The role of assessment in L2 learning and teaching: mediating selves

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Assessment is an integral part of formal education, including instructed foreign language learning. Most assessment is conducted by the teacher in the classroom and its main aim can be conceptualized as supporting pupil’s learning and self-concept. Assessment relies on the development of the teacher’s own identity and is connected to teacher’s own practical theory as well as influenced by other contextual factors. By looking at how student teachers perceive assessment we aim to identify the factors that are connected to student teachers’ development of self as learners and teachers of foreign languages. It also gives us an opportunity to examine the basis of their understanding of assessment in their teaching practice.

The data consist of 30 learner autobiographies from a longitudinal study following the university careers of student teachers of foreign languages in Finland. The students were asked to reflect back on their time in school as part of a basic course in education they took in the first year of their studies. Although they were not specifically asked to write about assessment, it emerged as a powerful theme in their writings. To find out what meanings the student teachers linked to assessment, the data were subjected to qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000, Hsieh & Shannon 2006).

The findings show that assessment has a pervasive presence in learner autobiographies. As expected, the students write about a high stakes national school leaving examination, the only one of its kind in Finland. However, assessment and achievement emerge as powerful themes in the students’ texts even when they write about their very first school years. It is suggested that assessment plays an important mediating role in the students’ appropriation of self-related beliefs (Mercer 2012) as potential L2 learners and teachers.

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