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Student Assessment Strategies in Portugal: An Analysis of TALIS 2013

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Abstract

The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) is the largest international survey of teachers. This survey looks at the features that influence effective teaching, such as teachers' initial training and their professional development, the feedback they receive on their teaching, the climate in the classrooms and schools, their satisfaction with their job, as well as the teaching, learning and assessment strategies they use in the classroom. In this paper it is proposed to (i) analyze the TALIS 2013 data concerning the assessment strategies used by low secondary (ISCED level 2) Portuguese teachers and (ii) compare the use of the assessment strategies made by low secondary Portuguese teachers' with those used by other European teachers.

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1. What is TALIS 2013?

The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) is the largest international survey of teachers and principals. This survey looks at the working conditions of teachers and at the features that influence effective teaching, such as teachers' initial training and their professional development, the feedback they receive on their teaching, the climate in the classrooms and schools, teachers' satisfaction with their job, as well as the teaching, learning and assessment strategies teachers use in the classroom.

TALIS was conducted for the first time in 2008 in 24 participating entities and economies (from now on called countries) and surveyed lower secondary teachers. In 2013, the second cycle of TALIS was implemented in 34 countries from different continents. Some countries also decided to survey their primary teachers (ISCED level 1, as

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classified by the International Standard Classification of Education in 1997) and upper secondary teachers (ISCED level 3).

According to TALIS 2013 framework, a teacher is someone “*whose primary or major activity in the school is student instruction, involving the delivery of lessons to students. Teachers may work with students as a whole class, in small groups or one-to-one inside or outside regular classrooms. They may also share their teaching time among more than one school*” (OECD, 2014, p.28).

In this paper we will look into the assessment practices implemented by European teachers in their classrooms. In the following section a brief theoretical note about student assessment is given.

2. The relevance of assessment practices

Assessment is frequently considered as a learning tool (Stiggins *et al.*, 2004). According to Brown and Knight (1994), assessment is usually considered as the core of the student experience and has a great influence on how students approach learning. Assessment influences students’ behavior and, from their point of view, sets the study methods adopted.

Even if assessment is recognized as a vital element for determining students’ approach to learning (Entwistle, 1997), there is a lot of criticism regarding assessment practices due to the weaknesses these often reveal (Rust *et al.*, 2005). Black and William (1998) highlighted three key aspects revealing weaknesses in the assessment processes: (i) most of the assessment strategies used by teachers encourage surface learning, even when they want to stimulate and develop higher order skills; (ii) the assignment of quantitative marks without regarding the formative function of assessment; (iii) the results and information communicated to students often serve functions other than those related to learning, promoting the comparison and competition among students.

Binkley *et al.* (2010) emphasize student assessment should let all students show their knowledge and skills in an equitable way. OECD (2014, p. 160) underlines this can be done through the use of “*multiple assessment approaches and opportunities, including engaging students in their own assessment*”. Astin *et al.* (2003) also consider assessment will be more effective if it includes a diversity of strategies and when it is continuing instead of periodic.

3. How are assessment strategies measured in TALIS 2013?

The teacher’s questionnaire inquired teachers directly about the usage of multiple forms of assessment (not at all, to some extent, quite a bit, a lot): “*use a variety of assessment strategies*” (OECD, 2013, p. 20). TALIS 2013 also inquired teachers about the frequency (in all or nearly all lessons, frequently, occasionally, never or almost never) with which they used six assessment practices throughout the year in a specific target class from their teaching schedule. These assessment practices are the following: (i) *observe students when working on particular tasks and provide immediate feedback*; (ii) *develop and administer own assessment*; (iii) *provide written feedback on student work in addition to a mark, i.e., numeric score or letter grade*; (iv) *have individual students answer questions in front of the class*; (v) *administer a standardized test*; (vi) *let students evaluate their own progress*” (OECD, 2013, p. 24).

4. Aims

In this paper we use the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2013 data regarding assessment strategies and we aim to: (i) characterize low secondary (ISCED level 2) Portuguese teachers’ assessment practices, and (ii) compare low secondary Portuguese teachers’ practices with the practices used by other European teachers.

5. Sample

In this study only the data considering ISCED level 2 European teachers were included. A total of 64446 European teachers, from 22 different countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovak Republic,

Spain, Sweden, England – United Kingdom and Flanders – Belgium) participated in this survey, including 3628 Portuguese teachers. Only the answers to the items previously presented in section 3 were taken into consideration. These data were extracted from the OECD TALIS 2013 database[†].

6. European teachers’ use of student assessment practices

Teachers in all participant countries report to use diversified student assessment strategies, as shown in Figure 1. However, the percentage of teachers stating the usage of a range of assessment practices varies among countries. For instance, 64% of Finish teachers report this practice; while in Portugal and Romania 98% of teachers declare they do so.

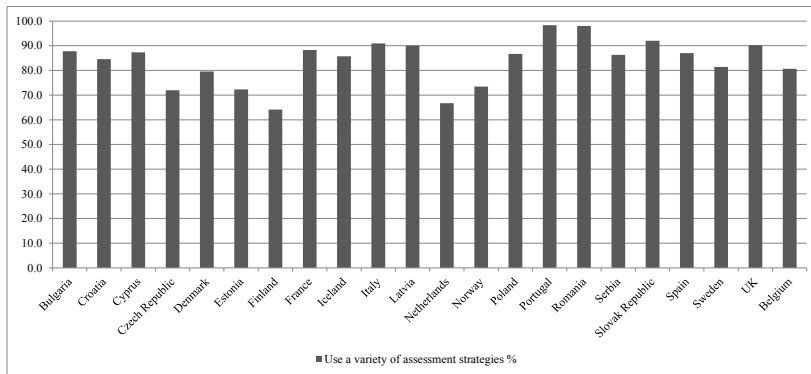


Figure 1. Percentage of teachers who feel they use a variety of assessment strategies “quite a bit” or “a lot”.

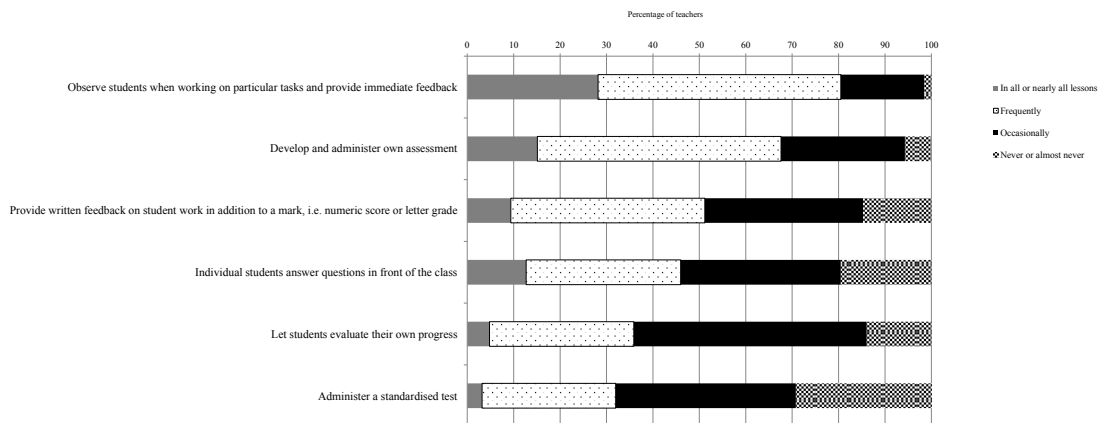


Figure 2. Teachers’ use of student assessment practices

Figure 2 presents the average proportions of European teachers’ reported use of each assessment strategy (including teachers from the 22 participant countries). The strategy that teachers admit to use more frequently is the observation of students while they work on specific tasks and provide immediate feedback (81%). 28% of the surveyed teachers report to use this strategy in all or nearly all lessons and 52% refer to frequently observe students

[†] TALIS 2013 database available online: http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?datasetcode=talis_2013%20

and provide feedback. The second assessment strategy that teachers asserted to use more frequently was the development and administration of their own assessments (68%). Approximately half of the participating teachers (51%) reported to provide written feedback in addition to marks on their students’ assignments frequently or in all classes. Among the assessment practices that are used less frequently are calling individual students to answer questions in front of the class (46%), letting students evaluate their own progress (36%) and administer standardized tests (32%).

These results suggest European teachers are using more frequently formative assessment strategies (for example, observing students and providing feedback) than summative (for example, administering a standardized test). These results go along with the recommendations of OECD (2014) regarding the importance of using multiple assessment approaches and, more specifically, engaging students in their own assessment. As stated by Black and William (1998, p. 10), “*Self-assessment by pupils, far from being a luxury, is in fact an essential component of formative assessment*”.

7. Comparison between the use of student assessment practices made by Portuguese teachers and the other European teachers

After analyzing the frequency of use of each of the assessment strategies presented in TALIS 2013, the same kind of analysis was conducted regarding the Portuguese teachers and regarding the average of all the European teachers, but excluding the Portuguese ones. Figure 3 and Figure 4 show the results of this analysis.

Asking questions to students in front of the class (Figure 3) seems to be an assessment strategy used more frequently in Portugal (65%) than in the remaining European countries (45%). Around 8% of Portuguese teachers report to never, or almost never, call students to answer questions in front of the class, while around 20% of the other European teachers admit to do so.

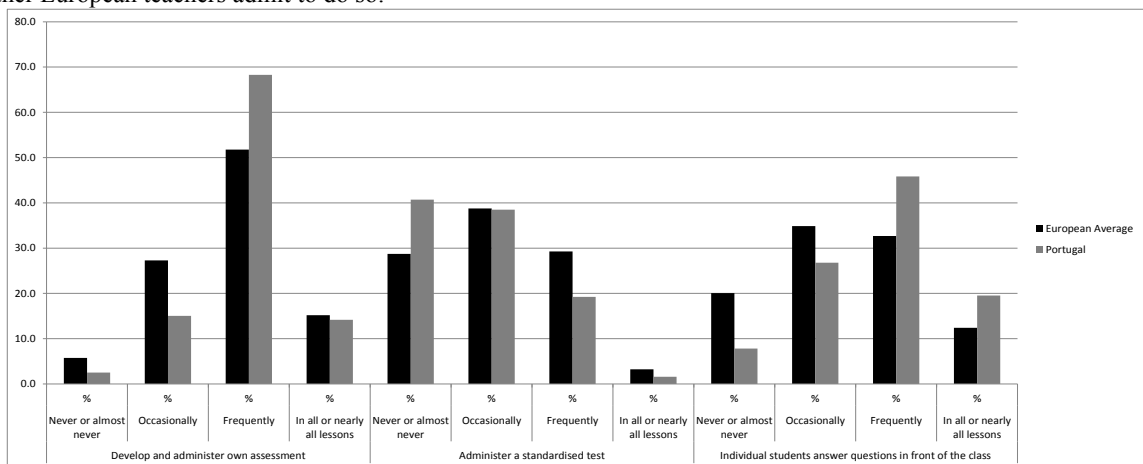


Figure 3. Use of student assessment practices made by Portuguese teachers and by the other European teachers (I)

Regarding the development and administering of their own assessment (Figure 3), this is a strategy that Portuguese teachers also adopt more frequently than other European teachers. 83% of Portuguese teachers use this assessment strategy frequently or even in all classes, and only 67% of the other European teachers do so.

41% of Portuguese teachers report to never or almost never apply a standardized test (Figure 3), while only 29% of the remaining European teachers report the same option. Actually only 21% of Portuguese teachers refer to use frequently or in nearly all lessons a standardized test, while 33% of the other European teachers report to use it with the same frequency.

Half of the European teachers, excluding Portuguese teachers, report to provide written feedback on student work in addition to a numeric mark (Figure 4). 76% of the Portuguese teachers claim to provide written feedback in addition to summative marks and only 5% report to never or almost never provide this kind of input.

Portuguese teachers seem to be more likely to let students evaluate their own progress (Figure 4) than the other European teachers. 55% of Portuguese teachers report to allow students to assess their own progress, while only 30% of the remaining European teachers adopt this assessment strategy frequently..

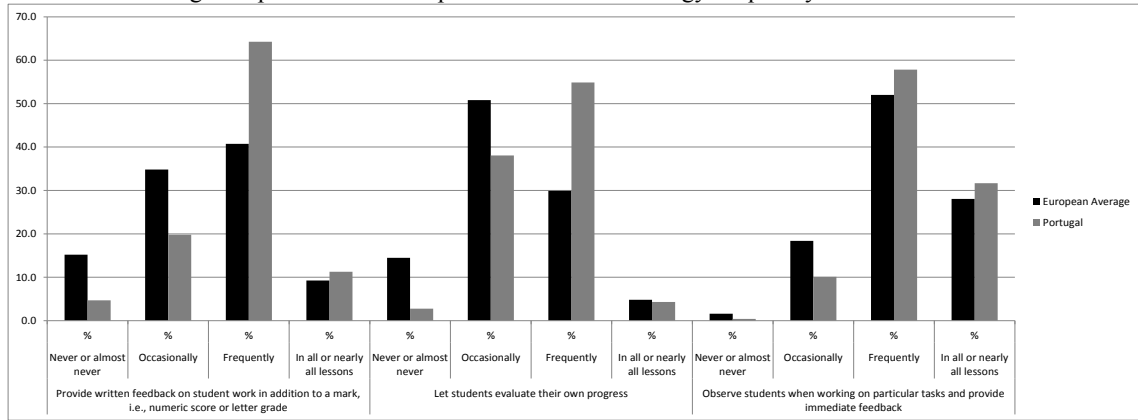


Figure 4. Use of student assessment practices made by Portuguese teachers and by the other European teachers (II)

It seems that there is not a relevant difference regarding Portuguese teachers and the other European teachers in what concerns the observation of their students when working on particular tasks and providing immediate feedback. 90% of the Portuguese teachers are likely to adopt this strategy, as well as 80% of the remaining European teachers.

8. Concluding remarks

The results indicate Portugal has the higher percentage of teachers reporting the use of multiple assessment strategies. It also seems that Portuguese teachers use more frequently formative assessment practices (for instance, “Provide written feedback on student work in addition to a mark” and “Let students evaluate their own progress”) than the other European teachers. However, TALIS 2013 only surveys teachers about the frequency of use of six specific assessment strategies and not inquiries them about the way these are implemented in the classroom. Furthermore, there is no information about the alignment between teaching, learning and assessment strategies (Biggs, 1999), which is essential for the promotion of effective learning. Actually, it is interesting to observe that in a study about the differences and the similarities of the teaching and learning strategies adopted by Portuguese teachers and by other European teachers (da Silva Lopes *et al.*, submitted), almost no differences were found. However, in what concerns assessment, and as showed in this study, several differences were identified. It would be of interest to analyze the kind of teaching, learning and assessment strategies more likely to be used in specific countries, and how these relate to each other.

It is also important to emphasize that the teacher’s questionnaire does not provide a definition of each of the assessment strategies presented. This can lead to different interpretations, according to teachers’ background, teachers’ context and/or teachers’ experience. For instance, regarding the observation of students’ activities and providing immediate feedback, this is a transversal assessment strategy that is used in almost every class at every moment. Thus, are there really teachers that never observe students’ activities and provide feedback? Or do they observe the activities but do not give feedback to students? Or do these teachers provide feedback later on? We can also question what a “standardized test” is. Is this expression understood in the same way by all teachers? A detailed

analysis about the way each of the assessment strategies is understood and how it is implemented is fundamental to have a deeper knowledge about student assessment strategies in Europe.

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