Language learner beliefs are typically collected by means of questionnaires, BALLI being the most prominent example. However, nowadays research on teacher and learner beliefs is undergoing a paradigmatic shift towards more qualitative approaches. Accordingly, in the present study, the data on learner beliefs were collected by means of critical incident technique (CIT) in which, without any additional prompts from the researcher, it is left to the learners to select and interpret experiences they considered important. The application of CIT aimed to gain in-depth insight into learners’ subjective evaluations of different assessment techniques they experienced in the language classroom. Additionally, content analysis of the critical incidents was hoped to add to the understanding of learner beliefs concerning language assessment as well as emotions and coping strategies such assessment engendered. In total 25 lower secondary school learners (aged 14-16) were invited to take part in an oral interview and to reflect on one positive and one negative experience of being assessed in the course of their language education. The results indicate that the respondents hold predominantly positive beliefs concerning language assessment they have been subjected to. Even though the research was conducted in a relatively traditional and grade-oriented education system, in their accounts of positive critical incidents the learners expressed preference for performance assessment and formative approaches to providing corrective feedback. Conversely, the importance of grades was emphasised mainly in cases when, in learners’ opinion, different properties of good assessment were violated or learners experienced some degree of unfairness.

Keywords: language assessment, beliefs, critical incident technique.