
11-6-2021

Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Assessment in English as a Foreign Language Classrooms in Vietnam

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Recommended APA Citation

Ha, X. V., Tran, N. G., & Tran, N. H. (2021). Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Assessment in English as a Foreign Language Classrooms in Vietnam. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(11), 3457-3475. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.5063>

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Abstract

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Keywords

assessment, classroom practices, curriculum innovation, task-based language teaching, teacher beliefs

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Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Assessment in English as a Foreign Language Classrooms in Vietnam

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Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has generated worldwide popularity as a curriculum innovation, and extensive research has investigated various aspects of the approach. However, little is known about the implementation of classroom assessment in TBLT curricula. This study investigated high school English as a foreign language teachers' beliefs and practices regarding assessment in a curriculum innovation context in Vietnam. Data comprised in-depth interviews with six teachers, as well as testing documents. The findings revealed a strong impact of the high-stakes exams on teachers' testing beliefs in that they focused explicitly on linguistic items in the assessed content and forms of assessment. These beliefs were accurately reflected in their testing practices. However, both the teachers' beliefs and practices were contradictory to teaching principles and the expectations of the intended curriculum. These findings suggest that in-service teacher professional development programs are necessary for innovations like TBLT to have a real change in the classroom.

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Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been implemented as a curriculum innovation in various countries, making it a topic of interest for second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and practitioners (Bryfonski, 2020). While the traditional language teaching approach is organized around discrete linguistic items, TBLT employs tasks which are typically driven by the authenticity of learners' needs and the resulting linguistic forms, as the basis of language curricula, syllabi, instruction, and assessment (Ellis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2019; Long, 2015). Due to the growing popularity of TBLT, an extensive body of research has investigated the effectiveness of tasks and the effects of TBLT on learner second/foreign language (L2) development (Ellis, 2017).

There has been growing interest in how language teachers' beliefs impact the implementation of the TBLT curriculum. Several studies have reported some positive evidence, showing that teachers attempted to implement the intended curriculum successfully (Carless, 2003; Peng & Pyper, 2019). However, many studies showed that teachers had difficulties implementing the intended curriculum in their classrooms, resulting in the continued but

undesired use of a traditional structural approach (Carless, 2004; East, 2012; Nguyen, 2014). This research agenda has identified constraints hindering teachers' implementation of TBLT, such as learner proficiency, class sizes, teachers' knowledge and beliefs, and exam culture.

Among these factors, exam culture has been considered a primary force driving teachers' classroom practices away from the prescribed curriculum and their beliefs (Ha & Murray, 2020; Ha & Nguyen, 2021; Ha, Nguyen, & Hung, 2021; Tran, Ha, & Tran, 2021; Zheng & Borg, 2014; Zhu & Shu, 2017). Nevertheless, it is argued that assessment reform needs to be involved in the innovation agenda to achieve a real change in the classroom (Ellis, 2017). In a recent study, Zhu and Shu (2017) emphasize that it is necessary to arm the curriculum with task-based assessments to ensure the successful implementation of a TBLT program. Teachers are important stakeholders in language assessment, and their input should be considered for desirable educational outcomes (Fan et al., 2020). Surprisingly, little is known about teachers' actual beliefs or practices regarding assessment in the TBLT curriculum. To promote assessment reforms, an understanding of teachers' beliefs and actual classroom practices regarding assessment in their enactment of a TBLT curriculum is essential. Therefore, this study investigates teachers' beliefs and practices regarding assessment in a Vietnamese high school English as a foreign language (EFL) context which adopts TBLT as the main teaching approach.

Literature Review

Assessment in L2 Classroom

Classroom assessment is one of the influential factors mediating students' learning and teachers' teaching practices (Liu & Yu, 2021; McDaniel et al., 2007). Classroom assessment has two main purposes: (1) assessment for learning (also known as formative assessment) and (2) assessment of learning (also known as summative assessment; McMillan, 2013). Assessment for learning refers to "any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning" (Black et al., 2004, p. 10). By contrast, assessment of learning is "designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence" (Black et al., 2004, p. 10). Assessment for learning has been promoted in most of the recent curriculum innovations, such as TBLT. The interest in TBLT and the pursuit of developing effective testing models for this approach to pedagogy have generated the framework of task-based language assessment (TBLA; Norris, 2002, 2016).

TBLA is a framework for language assessment which utilizes tasks as a fundamental unit for assessment and testing. Driven by the same tenets of TBLT, TBLA is organized around tasks, rather than discrete grammar and vocabulary items (Ellis et al., 2019; Shehadeh, 2012). According to Long and Norris (2000), task-based language assessment employs tasks as fundamental units of analysis, motivating the selection of assessed items, the construction of test instruments, as well as the rating of task performance. TBLA is seen as a way of achieving a correlation between test performance (what the teste does during the test) and the criterion of performance (what the teste must do in the real world). Assessment tasks are treated as devices for eliciting and evaluating learners' communicative performances in the context of language use which is meaning-focused and directed towards some specific goal (Ellis, 2003). TBLA entails four primary features, namely (1) formative, (2) performance-referenced, (3) direct, and (4) authentic (Ellis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2019; Shehadeh, 2012).

TBLA has been implemented in various language education classes and programs. In a recent review of current uses for TBLA, Norris (2016) has argued that the main motivation for the employment of TBLA in language education comes from the need to make assessment, curriculum, and instruction aligned in a way that they complement each other in enhancing

effective teaching and learning. Norris (2009, 2016) emphasizes that a focus on discrete-point tests of knowledge about language combined with instruction that aims at an individual's ability to use language may lead to confusion and incongruence of teaching and learning with the outcomes that are assessed. Assessments that require learners to perform with an acquired language to accomplish communicative goals related to tasks have been adopted in various classroom settings for both summative (Alanen et al., 2010; Virkkunen-Fullenwider et al., 2011) and formative purposes (Van Gorp & Deygers, 2013; Weaver, 2013).

Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding L2 Classroom Assessment

There has been a growing body of research investigating the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices regarding various aspects of language teaching and learning (Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2017; Ha & Murray, 2020; Tran, 2015; Tran, Ha, & Tran, 2021). This research agenda has viewed teachers as "active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (Borg, 2003, p. 81). Teachers' beliefs can exert a powerful impact on their classroom practices (Borg, 2003, 2017; Basturkmen, 2012; Ha & Murray, 2021; Ha & Nguyen, 2021; Hallinger, Tran & Truong, 2021; Tran, Ha, Le, et al., 2021). However, teachers' beliefs and practices are not always congruent (Basturkmen, 2012; Ha, 2017; Tran, 2015; Tran, Phan, Doan et al., 2020); they are mutually informing (Borg, 2017, 2019). Borg (2003) argued for a focused direction for researching language teacher cognition, and various studies have looked at different aspects of language learning and teaching, such as pronunciation teaching (Buss, 2015), oral corrective feedback (Ha, Nguyen & Hung, 2021; Ha & Murray, 2020), or curriculum design (Shieh & Reynolds, 2020). However, there is a paucity of research examining such a relationship regarding language assessment. In this article, the concept of practice refers to the teachers' design of tests, and belief refers to their ideas, thoughts, and values towards the nature and purpose of classroom assessment (Fulmer et al., 2015).

Of the limited body of research exploring the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices regarding language classroom assessment, Brown et al. (2009) conducted a survey investigating the beliefs and practices of Hong Kong primary teachers. They found a clear match between the teachers' conceptions and practices. Specifically, there was a strong association between the teachers' conceptions of using assessment to improve teaching and learning with students' accountability, resulting in frequent practice of exam preparation. In another survey study, James and Pedder (2006) investigated schoolteachers' values and practices regarding classroom assessment in Britain. They found a substantial gap between the teachers' values and practices in terms of promoting learner autonomy and orientation to their classroom performances. Their questionnaire was replicated by Warwick et al. (2015) in a study of schoolteachers in Argentina, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Saudi Arabia; they found congruence and incongruence across cohorts of teachers in the different educational contexts. In a recent study, Wang et al. (2020) investigated the beliefs and self-perceived practices of Chinese EFL teachers regarding classroom writing assessment using a mixed methods research design. They also found some congruence and incongruence between the teachers' beliefs and practices. Specifically, the teachers considered assessment for learning that empowered students to take responsibility in writing assessment more important than assessment of learning, but the reverse was reported in their practice.

The studies mentioned above collectively show that teachers' beliefs and practices about specific aspects of language education are an important area for research because such research can help understand teachers' classroom behaviors. This emerging knowledge, in turn, promotes the effectiveness of teaching and learning. While assessment is an important aspect

of language education, research looking at teachers' beliefs and practices regarding classroom language assessment is limited. Moreover, policymakers have attempted to introduce curriculum innovation to bring real change into the classroom. Among various innovation initiatives, TBLT as a curriculum innovation has become more popular in many countries, and a great deal of research has been conducted to investigate the effectiveness and the workability of TBLT in various contexts (Bryfonski, 2020). Surprisingly, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no published research investigating teachers' practices and/or their beliefs regarding assessment in TBLT curricula. This study is, therefore, timely. It was designed to address the following research questions:

1. What are EFL teachers' beliefs regarding assessment in a curriculum innovation context?
2. What are EFL teachers' practices regarding assessment in a curriculum innovation context?
3. Do the teachers' beliefs match their practices?

The researchers have been working towards improving the quality of teacher professional development programs for language teachers in Vietnam. The first and the third authors are language teacher education lecturers and teacher trainers at a university. The second author is an English language education specialist of a provincial Department of Education and Training. We hope that the findings of this research will provide us with more insights into Vietnamese EFL in-service teachers' beliefs and practices regarding assessment in the context of curriculum innovation. Accordingly, we will be able to design and deliver teacher professional development programs which are more contextually appropriate and feasible.

Methods

This study examines the ideas, thoughts, and values of Vietnamese in-service EFL teachers regarding language assessment in a curriculum innovation context. It also investigates the relationship of these ideas, thoughts, and values with their actual testing practices. Therefore, the study adopts a qualitative approach, which allows for a contemporary phenomenon to be examined within its real-life context (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Context and Participants

This study was conducted in a public high school (grades 10-12) in Central Vietnam. It is one of the largest schools in the province, comprising 45 classes, with 35 to 45 students in each class. English is a compulsory foreign language subject, and it is taught for three 45-minute lessons per week. Students are required to take an English test to graduate. Students' English proficiency could be considered as between elementary and pre-intermediate levels, although they begin learning English in Grade 6. Many students learned English for exam purposes or because it was a compulsory subject. The classroom was the main place for students to interact in English.

TBLT has been approved and implemented in Vietnamese secondary schools as a curriculum innovation since 2006 (MOET, 2010). The curriculum aims to help students obtain basic communicative competence in all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), formal knowledge of English, and an appreciation of the cultures of English-speaking countries. The national English curriculum has been operationalized in a set of locally written textbooks (Hoang et al., 2006). Accordingly, teachers are expected to adopt communicative learner-centered approaches with a task-based framework, whereas students are expected to

engage in the learning process actively, creatively, and cooperatively through a range of individual, pair, and group work activities (Hoang et al., 2006). To achieve the aims of the curriculum innovation, a national foreign language project (commonly known as Project 2020) was launched between 2008 and 2020 (recently extended to 2025) to train pre- and in-service teachers and enrich teaching and learning resources. In terms of assessment, the curriculum recommends assessing learners' use of language in relation to four language skills and language use (Hoang, 2011; Hoang et al., 2006). The curriculum regulates that the testing and assessment should be conducted in various ways and continuously during the process of teaching and learning. There are different types of tests: 15-minute tests, 45-minute tests, end-of-semester tests, and end-of-school-year tests. The grading proportion is evenly distributed to each of the five aspects: listening (20%), reading (20%), speaking (20%), writing (20%), and language focus (20%).

This study was conducted with six experienced teachers (Table 1). They were selected based on a snowball sampling technique which looked for two experienced teachers from each grade. Except for Tuan, five of the participants were identified as females, reflecting the unbalanced gender distribution in the language teaching profession in Vietnam. They were each Vietnamese and shared Vietnamese as their first language. They had also obtained bachelor's degrees in teaching EFL before starting their teaching career. They participated in professional development (PD) activities on a regular basis, including several training workshops regarding task-based language teaching provided by the local Department of Education and Training. These were short training courses, lasting between two and three days, and they focused on how to deliver a unit of work provided in the textbook.

Table 1

A Brief Summary of the Participants' Backgrounds

Name (Pseudonym)	Age (years)	Grade of teaching	Teaching experience (years)
Dien	36	10	13
Minh	30	10	9
Hoa	37	11	14
Lai	31	11	8
Hong	37	12	13
Tuan	38	12	15

Data Collection

Interviews

Data collection started after the ethical approval had been granted and consent from the participants had been obtained. Semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit the teachers' beliefs about testing and assessment in relation to the TBLT curriculum. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the shared language between the teachers and the researchers. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes. The interview questions were designed carefully based on Kvale's (1996) strategies of questioning. Specifically, three types of questions - namely (1) introducing questions (e.g., can you tell me about...?), (2) follow-up questions (e.g., you have said that... can you explain a bit more?), and (3) probing questions (e.g., can you make it clear that ...?) - were employed to elicit in-depth discussion with the participants regarding their classroom assessment. The questions focused on the teachers' knowledge, thoughts, and ideas regarding the approach to, the content, and the procedures of

tests and test designs that they used for their students. All the interviews were audio-recorded for data transcription and analysis.

Documents

Test papers over one semester were collected to investigate teachers' practices of testing and assessment in relation to the assessed content and forms of assessment. In the school, the teachers used two types of written tests in the classroom, namely, 45-minute tests and 15-minute tests. The 45-minute tests were used to assess students' general competence in English use, including linguistic competence (i.e., lexical, and grammatical knowledge) and language skills (i.e., reading and writing). The 15-minute tests focused on four language skills, namely reading, speaking, listening, and writing (MOET, 2010). These test papers were collected from the teachers as soon as the tests were administered to students. Accordingly, a total of 24 test papers were collected from the six teachers over one semester, including two 45-minute tests and two 15-minute tests from each teacher.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to uncover teachers' knowledge, thoughts, and ideas regarding testing and assessment in their curriculum innovation context. First, all the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim into Vietnamese; only quotes used in this paper were translated into English. The analysis started with coding, following two basic steps: becoming familiar with the data and generating initial codes. The researchers first listened to the audio recordings and read the transcripts thoroughly for a general sense of the teachers' beliefs regarding testing and assessment. Then, an initial coding of one entire interview transcript was conducted and revised. Intra-coding was carried out before the coding of other transcripts to ensure the consistency of the coding process. Twenty percent of the data were separately coded by a research assistant. The agreement rate was 88%, and the disagreement was resolved through negotiation. The analysis continued with theme development and refinement.

The analysis of test papers aimed to depict teachers' testing and assessment practices using content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). First, the test papers were read carefully many times to achieve a general understanding of the teachers' assessment in terms of the assessed content and forms of assessment. Second, codes (e.g., multiple-choice questions, focus on verb tenses) were labelled on the written test papers. Like the analysis of the interview data, intra-coding and inter-coding (with a research assistant) procedures were applied, and the agreement rates reached 91%. The codes were refined to avoid any overlap and repetition in order to develop themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Major themes emerging from the analysis of interview transcripts and test papers are presented and discussed below.

In the following section, findings from the analysis of the interviews regarding the teachers' beliefs about assessment (in response to the first research question) will be presented first, followed by findings from the analysis of the test papers to answer the second research question. The answer to the third research question will be addressed in the discussion section.

Results

Teachers' Beliefs about Assessment

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the interviews revealed two major themes emerging from the teachers' beliefs of assessment, as presented below.

Assessment of Linguistic Items

A recurrent theme was the explicit focus on vocabulary and grammar in the teachers' designing tests. Each of the six teachers explained that assessment should test students' language knowledge in terms of vocabulary and grammar, as evidenced in the following comments:

Minh: I think that, in any test, it's necessary to assess students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. This is very important as it can ensure how good at the language the students are.

Dien: Assessment should focus on linguistic knowledge, such as grammar, part of speech, use of language, and so on. Students must master the language before using it. In particular, students must know grammar before speaking and writing.

Tuan: I focus on assessing students' memorization of vocabulary and grammar. These aspects are important, as they are included in the final exam.

The teachers believed that vocabulary and grammar were the central foci of teaching and learning; therefore, vocabulary and grammar should be included in assessment tasks. They provided reasons for their focus on discrete linguistic items in assessment. For example, Hoa noted:

I think that no matter how "communicative" a curriculum is, students need to memorize the grammar and vocabulary of the target language. What can help students memorize vocabulary and grammar is testing, yes, through tests. You know, what is tested is learned. Students only memorize what is included in the tests.

Hoa's comment illustrated two important points in her view on assessment. First, she explicitly focused on grammar and vocabulary, as she believed that students needed to memorize linguistic items in learning English. Such a belief reflected a structural approach to learner assessment when linguistic items were made explicit in testing. Second, Hoa's comment that "what is tested is learned" by students suggests a teaching-to-the-test belief among the teachers. This belief was echoed in the other teachers' comments. For example, Tuan highlighted:

I need to focus on linguistic items to familiarize my students with the final exam so that they can do well in the exam... This is why vocabulary and grammar were so prevalent in learner assessment in the classroom.

According to Tuan, teachers focused on linguistic items in classroom tests to prepare students for the final exam. He further explained: "The focus on vocabulary and grammar helps me to anticipate how well my students can respond to lexical and grammatical items in the final exam." In the same vein, Hong said, "By doing tests on grammar and vocabulary repeatedly, students will be more likely to have high scores in the final exam."

Overall, analysis of the interviews indicated that the teachers focused on vocabulary and grammar in designing tests for two major reasons. First, they believed that linguistic items were crucial to language teaching and learning; therefore, linguistic items should be included

in the test content. Second, the focus on linguistic items could enable students to pass the final exams which were mainly based on discrete linguistic items. The teachers' beliefs about testing were consistent with their emphasis on teaching the tested content; however, they were also, to a great extent, contradictory to the goal of task-based assessment that targets communicative skills in using language (Ellis, 2003). This finding demonstrates a strong testing effect in the teachers' principles of test design. As the curriculum guidelines outline assessment in terms of linguistic competence and communicative skills (MOET, 2010), it is necessary for the current study to seek teachers' views on how these are assessed. The following section presents data on the teachers' beliefs about skill-based assessment in terms of reading and writing.

Assessment of Reading and Writing

The second theme emerging from the interviews regarding the teachers' beliefs about testing was the inclusion of skill-based assessment in classroom level testing. In particular, the teachers stated that, in addition to grammar and vocabulary, writing was a frequently tested component, as illustrated in the following comments:

Lai: I have one or two writing sections in a test paper. For example, students are asked to transform the part of speech in a sentence and keep the meaning similar to the original.

Hoa: I think that there should not be multiple-choice questions testing format only; there should be both multiple choice question items and writing in a test. Students need to practice writing and using language for a purpose. We should allow them to do so in assessment.

The teachers claimed to include one or two sections in their test papers that focused on controlled writing. For example, Hoa explained: "40% of the test items were controlled writing in the form of sentence transformation." In the same vein, Lai suggested that "the proportion of writing and multiple-choice question items should be 50:50 in the test content." The teachers' comments indicated that, in their views, writing accounted for about half of the tested content, suggesting a balance between language knowledge and skills in assessment. However, further analysis showed an interesting focus of the writing tests. For example, Minh described:

Usually, my writing section focuses on the linguistic items that students have learnt. I may ask students to rewrite a sentence, transforming from the past simple to the present perfect tense; I may ask them to connect two split sentences into one using relative pronouns; or I may ask students to transfer sentences from the active voice into a passive one, and vice versa. These are the foci of the writing component of a test.

In addition to writing, reading was also included in the teachers' descriptions of assessment. Accordingly, they included from 5 to 10 test items on reading, illustrating explicit specifications of the tested content. The teachers appeared to feel a strong testing effect of the final exam on their principles of test design. In particular, the two Grade 12 teachers (Tuan and Hong) contended that they included the same type of reading test items which were used in the final exam to familiarize students with the exam. It was clear that the testing effect of the final exam directed the teachers' test design in a way which was consistent with the final exam format. These are some typical comments:

Hoa: I usually have one or two sections on reading in a test. It can be a cloze or a reading comprehension. Students read and then fill in the gap or answer the question using the provided options.

Hong: Usually I have ten items for a reading question which is similar to the final exam. I need to prepare my students for the exam.

Teachers tried to avoid speaking and listening in their assessments. They specified several reasons for the exclusion of these two skills, namely large class size and the lack of equipment and resources. Also, an assessment of these two skills was not conducted in the final exam. As a result, teachers felt justified in neglecting these two important communication skills in their tests. This indicates that, in their beliefs, speaking and listening play a less important role than writing and reading, as the former skills are not part of the final exam. This suggests a strong effect of the final exam on the teachers' beliefs of test design. For example:

Dien: I cannot conduct speaking and listening tests. You know, it is impossible to test students' speaking and listening skills in the classroom. There are many students in one class, and the time allotted for a test is only 45 minutes.

Hong: The listening test cannot be conducted in the classroom as it's too difficult to prepare the equipment, and the classroom is too crowded. Similarly, speaking is not practical as there are many students in a class. In my opinion, these two skills are impossible to assess. In fact, we don't need to assess speaking and listening, as they are not in the final exam.

Teachers' Practices Regarding Assessment

Overall, two major categories were formed because of the analysis procedure: (1) multiple-choice questions (MCQ) assessment and (2) writing exercises (Table 2).

Table 2
Overview of Assessment Practices

	Category	Number of test items
Forms of assessment	Multiple choice questions (MCQ)	50/72 (69%)
	Writing exercises	22/72 (31%)

Multiple Choice Questions Format

Approximately 69% of the test questions (Table 2) from all the 24 collected papers were in the form of MCQ. The MCQ format was used in three types of test questions: phonetic features, general vocabulary and grammar, and reading comprehension.

Test papers showed that all teachers used the MCQ format in assessing students' recognition of phonetic features. Figure 1 illustrates an MCQ-based test question on phonetic features: consonants and vowel clusters. The first item focused on identifying the consonant sound deriving from the "ch" cluster, while the second item tested the recognition of the ending sounds of regular simple past tense verbs. This indicates that different linguistic items were tested in parts of the test question. In line with the teachers' perceptions of assessment of linguistic items, the use of the MCQ format allowed the teachers to test a range of phonetic features. It seemed that phonetic features were defined as essential objects of assessment in Hoa's testing practices.

Figure 1

A Sample of MCQ-Based Test Questions on Phonetic Features

Question 1. Choose the word whose underlined part is pronounced differently from the rest (5 items):

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1. A. parach <u>u</u> te | B. <u>ch</u> ampagne | C. <u>ch</u> ivalry | D. chur <u>ch</u> goer |
| 2. A. solv <u>e</u> d | B. practis <u>e</u> d | C. rais <u>e</u> d | D. explain <u>e</u> d |
| 3. A. <u>th</u> ese | B. <u>th</u> eory | C. wort <u>h</u> | D. <u>th</u> reaten |

(Hoa, Grade 11)

The MCQ format was also used to assess a wide range of linguistic items in terms of vocabulary and grammar. Figure 2 illustrates a test question including ten linguistic features, such as verb tenses, relative pronouns, prepositions, connectors, and vocabulary. Like the test items in Figure 1, this example displays an explicit focus on discrete linguistic items in assessment, showing a focus-on-forms approach that used multiple-choice questions of discrete linguistic items as the central objects in test design.

Figure 2

A Sample of MCQ-Based Test Questions on Grammar and Vocabulary Items

Question 2. Choose the word or phrase among A, B, C or D which best completes each sentence (10 sentences):

- She the piano since she was 10.
A. played B. has played C. had played D. was playing
- She arranged her friends in the evening.
A. to meet B. to be meeting C. meeting D. to have met
- Mai is interested in Vietnamese.
A. to learn B. learn C. learning D. learnt

(Dien, Grade 10)

The MCQ format was also used in the assessment of reading. Figure 3 offers a typical example of how the reading assessment was conducted by the teachers in the classroom. This test question tested the students' ability to search for the right answer since the phrase was provided in the same manner in the reading text. For example, Item 1 asked students to recall the statement "An educated person is ..." which was the same as the given sentence "An educated person is both talented and virtuous." In this way, the test question did not test the students' reading comprehension but their ability to identify information or facts provided in a text.

Figure 3*A Sample of Reading Comprehension Test Question*

Question 4. Read the passage and choose the most suitable option for each question (5 questions):

All human beings should study. It is widely agreed that we study to widen our knowledge and develop our life skills. Education plays a crucial role in our life. First of all, we have to learn how to observe accurately, to think truthfully, to speak correctly and to write clearly. Education provides us with knowledge of things around the world and it preserves the national noble traditions and customs from generation to generation. Education makes a person more perfect. An educated person is both talented and virtuous. In every country, the government always considers education as the most important policy. Some of us sometimes think that we 'have finished' our education when we leave school or graduate from a university. In fact, real education should never finish. *(Adapted from the students' workbook)*

1. An educated person is.....

a. virtuous.	b. talented.
c. both talented and virtuous.	d. perfect.
2. We study in order to.....

a. develop our life skills.	b. make things easier.
c. widen our knowledge.	d. both a and c.

(Minh, Grade 10)

Overall, the teachers' three types of test questions illustrate an explicit orientation to forms and/or regurgitation of knowledge when designing test items in the MCQ format. Phonetic, lexical, and grammatical features were assessed in the MCQ format, highlighting an explicit focus on the assessed content in the teachers' assessment practices. In this respect, the teachers' principles of test design emphasize discrete linguistic items, which is consistent with the focus-on-forms approach evidenced in the teachers' beliefs. Furthermore, the MCQ format used in reading elements to check students' recognition of knowledge confirms the form-focused approach that the teachers typically used in assessments.

Writing Exercises

The second category identified in the analysis of the test paper data shows that 31% of the test questions used writing exercises (Table 2). Examination of the data indicates that there were two types of writing exercises frequently used by teachers as test questions, namely sentence formation and sentence transformation exercises.

There were two common types of language formation exercises: word-level and sentence-level formation. Figure 4 illustrates a writing test question that employed a word-level language formation exercise.

Figure 4

A Sample of Word-Level Language Formation Test Items

Part 3. Complete the sentences with the appropriate form of the words in brackets (10 sentences):

1. We postponed our picnic because it was raining (heavy)
2. I live alone and I don't have many (visit)
3. It isof you to expect us to work overtime every night this week. (reason)

(Minh, Grade 10)

As can be seen in Figure 4, the test question asked students to provide the appropriate form (e.g., noun, verb, adjective, and so on) of the specified word to agree with the sentence structure. For example, Item 1 asks students to provide the adverbial form of the word “heavy” in relation to the verb phrase “was raining.” Student responses should be “heavily” to agree with the sentence structure. In this manner, the test question reflects a language exercise that explicitly focuses on discrete linguistic knowledge.

The teachers also included test questions requiring students to form a complete sentence from words provided, as shown in Figure 5. This sample focuses on assembling the words to form grammatically correct sentences (i.e., sentence formation). For example, Item 1 asked students to build a correct sentence using the list of separated words. To complete this test item, students need to have mastered a wide range of grammatical rules, such as the agreement between verb and subject, verb tenses, prepositions, and so on. All these features illustrate a strong focus on the accuracy of grammar in completing the test. By emphasizing the accuracy of grammar in such test items, this language exercise demonstrated a focus on form but avoided the meaning embedded in the writing.

Figure 5

A Sample of Test Items Focusing on Sentence Formation

Part 5. Complete each sentence with the words given (5 sentences)

1. You / not keep / promise / write / me / more frequently.
2. I / not dare / stay / home / myself / night.

(Dien, Grade 10)

Besides sentence completion, sentence transformation writing exercises were also used for written assessment by teachers. Figure 6 below illustrates a writing test question by Lai that asked students to transform the unfinished sentence in a way that preserves the meaning in each sentence compared to the original sentence provided. For example, in Item 1, students were asked to complete a sentence starting with the phrase “The box...” in such a way that the transformation retains the meaning of the original sentence. Students needed to use the passive voice as the underlying structure. In this respect, the students’ responses were deliberately controlled by the test designer (the teacher) regarding the structure needed for completing the sentences. As such, this type of test question focused on the accurate reproduction of language at the sentence level.

Figure 6*A Sample of Test Items Focusing on Sentence Transformation*

Part 4. Finish the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first one, beginning with the given words or phrases (5 items):

16. No one has opened that box for the past hundred years.

→ The box

17. "I have an English lesson this morning but I haven't done my homework yet," said a pupil.

→ A pupil said that

(Lai, Grade 11)

Discussion

The teachers' belief in the importance of focusing on students' knowledge about grammatical and lexical items in their test designs contradicts the assessment purposes of the intended innovated curriculum (Hoang et al., 2006; MOET, 2010). Also, the teachers' beliefs that testing students' knowledge of linguistic items could enable them to be well-prepared for the final exams indicate a strong effect of high-stakes exams on their classroom assessment approaches. These beliefs were, to a large extent, contradictory to general TBLA principles (Bachman, 2002; Ellis et al., 2019; Norris, 2009, 2016) and the teaching curriculum (Hoang et al., 2006; MOET, 2010). These beliefs may be influenced by their language learning experiences in which they were taught with a traditional grammar-translation method and by their own previous teaching experiences (Ha & Murray, 2021; Ha, Murray & Riazi, 2021; Ha & Nguyen, 2021; Reynolds et al., 2021; Tran, Ha & Tran, 2021). Zheng and Borg (2014) found that a novice teacher in their case study attempted to adhere to TBLT principles more frequently than the two experienced teachers. The teachers in the current study had taught English for exams for many years before the curriculum innovation started. This is evident in their comments about preparing students for the year-end exams and the final graduation exam (a national high-stakes exam). McDaniel et al. (2007) argue that one of the most serious consequences of high-stakes testing is that it pushes teachers to promote memorization and/or retention of pre-supplied materials for the final exams. The teachers' comments in the interviews indicate a strong testing effect in their principles of test design, showing an explicit focus on linguistic items in the assessed content to ensure that students learned the discrete content knowledge in preparation for the final exam. Aligned with their beliefs in rote memorization of linguistic items, the teachers' descriptions of the assessed content indicate that they made the related content explicit to support students' rote memorization, and thus enhance retention of tested content so that students could achieve high scores on final exams.

The teachers' comments about designing test items for writing and reading skills indicate their attempts to include skill-based assessment in their test designs. However, a closer look at the data revealed interesting insights. Their comments about including multiple-choice questions for reading, and controlled sentence transformation for writing tests, again reflect an explicit focus on linguistic forms in the assessed content and form of assessment. Therefore, their approach to assessing language skills was in contrast with the principles of TBLA which encourage the use of real-life reading and writing tasks (e.g., reading map instructions or writing a letter to a friend; Norris, 2009; Shehadeh, 2012). In TBLA, these tasks should be used as devices to elicit and evaluate learners' communicative performance in the context of meaning-focused language use (Ellis, 2003).

The effects of high-stakes exams on the teachers' principles of test designs were echoed in the teachers' choices of skills to assess. All the teachers explained that they decided to exclude the listening and speaking components in their tests because these two skills were not included in the final exams. These explanations indicated that teachers were trying to align their tests with the format of the final exam, where recognition of discrete linguistic items and precise reconstruction of language were the primary goals. This indicated a strong influence of the final exam on the teachers' testing practices in the classroom. In principle, the innovated curriculum stipulated that assessment should target the four language skills evenly (Hoang, 2011; Hoang et al., 2006; MOET, 2010), but the final exams (administered by MOET) excluded components of listening and speaking due to practical constraints related to time and resources. This shows an inherent conflict between theory and practice. These conflicts - in combination with the teachers' deep-rooted beliefs about traditional teaching, learning, and assessment - hinder curriculum innovation (Lanford et al., 2019; Rahmat, 2020; Tran, Ha & Tran, 2021).

The teachers' beliefs about assessment were largely reflected in their actual test papers, which included mostly multiple-choice items and writing exercises. This finding concerning the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices was different from studies which looked at incidental aspects of teaching, such as oral corrective feedback (Ha & Murray, 2020), but it was in line with studies investigating planned aspects of teaching (Basturkmen, 2012). Test designing is a planned activity in which teachers' decisions can be made based on their careful considerations of various factors related to their objectives, students, and school policies. Furthermore, the teachers in this study were experienced, with many years of teaching and assessing students in their local exam-oriented context. Research shows that experienced teachers' beliefs tend to be more consistent with their practices than their novice counterparts (Basturkmen, 2012; Borg, 2015; Hallinger, Tran, & Truong, 2021; Ha & Murray, 2020; Tran, Ha, Le et al., 2021; Tran, Ha, & Tran, 2021; Tran, Phan, Doan et al., 2020). This congruence suggests a strong influence of teachers' beliefs on their classroom practices. Also, language teacher cognition research has shown that teachers' beliefs and practices are incongruent when there are tensions between different sets of teachers' beliefs (Ha & Murray, 2020; Phipps & Borg, 2009). The teachers in this current study did not seem to face any tensions although both their beliefs and practices were contradictory to the expectations of the national intended curriculum. Their traditional structural approaches to teaching and assessment may be supported by the actual needs of the students and the unstated expectations of their school leaders. Therefore, they were able to enact their beliefs in practice. All in all, the teachers' beliefs and practices regarding assessment appear to be obstacles to curriculum innovation.

In summary, analysis of the interviews revealed that the teachers held a structural approach to assessment. They all emphasized the importance of assessing learners' knowledge of discrete grammatical and lexical items using multiple-choice items and writing exercises. Findings showed a strong influence of the high-stakes exams on the teachers' pedagogical approaches and their principles of test designs. Teachers' beliefs and practices were contradictory to the general principles of the TBLA (Norris, 2009) and the expectations of the national intended curriculum (MOET, 2010). Nevertheless, teachers' beliefs were accurately reflected in the tests that they designed. Teachers' beliefs and practices may have been influenced by their experiences as language learners and teachers in traditional, exam-oriented contexts.

Implications

The current study is an initial attempt to investigate the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices and assessment in a TBLT curriculum. It showed a clear match between

the two constructs but a mismatch with the principles of TBLA and the requirements of the national curriculum. This suggests that the teachers' existing beliefs and practices regarding assessment were obstacles to curriculum innovation. Therefore, in-service teacher training is needed in order for innovation to achieve a real change in the classroom. As acknowledged by TBLT advocates in recent studies (Ellis, 2017; Long, 2016), in-service teacher education is a real issue for progress in TBLT. This study provides empirical evidence for the need for in-service teacher training regarding assessment in a TBLT curriculum. Specifically, the findings about (1) teachers' beliefs in the importance of assessing learners' knowledge of discrete linguistic items and (2) the strong impact of teachers' beliefs on their practices suggest a need for PD programs to facilitate experienced teachers to reflect on and reshape their deep-rooted beliefs about teaching, learning, and assessment (Ha & Murray, 2021; Ha & Nguyen, 2021; Hallinger, Tran & Truong, 2021; Tran, Ha, Le et al., 2021; Tran, Ha & Tran, 2021; Tran, Phan, Doan et al., 2020).

Finally, this study shows that teachers' beliefs and practices were incongruent with TBLA principles and the intended curriculum, but the teachers did not seem to have any tensions among their different sets of beliefs. This may be due to conflicts in policy and practice concerning assessment at the national level. From the findings of the current study, it is suggested that the national curriculum has to be consistent in its policy and practice, and the final high-stakes exams need to be re-designed in accordance with the intended curriculum.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that warrant future research. Firstly, the teachers' practices regarding assessment were explored using the teachers' main type of assessment, namely, students' test papers. Further research, therefore, could employ classroom observation data to investigate whether and how teachers may employ other forms of assessment, such as comments at the end of a writing lesson. Secondly, within the limited scope of the study, it only investigated the beliefs and practices of a sample of six teachers from a high school in Vietnam. While this allowed the authors to study teachers' assessment of one high school in depth, the research results cannot be transferred to other contexts. Future research may be needed to examine the construct in other high schools in Vietnam, and beyond.

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Article Citation

Ha, X. V., Tran, N. G., & Tran, N. H. (2021). Teachers' beliefs and practices regarding assessment in English as a foreign language classrooms in Vietnam. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(11), 3457-3475. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.5063>
