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Teachers' Beliefs about Assessment in Different Contexts

Anotar la Línea de Generación y Aplicación del Conocimiento al que se adscribe el presente proyecto

Mayanin Juárez Rojas

Mtra. Patricia Núñez Mercado

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Abstract

This is a qualitative interview study about the impact of teachers' beliefs about assessment. It aims to explore teacher's agreement, or disagreement, about the way they assess, or have to assess, their students and the influence of this on their teaching.

The participants of this study were fifteen in-service teachers who were currently studying an MA degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, in which they took a course on evaluation. The participants were interviewed by email at the beginning of the course, inquiring about specific aspects of their beliefs regarding assessment and their own contexts, and they were interviewed again at the end of the course. This was an interview which consisted of six open questions. The data was analyzed in order to find out how these teachers perceived assessment, if there was any change in their beliefs after taking the evaluation course at the MA Program and if the way they assessed, or had to assess their students seemed to have any impact on the way they teach. Then, the information was classified into three different categories: feelings, school policies and perceptions, and for further research may be interesting to identify the different types of assessment which could be helpful for teachers in the future.

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Introduction

> *If assessment is to be a positive force in education, it must be implemented properly. It cannot be used to merely sort students or to criticize education. Its goals must be to improve education. Rather than 'teach to the test,' we [teachers] must 'test what we teach'.*
>
> *Lockwood and McLean (2007).*

Assessment in the classroom is an important way for students to get fair grades. As Santiago et al. (2012) underlines "this is a key area to guarantee fairness of student marking across the country" (p. 61). The way in which students are assessed could vary depending on their teacher's methods and criteria. Sometimes the criteria of assessment are implemented by the school authorities, but most of the time they are proposed by teachers. Teachers choose or propose some criteria to use during their assessment. However, authorities and students do not seem to be fully aware of what teachers think of the way students are assessed, if they agree or disagree with the assessment, or if they would like to add or modify something. The main objective of assessment is "to gather data upon which to make informed decisions and to support learning" (Wallace et. al, 2007, p.1). This research looks into teachers' belies about assessment in order to explore the impact of their feelings and beliefs when assessing their students.

The teachers participating in this qualitative interview study were enrolled in an MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and all of them were teaching at that moment, although not all of them were working in the same context. Therefore, in this study, I analyzed the different ways in which these teachers assessed and what they thought about the type of assessment they used or had to use, whether they agreed or not with it and if assessment influenced somehow the way they taught.

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One of the main reasons for doing this research was to give some teachers the opportunity to express their feelings and beliefs about what they were doing in their classrooms and explain what they thought about assessing their students and the techniques or methods they used. It is important to know how their beliefs may influence their way of teaching and assessing.

Chapter one explains the context and focus which includes sections such as evaluation in Mexico and English evaluation; the general focus of this research, assessment in the ELT context and previous research about teachers' beliefs regarding assessment; the objectives, research questions and the main reasons why this study was carried out.

Chapter two presents the definitions of beliefs and assessment, how useful it is for teachers and for students, how important it is for both teachers and students in the classroom, as well as the different types of assessment, such as formative and summative.

The methodology is explained in chapter three. Section one deals with the type of study and gives the definitions of action research and case study. Then, section two describes the contexts and the participants. Section three, the data collection methods, introduces e-mail interviews as the type of interview used in this study. Next, section four includes the description of the implementation and section five, the data analysis which involves the categories and the sequence I followed when analyzing the information.

Chapter four presents the main findings. There is one section for each of the categories as well as an extra section. Section one is feelings regarding assessment which showed teachers' feelings, whether positive or negative. Section two is about school policies regarding assessment and how it affected or influenced teachers' assessment. Section three is about assessment perceptions, which included what teachers considered

about assessment. And the last section was about other relevant aspects which included teachers' assessment methods and criteria they used.

Chapter five is about the discussion and reflections, it compares the results of this study with those of other authors. It also deals with the importance of the findings.

Finally, chapter six explains the conclusions and implications; it also includes the limitations of this study, further investigation and the implications of this study.

Chapter 1: Context & Focus

1.1 General Context

Mexican education has changed over the centuries. Coerver et al. (2004) explain that in colonial times, it was only focused on religion and "many secondary level schools focused on the training of young men for the priesthood" (p.159). Apart from this religion was "reserved for wealthier and more Spanish elements of society" (p.159), which means that poor people could not attend schools, or receive neither catholic nor academic education. From the beginning, Mexican education has faced different problems, for example "illiteracy, absenteeism, lack of schools, and shortage of well-trained teachers" (p.159). In short, Mexico has had many obstacles in education for centuries. First it was only about religion, and then it was only for men, "women education was limited by social expectations that consigned them to marriage or the convent" (p.159). The "first university was established in 1551" (p. 160) and they only admitted men.

During the twentieth century, in the Porfirian era, more people had access to education because of the growth of primary and vocational schools. During this period, education opened its doors to women. It was not until the Mexican Revolution that there were deeper changes regarding education. The Constitution of 1917 had a fundamental part on Mexican decisions; article 3 "reiterated the nineteenth-century idea of free, secular, and compulsory primary education" (p. 160) which led to a modified educational system. The Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) emerged in 1920; with this, education changed and religious education was prohibited in public and private schools. In 1910 was established the National University in Mexico City, "an opportunity for higher education" (p.160). However, by 1929, its name changed to National Autonomous University (UNAM as known today).

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1.1.1 Evaluation in Mexico

Nowadays, according to Santiago et al. (2012), the SEP has the role of a "regulator in areas such as funding, evaluation and administration of education personnel" (p. 19). Therefore, this secretariat is responsible for the development of the education system and the establishment of the students' learning objectives. The SEP also establishes the evaluation for teachers and students through the Educational Policy Planning and Evaluation Unit (UPEPE); this department is under federal management and is responsible for "the collection and dissemination of the information necessary for the planning and evaluation of the education sector as well as for the development of strategic programmes" (p. 20). The National Institute for Educational Assessment and Evaluation (INEE) also plays an important role in educational evaluation. This Agency, as well as SEP, is in charge of "the design and development of student national assessments, educational indicators on the quality of national education system, and evaluation instruments and guidelines; the management of international student assessment; the support to state authorities in their educational evaluation activities; the promotion of an evaluation culture within the Mexican education system; and studies an research in educational evaluation" (p. 20).

Additionally, the National Assessment Centre for Higher Education (CENEVAL) is in charge of designing and applying "instruments for assessing knowledge, skills and competencies, as well as for analyzing and disseminating test results, at different levels in the education system" (Santiago et al., 2012, p.21). Mexican education has grown "from about 3 million in 1950 to more than 30 million students in 2007" (p. 28). Nowadays, national education assessment is also monitored by the National Assessment of Academic Achievement in School (ENLACE), which was introduced in 2006. They use an instrument in which students are evaluated in Spanish, Mathematics and another different subject each year. With ENLACE, students, teachers, parents, school policies, etc. may modify their methods for teaching or learning.

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In Mexico, there is a range of assessment instruments from national assessment to continuous formative in classrooms. There is another test administered at the end of primary school which is called Instrument for Testing New Lower Secondary School Students (IDANIS) and another one at the end of secondary, the National Upper Secondary Education Entrance Exam (EXANI I). There are more diagnostic exams administered at these two levels (primary and secondary school), such as the National Assessment of Academic Achievement in Schools (ENLACE), mentioned before. There are also four main Undersecretariats: the Undersecretariat for Basic Education (*Subsecretaría de Educación Básica*, SEB); the Undersecretariat for Upper Secondary Education (*Subsecretaría de Educación Media Superior*, SEMS); the Undersecretariat for Higher Education (*Subsecretaría de Educación Superior*, SES); and the Educational Policy Planning and Evaluation Unit (*Unidad de Planeación y Evaluación de Políticas Educativas*, UPEPE).

1.1.2 English evaluation

According to authorities in Veracruz State, during 2007 – 2008 in elementary schools English was offered in twenty-three states which represented 7.19% out of the Mexican population. The Undersecretariat for Basic Education planned an increased number of hours for English as a subject in kindergarten, elementary and secondary schools. The program is called *Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica (PNIEB)*. The examination that certifies this program is called *Certificado Nacional de Nivel de Idioma (CENNI)*. Moreover, the university of Veracruz creates certified exams called EXAVER I, II and III with the help of British Council and the university of Cambridge, England. Such exams measure the level of English learned in a given period of time. Nevertheless, a university in Mexico did not ask for a minimum level of English in the entrance exam, that is, in 2013 and a couple of years before, the entrance exam did not include an English section which measures the students' English level.

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1.2 Problem/focus

1.2.1 Assessment in the ELT context

Assessment is important at all levels, from children to adults. However, the instruments or criteria for assessing students vary depending on teachers. For teachers in Mexico, marking "consists of assigning points to students across a range of elements: homework completion, class attendance, participation in classroom activities, neatness of tasks, discipline, teamwork, presentations and tests" (Santiago et al., 2012, p. 70). SEP recommends that tests should be aligned to content and activities of the "curricular content" (p. 72). Assessment not only improves Mexican education, but also improves ELT education. It helps teachers to develop instruments to assess students and based on results teachers or students can take action in classrooms. "Assessment in Mexico is integral to the work of teachers. Evidence on student learning is collected regularly and a variety of aspects are taken into account for student assessment: tasks, effort, presentations, tests, projects" (Santiago et al., 2012, p. 76). The main focus of this study is ELT assessment in different contexts due to its importance these days for EFL teachers.

1.2.2 Previous research about teachers' beliefs regarding assessment

Furthermore, some studies have been done about teachers' beliefs regarding assessment. For example, Bliem and Davinroy (1997) researched *Teachers' beliefs about assessment and instruction in literacy*, which explained instructions given by teachers in the classrooms in order to check how effective a "particular instructional program" was (p. 2). Another study was done by Matese et al. (2002) called *Teachers' beliefs about assessment in inquiry-based science: Research to inform professional development* which first analyzed teachers' beliefs to use that information in their professional development, "the first principle is that an assessment system should be

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based on a developmental perspective of student learning" (p. 4).

Then, Song and Koh (n.d.) did the study called *Assessment for learning: understanding teachers' beliefs and practices* which aimed at discovering teachers' beliefs "about student learning and formative assessment practices" (p. 4). Finally, Muñoz et al. (2012) called *Teachers' beliefs about assessment in an EFL context in Colombia* studied sixty-two teachers and their beliefs about assessment, their impact on their teaching practice. This last study about assessment was the inspiration for doing this study, but in Mexican context and using different method.

1.3 Objectives

The main objectives of this study were to identify the impact of teachers' beliefs about assessment and the assessment methods they used in classrooms. That is to say, how teachers define or perceive the way they assess their students, if they agree, or disagree, with school policies, and if it influences their way of assessing. It is important to know what teachers think about assessment, especially when they are studying an MA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

As secondary objective was to discover to what extent this study could give voice to the teachers for people to know their perspectives about assessment and their modifications in teaching practice, basically focused on improving education. Furthermore, it wanted to show teachers' agreement or disagreement about school policies regarding assessment methods and how their methods are influenced by them.

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1.4 Research questions

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- What is the impact of teachers' beliefs about assessment on their own context?

And three sub-questions are:

- How do teachers' feelings influence their assessment?

- To what extent school policies influence assessment?

- What do teachers think about assessment?

1.5 Rationale

When teachers assess, they should state clear objectives about their assessment in order to be logical when assessing. Morrison (2008) states "assessments must have a clear benefit" and he also says that it "should be reliable, valid, and fair for a purpose" (p. 148). Teachers need to collect several elements in order to have the criteria to assess their students. Assessment is important for teachers when assessing students because assessment is useful for teachers to be aware of what students have learned and based on the results teachers need to make any change in their teaching practice. That is to say, assessment is important to "gain information about what students have mastered and can be used to improve teaching" (Community College of Philadelphia, n.d.). Due to the fact that assessment is used to gather information in order to obtain the sufficient criteria to grade students in a specific subject, this study was carried out to gather information regarding what one group of teachers believed about assessment in their different contexts.

This study is important because it may help teachers to become aware of why to assess students and how important it was in their teaching practice. The findings can contribute to the fairer grading of students. It may also improve the teachers' development to analyze the criteria they take into consideration in the assessment. The sections developed in this paper may be helpful for teachers to improve their

assessment methods. When analyzing the information gathered from the interviews, I explained the findings I obtained before and after the course the participants took part. This course may be useful to obtain information and modify their assessment methods. The results of this research may increase the criteria teachers could include or take into account in their assessment; it may also be useful for them to determine their future ways of assessment. Personally, I consider this study to be helpful for those teachers who want to modify their methods when assessing students.

As mentioned before, Muñoz et al. (2012) carried out a study in Colombia with sixty-five participants. This study was the inspiration to do a similar study with fifteen teachers in the Mexican country. The assessment methods of these Mexican teachers were influenced by their teaching context and by school policies. In spite of the limitations, these teachers were committed to fulfilling their goals regarding assessment.

Chapter 2: Literature review

The main concern of this study was to explore the impact of teachers' beliefs about assessment based on different contexts and how these beliefs may, or not, influence their assessment methods. Therefore, different definitions of important concepts, types of assessment and importance of assessment for readers are explained in the following paragraphs in order to be aware of the different definitions in this study. In this chapter are developed the sections of definition of beliefs, assessment, different types of assessment, and the importance of assessment.

2.1 Definition of beliefs

Beliefs are defined, according to Brown and Cooney (1982 in Asia-Pacific forum, 2009), as "dispositions to action and major determinants of behavior" which may modify people's actions according to what they see or listen to. Therefore, Rokeach (1972 in Asia-Pacific forum, 2009) confirms "any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase 'I believe that'" (p. 113) and this author, classified beliefs into three categories: descriptive or existential, evaluative and prescriptive or exhortatory beliefs.

Finally, Pajares (1992 in Asia-Pacific forum, 2009) define belief as "individual's judgment of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do" (p. 316). This is that people agree or disagree with themselves according to what they think is adequate or not. What teachers believe about their class, students, colleagues, criteria, methods, etc. influence their assessment methods.

2.2 Definition of assessment

Assessment is "the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students' learning and development" (Erwin, 1991). Assessment helps teachers and students to improve their evaluation and to get better grades. It is done with the objective of being fair when grading students. Teachers should take into account this information in order for students to increase their professional development. According to Palomba and Banta (1999) assessment is "the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development". These authors agree with the idea that assessment helps the process of a course through giving feedback and improving student's learning. Pickford (n.d.) highlights that assessment "should be an integral component of course design, and should play a positive role in student learning". In other words, assessment is the main activity which a teacher develops when designing a program. He or she should highlight the evaluation criteria including activities, exercises or tasks students must fulfill to obtain a good grade.

Moreover, another definition of assessment is "the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deeper understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences" (Huba and Freed, 2000). The aspects included or taken into account in assessment are important, but teachers sometimes have the flexibility of deciding which aspects to consider in the assessment in order to help students to acquire knowledge. Students may get the necessary elements to get good marks through assessment. In this process, students are the participants and teachers are the judges who determine what students have to do and participate in to pass a specific course.

In conclusion, assessment is a fundamental part of evaluation which helps teachers to

grade students in a fairer manner, and it tends to improve, in a way, teachers' teaching practice and methods of evaluation, and at the same time, students' learning and development as well.

2.3 Types of assessment

Students find this tool beneficial because teachers should choose different ways of assessing them. That is to say, teachers should vary their ways of assessing students with the main goal of being practical and fair with them. In the following lines types of assessment are explained, for example, objective vs. subjective assessment, direct vs. indirect, formative vs. summative, and assessment as, for, and of learning.

First of all, objective assessment is the assessment which does not apply the teachers' judgement to assign the grade to students. For instance, teachers should apply professional judgement to interpret the results for each student's activities. On the other hand, it can also be subjective assessment which uses professional judgement to determine a grade for students based on teachers' perspective instead of proficiency tests. This last type of assessment also requires professional judgement from teachers, but the results may vary in quality (Suskie, 2004; Maki, 2004).

Secondly, direct assessment is represented by activities as evidence that students are learning. It is focused on students' perspectives about their learning (Suskie, 2004). According to Suskie & Maki (2004), direct assessment "prompts students to represent or demonstrate their learning or produce work so that observers can assess how well students' texts or responses fit institution- or program-level expectations". It should include portfolios, written tasks or presentations, and quizzes and tests. Indirect assessment, on the contrary, is the opposite. It takes into account students' performance more than specific evidence. Indirect assessment should include self-assessments of knowledge and skills about learning (Suskie, 2004; Maki, 2004).

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Thirdly, formative assessment is a process in which teachers assess students' learning. In other words, it assesses students' progress through providing feedback about their performance; such feedback "adjusts ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes" (Coffey, n.d.). Formative assessment also answers the questions: Where am I going? and Where am I now? Teachers have great responsibility with respect to assessment, they "must help students evaluate their progress in the learning process and give them explicit, descriptive feedback specific to the learning task" (Coffey, n.d.) in order for them to increase their learning, as a result their grades. Monroe (2013) highlights that feedback is a fundamental part of this type of assessment due to the fact that students may change their behavior and learning during a course or term; they could improve their progress by modifying their activities and performance.

Nevertheless, summative assessment is done at the end of a course to show students' achievement of a course by providing scores and students' grades (Suskie, 2004). According to Suskie & Maki (2004) summative assessment is "designed to capture students' achievement at the end of their program of study and their undergraduate or graduate education based on criteria and standards of judgment". Summative assessment is mainly done with the objective of identifying whether or not goals are fulfilled. With reference to Coffey (n.d.), summative assessment means "cumulative evaluations used to measure student growth after instruction and are generally given at the end of a course in order to determine whether long term learning goals have been met". Based on summative assessment results, teachers can modify their programs or the curricula to improve their teaching practice and develop students' performance in the classrooms. Monroe (2013) coincides with the idea that teachers, or even schools, could use this type of assessment to "identify strengths and weaknesses of curriculum and instruction, with improvements affecting the next year's/term's students". Thus, this type of assessment may include, end-of-unit or -chapter tests, end-of-term or -semester exams, etc.

The last type of assessment includes assessment as learning, for learning and of learning. Firstly, assessment as learning refers to fostering students' critical thinking. With reference to Earl and Katz (2004, p. 41), assessment as learning "emphasizes assessment as a process of metacognition (knowledge of one's own thought processes) for students". Thus, students need to focus on thinking in a deeper way and making their own conclusions. Earl and Katz (2004, p. 41) mentioned that students are "the connectors between assessment and learning". That is, students can "monitor what they are learning" in an active way. Secondly, assessment for learning considers students as the main instrument to identify what they can do or which doubts they may have about their learning.

According to Earl and Katz (2004, p. 29) highlight that "it is designed to make each student's understanding visible, so that teachers can decide what they can do to help students progress". That is to say that assessment for learning shows the continuous progress of each student. Thirdly, assessment of learning is a final assessment because it shows what students have learned and if they have achieved the main objectives of the curricula. It is helpful to "make decisions about students' future programs or placements" (Earl and Katz, 2004, p. 41). It helps students know how well they did it in a subject, term, etc.

2.4 Importance of assessment

The importance of assessment is to "gain information about what students have mastered and can be used to improve teaching" (Community College of Philidelphia, n.d.). This same author(s) attaches a figure which represents the ongoing process of the role of assessment in the classroom. The figure is called "the teaching-learning-assessment cycle". It is the following:

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The Teaching - Learning - Assessment Cycle
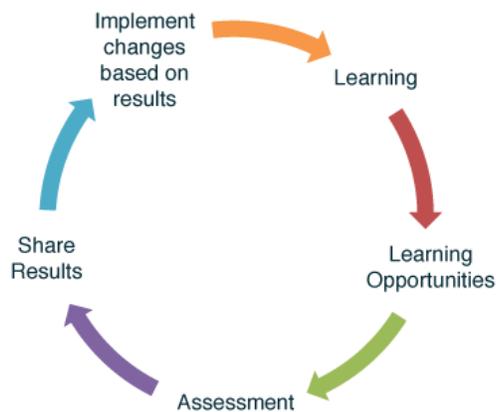
Source: Community College of Philidelphia (n.d.).

This figure shows how a teacher may engage this cycle and relate the activities which surround the assessment they apply in their classrooms. It is a recommendable way to work in classroom. Teachers should analyze this cycle and have a clearer manner of applying assessment. Furthermore, illustrates the cycle in which all students are assessed by using different types of assessment.

Assessment is used in classrooms to make improvements in students' methods and teaching practice. The results of assessment are important to teachers in order for them to improve students' learning; so that teachers "see their assessments as an integral part of the instruction process and as crucial for helping students learn" (Guskey, 2003, p. 6).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explains the sections of type of study which included the definitions of an action research and a case study as research methods. Secondly, context and participants which contains a table in which data of participants are included. Thirdly, data collection explains the instruments used in this study. Then, description of implementation indicates the way in which participants were interviewed. Finally, data analysis explains the information found in the analysis, the categories in which it was divided and quotations related to each category.

3.1 Type of study

This study aims to implement and evaluate different assessment methods in order to improve teaching practice and promote benefits to students and teachers. I explored the impact of teachers' beliefs regarding assessment as a first stage of action research. I decided to analyze their beliefs about assessment using case study as a research method.

Action research is an "investigation designed for use by teachers to attempt to solve problems and improve professional practices in their own classrooms" (Parsons & Brown, 2002). That is to say, it is an action research because the researcher "takes action in the investigation". Another definition, according to Ary et al. (2006, p. 538) is that the researcher has to "take action based in research and researching the action taken". Shivendra and Kumar (2007, p. 88) mention that action research is mainly focused on "aspects of education" when the research is focused on that. It "concerns the day-to-day problems that arise for the institution as a whole". Another definition of action research is that it is focused on practitioners in order to make decisions which help to improve teaching practice (Corey, n.d. in Shivendra & Kumar, 2007, p. 88). The

study was done scientifically with the main purpose of gathering a more precise result. Finally, MCthrete (n.d. in Shivendra & Kumar, 2007, p. 88) states that action research aims at "constructive change of given endeavour by individual or group concerned with change and improvement". Action research, in education, seeks to improve teaching practice and students' learning by studying the aspects which surround them in order to take action and establish better methods or pieces of advice.

The main characteristics of an action research are: the research is carried out in a local context and area, it is conducted by the researcher himself/herself, and the results take action or are implemented in the researcher context. Action research also involves "action and reflection" (Ary et al., 2006, p. 539). Moreover, based on Shivendra and Kumar definitions of action research, the main characteristics of it are, for instance, processes of "practical problems of education"; the scientific methods to find "a practical solution of current problems"; as mentioned before, it is used to improve teaching practice; however, it does not "contribute to the fund of theoretical knowledge" (p.88). In addition to this, action research has been used in different "settings, including schools, hospitals, etc. [...], it is used to "enhance everyday work practices" (Ary et al., 2006, p. 538).

Then, according to Ary et al. (2006, p. 32) a case study is "an in-depth study of a single group [...]". It is used to solve problems related to an individual, a group of people, an organization, etc. Merriam and Associates' (2002, p. 8 in Ary et al., 2006, p. 456) definition of case studies said that provide an "intensive description and analysis of a social unit such as a group [...]". Therefore, Yin (2009, p. 4) says that they help to "investigate characteristics of real-life" which involve human behaviours in their lives. Yin considers case study as an "empirical inquiry" which investigates "contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context and the boundaries between phenomenon and context [which] are not evident" (p.18). Moreover, it aims to "arrive at a detailed description and understanding of the entity" (Ary et al., 2006, p. 32).

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3.2 Context and participants

The participants of this study were fifteen in-service teachers studying a Master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language. The research took part in a public university in Veracruz. Most of these participants were teaching at university level, but the others are teaching at secondary, primary and kindergarten levels. In order to make the data more understandable, the following table shows the general information about the participants. The real names of the participants were omitted and substituted by nicknames in order to protect their identity.

Academic level	Type of school	Nickname	Age	Gender	Years of experience	No. of students	Hours/ week
Kindergarten	Public	Indra	35	F	5	40	20
Kindergarten	Private	Erika	29	F	5	69	35
Elementary	Public	Andrea	30	F	4.5	208	16
Elementary	Public	Zunnit	28	F	4	300 aprox.	16
Secondary	Private	Ana	27	F	5	15	7.5
Secondary & High school	Private	Edith	26	F	3	162	35
Secondary & High school	Private	Adele	28	F	6	67	19
High school	Public	Orlando	31	M	10	15	3
High school	Public	Froy	28	M	2	30	10
University	Private	Elda	33	F	3	22	6
University	Public	Osvaldo	38	M	17	70	40
University	Public	Elena	33	F	8	45	10
University	Public	Adriana	42	F	19	65	20
University	Public	Omar	27	M	6 aprox.	100	19
University	Public	Sergio	40	M	15	22	10

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3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Instruments

The instruments used in this study were e-mail interviews (appendix A and B); such instruments are explained in the following lines. The data were collected by interviewing, as I mentioned above, fifteen in-service English teachers from different contexts. There were two different interviews; the second one was done as a complement of the first one.

The first interview consisted of seven open-ended questions (appendix A) which were about their context, assessment criteria, how they felt about their contexts and the second interview was a complement (appendix B) which consisted of six open-ended questions about their assessment, their school policies and to what extent these influenced their assessment methods. The study fostered awareness about teachers' reflection and perspective about their assessment method.

The main reason why they were e-mail interviews were because of participants location was not the same as mine; that is to say, the participants lived far from me and it was impossible to look for them and interview them in a week before the beginning of the evaluation course. An e-mail interview is, firstly, "a viable tool for qualitative research" (Meho, 2006, p. 1285), also "a new and innovative method" (O'Connor, n.d., p. 2). It is, in general terms, a word document which includes questions about teachers' beliefs about assessment and their feelings regarding their assessment methods and techniques. Moreover, there are some studies which have used this type of interview: Illingworth 2001; Bampton and Cowton 2002; Kivits 2004; Kivits 2005 (O'Connor, n.d., p. 8).

The advantages of this type of instrument are: the costs are minimal; people do not

need to "travel", and they only need a laptop or computer, but not a recorder. It also saves time because the researcher does not need to type the interview transcriptions because they are written already. It allows participants to have the confidence of sending back the answers when they have them ready which allows participants to have enough time to analyze the answers. Finally, participants may enjoy this type of interview because they do not have to travel from one place to another and they have enough time to answer the questions, etc. (O'Connor, n.d., p. 4). On the other hand, there are some disadvantages to take into consideration when deciding to employ this type of interview. Participants may not be interested in answering questions in a serious manner; no acces to internet may also be an obstacle so that participants cannot log in to send you back the answers (O'Connor, n.d., p. 7).

3.4 Description of the Implementation

I interviewed a total of fifteen participants. I divided the interviews into two stages; the first stage was carried out before an evaluation course and the second stage after the course. In the first stage, I asked the seventeen teachers enrolled in the MA programme if they would participate in the study, and I explained to them that it was about their beliefs about assessment. They all accepted, and I sent the interview to all of them. However, only fifteen teachers answered back, and it took them about three weeks to do it. Actually, when using this type of interview, Opdenakker (2006) warns about how much time the interviewees can take to answer the interviews, so he suggests insisting again and again in order to obtain the information back as soon as possible (Paragraph 31). On the other hand, the advantage of this type of interview is that interviewees "take their time in answering questions and to take part in the interviews in a familiar environment" (Meho, 2006, p. 1290).

In the second stage, the second interview was sent to the same fifteen teachers after the evaluation course, in order to discover if the course had changed teachers' minds

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about assessment. This second interview was a follow-up to the first one in order to gather more information about how school policies influenced their assessment methods. The interviews were sent by email and the participants had to answer and send them back. However, there were some of them who spent so much time answering that I had to send some emails to them in order to get their answers back. It was maybe difficult for them because they all have a job and they needed much time to write their answers.

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Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Data Analysis

As mentioned before, this study was divided into two stages. The first stage (appendix A) took place before the evaluation course in the Master's programme the participants were enrolled, and the second stage (Appendix B) after that course. The useful information of the two interviews was classified together into three main categories, feelings, school policies, and perceptions which are related to teachers' beliefs regarding assessment towards their contexts. There were some other aspects regarding assessment methods and criteria mentioned by the teachers in the interviews that are reported at the end.

4.2 Description of Findings

4.2.1 Feelings regarding assessment

In this category, I included what teachers expressed about how they felt about their own contexts and assessment there. Evidently, teachers had some positive and some negative feelings regarding this issue, and so I presented them as follows. For example, *Edith* and *Ana* explained their feelings about how important assessment was in their classrooms.

> *If they [students] make mistakes they know that the most important thing is that they have to be able to express and transmit the information (Edith)*

> *I am not only interested in the written exam but also on students´ performance in the classroom (Ana)*

Edith was teaching from elementary to high school different groups in a private school

and *Ana* was teaching a public senior high school. These teachers highlighted that the most important for them was that students could demonstrate their knowledge while being assessed.

Then, *Adriana* mentioned that her priority was that students realized how important English was, so she felt sorry about the idea of her students regarding English. She did her best to help her students learn English. She also mentioned her responsibility towards her students.

> *I think the big problem is that students do not pay a lot of attention to the importance of learning English as a success tool in their careers. Very few of them really know what they want and prepare to obtain their goals. It is a pity … I think my responsibility is to expose students the most to the language so that them can learn and them demonstrate what they could achieve. (Adriana)*

Adriana was teaching young adults in a public university. She was worried about her students' learning and she really wanted them to learn English to face outside challenges.

Moreover, *Orlando* who was teaching in a public and rural preparatory expressed his feelings about assessment by saying that he would like to know more types of assessment in order to improve students' learning.

> *I wish I could know more specific ways of assessing my students.*

Omar also suggested that for him "*using tests and language portfolios is a good combination to enhance objectivity*". This last teacher wanted to highlight that: tests and portfolios were useful for him to assess his students in his context (a public university).

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Teachers seemed to be more aware of what assessment was and the different methods they could use in order to assess students, their feelings were expressed as follows. *Osvaldo* and *Omar* showed to feel positive with respect to assessment by saying that Osvaldo felt good and *Omar* liked when assessing their students.

> *I feel good when I have the chance to share with my students part of what I know and make them learn new things or solve any doubt (Osvaldo)*

> *I like assessing my students, but I may find it difficult as I am not an expert in this issue. I am learning a lot, but there is still a lot missing. (Omar)*

They expressed that they discovered what needed improvement, what their students learned and which their progress was.

There was another teacher, *Edith*, who expressed she felt nervous and frustrated, but also excited and enthusiastic at the same time.

> *Sometimes, I feel nervous because I expect the majority of my students have good grades and all their work is delivered on time, and frustrated when I have to check all the exams, books, notebooks, workbooks, etc. because it is time consuming and I spend more time or days than the ones that the institution gives me. On the contrary, Sometimes I feel excited and enthusiastic because when I assess my students I can see in which areas they are weak and strong (Edith)*

On the other hand, there were teachers who felt stressed. Those teachers highlighted they were committed with students' learning because they care of their course and classes; they spend time on grading, and care of students' improvement as well. For example, the following teachers expressed to feel stressed when assessing.

> *Sometimes is stressful when you realize that what you are doing is not appropriate for your learners, then you have to change everything and start all over again. (Erika)*

Erika felt stressed when she realized the plans were not the adequate or needed some modifications; this was because she wanted to be well prepared when assessing her students, so that they really learned. She also seemed to be worried about students' improvement because she mentioned that if assessment required it, she had to *"start all over again"* in order of have a successful assessment.

Then, *Elda* commented she was worried about improving students' learning and she said that:

> *Sometimes I feel stressed, because it is not about numbers, so many elements need to be taken into account in order to really have a general idea of what the students have learned, why and how and also what can I do as a teacher to give my students enough tools to keep learning (Elda)*

Andrea was really worried about students' assessment, she mentioned she had to take into consideration different elements in order to know how much students learned and what she could do as a teacher to improve it.

> *Sometimes I feel stressed because I know that what I will see is not what I expected. We tend to think that we are doing things right and everything is clear but what if students don't take the time to review at home what has been taught at school? So the results can motivate or demotivate you. But at the end assessment let us check students' improvement (Andrea)*

Finally, *Adele* expressed she worried more for the results when assessing and checking if students really learned what she wanted to teach them. Also, *Ana* said she felt *"under pressure"* because for her *"assessing is time-consuming"*.

All these teachers expressed their feelings whether positive or negative towards assessment. Most of them said it was a stressing task to assess students but they cared about students' progress too, so that they did their best effort to share with them their knowledge as much as possible.

4.2.2 School Policies regarding assessment

This category was about school policies which may affect or influence teachers' assessment. This was divided into two stages based on the order in which the interviews were employed. The expressions show how teachers' assessment was influenced by school policies.

The following teachers explained they were happy because in the school they worked they had the freedom to decide their way of assessing and the aspects they took into account when assessing their students.

> *The institution allows me to assess students in a free way, I am the one who decides which are the priorities at the time of checking students' learning process (Edith)*

> *In this school I am free to assess in any way I want as long as there are at least three ways of assessing and that the written exam has no more than a 50% of value. So the way I assess is the way I find most suitable for my class (Elda)*

> *They give me freedom enough to do what I consider the best to assess (Elena)*

> *We are free to do whatever we want as long as we do not lose the objectives of our teaching (Erika)*

These teachers expressed they decided how to assess, but focused on the main objective, students' learning. They had to decide what the best way to assess their students was, but they were happy because they could use any type of assessment with the only condition of fulfilling the objectives.

Then, *Adriana* highlighted she had *"to follow the standard evaluation proposed since 2010"* due to standardized partial and final exams were administered by a committee.

She said that:

> *It [assessment] includes four skills evaluation, self-learning strategies, collaborative learning. We [teachers] also prepare the quizzes and partial examinations, but the "Comisión de Evaluación y Seguimiento" at the UV prepares the final tests, which are administered simultaneously at the same time, the same day in the whole state (Adriana)*

Froy also had to administer a standardized exam when assessing his students, apart from some other aspects he took into account.

> *In fact, a standardized exam is compulsory. Thus, I need to follow the school policies. (Froy)*

Adriana and *Froy* were free to assess their students designing her own quizzes and partial exams, but they were not free to design the final exam. Based on what teacher Adriana said, the *Committee* seemed to be well-organized when administering their exams because they are administered the same date and at the same time in the whole State of Veracruz.

On the other hand, *Indra* had to ask for permission to talk to the principal and explained the situation of having the freedom to evaluate her students, after she was heard, she was allowed to do it freely.

> *There was no policy about assessment, that is why they do not influence me, mainly because I require a meeting with the principal (no coordinator here), then explained her all these obstacles and got her authorization to do whatever I wanted to do in order to evaluate them (Indra)*

Indra had to have a deep conversation with her principal in order to get a fairer way of assessing without the influence of school.

Another teacher, *Omar*, said that he did not agree with the school policies because he founded *the school programme "not well-balanced"* and there was no support from

the school:

> *The number of students per group, the timetables teachers and students must adapt to, the lack of participation from some teachers, some facilities, etc. make it a bit hard to teach easily (Omar)*

Ana also explained that she did not agree with school policies because they were not congruent in the school she worked in. She mentioned she was asked to teach something different from what was assessed and all her students should pass the subject:

> *Sometimes they are not congruent. They want us to teach in a way and evaluate students in a different manner … in my workplace almost all my students have to get a good grade in the exam, if students get a seven is like getting a 5 in a public school. So, I have to work harder in order to avoid this situation (Ana)*

Most of the teachers have to follow some rules or some policies which were established by the school in order for all the teachers to have a similar evaluation, the types of assessment had been, were and would be the same every year, every generation.

> *In High school, I have to follow strict rules but I think those are fair enough because they give me the opportunity of analyzing and reflecting about students development … , I just have to follow the policies from the "DGB" which is 60% for the exam and 40% focused in their evidences. (Edith)*

> *I personally do not agree with all the policies. Sometimes planning assessment requires time and preparation. However, this process is not always given enough time. Ergo, students might be evaluated wrongly as assessment policies were planned in a rush … Even if I believe certain policies are not appropriate for assessing students, I must adjust my assessment methods to them as agreements were made in meetings with teachers (Omar)*

What seemed to be more difficult were the situations of some of the teachers who seemed to be asked to assess their students in the way school policies asked for. Authorities in school did not mind if they were fair, stressed or tired. They told them a date to assign the grades and those teachers had to fulfill it.

> *Sometimes assessment is not really important to schools. They just want to know the grades as soon as possible. And it is your problem as a teacher to motivate your students or do whatever you have to do so that the students pass (Elda)*

> *I do not really like it because I have to assign a grade and sometimes students have made their best effort which is not enough to pass the subject (Adriana)*

> *They are too vague in my current job … That affects directly my decisions on how to assess, as I am not allowed to fail students. If for any chance any of them fail the exams I have to give extra hours to help them pass the course. So when I design assessment strategies I usually think of helping my students not to fail (Orlando)*

> *I am told what type of assessment to use and when to use it (Adele)*

These four teachers were aware of school policies, so that they had to follow them in order to keep their jobs. They are asked for the grades and school did not care about students learning and progress, but they only needed good grades, teachers looked for the way to motivate their students to pass the subject.

4.2.3 Perceptions regarding Assessment

In this third category, teachers explained if they agreed with their assessment methods their beliefs about assessment, how they perceived it regarding its importance. In other words, they expressed their perceptions about assessment.

The following teachers mentioned they agreed with their assessment method because in that sense they could be aware of how much students had learned or what was missing:

> *In this way [assessing] my students can feel I am worry about them and their learning process (Osvaldo)*

> *I agree because I can know if the students know what they have to know (Elena)*

> *I agree. Because otherwise I would never know because they are not the kind of students that ask you something they do not understand in English (Erika)*

Some other teachers, *Andrea* and *Adele*, expressed that in their specific context, the way of assessing students had worked as long as they fulfilled their objectives. And teacher Adele suggested some changes on her programme.

> *For me it has worked because it is also a way to help the 'weaker' students not to fail the course. And to help the better ones to get good grades (Andrea)*

> *I think it works where I work. Nonetheless I consider some different ways could be used. For example: classroom oral production instead of only classroom activities (Adele)*

Then, *Omar* explained how he perceived assessment, he mentioned he did not agree with his way of assessing because the exams were not *"reliable and valid".* Moreover, he mentioned those exams could affect students because they could fail exams.

> *I sometimes consider that the way exams are made is not good enough so as to evaluate students. They are not as reliable and valid as they should be. Therefore students may end up passing or failing a course they should*

not. The problem with some examinations is that they may need some correcting and professors cannot sometimes invest much time on them (Omar)

Furthermore, teachers expressed their beliefs about assessment and explained what assessment was and how important it was for them.

The following teachers considered assessment as an important tool to measure students' learning; they thought it was useful to check students' progress.

It's important to find out if students are really learning what you are trying to teach them … I feel confident in what I am doing (Elena)

It's quite important, in order to know our students progress (Sergio)

It is helpful because it "shows" to what extent a topic was understood (Ana)

I think that it is the best way to know if students are really learning and if the methods employed have worked (Andrea)

That it is part of the teaching and learning process. It is a way to measure my students' progress (Froy)

I think it is necessary to assess students so as to know and let them know what their current level is. (Omar)

Indra, for example, mentioned she considered assessment as a *"complicate activity"* as she was working with kindergarten level, however, in her school they were asked to implement an "alternative assessment", which was not developed in Mexico, in order to help their students.

It is a complicate activity because some of my students do not know how to write or to read … so, I implemented alternative assessment and then I feel just relaxed with this regard (Indra)

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As well as *Erika* who said that assessment was a *"responsible activity"* because they as teachers had to improve classes every time if failed.

> *I think that assessment is a responsible activity for us teachers to do, in order to check if what we are doing is working for our students, ourselves, the institution, etc. Therefore, if something is not right, then it's our duty to do something about it, to improve our classes as well our teaching, so that students can learn, which is our objective (Erika)*

On the other hand, *Erika* mentioned assessment was demanding and exhausted due to the preparation of different types of material during the whole course.

> *"It is very demanding and exhausted, it implies a lot of work since I have to prepare lots of materials during the week" (Erika)*

All these expressions represented the teachers who were committed to students but school policies were not the adequate for them to develop their job. Although limitations, teachers made their best to fulfill their commitment of sharing their knowledge with students and help them learn as much as possible.

Teachers explained the importance of learning on their teaching objectives; they really wanted their students to learn English. *Adele* stated that she felt like she might *"change or modify* her *techniques in benefit of* her *students"* which was very interested because she demonstrated she cares about their students learning.

4.2.4 Other relevant aspects

Assessment methods and criteria
There were also important aspects which teachers took into account when assessing

their students such as assessment methods and criteria. Such methods were tests based on text books, quizzes, observation, written and oral exams, partial and final exams, projects, peer, group and personal correction and some of the criteria were attendance, vocabulary, portfolio, homework, works, use of language, classwork, participation, oral production, pronunciation and grammar structures, fluency, and performance. Most of them assessed their students in the same way, some because of school policies and some others because they decided to do so.

After the analysis of the interviews administered to the fifteen participants, I realized that they based their assessment methods and criteria on their contexts. In other words, the teachers highlighted that their main priority were students, from children to teenagers or adults, they cared for students' learning and what they wanted was to transmit them their knowledge in order for them to have enough tools to face real-life.

Four of the participants said that apart from the elements they took into account when assessing, there were some others such as "their capacities [and] *attitudes towards what they are learning"(Orlando, Zunnit, Andrea, and Omar)* .

In conclusion, the three main categories: feelings, school policies and perceptions, as well as assessment methods and criteria were taken into consideration for most of the teachers to assess their students. The feelings varied according to their contexts, most of schools allowed teachers to assess their students freely, and many of the teachers considered assessment as important, useful, and helpful to know students' learning and improvement.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 General Reflections

The categories explained in the previous chapter, were feelings, school policies and perceptions regarding assessment. In this chapter, are compared the results with the information in literature review chapter.

Firstly, the information of the authors Erwin (1991) and Palomba& Banta (1999) is similar because all of them agree with assessment as an important process to "increase" or "improve students' learning and development". Assessment is "the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students' learning and development" (Erwin, 1991) and it is also "the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development". (Palomba and Banta, 1999)

Teachers coincided with the idea of assessment as important tool to let teachers and parents know about students' progress or improvement. *Andrea*, for example, said "*…at the end assessment let us check students' improvement*"; *Edith* mentioned "*I am the one who decides which are the priorities at the time of checking students' learning process";* and *Sergio* emphasized "*It's quite important in order to know our students' progress*"

Secondly, Huba and Freed(2000) described assessment as "the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deeper understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences".

In the same way, *Elda* highlighted that she took into account different aspects when assessing her students, *"so many elements need to be taken into account in order to really have a general idea of what the students have learned, why and how and also what can I do as a teacher to give my students enough tools to keep learning"*.

Thirdly, Guskey (2003) mentioned assessment is "an integral part of the instruction process and crucial to help students learn" (p. 6). That is to say that it is not an easy process, but it is fundamental to improve learning. Teacher *Erika* said that assessment *"is very demanding and exhausted, it implies a lot of work since I have to prepare lots of materials during the week"*. As it is integral, it needs more aspects to consider.

Then, Coffey (n.d.) expressed that assessment "must help students evaluate their progress in the learning process and give them explicit, descriptive feedback specific to the learning task". In that sense, students can measure how much they have learned and what is missing so that they could improve their learning, as well as teachers realize what is missing so that they can improve their teaching. *Froy* mentioned assessment "*is part of the teaching and learning process. It is a way to measure my students' progress"* and *Edith* expressed *"when I assess my students I can see in which areas they are weak and strong"*.

Finally, Monroe (2013) explained that assessment help teachers "identify strengths and weaknesses of curriculum and instruction, with improvements affecting the next year's/term's students". Most of the teachers who took part in this study exposed in different ways they were committed to their students and they wanted to provide them with the best in order for them to feel comfortable when learning English. *Erika* highlighted "*it's our duty to do something about it [assessment], to improve our classes as well our teaching, so that students can learn, which is our objective"* and *"when what you are doing is not appropriate for your learners, then you have to change everything and start all over again.*

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Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications

6.1 Conclusions

Most of the participants felt stressed or nervous because they had many students and it was hard for them to assess them all, and because they were worried about having an appropriate programme when assessing their students, and so on. However, they considered assessment to be important as a tool to know students' progress or learning.

Based on school policies, most of the teachers had the freedom to assess their students in the way they decided only respecting the dates and the schedules. They were happy with this freedom because they looked for adequate assessment methods for their students taking into account different aspects and not only exams.

Moreover, assessment was considered an important tool because it allowed them to measure students' progress and improvement. Teachers were committed to students and they wanted to monitor students' progress to modify or maintain both teaching practices and assessment methods depending on students' learning.

Although most of them did not have the opportunity to improve their contexts, they did their best to assess their students fairly, taking into account different criteria such as homework, participation, classwork, etc. as well as performance, attitudes, and quality of work.

6.2 Limitations/comments

One of the limitations was the lack of time to fulfill the first cycle of action research due to the fact that it needs much time to be done. Another limitation was the type of questions I chose for the first interview; I considered they were not the adequate to

begin my study. Maybe, this promoted short answers from the participants; some of their answers were limited and/or superficial. Finally, the limitation of lack of interest from participants, as Kivits (2005 in Opdenakker 2006:paragraph 31) mentioned that "this does not only lead to the risk that the interviewee will lose interest in the research, but also to the risk that the interviewee may forget to reply to questions". The participants were not really interested in the study so they did not answer back soon.

6.3 Further investigation

Based on the results of this study, it could be interesting if the following stages would be:

1. Monitor teachers when using different types of assessment.
2. Monitor the students' learning process and determine the impact of these assessment methods.

As an action research will be:

Teachers' design, implementation, and evaluation of different assessment methods in order to improve students' learning according to their contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Interview one

1. Are you teaching now?

2. Could you please tell me about your teaching context?

3. How do you feel about it?

4. What do you think about your context?

5. How do you assess your students?

6. Which elements do you take into account to assess your students?

7. Do you agree with this way of assessing? Why? Why not?

Appendix B. Interview two (follow-up)

1. How long have you been teaching English?

2. Which level?

3. What do you think about assessment?

4. How do you feel when you are assessing?

5. What do you think about school policies regarding assessment?

6. How do school policies influence your assessment?