

# Investigating the Assessment Literacy of Mandarin Chinese Teachers in the UK

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**Abstract** This study explores the assessment literacy of Mandarin Chinese teachers in the Confucius Institutes (CI) in the UK. Analyses of the data from questionnaires and interviews indicate that the levels of assessment literacy among CI Mandarin Chinese teachers differ from those of local Modern Foreign Language (MFL) teachers, particularly in terms of the assessment methods used and their understanding of assessment practices. The assessment literacy characteristics of CI Mandarin Chinese teachers also vary according to their years of teaching experience and their educational backgrounds. By exploring the reasons behind these differences, this study will help future CI Mandarin Chinese teachers be better prepared for their secondment in the UK education context and reduce anxiety over working in a different system, especially when it comes to assessing their students.

**Keywords** Mandarin Chinese teachers in the UK; assessment literacy; Confucius Institutes

## 英国中文教师评估素养调查

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**提 要** 本研究探讨了英国孔子学院中文教师的评估素养。对问卷和访谈的分析表明,孔院中文教师的评估素养水平与当地现代外语教师的评估素养水平不同,特别是在所使用的评估方法和他们对评估实践的理解方面。孔院中文教师的评估素养特征也因其教学经验和教育背景而异。通过探索这些差异背后的原因,本研究将帮助孔院中文教师更好地在英国教育环境中做好教学工作准备,并减少因在不同教育系统中工作而产生的焦虑,尤其是在评估学生方面。

**关键词** 英国中文教师; 评估素养; 孔子学院



## 1. Introduction

Mandarin Chinese is considered to be a top priority language for the UK's future (The British Academy, 2020). There has been an increase in Mandarin Chinese teaching and learning in British schools, and the number of GCSE Chinese test takers has increased accordingly (Tinsley & Doležal, 2018). To promote Mandarin Chinese learning in young generations, the British government launched the Mandarin Excellence Programme (MEP) in 2016 to encourage over 5,000 British students to become fluent Chinese speakers by 2020 (GOV.UK, Join the Mandarin Excellence Programme, 2018).

Meanwhile, researchers have drawn attention to the shortage of qualified teachers. In the UK, very few British institutes deliver accredited Chinese teacher training programmes (Zhang & Li, 2010; Tinsley & Board, 2017). Zhang and Li (2020) pointed out that the supply of qualified Chinese teachers is still one of the main challenges because Mandarin Chinese teachers in many UK schools are seconded from China for a short term, either through the British Council's Teaching Assistant Programme or Confucius Institutes (CIs). They are trained and assessed in China before starting their service and are credited with qualifications issued by the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation (previously known as Hanban). However, according to Tinsley and Board (2014), it is not clear how much of the pre-service training is tailored to the UK education context. Research has suggested that the training in China's mainland are often centralised and decontextualised, focusing on theory-based content knowledge or pedagogy (Wang, et al., 2013). On arrival, these teachers urgently need to gain a whole new understanding of the school system, the domestic culture, and the needs of their students.

More recent research has focused on the adjustment processes CI Mandarin Chinese teachers undergo in their intercultural experience as well as their continuing professional needs (Lu, et al., 2019; Ye & Edwards, 2018). While such studies highlight a period of cultural turbulence faced by the teachers, especially in the school environment, teachers' levels of assessment literacy in context—a vital part of teachers' professional knowledge—remains relatively unexplored.

The aim of this study is to investigate the existing assessment literacy of CI Mandarin Chinese teachers in the UK. Understanding their assessment literacy and comparing theirs with those of the local modern foreign language teachers could help us find some potential gaps or overlaps between the two groups of teachers. The findings can help stakeholders at different levels, such as policymakers, accreditation institutes in and out of China, and the hosting partners of CIs, to provide the Mandarin Chinese teachers with more specific training and support in the topic of assessing and teaching in the UK.

## 2. Relevant Literature: Theoretical and Empirical Evidence

In this section, theoretical frameworks on assessment literacy and a selection of current studies on language teachers' assessment literacy will be reviewed. Assessment plays a key role in education at both the classroom and the school level as assessment influences what and how teachers teach and students learn (Baird, 2013; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shepard, 2000). Because of its strategic nature, assessment is considered a key aspect of teachers' professionalism (O'Neill & Adams, 2014).

Assessment literacy has been the subject of researchers

who discuss teachers' capacities. Staggins (1991a; 1991b) defined assessment literacy as knowledge around educational assessment and the ability to apply it when measuring students' learning. Fullan and Watson (2000) added that it refers to the capacity of teachers to develop and alter classroom and school plans correspondingly. Paterno (2001) pointed out that assessment literate teachers are also familiar with standards in assessment and alternative measurements. Later, researchers discussed the importance of teachers' ability to interpret results, adjust teaching and methods accordingly, and communicate results effectively (Mertler, 2004; DeLuca and Klinger, 2010; Brookhart, 2011).

The levels of assessment literacy among language teachers have been investigated empirically. Zhang and Burry-Stock (2003) employed questionnaires to understand the assessment methods teachers use in the classroom. Volante and Fazio (2007) used self-reflections to track the assessment literacy of junior teachers undergoing a four-year training programme. They found that only a minority mentioned formative assessments. Fulcher (2012) developed an internet survey to elicit teachers' assessment training needs. They concluded that assessment literacy training needs to be addressed and more online resources are required. Vogt and Tzagari (2014) measured the assessment skills of English language teachers in European countries with questionnaires and in-depth interviews. They found that teachers expressed a need for training tailored to local education contexts. A common theme in the current literature is the participants' desire for more assessment literacy training.

From the discussions and definition above, it can be concluded that assessment literacy is believed to include theoretical knowledge, adoption of methods,

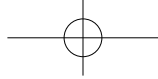
communication of results, and reflection on the results. This definition is adopted in designing the research instruments for this study. Although many studies have researched English language teachers' assessment literacy, as far as we are aware, there is as no such study so far on Chinese language teachers' assessment literacy development among native Chinese teachers in their secondment in the UK education system.

### 3. Research Questions and Methodology

In this study, we aimed at exploring Mandarin Chinese teachers' assessment literacy in the UK and compare that with the local MFL teachers. Specifically, the two research questions concerned are:

1. What is the status quo of CI Mandarin Chinese teachers' assessment literacy in the UK? How do they differ in relation to their personal backgrounds?
2. What are the differences in assessment literacy comparing UK CI Mandarin Chinese teachers and local MFL teachers? What are the reasons behind the differences, if any?

A questionnaire, consisting of six themes, was administered, followed by semi-structured interviews designed to ask questions related to ① theoretical knowledge of assessment, ② aim of assessment, ③ assessment methods, ④ assessment results communication, ⑤ reflection, and ⑥ training received. The first five categories were adapted from the definitions of assessment literacy (Staggins, 1991a; Staggins, 1995; Mertler, 2004; Fullan & Watson, 2000; Paterno, 2001; Brookhart, 2011). In these, communicating the results with students, parents and other stakeholders and giving feedbacks was included because teachers are not only required to "give feedback orally or through accurate marking", but also required



to “encourage students to respond to the feedbacks” (GOV.UK, 2011). To have a more comprehensive view of participants’ assessment literacy, the study also collected the information about their teaching and education backgrounds, and how they evaluate the training received.

Moreover, the questions concerning methods-in-use in the questionnaire are from the methods described by Tomlinson and Moon (2013). Assessment methods are divided into two types: test-based, such as quizzes, standard qualification tests such as GCSE or HSK, and non-test-based, which are self-assessment with marking criteria given, peer assessment, portfolios assessment where students’ performance are collected and evaluated as a whole, as well as assessment differentiation where students with different abilities are assessed differently.

### 3.1 Data Collection

The questionnaire consists of 45 questions, 33 of which have multiple items for rating on a Likert scale. This questionnaire was piloted with two respondents, a one-year volunteer and a teacher with three years’ experience in UK schools. The questionnaire was then distributed to 87 UK CI Mandarin Chinese teachers across England, Scotland, and Wales in Summer 2020.

In addition, we conducted semi-structured online interviews with 10 participants, 8 of whom were recruited from the survey respondents and 2 of whom were experienced local MFL teachers in the UK. The 8 respondents came from diversified backgrounds in terms of education backgrounds and teaching experience. The interview protocol was piloted with two participants and adjusted accordingly before rolling out. Each interview lasted 40 to 60 minutes. The

language used was dependent on the first language of the interviewees. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcribed versions of the interviews were translated into English for analysis use. In total, the English interviews were transcribed into 12,476 words while the Chinese interviews were transcribed into 86,557 words.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaires was analysed using SPSS to obtain the mean and standard deviation of each theme, as well as the correlations between teaching experience, education backgrounds, and the different themes. The Likert scale ranges from 1 to 5, representing from “totally disagree” to “totally agree”. All items were designed as positive statements, therefore, the higher the participants rate, the more assessment literate they are. The qualitative data of this study was sorted, coded, and analysed with NVivo 12. The nodes were in line with the themes and questions in the questionnaire. Data from the questionnaires and interviews both helped to address research question 1. Meanwhile, data from interviews also shed light on research question 2.

## 4. Findings

**Research Question 1:** *What is the status quo of CI Mandarin Chinese teachers’ assessment literacy in the UK? How do they differ in relation to their personal backgrounds?*

### 4.1. UK CI Mandarin Chinese Teachers’ Assessment Literacy: in General

Qualitative data from the interviews generated a matrix of nodes, which is presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Assessment Literacy Difference Between CI Mandarin Chinese Teachers and Local MFL Teachers

Interviewee # Major		Peer Assessment	Result communication	Quiz	Standard Qualification Tests	Portfolios	Self-Assessment	Assessment Differentiation
1-2 Years' Experience	#1 English	0	3	1	2	0	0	2
	#2 TCSOL	0	1	4	2	0	0	2
2-5 Years' Experience	#3 International politics	0	2	1	0	1	1	1
	#4 Chinese literature	0	2	0	0	2	0	3
	#5 TCSOL	0	1	1	1	1	0	4
	#6 TCSOL	0	2	1	0	1	0	2
>5 Years' Experience	#7 English literature	0	1	2	2	0	0	2
	#8 English literature	0	0	4	0	0	2	0
Local MFL Teachers	#9 Chinese	1	3	0	1	1	1	5
	#10 French	3	5	1	2	1	2	3

The table above suggests that, in terms of the assessment methods used, CI Mandarin Chinese teachers do not generally use peer assessment and self-assessment. This could be a result of a lack of knowledge according to the interview data. Chinese teachers all mentioned validity and reliability of

assessment (see interview extracts below), but did not mention assessment for learning, or formative and summative assessment. This explains why CI Mandarin Chinese teachers tended to adopt test-based methods to assess students.

*“The assessment in TCSOL is very theoretical. It tells you which aspects you need to assess in students’ learning, such as students’ learning attitude, students’ understanding of the subject. The methods include oral tests and written tests, such kind of theoretical knowledge. I can remember that we (had lectures) on validity and reliability, different types of assessment, one is called competency test, another is called proficiency test.” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 2)*

*“With regards to assessment, I am aware that there are some types of it, such as proficiency test, level test and potential test. What I memorise very well is that lecturer constantly emphasises that there are two characteristics of tests: validity and reliability, there is another called differentiability.” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 3)*

*“About the validity and reliability of assessment and some other details in conducting assessment including what types of assessment are. I developed a general understanding, but none are Chinese teaching and assessing-oriented. (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 4)*

Table 2: Means of Assessment Literacy Themes

Assessment Literacy Themes	Mean
Knowledge of assessment literacy	3.46
Aim of assessments	3.91
Assessment methods 1: non-test-based methods	3.58
Assessment methods 2: test-based methods	3.46
Assessment results communication	3.26
Reflection on assessments	4.05
Assessment training received	3.79

Table 2 shows that the means range from 3.26 to 4.05, which indicates that the assessment literacy of CI

Mandarin Chinese teachers align with the definition of the assessment literacy proposed by Stiggins (2010). CI Mandarin Chinese teachers are not confident enough about their assessment literacy as most means are between 3 and 4.

The mean of “Reflection on assessments” is the highest (M=4.05), and the mean of “Aim of assessments” is also close to 4. Responses from participants indicate that these concepts have long been emphasized in the pre-service and in-service training, hence CI Mandarin Chinese teachers are considerably literate in these aspects.

*“Based on students’ performance, we will make adjustment. If it is too difficult today, we teachers will adjust teaching progress and teaching methods....” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 4)*

*“I believed that I adjust after I receive students’ comments. I would adjust according to students’ different performance and participation in the class.” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 6)*

*“I believe that I adjust teaching methods based on assessment results.” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 8)*

*“If there’s a particular point that I think they haven’t understood then I’ll make an effort to include it again when I’m teaching something else.” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 5)*

On the other hand, the means of “Knowledge of assessment literacy” and “Assessment result communication” are below 3.5, while “Assessment results communication” has the lowest mean score

(3.26). The reason why CI teachers are not confident in communicating results could be that CI Mandarin Chinese teachers are seconded to the schools and are not yet able to access parents/students directly.

*“We often submit the result to school. School will pass the result to parents or their own class school teacher. They will help pass the results on to students. Yes, we don’t have direct contact with students.” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 5)*

*“We don’t communicate results of daily assessments with students, school, or parents. But school will pass the mock tests’ result to parents though parents’ nights or school will contact parents to communicate the results.” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 1)*

*“Since we are doing standardized test, students can check their results online. Afterwards, if there are certificates coming to me, I pass them to students. This is my students’ case. Once the course finished, we don’t have chance to see each other anymore.” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 7)*

The associations between teachers’ assessment literacy and their teaching experience and education

backgrounds are further investigated and reported in the next section.

**4.2 Teaching Backgrounds and Assessment Literacy**  
According to the questionnaire data, 73.6% of the respondents taught for 1-2 years, while 19.5% taught

for 2-5 years. Very few CI Mandarin Chinese teachers in UK taught for more than 5 years in this study.

Table 3: Assessment Literacy in Terms of Years of Teaching Experiences

Assessment literacy themes	1-2 years'		2-5 years'		5-20 years'	
	N=64		N=17		N=6	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Knowledge of assessment	3.46	1.10	3.59	0.77	3.10	0.87
Aim of assessments	3.94	0.78	3.86	0.86	3.63	1.23
Assessment methods 1: Non-test-based methods (i.e. peer assessment, self-assessment, build portfolios, etc.)	3.39	0.89	3.60	0.92	3.35	1.21
Assessment methods 2: Test-based methods (i.e. quizzes, termly tests, mock GCSE, etc)	3.42	0.93	3.59	0.99	3.26	1.17
Assessment results communication	3.18	1.04	3.43	1.13	3.23	1.43
Reflection on assessments	<b>4.09</b>	0.75	4.15	1.00	3.55	1.40
Assessment training received	3.76	0.96	<b>4.40</b>	<b>0.55</b>	3.67	1.37
On average	<b>3.61</b>	0.92	<b>3.80</b>	0.88	<b>3.39</b>	1.24

As we can see in Table 3, means of the second group who have 2-5 years' experience are mostly higher than those with less or more years' experience. The average mean of this group (M=3.80) is higher than the other two groups (M=3.61; M=3.39) and the standard deviation (SD=0.88) of this group is lower (SD=0.92; SD=1.24). This indicates that those with 2-5 years' experience are most assessment literate and novice teachers are also more literate than those with more than 5 years' experience. In terms of the means of different themes, the highest is the "Assessment training received" from 2-5 years' experience group (M=4.40), with the lowest SD (SD=0.55). Moreover, when comparing the means of different categories of teachers with 1-2 years' and 2-5 years'

experience, the most significantly different one is non-test-based methods". The data trend shows that teachers tend to develop better formative and non-test-based assessment methods after two years' practice. This finding echoed what we found from interview data presented in section 4.1

**4.3 Education Backgrounds and Assessment Literacy**  
Participants' education background is analysed in two major groups, those who major in *Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL)* and those who do not. The latter majors include *Education, Language and literature, English language and literature, or Chinese dancing and Kungfu*. The two groups' assessment literacy comparison is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Assessment Literacy in Terms of Different Majors

Assessment literacy elements	TCSOL majors		Other majors	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Knowledge of assessment	3.42	1.05	3.48	1.03
Aim of assessments	4.05	0.76	3.83	0.88
Assessment methods 1: Non-test-based methods	3.44	0.84	3.42	0.98
Assessment methods 2: Test-based methods	3.57	0.92	3.37	0.99
Assessment results communication	3.42	0.90	3.08	1.14
Reflection on assessments	4.23	0.68	3.96	0.94
Assessment training received	4.00	0.68	3.68	1.12

From Table 4, it is observed that the category with the highest means of these two groups is “Reflection on assessments” and the lowest means is in “Assessment results communication”. When scrutinising the SDs, it can be seen that teachers who major in TCSOL are more likely to agree with each other. In terms of means and SDs of these seven categories, generally speaking, those who major in TCSOL are more

assessment literate. There are two SDs of teachers from other majors that are over 1, which are “Assessment results communication” and “Assessment training received”. This suggests that more contextualised assessment training are required. At the same time, all interviewees, without exception, reported that they are in desperate need of training on assessment with comments like the following:

*“I think there is a lack of training on assessment in TCSOL, as there isn’t much attention to it in training.” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 2)*

*“I believe this is what CI headquarters need to work on. There shall be more contextualised training and explanation on the local assessment system, and local education system.....I believe these are much more important than teaching techniques.” (UK CI Mandarin Chinese teacher: interviewee 4)*

**Research Question 2:** *What are the differences in assessment literacy comparing UK CI Mandarin Chinese teachers and local MFL teachers? What are the reasons behind the differences, if any?*

Differences between local MFL teachers’ assessment literacy and that of CI Mandarin Chinese teachers were analysed by further reviewing the results shown

in Table 1. Local MFL teachers are good at using peer assessment while none of the CI Mandarin Chinese teachers mentioned using it at all. Local MFL teachers are also more familiar with self-assessment while CI Mandarin Chinese teachers barely mentioned it. The two local MFL teachers said:

*“(We) get him to peer assessment to assess each other.” (local MFL teacher: interviewee 9)*

*“We can tell them what a mark scheme is. I am going to assess each other probably that was writing, getting them to look (at) each other’s writing and see how they can improve.” (local MFL teacher: interviewee 10)*





It is worth noting that both CI Mandarin Chinese teachers and local MFL teachers are paying attention to assessment differentiation. However, local MFL teachers are less likely to use quizzes, but both CI Mandarin Chinese teachers and local MFL teachers mention standard qualification tests frequently. Local MFL teachers are more familiar with communicating results than all the Chinese teachers we interviewed.

Interestingly, the questionnaire results also show the similarity between CI Mandarin Chinese teachers with 2-5 years' experience and local MFL teachers. For example, both groups are not in favour of using quizzes. This phenomenon also shows in "Building portfolios" and "Assessment differentiation". This suggests that those with 2-5 years' experience tend to assess more like local MFL teachers. However, all CI Mandarin Chinese teachers seldom use "self-assessment methods" while local MFL teachers use it often.

In conclusion, the interview data seem to suggest that local MFL teachers follow the guideline of "assessment for learning", while UK CI Mandarin Chinese teachers often observe the principle of "assessment of learning". Yet there are similarities emerging between local MFL teachers and CI Mandarin Chinese teachers with 2-5 years' experience in terms of adopting formative assessment methods.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

### 5.1 Status Quo of UK CI Mandarin Chinese Teachers' Assessment Literacy

This study identified that UK CI Mandarin Chinese teachers' assessment literacy is strong in certain aspects, such as the Aim of assessments, which achieves the highest mean score in the survey. Their least confident element in assessment literacy is "Assessment

result communication" due to limited contact with parents and students. Meanwhile, it is noticed that UK CI Mandarin Chinese teachers tend to apply quizzes and standard qualification tests more but seldom use self-assessment methods or peer assessment methods. These findings echo the previous studies (Zhang & Li, 2010; Lu, Zheng, & Lin, 2019) that pointed out UK CI Mandarin Chinese teachers face challenges adapting to the local education system. Interesting findings are revealed in terms of the different theoretical knowledge on assessment of UK CI Mandarin Chinese teachers, as well as in the similarity between CI teachers with 2-5 years' experience and local MFL teachers.

### 5.2 Discrepancy Between Novice CI Mandarin Chinese Teachers and Experienced CI Mandarin Chinese Teachers

This study established that there is a significant difference in assessment literacy between novice Chinese teachers who have only 1-2 years' experience and experienced Chinese teachers who have 2-5 years' experience, with the latter being more assessment literate. It seems that 2-5 years' teaching could give the Chinese teachers adequate access to assessment training in the UK. This phenomenon is congruent with previous studies that investigated the change of assessment literacy of teachers who received training in workshops (Mertler, 2004; Paterno, 2001). There is also a significant difference between the latter group and teachers who have more than 5 years' experience. In this group of participants, teachers with more than 5 years' experience are often English teachers in China and are probably more rooted in their Chinese assessment beliefs and practices. Additionally, CI Mandarin Chinese teachers who major in TCSOL often demonstrate higher levels of assessment literacy than those from other majors. All participants in this study



called for more contextualised assessment pre-service or in-service training.

### 5.3 Comparison Between Local Teachers and CI Mandarin Chinese Teachers

When compared with local teachers, the CI Mandarin Chinese teachers are more focused on summative assessment methods and are less experienced in communicating results. In terms of methods used, those with 2-5 years' experience tend to agree that formative methods are fundamental and a good way of conducting assessment in daily teaching. However, many are still focusing on end-of-term tests or standard tests such as HSK or GCSE Chinese, especially if they are teaching Key Stage 3 pupils. This suggests that CI Mandarin Chinese teachers are less confident in using formative assessment in their teaching, and therefore should be provided with training in this area.

In addition, the formative assessment methods used by participants are different. CI Mandarin Chinese teachers often use quizzes, question-asking or behavior-observing as formative assessment methods. It is worth mentioning that methods such as peer assessment and self-assessment are seldom used by CI Mandarin Chinese teachers; on the contrary, they are commonly used by local MFL teachers.

Generally speaking, CI Mandarin Chinese teachers do not feel confident in their ability to fulfil assessment tasks at the beginning of their secondment. What is disturbing is the reported lack of confidence in using formative assessment methods. These skills are not only critical to successful assessment, but also necessary for effective teaching (Staggins, 1999). The participants in this study echo the need for more contextualised training before taking their overseas teaching jobs (Zhang & Li, 2010; Wang & Higgins, 2008).

### 5.4 Suggestion for Further Studies

The result of this study has implications for Chinese teacher training institutes and policymakers in this field. It also has implications for the assessment for Chinese teaching and learning in the UK— as one interviewee mentioned “the major concern she has for assessment is that she couldn't find clear guidelines for it”.

To conclude, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution. Though we collected quantitative data from 87 participants across the UK's different institutes, and qualitative data from 10 interviewees, the sample size is still relatively small. We also noticed that the respondents in this study are mostly teachers with less than 5 years' teaching experience. Those with over 5 years' experience only account for 6.9% of the participants and only two local MFL teachers participated. It is hoped that there will be more studies of assessment literacy of Mandarin Chinese teachers, with larger samples and from more diversified backgrounds. We would also like to suggest that future studies should focus on specific aspects of assessment literacy and provide further understanding of detailed assessment literacy of Mandarin Chinese teachers in the UK or in a global context.

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