

Language Assessment Literacy in Vietnam: Practices, Attitudes and Challenges

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Abstract

This paper explores the construct of Language Assessment Literacy in Vietnam. A mixed methods approach was adopted to understand the classroom-based assessment practices of English language teachers at all stages of education. Classroom observations with follow up interview, focus group discussions and a survey were the methods deployed to understand the teachers' assessment practices, their attitudes towards assessment and the challenges they encountered when assessing their students. The results revealed that the teachers used a range of assessment practices, and they were able to clearly articulate the rationale for the chosen practices. The teachers used the results of the assessments to inform their teaching decisions and lesson planning. Based on the range of assessment practices observed and discussed the participant teachers demonstrated high levels of Language Assessment Literacy. They were able to implement competence-based assessment which was a feature of a recent nationwide curriculum reform project. The challenges faced by the teachers included large class sizes, heavy teaching load and, for teachers in rural areas, resourcing issues. The teachers expressed a strong desire to have more autonomy in their teaching and assessment practices and for the teacher voice to be given greater weight when considering and implementing curriculum reform.

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Introduction¹

English language teaching and learning is hugely important in Vietnam. Notably, 99 per cent of all foreign language learners learn in English (Zein, 2022). As the population of Vietnam is 100 million with 70 per cent under the age of 35, this represents a very large group of people (Zein, 2022). English developed this important function in Vietnamese life due to the country's membership of The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The official language of this body, which promotes commerce and trade, is English. English is perceived as being important to the economic success of the country. In addition, English is used in tourism which is an important sector of the economy.

Vietnam has made substantial investments in English language education and launched several initiatives aimed at improving national proficiency levels. Among these efforts is the curriculum reform programme known as National Foreign Languages Project 2020, which was later extended to 2025 after the original proficiency targets were not achieved (Ngo, 2021). Assessment plays a central role in the reforms in these national projects. The new curriculum promoted competence-based assessment, which marks a departure from traditional exams that primarily tested knowledge of grammar and vocabulary through multiple choice questions (MOET, 2014b).

The Vietnamese authorities have consistently advocated for greater use of competence-based assessments with a focus on the use of formative and alternative assessment methods, and these approaches have been endorsed across all educational levels. For instance, at primary level, Circular 30 (MOET, 2014a) and Circular 27 (MOET, 2020b) specify that school assessment should focus on fostering student progress and helping learners reach their promise. Similarly, at secondary level, Dispatch 5333 (MOET, 2014b) mandates the adoption of diverse assessment formats, the delivery of both qualitative and quantitative feedback, and the inclusion of teacher, peer, and self-assessment. In higher education, Decision 43 (MOET, 2007) requires that each course incorporate multiple assessment methods, such as tests, essays, interviews, and performance-based tasks.

Thus, to enact the new assessments the teachers would need to make considerable changes to their teaching and assessment practices. As suggested in the literature, teachers need high levels of language assessment literacy (LAL) as they are engaging in assessment related activities on a very regular basis. Although there is guidance provided by the policy makers in Vietnam, whether the teachers apply it effectively is still in question. Moreover, Giraldo (2020) notes that much of the existing research on LAL tends to generalise findings without distinguishing between different levels of education. This appears to suggest that teaching, learning and assessment practices

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can be applied uniformly across the levels. LAL studies of schoolteachers in Vietnam are limited in number to date. LAL studies have mainly been conducted at university level. This means that considerable numbers of teachers in Vietnam have not been included in LAL studies to date.

This paper focuses on English language teachers in Vietnam and their classroom-based assessment practices. We explored how they assessed their students and the thinking behind their assessments. This examination allowed us to develop an understanding of the LAL of the participants and to provide evidence-based implications to those who are involved in this national project.

Literature Review

The Construct of Language Assessment Literacy

LAL has developed into an increasingly active field of studies over the last decade; however, there is no agreement on LAL conceptualisation (Gan & Lam, 2025). A broad and structured framework for LAL, which was proposed by Davies (2008, p. 335) and has been widely used in the literature (e.g.: Fulcher, 2012; Giraldo, 2018; Giraldo, 2021; Inbar-Lourie, 2013, etc.), consists of three key components: skill, knowledge and principles as follows:

Skills provide the training in necessary and appropriate methodology, including item writing, statistics, test analysis and increasingly software programmes for test delivery, analysis, and reportage. *Knowledge* offers relevant background in measurement and language description as well as in context setting. *Principles* concern the proper use of language tests, their fairness and impact, including questions of ethics and professionalism.

Several scholars following Davies have emphasized the importance of skills, knowledge, and principles in shaping LAL. Inbar-Lourie (2008), for instance, conceptualises LAL as a tripartite construct comprising three dimensions: the rationale behind assessment (the “why”), the specification of the trait being assessed (the “what”), and the procedures involved in assessment (the “how”) (p. 390). While Davies provides a more operational framework for developing professional literacy, Inbar-Lourie offers a conceptual lens for understanding assessment decisions. Together, these models underscore both the procedural and reflective aspects of LAL, suggesting that effective assessment literacy involves not only technical proficiency but also critical awareness of purpose and context although the element of context is not explicitly mentioned in Inbar-Lourie’s.

Fulcher (2012) extends the discussion of LAL by emphasizing the contextualisation of skills, knowledge, and principles within broader historical, social, political, and philosophical frameworks. Fulcher (2012, p. 125) provides the following definition:

The knowledge, skills and abilities required to design, develop, maintain or evaluate, large-scale standardized and/or classroom-based tests, familiarity with test processes, and awareness of principles and concepts that guide and

underpin practice, including ethics and codes of practice. The ability to place knowledge, skills, processes, principles and concepts within wider historical, social, political and philosophical frameworks in order to understand why practices have arisen as they have, and to evaluate the role and impact of testing on society, institutions, and individuals.

While Davies provides a practical foundation and Inbar-Lourie offers a conceptual lens, Fulcher integrates both dimensions and advances the field by situating assessment literacy within its wider societal, philosophical and political contexts. This makes his model particularly relevant for fostering critical and reflective practitioners who can navigate the complexities of language testing beyond technical proficiency. For an overview of research which explores the construct of LAL see Coombe et al. (2020).

In order to enhance practitioners' reflective practices in the field, Scarino (2013) emphasises the role of self-awareness. She foregrounds the interpretive dimension of LAL, asserting that awareness of one's own beliefs, assumptions, and experiences is central to one's LAL development. This means practitioners are therefore required to integrate complex theoretical, practical, and institutional dimensions of assessment with a reflective understanding of themselves in relation to these contexts. In this paper, we adopt this construct of LAL as it aligns with our aim to emphasise reflective engagement and the role of teachers' beliefs, attitudes, experiences and self-awareness in shaping practice. We argue that with insights into this interpretive dimension of assessment, more effective training could be tailored and delivered.

Research Approaches to Understand Teachers' Beliefs and Practices in LAL

One of the most common approaches to understand teachers' beliefs and practices is via surveys. Examples of such surveys include the following conducted in Asia (Park, 2024; Sun & Zhang, 2022), North America (Malone, 2013), Europe (Tsayari & Vogt, 2017; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014), and from a worldwide perspective (Crusan et.al., 2016). While surveys allow researchers to collect large-scale, comparable data on teachers' self-perceived knowledge, experiences and training needs across diverse contexts, their use also raises important conceptual and methodological concerns. First, regarding the conceptualisation aspect, survey items often reduce LAL to decontextualised statements, which can potentially oversimplify the construct that is inherently situated and shaped by institutional and policy contexts. The reliance on fixed responses may fail to capture the complexities and the many facets of LAL in a particular context as acknowledged by Sun and Zhang (2022). For this reason, surveys may offer limited insight into the decision-making processes used by teachers and the tensions and constraints that may mediate teachers' assessment practices. Regarding the methodological aspect, data collected using a single quantitative method, without triangulating through other methods such as classroom observations, interviews or other qualitative methods may restrict insights into how LAL is enacted in practice (Park, 2024).

Mixed method studies have become more common with interviews being added as a data collection method. Recent examples of such studies include Yan and Fan (2021), Mohammadkhah et al. (2022) or Zhang et al. (2026) or using interviews as the only data collection method such as Bohn and Tsagari (2021) or Wiese and Nortvedt (2023). Interviews allow participants to explain their reasoning, beliefs and experiences, which then enables researchers to explore complex aspects of LAL in practice. For example, interview data from the study of Zhang et al. (2026) was able to reveal that the teachers' perceived need for LAL may be partly driven by the lack of explicit LAL requirements in teacher qualification processes and the minimal emphasis on language assessment responsibilities. This finding could not have been brought into light if survey was the only data collection method.

To gain a deeper understanding of teachers' LAL, we argue that it is crucial to begin by examining what actually happens in the classroom. Studies which have gone into the classroom to research LAL are still relatively rare (e.g., Berry et al., 2019). This is surprising as the classroom is the location of teachers' assessment practices. One study which used classroom observation to explore teachers' LAL (Sheehan & Berry, 2024) found that the six observed teachers demonstrated high levels of LAL in terms of the range of assessment activities used in lessons and the clarity of the rationale provided for the use of these activities. Sheehan and Berry (2024) highlighted the spontaneous nature of classroom-assessments which were conducted as the teachers moved around the classroom. They also noted that the teachers' assessment practices encouraged the learners to reflect on their learning and in this way promoted learner autonomy. Classroom practices provide the most immediate and authentic insight into teachers' assessment needs. Research by Davison and Leung (2009) and Hill and McNamara (2011) demonstrates the value of thick descriptions in revealing not only what teachers do but also the reasoning behind their actions in language assessment contexts. Hill (2017) further emphasises that any attempt to develop teachers' LAL must start with a close analysis of the contexts in which assessment occurs. This supports Scarino's (2013) argument that teachers' personal conceptions, beliefs, and attitudes strongly influence assessment practices and understanding of assessment constructs. To fully grasp these dimensions—both practices and beliefs—qualitative research is essential, particularly in exploring how classroom realities intersect with broader assessment policies (Cohen et al., 2007; Giraldo, 2020; Lopez & Bernal, 2009).

In this paper, we adopt a mixed-methods approach. The qualitative data collection methods (classroom observation with follow-up interview and focus group discussion) allowed us to capture the complexity of the teachers' lived experiences (beliefs and practices), which cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measures alone. The study adopted:

... a social constructivist model of learning and meaning-making, with the language classroom representing the community of practice. It focuses on the sociocultural context in relation to actual assessment literacy practices in the language classroom, since an investigation into what is happening in classes

may be of little value without exploring why it is happening. (Berry et al., 2017, p. 203).

Thus, the project sought to reveal the rationale for the assessment activities used by the participants and the broader context of assessment in Vietnam. The quantitative data collection method was an online survey. The survey included questions about teacher training experiences, assessment practices and attitudes towards assessment with a particular consideration of competence-based assessment. The use of the survey allowed us to reach teachers from throughout the country and to develop an understanding of attitudes towards assessment and the curriculum reform project.

There has been a growing interest in developing language teachers' assessment literacy in various contexts, from Asia to Europe and America (Crusan et al., 2016; Malone, 2013; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). Koh et al. (2018) argued that when teachers gain comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the principles and practices of assessment, they will be able to select, adapt and design assessment tasks that are well aligned with the curriculum learning outcomes. Doing this can ensure fairness and equity as learners can have better experience of assessments and consequently pedagogical approaches that support their learning of those outcomes. Thus, it is important to obtain a thorough understanding of what teachers already know and believe, what they do to assess their students' learning and the challenges they face when assessing their students.

However, much existing research on LAL tends to generalise findings without distinguishing between primary, secondary, and tertiary education, often implying that teaching, learning, and assessment can be handled uniformly across levels (Giraldo, 2020). This assumption overlooks the fact that each educational stage has distinct aims, learner needs, and contextual challenges. Future research should therefore investigate these levels separately, proposing strategies tailored to their specific requirements and exploring how LAL can be effectively communicated and operationalized across contexts (Giraldo, 2020). Such an approach would complement Taylor's (2013) call to examine differential profiles of stakeholders and their varying needs for knowledge, skills, and principles in language assessment.

Researching English Language Teachers' LAL in Vietnam

In Vietnam, recent studies indicate growing efforts to align classroom assessment practices with national policy reforms promoting communicative competence and formative approaches. As noted above, much of the assessment research conducted in Vietnam has focused on tertiary education. A study explored Vietnamese university teachers' classroom practices (Tran et al., 2016) using sociocultural theory to study policy and practice. They found the teachers relied heavily on tests and these tests focussed on checking comprehension and not on the development of language sub-skills and strategies. The authors went on to note that the tests were often adapted from published textbooks and did not support the students in developing their

capability to use English communicatively. While Tran et al.'s work focuses on one stage of education in Vietnam it would seem reasonable to assume that the issues found at university level would be replicated at other educational stages given the importance of tests in Vietnamese education.

Another university-based study explored EFL students' beliefs and teachers' practices regarding classroom assessment (Bui, 2023). This study found that the teachers preferred summative assessment as they felt that such assessment engaged the students in language learning. The students, on the other hand, supported formative assessment. The results of this study may suggest that Vietnamese teachers set too much store by summative assessments, and they need to consider ways of assessing more formatively to provide learners with better guidance on how to develop as language learners and users. Similarly, Ngo (2019) who investigated novice teachers' use of observation as a formative assessment tool in a Vietnamese university context reveals that observation was often procedural and rarely aligned with learning outcomes, reflecting limited understanding of formative assessment's full potential. By observing teachers' classroom practices and interviewing with the teachers, Ngo was able to develop a better understanding of what the teachers may need. The study recommends strengthening initial teacher education programs to emphasize formative assessment principles, systematic observation practices, and reconsideration of cultural and historical contextual factors to enhance learning.

A qualitative study (Vu, 2017), based on interviews with 15 high school teachers and 5 university teachers in Ho Chi Minh city, explored their beliefs and practices about classroom-based assessment (CBA). The study reveals that teachers generally believe that CBA had the potential to enhance student learning and provide valuable feedback, but their practices were constrained by systemic and contextual factors. Many expressed that heavy workloads, large class sizes, and time limitations made it difficult to apply formative assessment effectively. There seemed to be also a strong fear of deviating from established norms due to the dominance of high-stakes national exams, which prioritise summative testing. Additionally, teachers acknowledged gaps in their assessment literacy, particularly in designing valid and diverse tasks, and noted that low student motivation—especially in low socio-economic contexts—further limits the impact of CBA. Overall, while teachers appeared to recognise the benefits of CBA, structural pressures and resource constraints were reported to hinder its meaningful application. However, the study did not report if there were any differences between high school teachers and university teachers in terms of beliefs. It might have been the case that the teachers at these two educational levels seem to have similar beliefs about CBA although it is interesting to learn that informal assessment tasks are left entirely in the hands of teachers and not paid enough attention to.

A nationwide survey-based study (Nguyen, 2023) provides an impression of language assessment practices in Vietnamese schools within the context of recent educational reforms. Teachers were reported to frequently use assessment processes and test

banks, and students appeared to be increasingly engaged in self- and peer-assessment, reflecting positive movement toward diversified practices. However, formative assessment remains difficult to implement due to large class sizes, time constraints, and unclear guidelines. While teachers valued guiding documents and training programs, they highlighted the need for more practical examples and richer question banks, particularly for listening skills. Feedback practices, though encouraged, were often limited to scores rather than qualitative comments. The study also notes systemic issues such as uneven access to IT infrastructure, large class size and heavy workloads, which hinder innovation. These findings seem to be concurrent with those revealed by Pham (2017) who examined primary teachers' assessment practices in Central Vietnam. Pham reported that classroom assessment remained largely summative-driven, dominated by selected-response items and grammar-focused tasks.

These studies on assessment practices in Vietnam offer valuable insights but reveal notable limitations. Tran et al. (2016) and Bui (2023) highlight teachers' reliance on summative tests, often adapted from textbooks, which fail to develop communicative competence. Ngo (2019) adds that formative observation is underutilised and largely procedural, suggesting gaps in teacher training. Vu (2017) and Nguyen (2023) acknowledge teachers' positive attitudes toward classroom-based assessment but emphasise systemic barriers such as large classes, exam pressure, and resource constraints. Moreover, while these studies employed diverse methods—ranging from sociocultural analysis (Tran et al.), surveys (Nguyen), interviews (Vu), and survey and interview (Pham)—few incorporated systematic classroom observations (Ngo), underscoring the need for more observational research to capture authentic practices and construct comprehensive teacher assessment profiles. Thus, in this study, we combined different methods, including survey, observation with follow-up interviews and focus group discussion to better understand teachers' beliefs and practices in each level of education in Vietnam.

Methodology

The project was informed by the following three research questions:

RQ1: What are the classroom-based assessment practices of English language teachers in Vietnam?

RQ2: What are the attitudes towards assessment of English language teachers in Vietnam?

RQ3: What are the perceived challenges of conducting classroom-based assessments for English language teachers in Vietnam?

To answer these questions the project adopted a mixed methods approach to data collection. Four data collection methods were used in the project. These were: questionnaire, observation with follow-up interviews, focus group discussion. The project was conducted by researchers based in the UK and in Vietnam. The data collection instruments were developed by the UK research team and then piloted and revised by the Vietnam research team. All the qualitative data were collected by the

Vietnam research team and participants could chose to use either Vietnamese or English when responding to any of the data collection instruments. The Vietnam research team translated all responses in Vietnamese into English. The appropriate Ethics Committees of the University of Huddersfield reviewed and approved the overall methodology and the data collection instruments.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was adapted from one which had been used in a global survey of English language teachers' assessment practices (Sheehan, 2020). The online questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first section explored experiences of assessment as a language learner as this may influence attitudes to assessment and choice of assessment tasks. The second section explored training and how the topic of assessment had been treated in initial teacher education and in any ensuing training undertaken by the participants. This section explored the types of assessment the teachers had been trained to use and if their teaching experiences had informed their assessment practices. The final questionnaire section considered assessment practices and their use by the participants. The questionnaire was available in both English and Vietnamese. The survey included 68 questions. 67 items were based on a Likert scale with participants selecting from five options which ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The question which did not use a Likert scale response asked the participants to list any online assessments tools used. There were no open-response questions in the survey as the project included other data instruments to collect qualitative data.

Classroom Observations and Follow-up Interviews

Eight classroom observations with follow-up interviews were conducted. This number reflects the four stages of education in Vietnam: Primary, Secondary, High School and University. Seven of the observations were conducted in online classrooms and one was conducted in the school. For each stage of education, a private school and a public school was included in the project. All the teachers were experienced with years of experience ranging from 10 to 20. The structured observations used an observation schedule which included 15 assessment activities. The schedule was based on one used in two previous projects (Sheehan & Munro, 2017, 2019). The schedule was adapted for the Vietnamese context by the Vietnam research team. The observers used the schedule to record each observed assessment activity. The observers could add notes to the schedule to capture what was done and said during the observed assessment activity. This enriched the observation data and gave a sense of what was happening in the classroom at the time of each assessment activity. Following each observation the observer and the teacher met to discuss the assessment practices observed and broader issues relating to assessment practices. This wider discussion covered many aspects of the LAL construct such as the institutional context and language assessment training.

Focus Group Discussions and Follow-up Interviews

Two Focus group discussions (FGD) were held to explore teachers' language assessment practices. The groups included teachers from all four stages of education and from both public and private schools. 15 teachers took part in the discussions. The teachers were experienced with between five and twenty years of experience. The participants described how they created assessment activities and how they used them in class. In addition to discussing their activities the teachers were asked to talk about their assessment practices and philosophy. The FGDs were held online to meet Covid-19 guidelines. This meant that the discussions did not generate the rich data which both research teams had hoped for. The participants were unsure when to speak and it was difficult for the moderator to encourage the participants to engage with each other. To enrich the FGD data eight of the FGD participants were interviewed individually. The participants came from all four education sectors. They ranged in years of teaching experience from five to seventeen years.

The Participants

There were 2045 completed survey responses. The responses came from 59 of the 64 provinces in Vietnam, with the majority from the north of Vietnam. Teachers from the four levels of education responded to the survey. The respondents had a range of teaching experiences in terms of number of years teaching, from one to more than 25 and institutions worked for. The respondents held varied qualifications including teaching certificate, bachelor, master, and PhD. The educational stage which received the most responses was primary school.

Table 1 provides information on the institutions where the observed teachers worked and their length of service in the teaching profession. It also contains information about pre-service training in assessment.

Table 1

Observed Teacher Participant Information

Teacher	Work Institution	Years of Teaching	Pre-Service Training in Assessment
1	University	14	None
2	High School	14	None
3	University	13	Limited
4	Secondary	18	None
5	High School	15	None
6	Secondary	10	None
7	Primary	10	None
8	Primary	20	Limited

Table 2 details the teaching experiences of the FGD participants.

Table 2
Focus Group Discussion Participant Information

Teacher	Levels	Years of Teaching
1	Primary & Secondary	10
2	Primary	17
3	High School	14
4	Secondary	20
5	High School	11
6	Secondary	5
7	University	5
8	University	13
9	Secondary	16
10	High School	5
11	Primary & Secondary	5
12	Primary	5
13	Secondary	10
14	University	14
15	High School	10

The participants were drawn from both urban and rural locations.

Findings

The findings are presented by research question. The participants will be referred to as she/her as most of the participants were female. The participants will be referred to by a code which reflects the stage of data collection in which they were involved. The observed teachers are referred to as OT followed by a number. The participants of the first FGD are referred to as FGD1 and those of the second one are labelled as FGD2. The participants who were interviewed post FGD are referred to as PFGD followed by a number. When reporting questionnaire data, the percentages combine the responses for Strongly Agree and Agree and the same applies to the responses for Strongly Disagree and Disagree.

What are the Classroom-Based Assessment Practices of English Language Teachers in Vietnam?

This section begins with highlights from the questionnaire data. Notably, 56% of respondents stated they used alternative assessments such as self-assessment with students which indicates that teachers are deploying a variety of assessment activity types. While there is evidence to suggest that tests are used, for example, 67% of the questionnaire respondents indicated they used tests, these tests seem to be used as part of a broad menu of assessment activities. Only 22% of the respondents agreed that they used tests every week. This would suggest that teachers are using assessment activities other than tests much more often than they are using tests. 67% of respondents agreed that they planned their assessment activities as they planned their lessons. In addition, 65% stated they used information from assessments to plan classroom activities. This implies that the teaching and assessment process are closely aligned, and teachers are drawing on both their knowledge of teaching and of assessment when planning both teaching and assessment activities.

The data presentation now shifts to observation, interview and focus group discussion data. In one of the observed lessons there were no recorded assessment activities. In the follow-up interview the teacher was asked to talk through the reasons for choosing not to include any assessment activities. She explained that purpose of the lesson was to provide information about structuring an essay and that the lesson did not touch on any matters relating to scoring. As such, she decided to make the lesson light-hearted and to not include any assessment activities. She stated: “...*no score-related matter was discussed. So, I think it made the lesson less stressful for them.*” (OT7) This seems to suggest the teacher thinks assessment is stressful for her students, so she sometimes avoids assessment to avoid stress in the classroom. Teaching and learning, in contrast, are not stressful.

The participants had good levels of assessment knowledge which related to what to assess and they used this knowledge to inform their classroom-based assessment practices. This participant explained what she wanted to assess thus:

So, I assess my students based on two things. Their knowledge and also their attitudes towards the knowledge. So, to assess the knowledge, I impose some tests and then also some formative assessments. I'm not going to assess the students' knowledge by just one or two tests. I'm going to base on the whole process of studying (PFGD3)

She demonstrates high levels of assessment knowledge relating to what she wants to assess. The questionnaire data also suggests that the participants have high levels of assessment knowledge relating to what to assess. When discussing questions covering why they assess the participants, overall, highlighted the ways in which the information from the assessment is used to inform their teaching of the students who had undertaken the assessment. For example, one of the teachers whose class had been observed stated:

I think that classroom-based assessment plays a very important part in teaching and learning. For example, the teacher can know about the need, the demand of each student, know the setting of them. When we know exactly the need of the students, we know how to deal with them. (OT5)

Similarly, another teacher commented:

How they act towards their assessment and how they act towards the test and how they act towards the project. So, I can also alter something for students to perform best and to show me the correct level of their action. (PFGD3)

The participants seem to be student-centred in their approach to assessment. The reason to assess the learners is to collect data which can be used to inform future

teaching. This, in turn, will support the learners in their learning, and so support their learning outcomes. The participants also suggested that their assessments help the students to understand how well they are developing in their studies and to understand their strengths and weaknesses as language learners

What are the Attitudes towards Assessment of English Language Teachers in Vietnam?

Many participants expressed concern about the impact of tests on the classroom. This comment, is one of many, which highlights the negative impact: *“I have to say in our country written test is very hard for students because we have a lot of tests, today they reduce the number of tests, but it's still very hard for students.”* (PFGD3) There is an acknowledgement of the reduction in the number of tests but there seems to be a suggestion that this reduction is not sufficient. Alongside these concerns about the impact of tests can often be found requests for classroom-based assessments delivered by teachers to be given more weighting in the overall assessment process. One of the observed teachers made the following suggestion: *“they can reduce the number of tests in class, and the teacher will assess students in different way through their frequent performance in class, and maybe only 60% for written tests and 40% for other activities”* (OT6) Another participant suggested that: *“the teacher will assess students in different way through their frequent performance in class.”* (PFGD2)

Comments made by the teachers imply they felt disenfranchised from assessment policy. For example, one of the observed teachers stated:

So, they are just like, uh, recipients of the policy. So, they are not the, the stakeholder. Um, what the, I'm sorry. They, um, they do not really participate, or they have a say in forming the policy. So, most of the time that they are quite passive. (OT8)

Other teachers felt constricted by the assessment policy. The following appeal was made for teachers to have more autonomy:

they don't have much freedom in choosing the activity, the assessment activity for their students. So, I think that we should give them more like more freedom more room to conduct their own assessing activity for students. (PFGD7)

The teachers wanted to be allowed to have the opportunity to put more of their own assessment ideas into practice. There were calls for the teachers to be allowed more flexibility and autonomy in their assessment practices. Thus, one teacher stated: *“So I think teachers should have more autonomy in class. So, they should be more, they should be given more flexibility in assessing their student instead of the same format among all classes.”* (PFG8)

Both the questionnaire and interview data suggest that the teachers have good levels of assessment knowledge which suggests positive attitudes towards assessment. 76% of teachers stated they planned their assessments carefully. This indicates that the teachers have a body knowledge, possibly developed while in practice, relating to assessment which they then draw on when creating and planning assessments. Furthermore, more than half of the respondents agreed that they feel confident when creating assessments and half stated that they feel confident using the CEFR-VN. This is an adapted version of the CEFR which is used in Vietnam. This sense of confidence would seem to indicate that the teachers understand how to assess. One of focus group participants provided a detailed account of how she approached assessing her students:

When doing an assessment like that, one of the very important things is that we have to understand the goal we evaluate, is it a regular score or a mid-term score, and the nature of the test/assessing activity, is it summative which means an assessment of how you have learned through your learning process or an assessment of your current capacity (such as a diagnostic test) so that you can select the appropriate evaluation activity. (FGD1)

This account demonstrates high levels of assessment knowledge relating to how to assess. This quote highlights the importance of teacher assessment literacy in ensuring valid and reliable evaluation. It suggests that effective assessment requires clarity about why the assessment is being conducted and what it aims to measure. Without this clarity, there is a risk of misalignment between assessment activities and learning objectives.

The participants expressed firm beliefs around assessment and its importance in the classroom. For example, 71% of the questionnaire respondents stated that while they were teaching, they were always assessing their students. The following comment, which is one of many similar ones, shows the strength of belief around the importance of assessment. A FGD2 participant stated: *“Testing and assessment are two sides of a process, to collect information and evidence of learning outcomes, assessment is to compare with teaching objectives to make judgments about the current teaching and learning situation.”* The data suggests that the participants held strong beliefs about assessment. It also proposes that the participants were nuanced in their beliefs, and they acknowledged the limitations of assessment. The following quote from one of the FGDs exemplifies the belief that scores are not absolutes: *“When we give out a score, the score actually, only reflects a part of the student's ability, not really absolute.”* (FGD1). These seem to suggest that teachers conceptualise assessment as a multi-dimensional process involving evidence collection, comparison with objectives, and judgment. At the same time, they are critically aware that numerical scores cannot fully capture student ability, indicating a sophisticated understanding of assessment's strengths and limitations.

The interview and questionnaire data both indicate that the participants had had negative experiences of assessment when they were language learners. These experiences may have shaped their attitudes towards assessment. One teacher, for example, stated that:

Well, when I was a student, I was not very confident because I was afraid that I would make wrong answers. So, I barely raised my hand or raised my voice in class. Being aware of that kind of thinking, I try to make my students feel as comfortable as possible so that they will feel, and they are not afraid of making mistakes. (OT5)

There was strong agreement with the idea that assessment was used as a mechanism to promote hard work amongst students. The following table shows how the survey participants responded to the item.

Table 3

My Language Teachers Used Assessments to Frighten us to Work More

	1	2	3	4	5
N	187	381	538	505	122
%	10.8%	22.0%	31.0%	29.1%	7.0%

It seems that the participants were aware of assessment being used as punishment or threat. The data does not indicate that the teachers engaged in such practices themselves.

The position of assessment in teacher education seems to have influenced the teachers' attitudes to assessment. The observed teachers reported either none or limited coverage of assessment in their pre-service training. Data from the interviews and FGD also indicates that when assessment was included as a topic in initial teacher training it did not capture their interest. One participant stated:

Well to be honest at that time I didn't focus on that, I focused on how to deliver the lesson to my students and how to make the lesson interesting for students. At that time, I didn't focus on that, so the university gave lessons on that I didn't pay much attention, I didn't really remember what they taught us about that, to be honest. (PFGD5)

The comments from the interviews suggest that creating tests was the focus of any assessment training. The participants did not mention studying assessment activities other than tests in their initial education.

What are the Perceived Challenges of Conducting Classroom-Based Assessments for English Language Teachers in Vietnam?

In schools the issues related to context focused on class size and how this renders more difficult the task of assessing speaking. When discussing large class size in high school a participant (FGD9) noted that class size prevented direct assessment of speaking skills and that alternatives had to be found to assess speaking. Another participant indicated that paper-based assessments were used as a response to large class sizes: *“I think it depends much on students and the number students in a class and whether I have much time to observe my students. In Vietnam, the class size is mostly big, so most of the assessment is paper-based while assessment through speaking or practical communication is still limited.”* (OT4) These data reflect a tension between ideal assessment practices (which would include speaking and communicative tasks) and practical realities (large classes, limited time). The participants’ comments suggest that assessment practices are shaped more by logistical constraints than pedagogical principles.

Many of the challenges reported by the participants can be related to the issues of fairness. Fairness in assessment seems to be perceived as a complex and multifaceted issue, shaped by structural, socioeconomic and contextual factors. For some of the participants fairness was questioned due to logistical constraints, such as examination conditions. One of the FGD participants made the point that: *“When arranging a general examination room, there are usually more than 30 -40 students/room, only 1 supervisor/ 1 room, not 2 supervisors, the fairness is only relative.”* (FGD 1) For other participants fairness related to lack of access to opportunities or resources. A participant from a rural context stated: *“My students are students in the countryside, so they don't have many conditions and capabilities as students in big cities.”* (FGD2) This disparity extended to enrichment opportunities, where families with financial means can afford additional certifications (e.g., Starters or Flyers tests), creating further gaps in achievement and recognition. The teachers who work alone in a school face have a heavy burden in both teaching and assessment. Similarly, there were numerous comments on class size and how difficult it was for teachers to assess students individually, with special mention of assessing speaking skills, in classes of up to 60 students. The participants’ nuanced views underscore that fairness is contingent and relative, influenced by systemic constraints rather than solely by teacher practices.

Discussion

This paper aimed to gain a better understanding of teachers’ LAL beliefs and practices in each level of education in Vietnam. The adoption of a social constructivist perspective facilitated the exploration of what is happening in the classroom and why it is happening.

One key finding of this study is the evidence of incremental movement towards formative, learner-focused assessment practices in Vietnamese classrooms although

structural and cultural constraints identified in prior research remain relevant. Teachers reported using more diversified assessment practices such as self-assessment not only to measure learning outcomes but as an ongoing process integrated into lesson planning to guide future instruction. This finding is significant because it challenges the dominant narrative in the literature that seems to depict assessment in Vietnam as test-driven and summative (e.g: Bui, 2023; Tran et al., 2016). The move towards formative assessment appears to suggest that teachers are beginning to reconceptualise assessment as part of the learning process rather than as a final evaluative event. Teachers seem to have a growing attention to learners' needs and classroom interaction as this might explain why they used assessment as a tool for supporting learning rather than controlling it. This shift to formative assessment may indicate that policy discourses promoting formative assessment may be partially translating into classroom practice, even within a system still dominated by examinations. To sustain this movement, teacher education programmes and in-service professional development opportunities should provide structured support for teachers to design, implement and reflect on formative assessment practices within their own classrooms. Practical initiatives such as peer observation or shared repositories of formative assessment tasks could help promote these practices and support teachers under real classroom conditions.

A second important finding concerns teachers' demonstrated levels of LAL, particularly their understanding of the purposes of assessment and its pedagogical value. The participants in this study both reported and articulated clear rationales for designing and using assessment to inform instruction and respond to learners' needs, suggesting they possessed a solid conceptual grasp of the "what" and "why" of assessment even if contextual constraints limit their full implementation. The majority of the participants were well aware of the importance of classroom-based assessment, indicating a level of professional awareness that contrasts with findings from studies conducted in university contexts (e.g., Ngo, 2019). This would seem to suggest that the LAL of teachers in compulsory education is different from that of teachers working in the university sector or at least as suggested in the existing literature. Such variation implies that LAL across different educational levels in Vietnam is complex and multifaceted. To address these gaps professional development initiatives should focus less on introducing assessment principles and more on supporting teachers in translating their assessment knowledge into classroom practice. We would recommend this could include school-based professional learning communities where teachers can analyse student work together and reflect on assessment decisions. Such initiatives could enable teachers to bridge the gap between understanding assessment principles and enacting it effectively. At the same time, further research should prioritise close examination of teachers' enacted practices across educational levels to develop a more comprehensive and context-sensitive understanding of LAL in Vietnam.

Another key finding of this study is that the participant teachers expressed concerns about their lack of influence over the overall assessment regime, particularly within a high-stakes examination-oriented system. This concern about assessment-induced anxiety echoes Vu's (2017) findings on contextual pressures and cultural norms surrounding high-stakes testing. Although teachers valued assessment for informing teaching, they reported modifying or even avoiding certain practices in order to reduce student anxiety. This finding seems to expose a critical tension between teachers' assessment literacy and their professional agency. While Koh et al. (2018) suggest that LAL is needed to ensure fairness, the results of this project suggest that teachers are not in a position to reduce inequalities notwithstanding being able to demonstrate high levels of LAL. The inequalities are systemic, and the teachers do not have sufficient autonomy to really address unfairness or to influence policy. It can be interpreted that in this context literacy alone is insufficient when teachers lack autonomy to influence assessment structures. This points to the need for reforms that extend beyond teacher training to address institutional and policy-level constraints. To address this, we would suggest that schools would need greater flexibility to integrate formative and alternative assessment practices alongside mandated tests. Examinations should not be positioned as the sole indicator of achievement. In addition, it is important to incorporate the teacher voice into assessment policy development. Teachers should be recognised as informed professionals rather than passive policy implementers.

All projects have limitations and there follow discussion of the limitations of the current project. The number of survey participants selecting the neutral option (3) tended to be higher than would be hoped for. It seemed that the participants found it difficult to commit to one of the available options. This may have been due to lack of previous experience in considering their assessment practices. Whilst observations were conducted at all four stages of education the total number of classes observed is very small when compared to the number of classes taught each day in Vietnam. Due to Covid related restrictions in place at the time of data collection the focus group discussions and some of the observations of teaching were held online. This, unfortunately, negatively impacted on the quality of the focus group discussion. Steps were taken to mitigate this impact by holding further interviews. In addition, the example of one lesson without assessment cannot be generalised; more lesson observations would be needed to gain a better understanding of LAL in Vietnam.

Conclusion

The project has explored classroom-based assessment practices in Vietnam with the aim of understanding LAL in Vietnam. Teachers used a range of assessment activities with the goal of improving student learning by ensuring that their teaching is addressing student needs in often challenging circumstances. The teachers' attitudes towards assessment were multifaceted. Assessment was valued as a means of improving student outcomes. The teachers engaged with the competence-based assessments which had been mandated by the curriculum reform projects. The

negative attitudes towards assessment stemmed from frustration at the lack of teacher influence at the policy level and the stifling of opportunities to put their assessment beliefs into practice. The challenges identified by the teachers go a long way to explain why the teachers could not deploy their preferred assessment practices. Large class size, heavy workload and the pressures of being the lone English teacher in a school were challenges which featured in all the data sets. Those teachers working in rural or isolated contexts discussed the challenges of working in an environment in which their learners had very little access to English beyond the classroom. LAL is important but in and of itself it is not enough to improve student outcomes as teachers need more autonomy and sway over assessment policy to affect real change in their own individual classrooms or in the way assessment functions in the overall education system.

The study provides important implications. First, for policy makers, policies should move beyond mandating competence-based assessments and provide teachers with greater autonomy in adapting assessment practices to their classroom realities. Structural challenges such as large class sizes, heavy workloads and isolation in rural contexts must be addressed through resource allocation and support networks. Second, professional development should focus not only on building assessment knowledge but also on practical strategies for implementing formative and competence-based assessments in challenging contexts. Training should include examples of low-resources solutions and stress-reducing assessment techniques. Third, creating and establishing professional learning communities or online networks may help overcome isolation in rural areas. Teachers can share practical solutions by collaborating with peers through the networks created.

This paper contributes to the understanding of LAL in Vietnam and of LAL beyond Vietnam due to the methodology employed. Data were collected in the classroom which is the location of the teachers' assessment practices. Thus, we can observe how the teachers operationalise LAL when conducting assessments and in the follow-up interviews hear from the teachers the thinking behind those assessment activities. The project included further data collection methods such as survey and focus group discussions which further enrich the understanding of LAL in Vietnam.

In sum, LAL is a phenomenon that extends far beyond knowledge of assessment. When trying to understand teacher LAL it is necessary to acknowledge the tensions between policies and ideologies. By looking into teachers' attitudes, beliefs and practices more effective training can be tailored and targeted. This training should be directed to in-service teachers and should respond to changes to the teaching context such as curriculum reform.

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World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki–Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Participants

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was entirely voluntary and consent forms were obtained from all participants. All data were collected anonymously and used solely for research purposes.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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