The challenges of a learning oriented and multilingual school assessment policy

The last two decades a worldwide increased mobility can be observed. This mobility – among other challenges – impacts also the linguistic and socio-cultural diversity in schools. Exploiting this diversity, providing equal opportunities for all pupils and raising their language proficiency is a major challenge for many school principals and teachers. In this context, a powerful school assessment policy which monitors the (language) learning processes of all pupils and which takes into account the multilingual realities of many pupils is pivotal. In this panel 4 papers will focus on these challenges.

Presentation 1 – Linking learning and assessment to support plurilingualism

The presentation will be organised around three core questions – What is learning? What is to be learned? What is the role of assessment in language learning? – and reports on projects that seek to implement a learning-oriented approach in practice.

Language learning is one of the first things we do in life and is a natural and engaging process. Children in multilingual communities can acquire several languages from an early age leading to extensive plurilingual competence. However, school-based learning too often fails to equip youth with real-world, plurilingual skills needed in contemporary society (European Survey on Language Competences, 2012). Policies on educational assessment can be part of the problem. While assessment is a process bound up with learning, large-scale educational assessment can become systematised in ways that fail to promote language learning effectively (Jones and Saville, 2016).

Learning Oriented Assessment (LOA) as outlined in this talk seeks to address this problem. It is an ecological approach that seeks to get all aspects of the system to work in harmony to serve the most important goals. In this systemic view, different stakeholders are enabled to work to a common purpose putting tasks at the centre. This highlights the role of meaningful communication in the cognitive development of learners, and the practical utility of tasks for aligning the different parts of the system. It also favours the acquisition of plurilingual repertoires which link school-based learning with society in more effective ways.

Dr Nick Saville, Cambridge English Language Assessment, University of Cambridge, UK

Dr Nick Saville is Director of Research & Thought Leadership in Cambridge English (University of Cambridge) and Secretary-General of ALTE. He has a PhD in Language Assessment, an MA in
Presentation 2 – Towards a learning oriented language assessment: The role of a Toolkit Alternative Assessment

In order to identify students at risk of failing academically and to raise the language proficiency of every student, the Flemish Minister of Education wanted to introduce a compulsory standardised language test at the beginning of secondary education. An expert committee that was consulted on this issue advised against the idea of one standardised test and instead recommended to develop an assessment toolkit that would support schools in setting up a language assessment policy.

During 2012-13, a team of the University of Leuven and Ghent University created a framework for learning-oriented assessment. The framework should allow teachers to measure students’ language proficiency in more depth and width than one single test does. First, all the language competences that students need to function academically were inventoried. Second, all available assessment instruments (tests, observation instruments, etc.) were linked to these language standards. Each instrument was evaluated and annotated on its validity, reliability, impact and practicality by a team of assessment experts. Third, scenarios and videos of good practices were developed and included in the toolkit to support teachers and school teams in setting up a language assessment policy. A team of language experts, teachers, school advisors and school inspectors reflected on the framework and evaluated its practicality. The toolkit is available free of charge on the website of the Flemish Department of Education.

This paper presentation will discuss how with the support of important stakeholders (the Flemish Department of Education, the inspectorate, the educational networks, headmasters and teachers) a Toolkit Alternative Assessment for primary and secondary education was developed helping teachers and schools develop a coherent language assessment policy that takes into account the dynamic and complex language development of each individual learner. We will address the challenges of implementing the toolkit in Flemish education.

Dr Koen Van Gorp, Michigan State University, USA

Dr Koen Van Gorp received his PhD in 2010 from the University of Leuven and is currently Head of Foreign Language Assessment at the Center for Language Teaching Advancement (CeLTA) at Michigan State University. From 2010 till 2015 he was Director of the Certificate Dutch as a Foreign Language (CNaVT), the international test of Dutch as a foreign language. His research interests are task-based language teaching and assessment.
Presentation 3 – Schools as laboratories for exploring multilingual assessment policies and practices

The unprecedented increase in linguistic diversity in Flemish schools (Belgium) is assessed in many different ways. At least two dimensions can be identified: the assessment of children whose linguistic functioning in educational spaces is being subjected to evaluations and the assessment by different educational stakeholders of children’s multilingual realities in school contexts. In this paper the dynamic interactions between these two dimensions will be discussed. How are the multilingual realities in different urban spaces assessed? How does this affect the valorisation of (language) proficiencies and practices? What are the implications of contemporary multilingual realities for assessment in education, more generally, and in (language) learning, in particular? Can alternative approaches to assessment succeed in providing a more complete picture of students’ linguistic repertoires and contribute to better achievement, a heightened sense of self-efficacy, and more well-being? These questions will be addressed in this paper.

Prof Piet Van Avermaet, Ghent University, Belgium

Professor Piet Van Avermaet is head of the Centre for Diversity and Learning, at the Linguistics Department of Ghent University. He teaches ‘multicultural studies’, ‘multilingualism in education’ and ‘language policy’ at the same university. His expertise and research interests cover topics related to multilingualism in education, social inequality in education, language policy and practice in education, language policy and practice in contexts of (social) inclusion, language assessment, diversity and inclusion, integration and participation, discrimination in education, migration.

Prof Stef Slembrouck, Ghent University, Belgium

Professor Stef Slembrouck is Senior Full Professor in the Linguistics Department of Ghent University. His main research interest is in the role of communicative and interactive processes in the functioning of institutions, and with particular reference to globalisation-affected multilingualism. He has published widely on such processes in contexts of education, social work and health care.

Fauve De Backer, Ghent University, Belgium

Fauve De Backer is a PhD student at the Centre for Diversity and Learning (Ghent University). Currently she is working on a project of Multilingual Assessment in Education (MulAE). Her PhD focuses on the evaluation of multilingual pupils in primary education. Before she started her PhD, she worked as an assistant national manager for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), co-developed the Toolkit Alternative Assessment for secondary education and researched the multilingual reality in schools for the MARS-project.
Presentation 4 – Pupils’ perceptions of multilingual accommodations in science assessments

The linguistic abilities of multilingual pupils impact their results on content-related tests. It is therefore unlikely that multilingual pupils who take a test on content (e.g. mathematics or science) are able to demonstrate fully what they know and are capable of (Menken, 2010). This leads to the question to what extent the assessment procedure succeeds in measuring the intended construct (Wolf, Kim, & Kao, 2012). To overcome this validity issue, accommodations may offer a fruitful solution. However, research on which accommodations are effective under what conditions is limited and often contradictory (Pitoniak et al., 2009). Even less research is available on pupils’ perceptions of assessment in general and accommodations in multilingual assessment in particular. In Flanders, a study on multilingual assessment was conducted in 2016-17. A population of pupils was divided into three groups with specific test conditions: a condition with a written science test in the language of instruction (Dutch); a condition where pupils took a bilingual test in the school language and a translation in their L1 and, finally, a third condition in which pupils received the same bilingual test with extra audio support in both languages. In addition, for each condition, two pupils were interviewed (N=12) afterwards so as to find out (a) how they experienced the assessment; (b) why they chose (not) to make use of the read-aloud and/or translated accommodation (2nd and 3rd conditions only); (c) which extra support or accommodation they perceive to be necessary, as well as (d) their perceptions of fairness in the case of accommodations. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed using NVivo 11 Pro. The outcomes of these interviews will be presented in this paper. Preliminary findings already indicate that pupils perceive testing accommodations positively, though much depends on their proficiency in the language of instruction and their academic language proficiency in their L1.

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