

EAL Teachers' Beliefs About the Assessment of Language Learning in State-Funded Primary and Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study presents the results of an investigation on beliefs about learning assessment involving nine in-service EAL (Note 1) teachers from state-funded primary and secondary schools in Santarém, western Pará, Brazil. It capitalises on authors who discuss beliefs in the educational context, considering general learning assessment, English learning assessment, and beliefs about teaching English in state-funded schools. Data were gathered by means of semi-structured interviews and analysed following the principles of content analysis as an attempt to find points of convergence and divergence among the beliefs found. Results indicate that most of the participants' beliefs are not consistent with the Brazilian National Curriculum Parameters for teaching additional languages, and that the participants appear to misunderstand the concepts of *feedback*, and *diagnostic, formative, and continuous assessments*. These findings can be used to improve proposals for initial and continuing education of EAL teachers both in western Pará and in the other regions of the country, as a means to promote their compliance with the National Curriculum Parameters.

Keywords: beliefs, EAL teachers, learning assessment, state-funded schools

1. Introduction

The use of the term *assessment* is recurrent both in state-funded and private educational institutions in Brazil. Normally, educators and head teachers use it to identify strengths and gaps in pupils' learning in order to better plan or review their performance strategies. According to Ávila (2015), assessment should be seen as part of the teaching process, guiding teachers in their decisions, integrating teaching and learning. Many students, however, become astonished just by hearing the word assessment, since they associate it with terms like *failure, re-sit exams, scores, and achievement* because of the frequency with which they experience summative assessment. Additionally, unfortunately some teachers have the understanding that – or at least act as if – assessment is just a test (from pupils' point of view, *the terrifying test*) administered every two months to determine whether the pupils will be able to advance to the next grade at the end of the school year. These misconceptions constitute an obstacle to the enhancement of the learning process of pupils.

The assessment of learning is multidimensional and idiosyncratic: while it is meant to cover various skills and knowledge to which pupils have been exposed, it is subject-specific. In the process of teaching and learning additional languages, for example, assessment requires specific criteria to identify levels of basic skills development necessary for communication in the target language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Nevertheless, it is important to point out that, besides these criteria, additional language teachers are also influenced by beliefs when they assess their pupils' learning. Several researchers have discussed learning assessment in Brazilian schools, including Hoffmann (1991, 1993), Luckesi (2000, 2008), Libâneo (2004), and Lucena (2006), to name a few. However, there is little research on beliefs of EAL teachers in this area, especially in the educational context of northern Brazil. We found only two studies on teachers' beliefs in a search for data published from 2015 to 2020, using Google Scholar and Google.com.br with the keywords *teachers' beliefs, teacher opinions, teacher perceptions* and *teacher representations*, none of which focus on classrooms in the north of the country. Based on data gathered in this region and on the assumption that teaching can be influenced by beliefs, the investigation reported here attempted to answer this central question: What belief(s) influence(s)

the way EAL teachers from state-funded schools in Santarém assess their pupils' learning? The answer to this question may contribute to the expansion of knowledge in the area of assessment of pupils' learning as more aspects of teachers' beliefs on this matter are brought to the fore.

2. Theoretical Background

According to Barcelos (2004), it was only from the 1990s that the concept of beliefs became elevated in importance in Brazil. To this author, beliefs are ways of reflection on and comprehension of what appears to be real, ways of seeing and understanding the universe and its manifestations, which are established in our practices, shaped by our interpretations, meanings, and resignifications of the information to which we have access. Barcelos and Vieira-Abrahão (2006) also consider beliefs as a social and individual phenomenon that, in addition to being dynamic and contextual, manifests itself paradoxically.

In Brazil, most studies on beliefs about additional language teaching and learning are conducted in state-funded school environments where, according to Hirata (2012), negative beliefs gravitate towards this theme. In her view, this is because parents, teachers and pupils believe that additional language teaching and learning are failed enterprises in state-funded schools. Such beliefs need to be rigorously studied since they can have significant impact on the behaviour of those involved in the educational process. It can, for instance, influence the way teachers assess their pupils' learning because they tend to act according to their convictions (Kudriess, 2005). Anticipating this view, Pajares (1992) argues that beliefs influence the way people idealise and perform their actions to the extent that their beliefs become reflected in their attitudes. It is not surprising, therefore, that teachers have the tendency to reproduce the teaching methodologies to which they were submitted as pupils.

The influence of beliefs on teachers is also pointed out by Ávila and Marchesan (2017), and Barata (2006), especially as regards assessment. In a case study on metaphors in the discourse of aspiring English language teachers, Barata's (2006) reflections on her own schooling and teaching experience lend credence to this view as she too used to consider assessment as a means of grading and classifying pupils: "I felt quite safe, sometimes administering institutional tests, sometimes administering tests that I myself had designed, fully confident of their results" (p. 2, our translation from Portuguese).

After five years working as a teacher, Barata (2006) decided to take a specialization course on English Language teaching, which had significant influence on her teaching career and awakened her to some important dimensions of it, one being the area of learning assessment. Her understanding of learning assessment was further developed and more focused on beliefs about EAL learning assessment as she read for her master's degree and, later, during her doctoral research (Barata, 2006). These academic enterprises seem to have made her more mindful of her own behaviour: "I came to the conclusion that the way I used to assess my pupils' learning was related to the experiences I lived as a pupil and were rooted in my attitudes and actions, later as a teacher" (Barata, 2006, p. 3, our translation from Portuguese).

In sum, the authors we have mentioned reiterate the fact that previous experiences can both reflect and determine the way teachers deliver their lessons and assess levels of school achievement of their pupils. This phenomenon is in line with the conception of beliefs as "ways of seeing and perceiving the world and its phenomena, co-constructed in our experiences resulting from an interactive process of interpretation and (re)signification" (Barcelos, 2006, p. 18). This view about beliefs informs the study reported here.

2.1 Learning Assessment Forms

There are three forms of assessment widely known among educationalists: diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments (Rodrigues, Rocha, & Gonçalves, 2011). According to Haydt (2000), summative assessment classifies pupils through metrics at the end of each part into which the school year is divided (e.g., bimester, semester) based on their *achievement* in each school subject. Therefore, the goal of this form of assessment is to determine, through marks, who passes or fails the exams that the pupils have to sit throughout the school year. This traditional assessment method is predominant in schools (Luckesi, 2008), and the educational system relies excessively on it (Santos & Varela, 2007). According to Santos and Varela (2007), summative assessment assumes that all pupils learn in the same way, at the same time, with the same teaching methods. As a result, pupils who have better conditions for studying benefit much more than those deprived of such conditions, or who have difficulties – often, these pupils end up excluded from the teaching and learning process.

Diagnostic assessment can help pupils to advance in learning and help teachers to better organise their activities and actions (Haydt, 1994). Regardless of the level of teaching, this form of assessment aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses of pupils' performance in the school subjects. This form of assessment can be used throughout the school year together with other forms under the assumption that the tasks pupils carry out in and

outside the classroom require frequent assessment so that the development of their learning can be monitored.

Diagnostic assessment can take many forms. Apart from written tests, there are several other ways to find out whether pupils are learning what is being taught to them, such as dynamics, games, presentations, and debates, just to mention a few. Also, according to Haydt (1994), so that teachers can make a comprehensive assessment, considering all aspects of their pupils' learning and behaviour, they must use techniques and assessment instruments which are related to the proposed objectives in their lesson plans. The author also argues that teachers should use all available resources to obtain as much information as possible about their pupils' achievements. Thus, teachers should not rely only on one assessment instrument, because it may fail, but rather make use of the diversity of techniques and instruments available.

As for the pupils, it is important for them to understand how their learning is assessed, as well as the meaning of their grades (Haydt, 1994). Teachers need to comment on results, so that each pupil understands his/her strengths and weaknesses. This understanding can help them focus more on the aspects they need to improve in order to overcome their learning barriers. At this point, teachers play a pivotal role. When giving feedback on pupils' performance in a specific situation or activity, for instance, teachers need to help them understand exactly what their mistakes were and about what they can do to repair them. Providing feedback to pupils is a critical part of the educational process, and teachers have the responsibility to effectuate it (Zeferino, Domingues, & Amaral, 2007).

The third form is formative assessment, which aims to inform both teachers and pupils. It informs teachers about their performance, their practices in the classroom, allowing them to think about their teaching, considering the individual needs of their students. Likewise, it informs pupils about their situation in relation to their performance in the subjects that they are studying, so that they can find the means to maintain high levels of learning when they are doing well and overcome their weaknesses when something prevents them from learning (Hadji, 2001). Other characteristic of this kind of assessment is continuity, which needs to be at the centre of the educational process since it is a pedagogical resource that fully integrates teaching and learning processes (Allal, Cardinet & Perrenoud, 1986; Fernandes, 2009; Hadji, 2001).

2.2 Assessment Instruments

Rodrigues, Rocha and Gonçalves (2011) regard assessment instruments as tools used to gather data about teaching and learning processes. Such tools should be as varied as possible so that teachers can obtain a large quantity of information from their pupils, and thus be able to evaluate them adequately (Haydt, 1994). Herculaneum (2001), and Rodrigues, Rocha and Gonçalves (2011) discuss some of the most common instruments used to assess pupils' learning (Table 1).

Table 1. Assessment instruments

Assessment Instrument	Features
Objective test	It consists of a series of direct questions, with only one correct option among the alternatives, whose function is to verify how much pupils have learned a specific content.
Textual production	It consists of indirect questions to assess pupils' capacity of expression, interpretation, and organisation in textual production.
Oral test	It consists of oral direct or indirect questions, whose objective is to verify pupils' comprehension and oral production abilities.
Mixed written test	It consists of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to assess both the acquisition of specific information and the ability to formulate and write ideas.
Seminar	It consists of an oral presentation of a topic to an audience. Its function is to provide communication about the topic and contribute to pupils' as both audience and presenters.
Group work	It is carried out collectively and the communication system can be either oral, written, or gestural. Its function is to develop collaborative work. This instrument makes it practical to work with large classes and when time is limited.
Debate	Discussion in which pupils expose their opinions and their views on one or more topics, whose function is to develop pupils' ability to defend their point of view based on compelling arguments.
Individual report	Text produced by pupils after a practical activity or thematic projects, whose function is to verify if pupils have acquired knowledge through the activity, and if they have understood the structures of the text.
Self-assessment	Free oral or written analysis that pupils make of their own learning process, whose function is to help pupils to develop the ability to analyse their skills and attitudes, strengths, and weaknesses, allowing them to learn how to deal with their limitations as well as improve their skills.
Observation	Assessment of pupils' performance in the classroom in general or in specific activities. It has the function of verifying pupils' scholastic, affective, cognitive, and psychomotor developments. Observation allows teachers to know how pupils build knowledge, and closely follow the stages of this process.
Evaluation	Analysis provided by the teacher about pupils' participation in proposed activities.

Note. Adapted from Herculano (2001), and Rodrigues, Rocha and Gonçalves (2011).

Although assessment should be completely related to the teaching and learning process, in many school environments, it has been observed that scores are regarded as the *final product* of pupils' work without any consideration of the process through which they were achieved. Pupils' sociocultural background, emotional and affective states are also disregarded as if assessment had no connection whatsoever with these dimensions as well (Hoffmann, 1991; Luckesi, 2008). Many Brazilian pupils attending primary and secondary schools are affected by this decontextualised way of regarding assessment, and the sole use of summative assessment.

A pattern that seems to be well-established is that, after a period of classes and activities, teachers create tests or other activities through which pupils are guaranteed enough scores to advance to a higher level at school. Teachers can even make things more difficult for them, including slightly more complex questions in the test to know whether they are good at what is being tested (Luckesi, 2000, 2008). But, in most cases, *all ends well* since teachers always find an extra activity worthy of some marks so that pupils are not *left behind*.

Assessing is not just administering a test, making observations, knowing whether a given pupil deserves grade A, B, or C. Assessment is a rigorous act of learning monitoring (Luckesi, 2005). The use of this instrument should aim at improving the knowledge acquired by pupils and not at judging them for what they do not know or did not remember when taking a test. Finally, whatever the instrument teachers choose to use for assessing learning in their classrooms, it is crucial that they remember that an essential element of assessment is dialogue between pupils and teachers throughout the process. It is important that when sharing the results of the assessment with their pupils, teachers have a conversation with them about what they have done and about possible reasons for the mistakes they have made (if any). Feedback can help pupils consolidate learning and overcome feelings of failure and frustration, which frequently lead to lack of motivation (Brasil, 1998).

2.3 Assessment of Additional Language Learning

For a long time, according to Haydt (1995), pupils' learning assessment was represented through metrics. But not a few educationalists questioned this mode of assessment, since not all aspects of learning can be measured. Unfortunately, inadequacy in assessing pupils' work is not *a thing of the past*. Hoffmann (1993) argues that teachers examine pupils' tasks and tests only to verify right and wrong answers and, based on this approach, decide whether a given pupil succeeds or fails. To this day, for some teachers, assessment is used as the moment to get revenge on that *problematic* and often *badly-behaved* pupil. According to Rodrigues, Rocha and Gonçalves (2011), there are also teachers who, in the attempt to facilitate matters for themselves, end up assessing their pupils' works in a way that all of them achieve high grades irrespective of the quality of their production. The authors also point out the existence of extra summative activities from which their pupils either profit very little or not at all. This sort of practice, even if it has nothing to do with pupils' learning, makes parents and society satisfied, because, for most of them, school achievement only equates to good grades.

Language teaching and learning are complex context-specific processes and, as assessing pupil's learning is undoubtedly part of these processes, such complexity is also extensive to it. Developing assessment procedures in tandem with the objectives established in the lesson plan may be an effective way of assessing pupils' learning adequately (Ávila, 2013). Also, when creating assessment instruments, teachers should bear in mind that learning an additional language is significantly different from learning other subjects. This peculiarity makes it all the more important to produce and deliver high quality additional language lessons for it does not matter how suitable the assessment instrument is if pupils have not learned what has been shared with them in the classroom. Planning is thus of ultimate importance.

When planning their lessons, additional language teachers should consider several strategies to make their pupils learning less challenging, having in mind their learning needs and individual learning styles. They should also consider the fact that some pupils may feel frustrated at not being able to communicate in the target language; that they may not want to study it at all for some reason or another, including the possibility that they might find it ridiculous to pronounce the words of the target language.

It seems, however, that in many schools in Brazil, pupils' learning needs are not taken into consideration in the additional language classroom. Araújo, Dias and Lopes (2016) seem to support this view. They argue that a frequent complaint among teacher educators is that: "Traditionally, teaching English in public schools has focused on the study of grammatical rules and only one of the language skills, which is reading" (p. 1). The authors point out the need to focus on basic language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. And they go on to say that, even if the focus is on reading, the other skills can also be improved if the teacher adopts an integrated-learning strategy.

We understand that the teaching and learning conditions in Brazilian state schools are precarious: overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, little or no support material, inadequate infrastructure, teachers with excessive

working hours, among other problems – these and other problems constitute what Hitotuzi (2020) metaphorically calls the “roots of an unwanted-millennial tree” (p. 56), referring to the numerous obstacles to the development of proficiency in English of upper primary and secondary school pupils in Brazil. These problems can influence the way many teachers evaluate their students since, according to Barcelos and Vieira-Abrahão (2006), the context in which teachers live and work affect their attitudes and actions. In other words, in public schools in Brazil, teaching English is a process surrounded by beliefs which can influence both the teaching and the learning of the target language.

English teachers have, therefore, a difficult and continuous task: to deal with the various interests related to teaching and learning, making use of theories and their own beliefs on how to carry out their teaching practices. They do so in a context that, most of the time, does not allow them to act either according to their beliefs or to what theories and methods purport to be appropriate. Teachers, thus, tend to adopt certain approaches in their classrooms, not because they believe they are the most effective ones, but because they are often the only affordances that can be offered to their pupils (Barcelos & Vieira-Abrahão, 2006).

Assessment of additional language learning and that of other subjects can be carried out by means of a variety of instruments, such as those listed in Table 1. It is, however, the quality of teaching strategies, informed by a deep understanding of pupils’ needs that will be most valuable in the additional language classroom.

3. Methodology

According to Barcelos (2001) research on beliefs about teaching and learning languages has mainly been carried out based on three approaches: normative, metacognitive, and contextual. Both normative and metacognitive approaches focus on beliefs from a decontextualised perspective. The former is based on the respondents’ answers to questions prepared by the researcher, usually employing a questionnaire structured in a Likert scale format. Through this approach, there is no analysis of the context where the respondents ‘act and interact’, to put it in Barcelos’s (2001, p. 78) words. Similarly, the latter does not investigate the relationship between the respondents’ beliefs and their actions *in loco*. Researchers following this metacognitive approach normally collect data through interviews and semi-structured questionnaires; therefore, their analysis is based only on the respondents’ statements. On the other hand, researchers adopting a contextual approach observe what is going on in the classroom, the environment where the participants’ beliefs are materialised. Thus, considering the relevance of the context for the study of teachers’ beliefs, we have chosen to adopt the contextual approach, a perspective according to which beliefs are dynamic, social, and contextual (Barcelos, 2015). In line with this approach, we gathered data using semi-structured interviews and observations (In this article, we present only the analysis of the interviews). The participants were nine teachers of English as an additional language (EAL teachers) – four men and five women – from government-funded state schools in Santarém, one of the 144 municipalities of the state of Pará, Brazil.

The interviews averaged 22 minutes each and were recorded with a voice recorder. After being transcribed, data were analysed according to the principles of content analysis, which is a method that consists of a set of procedures and techniques for extracting meanings from a corpus through elementary units (Chizzotti, 2014). These units can be a hypothesis or a significant set of words that corresponds to an idea. These semantic categories constitute the fundamental criterion of content analysis. They establish significant correlations amongst themselves, allowing the count of the frequency of their occurrence in the corpus and the extraction of relevant meanings from it (Chizzotti, 2014).

The process of uncovering semantic or thematic categories from data is known as *categorisation* – a key concept of content analysis (Chizzotti, 2014). It consists of a procedure in which common data are grouped together, classified by similarity, or analogy, according to a set of criteria previously established. Chizzotti (2014) discusses different criteria for uncovering categories, including the lexical criteria, which focuses on words and their senses. Following Chizzotti’s (2014) suggestion that each set of categories must be based on only one type of criteria, only lexical criteria were used to identify categories during the analysis of the interviews with the EAL teachers, which were conducted as an attempt at answering our research question, namely *What belief(s) influence(s) the way EAL teachers from government-funded schools in Santarém assess their pupils’ learning?*

Assuming that, in general, people act under the influence of their beliefs, although acknowledging that the relation between beliefs and action is not a causal one, in Table 2, we list the sub-questions that helped us answer the central research question.

Table 2. Sub-questions

1.	What does assessment of pupils' learning mean?
2.	How to assess the learning of an additional language in school?
3.	Do EAL teachers follow the recommendations of the National Curriculum Parameters for pupils' learning assessment?
4.	How do beliefs influence primary and secondary school teachers in choosing learning assessment instruments?

4. Results and Discussion

As previously mentioned, we analysed data trying to understand the participants' beliefs about pupils' learning assessment. Considering that teachers assess their pupils' learning in different ways, we asked the participants to explain how they assess learning in their classrooms. As much as possible, we tried to create an anxiety-free environment during the interviews as an attempt to have the interviewees express their understanding of assessment and their assessment practices freely. From their answers, three major categories emerged: i) beliefs about the conception of assessment of pupils' learning; ii) beliefs about forms of assessment; and iii) beliefs about assessment instruments. It is important to say, however, that we did not find all three categories in the discourse of each one of the nine EAL teachers interviewed.

4.1 Beliefs About the Conception of Pupils' Learning Assessment

Six of the nine participants provided explanations on how they assessed their pupils' learning (Ana, Lúcia, Suzi, Déborah, Luís, and Fernanda). The data seems to evince their beliefs about pupils' learning assessment, as can be noticed in the following excerpt from Ana (Note 2), "we can assess (...) the way we think it is better." It is evident that Ana assesses her pupils' learning based on her beliefs, and her judgment is her compass (Ávila & Marchesan, 2017).

Lúcia's (LC001) comments reveal her recognition of the challenge discussed by Ávila (2013) involving the complexity of assessing EAL learners:

Assessing is quite complicated because (...) there is a very large lag, a lag, I do not know if it is the correct word, but (...) there is a lag. We see a very large gap between writing, pronouncing (...). So, it is difficult to assess English learners (...), and (...) I try to assess the way I was assessed during college (LC001).

The way she assesses her pupils' learning resonates with Barata's (2006) account of how she used to assess her own pupils – her own experience as a pupil informed her assessment practice, experience that was ingrained in her attitudes and actions as a teacher for some time. Pajares (1992) reminds us of this incorporation of one's teachers' classroom practices into one's own classroom – it is a deeply-rooted proclivity of some teachers to teach the way that they were taught.

Suzi, on the other hand, seems to assess her pupils by *hunch* based on her impression of their motivation to study the language. Additionally, we do not know the parameters she uses to conclude that her pupils are not "as good as they think they are." From the following excerpt, however, we can infer that Suzi (SZ001) has a negative belief about her pupils' learning abilities. This is a sort of belief that directly influences the way she categorises them as *mediocre* pupils.

If I were to give my pupils a score from zero to ten, I would give them a six, because motivation to study, some do have, you know. So, sometimes some pay heed to others, and ahead they go. But then, I cannot say that they are "Woowww!" [I cannot] say that they are better learners because they are not. No, they aren't! Frankly, they are not as good as they think they are (SZ001).

We do not know if Suzi truly believes that pupils' achievements are adequately represented by means of numbers as it used to be the case (Haydt, 1995). But, for the sake of argument, even if numbers constitute a reliable way of representing learning achievement, a *score-six* cohort of pupils reveals that the learning outcomes proposed by the teacher have not been achieved considering the indispensable relationship between objectives and assessment: assessing means attesting if the desired objectives were achieved (Haydt, 1994). It seems clear to us, therefore, that Suzi needs to dedicate some time to reflect on her assessment practice because this cannot be delegated to anyone else (Hoffmann, 1991).

Both Déborah and Luís conceive of assessment as *productivity*. Luís (LU001) associates productivity with pupils' understanding of what has already been taught, and their capability of being able to answer exercise questions correctly. He also mentions one dimension of the concept of *feedback* – the feedback he obtains from his pupils based on their answers to exercises.

First, it is productivity. If, from what I worked with them, if I realise that the pupil understood (...) when I

am administering an exercise, if I see they did it, answered it correctly, I think this is what we call feedback (LU001).

Another dimension of feedback is discussed by Zeferino, Domingues and Amaral (2007), to whom feedback is the information shared by the teacher with his or her pupils; it is a description and discussion of their performance on an activity, highlighting things that they did right or wrong in it, and how they can improve what went wrong. It is important for teachers to give feedback to pupils. So, it is crucial that they know what it is and how to do it.

Besides associating assessment with production, Déborah also associates it with the effort of her pupils, and with awarding marks: “And I assess them by production. They earn for what they produce, (...) so the assessment is based on what they produce, on their effort.” This way of assessing is more related to performance than to learning. It is a form of assessment which is used mostly in companies where the ideology of meritocracy is very strong: the more the employees produce, the more they earn. Some teachers believe that if pupils are producing, they are learning. We think that assessing only productivity may not be beneficial for learning because the fact that a group of pupils is producing copiously does not necessarily mean that a great deal of learning is occurring. The quality of what is being produced is quintessential to the process of assessing pupils’ learning.

Fernanda (FD001) is the only participant who presents a notion of assessment of English learning which partly takes into consideration the four basic communication skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Such perspective corroborates the thoughts of Araújo, Dias and Lopes (2016), who highlight the importance of such an integration in the EAL classroom. For the authors, successful learning of an additional language requires the promotion of a concerted development of these language skills.

Well, I’ve always assessed (...) I observe the different aspects, (...) the four aspects. So, I try to assess their oral skills (...) writing, production, (...) and memorisation, so that I can record [their] bimonthly marks (...) then I realised that I had some good ones who, [on certain occasions when taking a test], couldn’t do it, would make petty mistakes, get nervous, wouldn’t feel mentally or physically well, be unprepared for the test, and whatnot. Then, this year, [I said] “No!” I’ve decided that I’m going to observe my pupils in the classroom, I’m going to create a[n observation] form, and I’m going to observe them in the classroom (...) I also have to assess them in a different way, I cannot assess everyone in the same way (FD001).

Fernanda seems concerned about her pupils’ marks and about the way they learn. Her observation of their behaviour while taking tests has made her change her approach towards assessing them. She also appears concerned about her pupils’ emotions and their potential to influence pupils’ learning and its assessment. Because she now believes that test scores may not account for her pupils’ learning, Fernanda has decided to use classroom observation as an additional assessment instrument to aid her in the process of identifying levels of pupil achievement in her classroom. It is also important to point out that she cares about her pupils’ physical and psychological well-being. Furthermore, she demonstrates awareness of the fact that these states can affect pupils’ cognition and results of assessment procedures.

Because all the EAL teachers interviewed share basically the same teaching context, since they all work for government-funded primary and secondary schools, use the same type of textbook and have approximately the same number of pupils per class, one might expect a high level of similarity in the way they assess their pupils. Instead, the data we have analysed show a diversity of conceptions about pupil assessment in the investigated context. Nevertheless, there is a thread running throughout their responses to the question eliciting their stance on pupils’ learning assessment: they all seem to prioritise marks over the process of obtaining them. This lends credence to Hoffmann (1991) and Luckesi’s (2008) argument that, in most cases, marks are considered the major final product, and the process of obtaining them has been left out.

4.2 Beliefs About Forms of Assessment

In this category, it was possible to identify the forms of assessment used by seven of the participants (Ana, Lucas, Alan, João, Déborah, Lúcia, and Fernanda). The data suggest that they used three forms of assessment, namely formative, summative, and diagnostic assessments.

Although Ana (AN001) claims that she uses a form of continuous assessment, the description she gives of how the assessment is conducted, it becomes evident that it is summative. Continuous assessment is conducted in every lesson, through observation or using some other instrument. Checking pupils’ notebooks at the end of the bimester to give them marks as a way of encouraging them to do the assigned activities and for the purpose of grading is by no means an ongoing assessment process.

And there is an assessment that I do, which is a part of that score, which is composed of three marks, which

is the continuous assessment, (...) every day, they can get 20 marks for class activities. So, everything they do in the classroom counts at the end of the bimester. I check each notebook and mark them (AN001).

Being more formative than summative, among other things, continuous assessment involves the whole learning process of the pupils (Allal, Cardinet, & Perrenoud, 1986; Le Grange & Reddy, 1998; Hadji, 2001; Fernandes, 2009). Considering its holistic nature, it is expected that EAL teachers who claim to adopt this form of assessment constantly observe all aspects that have influence on their pupils' school achievement, including attendance, classroom behaviour, attitude towards the subject matter and basic communicative skills development levels – none of these is found in the excerpt or in other parts of the transcription of Ana's response.

The following quote from Lucas (LS001) reveals that his understanding of the aim of diagnostic assessment is very different from that shared by many educationalists and researchers who consider that diagnostic assessment aims to identify pupils' difficulties or strengths in their schooling process. They believe that it should be used to provide teachers with information about their pupils' ability to learn new content so that, in case learning problems are identified, modifications can be made to facilitate the learning process (Haydt, 1994; Luckesi, 2008; Santos & Varela, 2007). On the other hand, Lucas thinks that, by presenting theory, assigning exercises, and checking pupils' involvement in the activities, he is doing diagnostic assessment. More could be said about Lucas's misconception of this form of assessment, but it suffices to say that exercise completion per se does not say anything about pupils' strengths or levels of difficulties in a subject matter.

So, I present the theory, then I [have them] do exercises. Then (...), we check the exercises, and then I check notebooks to really see who participated, who did not participate in class, which is a kind of assessment I do. So, first, my assessment is diagnostic (...). So, theory and practice, theory and practice and checking participation. Then, I do my formative assessment, checking, informing, checking, and assessing students at the same time (LS001).

Lucas argues that he also uses formative assessment. The examples he gives, however, are rather vague, and he does not mention whether the assessment is based on his pupils' individual needs, which is a fundamental tenet of this form of assessment. As Hadji (2001) suggests, placing pupils' learning needs at the centre of the formative assessment process is a *sine qua non* for teachers to fine tune their practices in the classroom to the benefit of their pupils. Likewise, having a dialogue with one's pupils about those things that they are getting right and those with which they are still struggling seems to be an interesting way of implementing formative assessment. This way of raising awareness among pupils can lead to self-correction (Hadji, 2001), which can also be an important step towards promoting pupil autonomy.

These quotes from Alan and João, respectively, suggest that they capitalise on summative evaluation, which serves to classify students at the end of an educational process (bimester, semester, school year) through grades, according to their achievements (Haydt, 2000): "So, I divide (...) the marks per month (30, 30, 30) and participation," and "And another 30%... Ah! (...) I have them do assignments in groups or sometimes a short knowledge [written] test, (...)."

Additionally, one thing that caught our attention was Déborah's (DB001) complete dismissal of learning evidence in the assessment of her pupils' work. By her criteria, pupil B might well receive a highly positive assessment as much as pupil A, even if he or she has not learned anything at all: "Assessment is through production, their effort. I don't take into consideration (...). Ah, pupil A learned vocabulary [and] content well, and pupil B did not, because, although he didn't learn as much as the other, he tried to do it" (DB001).

As we can see in the following excerpt, Lúcia (LC002) somehow uses the principles of formative assessment. In the process of assessing her pupils' learning, she takes their attempts to learn into account.

No, I cannot say they know nothing. No, they tried, then (...) I try to evaluate them that way (...). I try to assess pupils globally, considering what they really learned of the content, even if they have written a wrong word (LC002).

She is one of the few participants to show concern about pupils' learning. Her idea of assessing pupils globally, however, is divergent from that discussed by Haydt (1994). While she uses the expression to refer to what pupils have learned from the content that she shares with them, Haydt (1994) uses it to encompass all aspects potentially influencing pupils' learning that teachers can possibly assess. To gather these pieces of information, the author suggests that teachers should avail themselves of as many kinds of assessment instruments as possible.

Fernanda does not mention that she uses formative and diagnostic assessment forms, but her response reveals that these forms of assessment are ingrained in her practice. By observing how her pupils are 'doing', Fernanda (FD002) can diagnose their potential learning difficulties and adjust her practice to better assist them. Through

observation, she can also assess her pupils' learning continuously, considering their effort, commitment, and other aspects that can have a sway on the achievement of learning outcomes planned for them.

And I decided that I'm going to observe in the classroom. I'm going to create a form and I'm going to observe in the classroom – I know each one of them by name – and then I'm going to observe how they're doing during that period so that I can award them marks (...). So that, as I said, if I have some pupils who learn more by practicing, others by repeating, others by writing or others (...) another way, by listening, I also have to assess them in a different way. I can't assess them in the same way (FD002).

She understands that not all of her pupils learn in the same way, and that she needs to assess their learning differently, and she does it in a way that might as well be characterised as formative assessment. As pointed out by Fernandes (2009), this way of accessing pupils' learning is fully integrated into the learning-teaching process, and it helps pupils to deal with learning challenges both in and outside the classroom.

4.3 Beliefs About Learning Assessment Instruments

The analysis of the data revealed the kinds of learning assessment instruments used by seven of the participants, and some of their beliefs about these instruments (Table 3).

Table 3. Quotes from seven EAL teachers

Alan	"I always administer an individual activity [to assess learning], an activity in groups and a [written] test (...). So, I divide the marks by month – 30, 30, 30 plus participation."
Ana	"They have written test (...). We can assess learning through written assignments, expositive assignments or research (...), and by checking notebooks."
Déborah	"And I check the completed assignments [in their notebooks]. So, the assessment is through production, their effort."
Fernanda	"[I assess] the four aspects [through tests]. So, I try to assess their oral skills (...) writing skills, the production (...) and their memorisation of [content I've taught them], so I can finalise the grading process for the bimester (...). And I decided that I'm going to observe in the classroom. I'm going to create a form and I'm going to observe in the classroom."
João	"I attribute 20% [of the marks] to practical exercises in the classroom (...). And another 30%... Ah! (...) I have them do assignments in groups or sometimes a short knowledge [written] test, (...), but not always. Sometimes, it is an assignment or sometimes it is a test."
Lucas	"For assessment, I prepare a test having not only multiple-choice questions, not only with blanks to fill, but the pupils have to analyse texts in a contextualised way. So, many times, I give them the answer and they have to analyse that particular answer. The texts are part of the tests (...) I analyse [the activities in their notebooks], and then I put a check [on the activities] to really see who participated, who did not participate in class. This is a way of assessment I use (...) seminars."
Lúcia	"I even administered an oral test to them this bimester (...) to finalise the marking process. So, it's difficult, when I start marking their written tests, I find it hard, you know. He tried."

As we can see, in Table 3, Ana, Déborah and Lucas use notebook checking as a way of assessing their pupils' learning. The reliability of this mode of assessment is dependant mostly upon the amount of time the teacher can spend on examining the activities in the pupils' notebooks. The teaching conditions under which teachers work in Brazil can be an impediment to this kind of assessment – overcrowded classrooms and too many classes to teach are two of several challenges faced by schoolteachers in this country (Hitotuzi, 2020). Anecdotal reports from pre-service teachers attending the initial teacher education programme from an Amazonian university reveal that often teachers put check marks on their pupils' notebook pages without examining the pupils' answers in detail. If that is the case, no assessment takes place in these practices.

Alan, Déborah, and Lúcia appear to consider participation and effort valuable assets when assessing their pupils, both of which are observable phenomena. Observing pupils' levels of commitment when taking a course can be an effective way of understanding their learning process and what affects it either positively or negatively. Nevertheless, when Alan uses the expression *participation*, it is unclear what he really means by it. Déborah judges the level of commitment of her pupils on the base of what they produce in their notebooks and how much effort they put into it. Lúcia, on the other hand, struggles to decide on which mark to award to pupils who apparently have not got the answers correct in a written test but show some evidence that they have 'tried'. This attitude is telling of the primacy that summative assessment has over other forms of assessment in the classrooms of the interviewed teachers and possibly in other classrooms across the country (Luckesi, 2008).

Ana and Lucas have their pupils make oral presentations in the classroom (e.g., seminars and expositive work) to assess their learning. These are valid assessment tools since they constitute an opportunity for pupils to share their thoughts and things that they have learned through research with an audience. The whole process, from preparation to presentation, contributes significantly to pupils' learning; both the audience and the presenters can learn from these kinds of activity (Herculano, 2001).

The data demonstrate that João, Lúcia, Fernanda, Lucas, Ana, and Alan use written tests as an assessment instrument. Written tests can contribute a great deal if they are used in combination with other kinds of assessment instrument. Two of these teachers, Lúcia and Fernanda, include oral tests when assessing their pupils, which can consist of oral direct or indirect questions, whose objective is to verify pupils' ability to understand and produce oral speech. Helping pupils develop oral skills is important, but it is equally important to understand that assessment should not be limited to tests (Brasil, 1998). Testing is one of the instruments that assist teachers in the assessment process, but alone it cannot provide feedback on all pupils' learning gains and challenges.

To Lucas, providing a context is crucial for his pupils to be able to solve problems while taking a test. He appears to use the tests that he administers to his pupils as a way of assessing their thinking skills. According to the Brazilian National Curriculum Parameters (PCN, in Portuguese) for additional languages teaching, tests that aim to investigate only the student's systemic knowledge and written comprehension questions, "which only make student seek the answer in the text using decoding strategies, are not adequate forms of evaluation of written comprehension" (Brasil, 1998, p. 82, the translation from Portuguese is ours). It seems, however, that Lucas's pupils are encouraged to do more than just use their decoding strategies because, as Lucas puts it, "they have to analyse (...) the answers".

Alan and João say they have their pupils do group work in the classroom. This is a useful tool, mainly because, in government-funded schools, classrooms are usually crowded, and teachers have to find ways of integrating and involving all the pupils in the activities carried out in the classroom. Group work, nevertheless, also has its disadvantages because many pupils end up leaving classmates who are – or are thought to be – more knowledgeable than them to do all the work alone.

Another important thing that emerged from the data was a generalised preference amongst the respondents for written tests as assessment instrument. Although this predilection cannot be attributed to all other EAL schoolteachers working in government-funded schools in Brazil, we can at least hypothesise that it can be applied to them. Obviously, many more teachers would have to be interviewed so that such a generalisation could be made.

It is interesting to notice that only Lúcia and Fernanda mentioned administering oral tests to their pupils. It is possible that someone who is not familiarised with the EAL teaching context in government-funded schools in Brazil might find the avoidance of oral tests somehow unexpected to say the least; after all, the pupils are learning an additional language, and that should include oral communication. Why should the teacher avoid checking on his or her pupils' oral skills? To cut a historically long story short, not a few EAL schoolteachers in Brazil have serious difficulties when it comes to speaking and listening comprehension in English (Gonçalves, 2020; Hitotuzi, 2020; Assunção & Hitotuzi, in press) and, these skills are possibly their *Achilles' heel*.

5. Conclusion

The study reported in this article aimed to investigate the beliefs of nine EAL teachers working at state-funded primary and secondary schools in Santarém, Brazil, about the way they assess English language learning in this context. First, we tried to identify the perceptions of the participants on assessment of English learning. Regarding how they assess their pupils' development in the target language, the participants seem not to have much understanding of how to do it in an effective way. Second, most of the participants seem not to follow the guidelines established by the PCN for additional language teaching nor the ones proposed by some of the authors that we have mentioned here. Concerning assessment forms, the participants presented a confused understanding of feedback, diagnostic, formative, and continuous assessments.

As for assessment instruments, we noticed that written tests represent the assessment instrument used the most by the participants. Because they rarely use other assessment instruments, assessing their pupils' learning more comprehensively is hardly a possibility. Only two teachers claimed to administer oral tests, which might imply that at least some of the activities in their classrooms focus on the development of oral skills, which is an important dimension of additional language teaching and learning. Finally, we noticed the influence of the participants' beliefs in their attitudes towards assessment. The facts that they assess learning based on the experience of their own schooling process, that they associate assessment with production without focusing on quality, and that they mark pupils' work based on hunches about them, reflect beliefs that teachers conscious or unconsciously put in practice while teaching.

Some of these beliefs may not be as helpful as one might wish them to be. One negative effect that we noticed in context of our research was, for instance, the labelling of pupils as *mediocre* by one of the participants. Moreover, there was no indication of reflection about assessment practices in most of the speeches of the participants. Lack of reflection by teachers on how they assess their pupils may impoverish the assessment process, because

without reflection teachers will not be able to know if their actions correspond to their own methods of learning assessment.

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Notes

Note 1. English as an Additional Language.

Note 2. Pseudonyms were used to protect the interviewees' identities.

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