I treat oral language assessment as an aspect or an element of the EFL classroom culture.

One of the important components of the ethnographic approach is the emphasis on “producing the work of describing culture” (Spradley, 1979: 6). Such an approach enables me to gain insight into different participants’ beliefs and practices towards oral language assessment in their own terms, and to work towards situational (Elliott, 1993) or local (Freeman, 2000; Tudor, 2002) understandings.

### 4.1 The research methods

Making sense of teachers’ beliefs and practices towards oral language assessment was the most critical part of this research. Classroom observations, interviews, and field notes were the most important and perhaps the most effective methods of gaining a deeper understanding of the social and educational practices being studied. Information gathered using these methods provided me with evidence and insights regarding teachers’ assessment practices and their beliefs. These in turn produced two kinds of data; namely quotations and descriptions, resulting in one product: narrative description.

### 4.2 The participants

There are two types of participants in this study: the teachers I observed, and the teachers I interviewed. Purposive sampling (Putton, 1990) was utilized to locate informants who were willing to converse about their experiences with oral language assessment practices. Table 1 outlines the backgrounds of the four teacher participants. The 9 interviewees in this study are my colleagues at Nightingale University, my former MA classmates, or my college classmates; three males and six females. Five out the 9 interviewees teach at Nightingale
University, with the rest teaching in other universities. For detailed information on the interviewees see Appendix 1.

Table 1. Backgrounds of teachers whom I observed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Pseudonym/ Abbreviation in interview excerpts)</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Courses Taught</th>
<th>Years of teaching English</th>
<th>Years of Teaching English Conversation</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steve (T9)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Ph. D in Psychology</td>
<td>*English Conversation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*English Prose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*English Speech</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Research Methodology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam (T13)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M.A. in Education</td>
<td>*English Conversation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*English Prose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy (T12)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>M.A. in English Literature</td>
<td>*English Conversation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*English Grammar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*General English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn (T10)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M.A. in Applied Linguistics</td>
<td>*English Conversation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*English Grammar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Process of Data Collection

Qualitative research procedures (Bogdan and Bilken, 1998; van Lier, 1988) were used in both the data collection and analysis of the data. The processes adopted in collecting the data were as follows:

(1) A series of tape-recorded classroom observations of lessons conducted by the four teachers were carried out. Table 2 outlines the schedule for classroom observations of the four instructors.

(2) A descriptive account of the classroom observation for each lesson was then written.

(3) Ethnographic interviews were employed using a semi-structured approach. In this study, the interview agenda was developed after an initial review of the literature and classroom observations. As is suggested by the literature, how teachers assess students and how they interpret the results of assessment are influenced by their beliefs about language, learning, and the subject matter (Brookhart, 1997; Rueda & Garcia, 1994; Genesee & Upshur, 1996), and these aspects were the focus of the interviews. Thus, to have a holistic understanding of teachers’ beliefs and oral language assessment practices, their beliefs about
language, language learning, and the subject matter should be explored. Appendix 2 shows a list of the preliminary questions employed in the interviews for this study.

(4) The teachers were asked to watch the video recording and to comment on certain or significant events which had occurred during their classroom instructions with a view to exploring the teachers’ interactive decision-making in their improvisational teaching performance with specific reference to oral assessment.

Data collection for this study occurred over two months, from the end of April 2003 to the end of June 2003. Throughout the process, and afterwards, I continued to consult with the participants whenever questions arose.

Table 2. The Schedule for Classroom observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Period of observation</th>
<th>Amount of observation per week</th>
<th>Total amount of observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Year one 4-year University Programme</td>
<td>April 30-June 24</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>27 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivey</td>
<td>Year two 5-Year Junior College Programme</td>
<td>May 5-June 19</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Year four 5-year Junior College Programme</td>
<td>May 5-June 18</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>Year three 2-year University Programme</td>
<td>May 2-May 15</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
<td>6 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Setting

The research site of this study was a private university of technology in Kaohsiung county, Taiwan: Nightingale University (a pseudonym). Nightingale University was chosen as a research site for two reasons. First, it was closely related to my research interest and was a rich source of information. It had a Department of Foreign Languages, in which oral language assessment is a requirement in English conversation classes. Generally speaking, English conversation classes are only taught in English major departments in Taiwan. The second reason for selecting Nightingale University was that, compared to other universities of technology in Taiwan, the status of this university and the quality of students were regarded as average, meaning that it was more likely to represent the population of the universities of technology in Taiwan in terms of the teaching of English conversation. Table 3 below provides information about the classes I observed.
Table 3. Information about the classes I observed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Class 1</th>
<th>Class 2</th>
<th>Class 3</th>
<th>Class 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student number</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average student age</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of period (minutes)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Location</td>
<td>F Building Floor 4</td>
<td>F Building Floor 5</td>
<td>F Building Floor 2</td>
<td>B Building Floor 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom facilities</td>
<td>2 TVs, VCR, CD/cassette player</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4 Data Analysis

In the present study, the data for analysis includes the transcriptions of the interviews with the instructors, classroom observations, instructors’ assessment practices, and other related documents including the textbooks, syllabi, and the instructors’ exam sheets. These were analysed following the methods of data analysis in qualitative research as suggested by Taylor and Bodgan (1998).

- Data presentation

Data presented in this thesis were primarily derived from the teachers as they were the main participants, and the main concern was to understand their beliefs and practices towards oral language assessment. However, embedded within the teachers’ data was data from observations and documentary sources. I decided to let the data speak for themselves, through the voices of the teachers. These are in the form of quotes, where the language used by the teachers was retained in its original form. However, in cases where certain points needed clarification, these were included in the quotes by using squared brackets [ ]. The designation of the data (participating teacher, date of the data collected, type of transcript) refers to relevant information concerning the data. For example, (T1, 280503, interview transcript) stands for the excerpt came from the interview with T1 on 28th of May, 2003.

5. Data Analysis & Discussion

In this section I present the analysis of the three data sources (i.e. interviews, classroom observations, and documents) as well as a critical discussion. The organisation follows the pattern: research question, results, sample quotations, and discussion. The assessment in the discussion and analysis refers to both formative and summative assessment.

5.1 What are the underlying beliefs of teachers concerning OLA?

Six main themes emerged from the data generated from interviews and observations regarding teachers’ beliefs concerning oral language assessment. They are: 1) language
learning 2) orientations and purposes of assessment practices, 3) decision making rationale, 4) grading practice, 5) use of the result gained from assessment, 6) their roles in oral language assessment.

5.2 Teachers’ beliefs regarding language learning

How teachers see learning taking place is crucial to how they construe teaching as an activity. It is also crucial to know how they construe assessment. General beliefs about language learning will impact on attitudes and practices for oral language assessment. Thus in the interviews I asked the teachers “In general, how is language best learnt?” Analysis of the data shows a range of beliefs about language learning. Three categories represent their first reaction to this question: (a) the role of authentic input in the learning of language, (b) the role of contextualization in the learning of language, and (c) the role of age in the learning of language.

There were similarities and differences in the participants’ views of authentic language input. Beliefs were also expressed in favour of the view that learning a second /foreign language is the same as the mother tongue acquisition, i.e. that it can be acquired naturally through direct exposure and contact with native speakers of the target language. There is evidence of this belief in the following excerpt:

...they missed a great opportunity, because they have a full semester with a native speaker, all they have to do is sit there and listen and pay attention. That’s the main thing they have to do. That’s more important than anything else they think they have to do... If you don’t understand, just listen harder and pay attention because your mind is working all the time (T5, 030603, interview).

T5 believed that when students notice the gap between their own language and that of native speakers, improvements and learning occur.

Living with native speakers of the target language is also believed to be of prime importance.

I started my English learning in junior high school. Then I got to like it very much. I think it was because there was a foreigner living next door and my sister studied in Wen Tsao [a college of languages in southern Taiwan] , this all sort of influenced me to some extent I guess (T10, 120603, interview).

It was also believed that use of authentic materials help to achieve students’ attraction to the target language and hence makes the learning of the target language an unconscious process. The following extract illustrates this:

I would suggest the department should have more video tapes related to our teaching materials. I hope we can have a resource centre. We can then arrange to use these materials and supplements according to the topics we are teaching, I think it would be quite helpful for
Beliefs also were expressed in support of the role of contextualization in the learning of a language. Here is one response characteristic of this belief:

I told them the reason I wanted them to do role-play was because we don’t have the authentic environment; I hoped that this could help them to become involved in different situations and learn how to express themselves and communicate with others (T12, 120603, interview).

Teachers believed that relating the learning input to students’ experience motivates them. One of the teachers would ask his students about their own life experience and conduct a free-style dialogue based on information-gap questions.

A common belief among the teachers was that the younger the student, the better s/he was in learning the language. In support for the early age argument, the following anecdotal evidence was related:

It was in grade one in elementary school when I first learned English. You can say I started it quite early. I felt my first English teacher was quite good because his pronunciation was very good. Although I just learned English for one summer, I felt that this teacher had a great influence on me (T12, 150503, interview).

Another teacher also pointed out that learning a language at an early age influences the students’ proficiency in it.

It probably depends on the age of learners. Certainly, young learners are going to be able to pick up the language and adults have more difficulties to become native speakers unless they work really hard. You kind of have to accept that (T3, 130603, interview)

**Discussion of 5.2**

**Contextualization**

Contextualization is a basic premise in communicative language teaching (Finnocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983). Some teachers in the interviews pointed out the importance of contextualization in language learning and teaching. They believed that when the language of ideas is comprehensible, i.e., delivered in graphical, oral, and tactile-kinaesthetic sensitive ways, learning increases. Their views emphasize the importance of contextualizing these activities in the real world. In the contextualization stage, learners are provided with information about the situation and the nature of the text (e.g. a travel brochure). This gives learners a context from which they can relate to past experiences they have encountered with this type of text.

**The younger-is-better hypothesis**
Regarding language learning, a number of participants seemed to take a younger-is-better position and believed that the earlier children begin to learn a second language, the better. However, at least with regard to school setting, the research literature does not support this view (e.g. Nikolov, 2000). Pronunciation is one aspect of language learning where the younger-is-better hypothesis may have validity. A number of studies have found that the younger one begins to learn a second language, the more native-like the accent one develops in that language (Long, 1990; DeKeyser, 2000). This may be because pronunciation involves motor patterns that become fossilized in the first language and are difficult to alter after a certain age because of the nature of the neurophysiologic mechanisms involved. It may also be that we do not understand very well how to teach phonology in a second language.

Aside from the question of pronunciation, however, the younger-is-better hypothesis does not have strong empirical support in school contexts. The research suggests that younger children do not necessarily have an advantage over older children and, because of their cognitive and experiential limitations when compared to older children, other things being equal, are actually at a disadvantage in how quickly they learn a second language.

5.3 Orientations and purposes of oral language assessment practice

There are two orientations to oral language assessment practice evident in my data. The first relates to assessing the students’ ability to reproduce information presented in lectures and textbooks. Underpinning this orientation are the beliefs that there is established knowledge and procedures which the teacher provides (in class and/or through texts) and which students must be able to reproduce. Correct reproduction and straightforward use of course material are equated with understanding. Assessment aims to discover whether the student knows, understands or can do a predetermined thing.

The second involves assessing students’ ability to integrate, transform and use knowledge purposefully. The key to this orientation is the belief that students have to develop their own understanding by transforming and reorganizing established knowledge and procedures, and use it to achieve specific purposes. What is assessed is the students’ ability to use knowledge in open-ended situations. Assessment is believed to be a means of supporting students’ learning, and is almost seamlessly integrated with teaching. Assessment aims to discover what the students knows, understands or can do.

The following two examples are presented to demonstrate how the abstracted and generalized descriptions of the two orientations are manifested in practice. They are intended to show, not only how closely the beliefs are interrelated, but also how different orientations result in different assessment practices. The responses of all participants fall into these two categories.

Example (a):
Teacher 8 (a Taiwanese male teacher) teaches English conversation to 1st year and 2nd year university classes. His syllabus basically follows the textbook. The types of assessment tasks he implements are question and answer, audio recording (individual’s responses to teacher’s questions in the lab), and written exam. Teacher 8 views students’ ability to speak English accurately as a sign that they have learned and will be able to use the language: ‘I don’t want to hear fluent bad English; I prefer to hear slow and correct English, because fluency can come later…’ He sets examination questions deliberately to include both recall and what he sees as ‘comprehension’ questions. His rationale for doing this is that assessment tasks should match students’ preferences for different approaches to learning: “…you have a blend of an oral exam with maybe a written exam. It’s difficult to test vocabulary in the speaking test. Even though I already test them the structures in speaking, just give some students a chance to sometimes they do know what it is but they can’t use it or they forgot or come to exam time they crack. This is giving them a second chance.” Although Teacher 8 uses different types of assessment tasks to assess students orally, he only tests the students’ ability to reproduce how all these tasks were covered in the textbook. Because he equates doing well in exams with accuracy/reproduction, and he expects more effort and longer time spent doing practice to result in better exam performance: “…if they can basically speak in a correct manner, then just with more practice they can become fluent.”

Example (b):

T13 (an American male teacher) teaches English conversation to year 4 junior college classes. Underpinning his orientation to assessment and his assessment practice is his perception of language as an applied discipline. Consistent with this perception he believes that what should be assessed in conversation class is the students’ ability to communicate with others. Accordingly, the assessment tasks he prefers involve question and answer, pair work, role play, interview, dramatization, participation and observation. He uses assessment as a tool, both for identifying students’ understanding of language and for bringing about change: ‘…I am looking at their flow, at their thought process in English’. T13 sets assessment tasks which are holistic and require students to deal with a project, not discrete skills: ‘They are asked to have a 15 or 20 minutes conversation based on one of three things, one being an open topic, two: on their summer plan, and three: the video they have watched in class. So they have a couple of topics they can choose from, and then they have to make an audiotape for me’. Students are thus expected to integrate knowledge gained from many sources with their own ideas, and to produce a unique piece of work. There are no ready-made answers to the tasks set by Teacher 13. He assesses students’ ability to reorganize, transform and apply their knowledge to produce a tape. Consistent with his belief that the process of learning is at least as important as the midterm and final exams, he assesses students’ in-class performance: “I think every day is an assessment, each day I listen
and watch. If they are not performing I will know. I watch them, I know who my slackers are, who my workers are."

After the initial analysis, the purposes of assessment are organized into three underlying constructs: student-centred, instruction-based, and administration-based assessment purposes. Table 4 sets out the result of the question about the purpose of oral language assessment.

Most accounts of assessment during the interviews focus on the ongoing, formative assessment of students’ oral performance and the grading of it. Similarly, six teachers described intricate ways of integrating assessment with English conversation classes.

This concern was voiced particularly by those teachers who focused intently on the individual development of students. The following is an illustrative excerpt:

*I think assessments help students stay focused and motivated. They are useful in that they help students stay focused on their task, and it tells them the consequences of what they are doing. It is an individualized process, focused on problems, but aimed at getting students to self-direct learning in the future. I think assessment is to let students know where they are at, and where they need to go. And if they’re already there, it makes me think of how can I push them a little bit further. I do not view assessment merely “as a pass or a fail”, assessment is ongoing; it’s a continual process of looking at where the students are and where they need to go. It will tell me where the students are at already, and where they need to move to next (T13, 160603, interview)*

This intense focus on individual students seemed to prompt teachers to use formative assessment as a basis for record-keeping (for individual students) and instructional planning (for a group of students). The following is an illustrative example:

*After the assessment I tell students the results and my suggestions individually. I put the record into each student’s personal file, to see if they make progress along the way, and I use it for planning my teaching (T7, 090703, interview).*

Seven teachers viewed assessment as a tool to determine if students had achieved the outcomes. For example:

*I think assessment is a measurement of growth, that is, have they learned anything? Have they accomplished anything? Have they figured out anything? Have they shown some progress in some area? (T1, 190503, interview)*

One teacher pointed out that the purpose of assessment had evolved beyond numbers to being an element that helped both students and teachers plan what they were doing. The following is an illustrative example:

*When I started out, everything had to be in numbers, and it was based on a percent, and you weren’t really a participant of what was going on per se... Assessment has become more and more an element. And if I embrace it, rather than avoid it, it seems to be very helpful to both the students and to myself, to plan where I am going, what I am*
What emerged with T6 as the strongest feeling about assessment was the necessity to find a way to legitimize assessing as a tool for learning rather than for numbers.

### Table 4.
The purpose of oral language assessment as perceived by teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Total mentions *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student centred</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observe information on my students’ progress</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide feedback to my students as they progress through the course</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnose strengths and weaknesses in my students</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determine final grades for my students</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivate my students to learn</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make my students work harder</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instruction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan my instruction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnose strengths and weaknesses in my own teaching and instruction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administration</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide information to the central administration</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(* N.B. As the teachers often made multiple responses to each question, the number reported in the table above can add to more than the number of respondents)

Three teachers believed that the purpose of assessment was to give them something on which to reflect, some sort of unbiased perspective. For example, one teacher said:

*Assessment usually, for me, is a form where I can give students feedback on what they have just accomplished, what they have learned, what they have shown me they can do. That for me is assessment. Meanwhile, I also rely on assessment to provide the students with clear objectives (T8, 260603, interview).*

In addition, they indicated that the purpose of assessment is to diagnose their own instruction and find out their strengths and weaknesses.

*When I get the results of the assessment, I want to know if a student’s poor performance was simply due to the lack of efforts or if he/she couldn’t understand my instruction. If it’s the latter one, then I will review my instruction and try to find another way to deliver my instruction (T2, 270603, interview).*
This view is congruent with that of Bostwick and Gakuen (1995) in which they noted that the purpose of assessment can help teachers focus their instruction and provide feedback to evaluate their instruction.

Discussion of: “Orientations and purposes of oral language assessment practice”

The orientations I have described range from assessing students’ ability to reproduce information presented in lectures and textbooks to assessing students’ ability to reproduce structured knowledge and apply it to modified situations. There are points of similarity in the available literature. For example, these two extremes seem to be in line with the two history teachers described by Wilson and Wineburg (1993). There are also certain similarities with the concepts as reported by Trigwell et al. (2001).

Teachers who hold the first orientation view knowledge as a collection of important ‘bits’ of information and discrete procedures and skills, whereas those holding the second orientation place emphasis on applying the structured knowledge. Valuing knowledge in bits is accompanied by a modest expectation on the ideas students should integrate with an emphasis on the quantity of material that students can reproduce. On the other hand, the emphasis on the application of structured knowledge in the second orientation is accompanied by a belief in the application of standard techniques to unseen problems and with the expectation that students can apply this knowledge in real life settings.

Teacher 8’s approach to oral language assessment reflects the features of convergent assessment in Torrance & Pryor’s (1998) study. Teacher 13’s orientation is consistent with Torrance & Pryor’s (ibid) divergent approach. Initial analysis of the orientation of teachers’ assessment practices confirmed that they were consistent with prior studies of teacher assessment (e.g. Wilson & Wineburg, 1993). The orientations that teachers adopt for conceptualizing learning and teaching appear to influence the ways in which they assess their students’ achievement.

It is worth noting that T8’s orientation reflected one of the most important traditional Chinese educational ideas- an emphasis on the cognitive growth of the students. Teachers in some cases in Taiwan still believe in much the same way as their predecessors did a hundred years ago, that one of their roles is to pass knowledge to the next generation. This knowledge transmission model dominating thought and practices of some Taiwanese teachers participating in this study (e.g. T11, T1, T8, T7) was in sharp contrast to the constructivist approach exemplified in responses and actions of their Western counterparts (e.g. T9, T13, T5). The consistency of these respective beliefs and their strong impact on practices seem to support Bruner’s (1996) general position that education reflects culture. In turn, culture influences educational practices through the collective experience of teachers and learners (Cheng, 1992).
The way in which these teachers chose to assess their students’ oral language progress and achievement was influenced by what they understood and believed the purposes of evaluation to be. There are points of similarity with the available literature. For example, Kohn’s (1994) ‘demand’ and ‘support’ models appear to be reflected in the responses of my participants: some teachers focused on what students ought to be able to do, and some focused on what they could do to support student learning and development. From Table 8 we can see that the purpose of communicating achievement (e.g. obtaining information on my students’ progress, provide feedback to my students as they progress through the course, determine final grades for my students) strongly dominated any other use of assessment data. However, the results of this study did not support Wilson’s finding (1996) as my participants did not report that they used their formal assessment mainly to generate marks for reporting purposes. On the other hand, my participants indicated that for them assessment was used first and foremost to provide feedback to students, and to inform instruction; any other purpose, such as implementing the university’s policy in reporting was secondary.

5.4 Decision making rationale

Teachers were asked to provide a rationale or justification for why they made their decision regarding assessment practices. Three factors emerged from the categories as significant: (a) the nature of learning objectives, (b) the importance of using a wide range of practices, (c) professional experience.

(a) The nature of learning objectives

Eight teachers indicated that the nature of learning objectives would determine the choice of assessment method. The following extracts show the influence of objectives and topics.

Well it depends on the topic sometimes. For example, I just finished the objective on identifying people, and in that case I do a number of information gap activities. For learning definitions I will do an interview or a survey. So a lot of times the topic will determine the assessment that goes with it (T4, 110603, interview).

It depends on what is being covered how we assess them (T1, 190503, interview).

(b) The importance of using a wide range of practices

A second finding was that six teachers believed that they should use a variety of assessment methods and multiple criteria in grading. This may reflect the conflicting influences of internal and external factors, but may be based mostly on the belief that multiple assessment methods were needed to ‘fairly’ assess students so that they were all able to demonstrate what they had learned. This is noticeable in the following comment on how assessment practices vary according to, and are influenced by, the nature of the students.

It depends on what I feel the students are like in that class how I will decide what the best way is. ....some students do better with certain type of assessment task

21
than with another one. But you know what they know, but you have to come with a way so that they can show you what they know... My philosophy is that I will try to get them to show me what they know (T1, 190503, interview).

(c) Professional experience

It is evident that the experience of teachers has much to do with determining their assessment practices. Whether by trial and error, or by talking with others, it seems that the teachers learned through their own experience which assessment approaches worked best for them and their students. It is as if the practices simply evolved over time. One thing that was absent in their comments was any indication of influence from their initial teacher training or subsequent professional development opportunities. The following comments illustrate the importance of experience.

I have taught for 10 years and I guess some of this just evolves over the years.
(T10, 120603, interview)

I had to figure out what to do. It sort of came upon me...trial and error would be the best answer. To put it in a nutshell...like a lot of things, once you do it for a long time, you sort of get a feel for it (T9, 170603, interview).

Test experience, what was done with me in college (T4, 110603, interview).

Discussion of: Decision making rationale

Teachers make many decisions throughout all phases of the assessment process. The data of this study identify a number of considerations likely to influence teachers’ assessment practice, such as: teachers’ concerns for students and their growth, not only in learning but also in their social and emotional development; the subjects being taught; the policies and practices of reporting that are in place; and the views of teaching and learning held by individual teachers and the practices that result from them - all of these are likely to have a significant effect on teachers’ assessment practices. The three factors affecting teachers’ decision - making in this study appear to be in line with part of the results in McMillan and Suzanne (2000). Also, the three factors in the current study seem to implicitly resemble the contexts of personal values and priorities and professional responsibilities reported in Jamison’s (2002) study. Similar to the findings of Davison (2004), the teachers in this study seem to use a holistic and interactive approach in their assessment decisions.

5.5 Grading practice

In the discussion of grades, several factors emerged as significant, including grading policy, borderline grades, how extra credit was handled, and grade distributions.

Grading policy

Regardless of university policy, each teacher had a unique, idiosyncratic grading policy. However, there were some common elements. First, all teachers obtained most of their grades
from four primary sources: homework, quizzes, midterm and final exams. Four teachers also utilized participation, class work, or some other indicator of effort. It is worth noting that two teachers counted participation for more than 30% of the final grade. Teachers indicated that they used a criterion-referenced approach to grading rather than a norm-referenced approach, and a total point system provided a percentage consistent with university or department guidelines. An interesting issue was whether the teacher used the students in the class or the grade level objectives as a frame of reference for giving grades. That is, it was possible for students to receive marks in the 80s if they learned a lot, or marks in the 60s for the same level of performance if what they had achieved was below the grade level objective.

This is illustrated by the following two different responses:

*I'm not a believer in having a bell shaped curve for grades...if in a class nobody's trying and I only have one or two that pass, and the rest fail, then that's exactly what the assessments are going to be* (T3, 130603, interview).

*So I think it's a bit mean (unkind) to fail students in conversation classes unless their performance is totally unacceptable. What I mean here is their learning attitude, not their test performance. I think learning attitude is what we should pay attention to. I think assessment is also recognition of someone's effort. For example, if someone studies hard and performs well, then s/he deserves to get a higher grade* (T4, 110603, interview).

**Borderline grades**

Every teacher faces decisions concerning grades that are borderline. Teachers in this study indicated that in these situations they wanted to be able to give the students the benefit of the doubt. In order to make their decision, they typically used non-achievement factors, such as effort and participation, or used extra work or extra credit. This reflected the teachers’ desire for students to be as successful as possible and to obtain the highest grade possible. This is usually a subjective judgment by the teacher. Here are some illustrations of what the teachers did with borderline grades:

*I will pass them, especially if they've really shown me the effort...if I know they're really trying, and I mean genuinely trying, then I will pass them* (T13, 160603, interview).

*Borderline, most of the time I round it up...I'll give extra points to someone who really works hard* (T11, 040603, interview).

There were two teachers who clearly did not want to use subjective criteria for borderline situations:

*Frankly I tell them that when they get grades they will be based on objectives and how well people meet them. How can I grade on effort?* (T3, 130603, interview)

*The calculator decides borderline cases...to me, I round up half a point...I try to set up a system where I don’t have to make evaluative judgments* (T10, 120603, interview).
Student effort

One of the most varied practices in grading students was recognizing and handling students’ efforts. From one standpoint, most (eight out of thirteen) teachers used effort to some extent in deciding borderline cases, giving a student who tried hard a higher grade. Six teachers viewed effort as enabling achievement or as part of achievement, so that it became an important contributor to determining grades. Five teachers did not use effort at all, relying instead solely on the quality of a student’s performance. Six teachers considered homework a substitute for effort. The following quotes illustrate the different ways in which teachers handled effort.

I put effort in their class participation grade. Some students sit there and don’t say a word. I factor in not only their actual class participation, but also their effort, what I perceive is effort (T9, 200503, interview).

At this level you have to take into consideration effort but it can’t be to the exclusion of performance because it’s a fine line (T12, 120503, interview).

Extra credit

Teachers were asked how they incorporated extra credit in grading students. Six teachers used extra credit primarily as a way of boosting the grades of students who were borderlines or received a low grade. There are many different ways in which extra credit was applied. Three of them made it relatively easy for students and had an informal set of guidelines, while other teachers believed students must clearly earn the extra credit with additional effort. Another variable with extra credit was whether students knew about it and could plan for it, or whether the teacher simply awarded extra credit as a surprise. Both approaches were used. The following are some comments from teachers related to extra credit:

I tell them they can have extra credit when they have done what they are supposed to have done to earn extra credit. Make them learn and see that they have to put in some effort (T12, 120603, interview).

In class, I encourage them to voluntary take part in the activities. If they do so, they can go to the attendance list and register their times of participations. So the attendance list is also a record of their participations. I started to use this as of last year, and I found students like it very much. They can register as long as they participate; they don’t have to give the correct answers. They feel it is easy to register their participations (T6, 040603, interview).

Discussion of: Grading practice

Grading practices represented an interesting mixture of results from assessment, teachers’ beliefs and values grounded in their classroom environments, and overall learning goals. In addition, there are clearly external factors, such as university grading policies, as
well as teacher beliefs about motivation and engagement that influenced the practices. The result is, as is the nature of assessment, individualized approaches taking these considerations into account together with the types of students in the class.

Grading policies were very idiosyncratic. Teachers adapted their own grading policy with little regard for standardization with other teachers. Most teachers used effort as a determining factor in borderline grades, and in general, believed that student effort is a good substitute for student achievement. Extra credit was used to help students obtain a higher grade.

Teachers chose to include scores from participation and classroom observation as part of their summative assessment since they believed that students would be motivated to apply more consistent effort if their work was being scored and included in their grades. It was important for the majority of teachers that students’ grades reflected effort and attitude in addition to achievement, and they found ways of incorporating these aspects into their assessment of the oral language of their students.

Stiggins (1988) discusses the practice of measuring affective traits and personality characteristics such as effort and attitude. He points out that teachers rarely have training or expertise in the assessment of these traits, and that these are usually measured through subjective judgments formed during personal contact with students. Since these assessments can affect teacher expectations and students’ grades, it is important to note that, while these characteristics should be taken into account there are risks of undesirable side effects when too much of the assessment rests on this type of subjective judgment.

5.6 Uses of the result gained from assessment

Teachers were asked how they use the result of the assessment. Two different uses emerged from teachers’ responses: (a) changing the teacher’s and/or students’ actions (b) monitoring and improving students’ understanding. The use of feedback gained from the assessment was related to the purpose of assessment, and is discussed in section 5.2.3. Therefore, the replies to this question link with the points discussed in that section.

(a) Changing the teacher’s and/or students’ actions

Eight teachers believe that feedback from student performance should be used to change the teacher’s or students’ actions. For example, T9 sees the results of students’ performance in exams as an indication of which parts of the course he taught well or not so well:

*The assessment is to make sure that I am doing an adequate job of teaching, and I need something to let me know that I have some kind of effect on my students (T9, 200503, interview).*

Teacher 9’s response to students’ poor performance in some exam questions is:
My teaching would change if the majority of the class failed on something. For example, if I designed a test and most of the students failed, then of course I would react to that and re-think the exam, ...maybe the exam is not valid or ... (T9, 200503, interview).

T13 sees students’ performance in exams as useful in telling him what additional assistance students need, and what action he can take. Similarly, he sees the analysis of students’ performance in exams as a way of becoming aware of students’ shortcomings which could lead to changes in his teaching:

I look at my teaching, how it is developing. I look and see if there is something I need to change the students. Do I need to do things differently, what do I need to do in order to help them grow more? I also think these ideas should be for helping them develop their thoughts, developing their patterns, and my teaching (T13, 160603, interview).

(b) Monitoring and improving students’ understanding

Ten teachers believe that feedback from students’ performance should be used to monitor students’ learning and to help them improve. T6 sees continuous assessment as a tool for monitoring students’ progress. In this way she can identify students’ strengths and weaknesses and help them resolve difficulties and guide their learning.

However, I’ll say to myself: “Can we make the oral assessment become a learning tool instead of a result of the learning assessment?” If I treat it as one of the tools in the learning process, then the final exam format is a very good activity, because it allows students to see that they are capable to speak fluently and with confidence on the stage. I believe this kind of assessment will make them more willing to learn English...I see the assessment as a process. I put a lot of emphases on the learning process, because I think there is no end to language learning. After the midterm exam, I usually give them the feedback right after their performance. I will point out what they did well and what they need to improve (T6, 040703, interview).

Discussion of: Uses of the result gained from assessment

The participants’ responses as to how they use the result from the OLA seemed to parallel the socio-cultural view of learning. This view highlights the importance of social processes in cognitive activities. More specifically, this perspective is related to the bi-directional interaction between novices and the expert, particularly the guidance by an expert sensitive to feedback given by the novice about the appropriate level and pace of learning. This perspective differs greatly from traditional unidirectional lecturing, where social processes are somewhat neglected as little attention is paid to the feedback from the students. Teachers in this study use the result of assessment to facilitate learning by providing students with important feedback on their learning progress and by helping them identify learning problems (Stiggins, 2002). Meanwhile results serve as a meaningful source of
information for teachers, helping them identify what they taught well and what they need to work on. It is an ongoing process of looking closely at the work of the students, and responding to it, both in planning instruction and guiding students toward improved learning and understanding (Allen, 1998). Just as there are a variety of ways teachers assess students, there are various ways teachers use the assessment results to monitor progress, grade performance and modify instruction.

5.7 Teachers’ beliefs about their roles in oral language assessment

Based on the premise that teachers’ beliefs of their professional roles are closely linked to their impact on the learning and achievement of their students, this study sought to investigate teachers’ beliefs about their roles in OLA. Analysis of the interview data indicated that teachers’ beliefs or the conceptualisations of their roles in oral language assessment were often mixed with their beliefs about what a good language teacher and a good language classroom meant to them, as well as aspects of language teaching and learning such as, grammar, error correction, language skills, etc.

Even though there were 13 participants, 11 different metaphors were produced in response to the question “What is the image or metaphor of your experience of implementing oral language assessment?” One participant gave more than one metaphor. Meria et al’s (2002) categories, mentioned earlier, provided a useful framework for categorizing this part of the interview transcripts. The varied responses that represent these teachers’ beliefs about their roles in oral language assessment can be classified into seven main categories:

Table 5. Images or metaphors of teachers’ experiences of implementing OLA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Participants’ responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-operative leader</td>
<td>Guide, movie director, helper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nurturer</td>
<td>Counsellor, silent film watcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>repairer</td>
<td>Mechanic, doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>artist</td>
<td>Sculptor</td>
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<td>Military trainer</td>
<td>Military trainer</td>
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<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. The teacher as co-operative leader

In this group of metaphors (teachers as guide, movie director, helper) the teacher is in a traditional position of leadership and the learner at a certain level of dependence. The students’ dependence on the leader for direction does not necessarily imply that the teacher is passive. In this metaphor, the role of the director is active in that s/he ‘sets up’ the action; however, the students/actors are then given the room to interpret their roles as they wish. The director is someone who sits back at a certain point after the scene has been prepared and lets
the actors act. The learner is an actor who interprets a role, not a puppet. As one participant said:

*When carrying out the classes, I felt like a director, I have to set up the situations in advance to let students perform; sometimes I have to demonstrate what is expected. However, the students are the actors. Their learning process will be recorded as a film; they will be given the opportunities of NG. In the end, the completed play is the result of consistent observation, learning, self-performance, and self-correction. I hope students are able to watch their performance with appreciation and experience their progress and growth* (T6, 040603, interview).

Another prominent metaphor was the dual metaphor of learning as a journey and the teacher as a guide. The metaphor of teacher as a guide of the learner’s journey seems to serve the important role of creating order in an ambivalent, unsettling and chaotic situation. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980:156) pointed out, this is a basic function metaphor: lending coherence to our experience by serving as “a guide for future action.” The metaphor of the teacher as a guide helps to make teachers’ goals and purposes specific and unified. It allows them to set aside conflicting issues in order to focus on the larger goal in their teaching. The metaphor also allows them to steer attention away from themselves to the students. In fact, the metaphor of guide for students’ learning seems to serve as their own guide used in navigating and overcoming the different tensions that they experience in their teaching.

*Like a guide I always tell my students that they should learn English from multiple resources, and I remind them that the school and the textbook are only a part of learning* (T10, 120603, interview).

*The most important role for me is to make sure that they learn, as well as to facilitate their moving on to the next stage of learning and to not spoil their motivation but to facilitate it.* (T7, 90603, interview)

In the helper metaphor the assessment process is conceptualized as one of guidance and assistance to help students achieve their goal of learning the language.

*Well, I think I am here to help them along their way rather than to be an evaluator per se. You evaluate them but the idea is to help them along their way. To some extent, you have to do that in the dark because they resist you a bit. They don’t really care what you’re saying, all those brilliant things you wanted to tell them. Of course a teacher doesn’t have God-given wisdom. You know, actually we are kind of searching in the dark as well, trying to balance the negative with the positive* (T5, 100603, interview)

2. The teacher as a nurturer

In this category (teacher as a counsellor, or silent film watcher), the teacher’s role is to nourish, influence, and foster the potential capacities of the learner. The teachers serve as the ‘counsellor’ whose role is essentially passive. They are there to provide language necessary
for students to express themselves freely and to say whatever it is they want to say. They provide emotional support when it is required and help learners feel secure and confident about the language learning.

I feel I have to be very patient, so I feel like a counsellor, no matter what students say (good or bad); you got to listen even you are very tired (T2, 270603, interview).

3. The teacher as a repairer

This category (mechanic, doctor) is exemplified in the metaphor of comparing the EFL teacher to a mechanic. This metaphor puts the teacher in the superior position of someone who knows what is correct or not and whose main task is fixing other people’s errors or deficiencies. The learner, in turn, is assumed to be linguistically defective and in need of repairs. This metaphor is very much in line with the notion of the learner as a ‘defective communicator’ and with many other negative conceptualizations of L2/FL learners in the literature (Firth and Wanger, 1997). In this case, what seems to be defective is not so much the learner’s language but the learner’s approach to learning the language. As T13’s assumption suggests:

Maybe a mechanic. A mechanic has to fix many parts of the car. That sounds in many ways like me having to help students. Students need pronunciation, conversation, and grammatical help. I try to fine-tune everything. Much of the students’ past experiences have taught them wrong ways to approach language learning. Their past experiences are very different from what they get in my class (T13, 160603, interview).

Views of the teacher’s role as “doctor” reflect teachers’ conceptualization of their roles and the roles of their students. These conceptualizations are underpinned by the traditional mode of instruction. The metaphor of the teacher as a doctor highlights the teacher’s role as the active agent, while the student is the patient who goes to the ‘clinic’ to get his/her medicine. Like the doctor’s prescriptions, the teacher’s exercises are remedies that return students to a healthy state of language use.

I felt like a doctor doing diagnosis. Every student is different. You don’t know what’s wrong with them until they start speaking. Then you begin to understand their problems, and you can give them your feedback. It’s like writing a prescription (T1, 190503, interview).

4. The teacher as an artist

In this category (the teacher as a sculptor), teaching is like moulding learners into works of art. In this instance, learners are perceived as ‘clay’ or raw material (Williams and Burden, 1997), and the learning entailed is an entirely passive one. The learner merely supplies the raw material while the teacher does all the ‘moulding’ (Oxford et al., 1998).

Of course, for year two and three students, you start to do things that are more delicate, because they already have some foundation, and you must carve like a sculptor (T11, 040603, interview).
5. The teacher as a military trainer

A further metaphor sees the EFL teacher as a military trainer and the EFL learner as someone undergoing military training. The learner, like a new recruit in the army, needs to be trained in order to be developed. For the teacher, teaching English, also includes changing the feelings and attitudes of the students towards the learning of a new language, feelings and attitudes that resulted from past experiences. The assumptions as stated by teacher 8 reflect this conception:

*It is like training newcomers in the military. In fact, there are a lot of times you have to drill a lot of things into their brain. This is especially true when they are year one students and come from different vocational schools with different learning backgrounds. Then you have to be like the trainer in boot camp. You not only have to force them to learn, you literally have to drill the learning strategies into their brains. You have to train them to have the guts to speak in public. I do not think it is elegant, in fact, I think it’s quite rude behaviour (T8, 26/06/03, interview).*

6. The teacher as an engineer

In the engineer metaphor, the role of the teacher is to make language available to the students so that both students and teacher can construct meaning. In this process, the teacher is a mediator and a co-participant. In addition, the learner is not a passive recipient of knowledge but a ‘constructor’ of language. The participant’s stated assumption behind this metaphor indicates that:

*Probably like building something, it is like helping students build something for themselves, maybe like an engineer.*

Two elements seem to be emphasized in this metaphor: that learning and teaching are ‘construction’ (see Cortazzi and Jin, 1999) and that they are a joint, communal activity. The theoretical assumptions underlying this metaphor are thus in line with social-constructivist theories of language learning and teaching (Williams and Burden, 1997).

7. The teacher as ‘water’

The last metaphor (the teacher as water) does not appear in the literature; however, it is interesting to note that teaching is seen as a professional activity which demands keeping abreast of developments in the field and implementing new ways of teaching the language. In the water metaphor, the teacher believes:

*Maybe water is something that is always changing and very flexible. I think to be a language teacher, especially for me, because I am not an Asian, you have to be very flexible. You have to try new things. The image I have is that I have to be very flexible, like water. I have to be able to change if something is not working. A teacher has to be able to recognize failure and change when something is not working (T9, 17/06/03, interview).*
The teacher as water metaphor seems to present a view that teaching and learning entails many problems. The teacher may encounter a lot of problems during their instruction and teaching. As stated by T9, in order to solve these obstacles, the teacher has to be very flexible and have a very innovative attitude.

**Discussion of: Teachers’ beliefs about their roles in oral language assessment**

Various metaphorical conceptualizations of the EFL teachers’ experiences in OLA emerged in this theme. It is interesting to note that with these metaphors the teachers pictured their roles as they thought they should be. Conceptually, these metaphors represent a variety of positions related to teacher roles, and they carry implications for the perceptions of the teachers regarding the roles of their students. Teachers were most often represented in the classic roles of leader or nurturer, whereas learners were perceived in a range of roles, from the most active (actor, constructor) to the least active (piece of clay). OLA practice appeared as a multifaceted activity which involves guiding and assisting, providing tools or opportunities, bringing about changes; fostering development, moulding and correcting behaviour, and keeping abreast of new methods.

An analysis of the theoretical assumptions expressed by the participants showed that they were able to move to a level of abstraction as they articulated some of the principles governing their metaphors. Some behaviouristic notions of the response-strengthening model, such as a belief in the importance of language practice, were evident, as well as the new postulates from communicative, humanistic and socially grounded approaches, including beliefs in the importance of interaction and its positive effect. In this sense, the theme indicates the extent to which the participants had appropriated the metaphors, principles and notions of various L2/FL theoretical paradigms and approaches.

It is interesting that those metaphors paralleled those of Marie et al. (2002) and reflected conventional metaphorical conceptualizations of teaching and learning that appeared in the culture of EFL/ESL educators.

It is certainly worth noting that the expressed beliefs of Taiwanese teachers regarding their role in OLA, traditional Chinese educational values that emphasise achievement, discipline, and high regard for the teacher as an idealised role model to pass knowledge onto the younger generation can be found in juxtaposition with Western ideas that emphasise the interests of students and enjoyment of learning. This may be related to teachers’ varying amounts of exposure to western models of teaching, for example, during graduate school. This has resulted in different degrees of enculturation in, and familiarity with, western ways of thinking. Therefore it can be stipulated that for teachers the personal experience of learning and teaching is more influential to their practice than other socio-cultural factors.
6. Conclusion & Implications

6.1 Implications

There are several implications from the findings in this study. First, given that teachers clearly “pull” for students and use many different practices that help students succeed, it may be helpful to ask if teachers are “coddling” students. “Coddling” is defined as making it so easy to obtain passing or even high grades that students may get a false sense of their own level of understanding and performance. In other words, is the desire of the teacher to see students “succeed” so strong that it promotes assessment and grading practices whereby students can obtain good grades without really knowing the content or being able to demonstrate the skill?

Second, what are the results of emphasizing individual effort, as much as is being done by the teachers, in grading students? Research of student motivation and attributes for success (reasons students give for their success) suggest that the emphasis on effort is a positive contributor for motivation, because effort is a controllable internal factor. Also, this emphasis on effort may teach some students the importance of being involved, and the need for this involvement to be successful. However, it may be counterproductive for some low performing students because they may develop a belief that they are rewarded for effort and not mastery of the content or skills. It may also give some students a false sense of competence. Furthermore, too great an emphasis on effort could possibly reduce the focus on ability, which is a more stable attribute. However, this finding is related to the socio-cultural setting – effort is reported to be given a higher status in Confucian heritage cultures than in some others and may account, in part, for why these teachers promote this attribute (Watkins and Biggs, 2001).

A third implication of the findings suggests that attention must be paid to the beliefs of the teachers regarding the role of the students and their achievement in the classroom. If teachers believe that students are unable to handle student-centred activities that require high level thinking processes, then perhaps assessment tasks that value these elements will be difficult to be sustained in the assessment practices by the teachers. We need to help teachers become aware of the potential of all their students and the advantages of different assessment tasks that value student growth. In addition, how significant/important is the nationality and background of teachers with regard to what they believe and say in OLA? Although there are some differences in the orientations of OLA practices and beliefs between native and non-native English teachers in the results of this study, this question needs to be explored fully, so that new English teacher training programmes in Taiwan’s tertiary sector can respond to the changing staff profile.
6.2 Recommendation for further research

The nature of this study as an exploratory investigation conducted in a particular context and the nature of its findings suggest a number of directions for further research, particularly the following---

- There is a need to research teacher’s beliefs and practices of oral language assessment in different contexts. The present study was conducted in a context that included a group of teachers who teach at private technical universities in Taiwan. It seems reasonable to expect that studies of EFL contexts may produce different results that will extend our understanding of teachers’ beliefs and practices in oral language assessment, and so provide us with a more comprehensive picture about collegiate-level OLA practice.

- Based on the present study, it seems that future research into the perceived difficulties of the participants and their actual practice is needed. Furthermore, longitudinal data on the perceptions of teachers and students could add to our understanding, as many concerns expressed by the teachers (e.g., students’ low ability and motivation) are not static factors. They are dynamic in nature and thus have a potential to change with increasing experience in new pedagogical attitudes and beliefs. Consequently, future research investigating teachers’ and students’ changing practices in the oral language assessment could prove interesting.

6.3 Conclusions

The findings of this study revealed that the participating teachers believe that they can better capture a holistic view of student oral language ability through the use of a variety of oral language assessment methods. Most teachers see assessment as an extension of instruction that has an important effect on the involvement and motivation of the students. Thus, thinking about how assessments can enhance student learning heavily influences the decision making of teachers. Teachers believe that oral language is best assessed through multiple assessments, using different formats. They believe that informal or formative, constructed-response assessments provide the best information to judge the oral fluency of their students.

My goal in this study was to understand the practices and beliefs of teachers towards OLA. I learned that assessment practice decisions are made on the basis of how teachers believe assessment or grading procedures will affect student learning and motivation. At the same time teachers also respond to the realities of their classroom environment and to external pressures. In this balancing act, each teacher has his/her own solution, one that is constantly changing with each new group of students. In terms of OLA, the teachers reported that they all pay careful attention to the differences among their students, as well as to their opportunities for learning.
Personally, this study has provided me the opportunity to reflect upon my own learning and teaching experiences. The experiences of the participating teachers in OLA have broadened my visions of how to assess student oral language in an EFL setting, and moreover through the experience of ‘language teacher as a language researcher’, I came to realize that classroom-based OLA will require teachers and learners to become accustomed to thinking of language tasks not only as activities but also as indicators of progress and achievement, and that learners will need to understand the criteria for evaluating their performance. If students do not understand what teachers want them to know and be able to do, then they are less likely to do so, and therefore may not perform well when teachers assess their learning in the classroom. Thus, how teachers communicate their expectations is essential not only to student learning and performance but also to effective classroom assessment.

Finally, I like to argue that only by spending time in classrooms and attempting to understand OLA within the rich and diverse sociolinguistic contexts in which it occurs that we will deepen and enrich our understanding of OLA processes. These processes are not just linguistic, they are also social; they are not just psychological, they are also cultural; they do not just happen through a process of osmosis, instead they are crucially dependent upon appropriate interaction. Only by studying OAL in its social and cultural contexts will we come to appreciate the apparent paradox of OLA; that it is at once a deeply personal and yet highly social process.
REFERENCES


Lu, Ai-ying (2003). Teachers’ Beliefs and Classroom Assessments: A Case Study of Two University Instructors of English. Master’s dissertation, National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan, R.O.C.


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Linguistics, 5(1), 81-106.


### Appendix 1: Background Information about the Interviewees

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
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<th>Education</th>
<th>Course Taught</th>
<th>Years of Teaching English</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
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Appendix 2. Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. I am going to tape your comments but you can ask to stop the tape if there is something that you don’t want recorded. As I mentioned in the letter, your responses will be confidential and you will not be identified in any reports unless you give written permission.

1. Why do you assess? (i.e. for what purpose? How do you define assessment?)
2. Talk to me about the purpose of oral language assessment in your classroom. (prob- what’s your role? Has this changed over the years?)
3. Is your understanding about assessment similar to/ different from other teachers, administrators?
   • How do you know?
   • How does this make you feel?
   • Does this influence or impact your understanding-learning of assessment in any way?
4. Do you feel you have the appropriate skills and knowledge you need about oral language assessment? (If not, go to 0.5)
5. What do you need to know or want to learn about oral language assessment?
6. How do you go about learning this? (Probe-do you learn about oral language assessment on your own initiative? Explain)
7. What would be a metaphor or image to represent your experience with oral language assessment?