RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Classroom Based Assessment A focus on formative language assessment

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate research studies in relation to assessment in the classroom environment, and to look at the role of classroom assessment, with a peculiar concentration on formative language assessment. It seems that the teachers' classroom assessment performanes and techniques may directly affect learners' learning, and this includes young learners. Classroom teachers are the pioneers helping students learning and assessing their practice in the classroom. Hence, the literature review is mainly concerned with the role of classroom assessment and the connection between classroom assessment practices and learning. This study also aims to clarify some terminology and explores the relationship between assessment and learning with young language learners in the EFL context via a review of literature on experiences of assessment with young adolescent learners.

Keywords: Classroom based assessment, EFL context, Role of assessment, Learning, Terminology, and Young Learners

1 | INTRODUCTION

The main distinction between assessment and testing

In the educational context, the term "assessment" is often associated with "testing" for most of the teachers and learners. Despite the fact that, testing is merely one particle of assessment and it specifically covers a wider range of elements from tests to dynamic and collaborative activities and tasks. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the difference between assessment and testing before looking at the definition of classroom-based assessment.

Ioannou-Georgior and Sophie (2003: 4) presented a wider interpretation of assessment; they demonstrate assessment as 'a general term which includes all methods used to gather information about children's knowledge, ability, understanding, attitudes and motivation. Assessment can be carried out through a number of instruments (for example, test, self-assessment), and can be formal or informal.' This

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definition shows that teachers may use both formal and informal methods to gather information in relation to learners' performance, such as their capability and attitudes, as an evidence of learning. Ioannou-Georgior and Sophie state that assessment means all kinds of methods, whether they are formal or informal, and the goal of collecting evidences of learners' learning.

The investigations of Rea-Dickins(2000), Lambert and Lines (2000) discuss depper levels suggesting that assessment is a permanent ongoing process than a onetime thing. Rea-Dickins (2000) presents assessment as 'the general process of monitoring of keeping track of the learners' progress.' (p. 376). She claims that such a process is a continuous method to supervise the learners' outcome. Lambert and Lines (2000) also state the similar viewpoint, they define assessment as 'the process of gathering, interpreting, recording and using information about pupils' responses to educational tasks' (p. 4) According to them, assessment is linked to what teachers undertake while the process of teaching and learning is going on, including gathering, diagnosing, recording and using information about learner's performance and feedback. Apparently, assessment is a part of both teachers' and learners' life within classroom and is integrated to the process of teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, testing relates a procedure that is used to gauge learners' skills by teachers and examiners (Rea-Dickins, 2000). According to Ioannou-Georgior and Sophie (2003), testing is a procedure with a certain goal and is used by teachers to assess learners' performance in order to understand whether the learner has achieved this objective or not. They also point out that testing 'used tasks or exercises and assigns marks or grades based on quantitative results' (p. 4) This seems to suggest that testing is one of the tools that used by teachers to assess their learners' ability and is a way to demonstrate what learners have learnt. It also implies that testing is a onetime thing rather than an ongoing process. As can be seen, testing is a procedure with a certain objective and is used to collect quantitative results, in terms of marks or grades. It is used to measure what the learners have learnt and to check whether they have met their goal or not; meanwhile, assessment refers to all methods

of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in relation to learners' performance and is a continuous process. In fact, through clarifying the boundaries between testing and assessment may help us to get insight into the meaning and definition of classroom-based assessment.

Classroom-Based Assessment

Classroom-based assessment is defined by Airasian as 'the process of collecting, synthesizing and interpreting information to aid in classroom decision making' (2005, p. 2). He highlights the work that teachers need to take during the process of assessment in the classroom context, with the aim of supporting teachers in decision making, such as deciding what forms of assessment are most appropriate for gaining information about learner's learning and measuring achievement. In classrooms, teachers collect data in relation to learners' needs, strength, and weakness and try to interpret the information on the basis of teachers' own beliefs, capacities and knowledge. They then provide help to learners and may be able to support individual learning needs. Such ongoing processes, including assigning marks, providing feedback and learning opportunities, and modifying the teaching and learning, are aiming to renew, keep track and record learners' performance in the classroom. By doing so, teachers may be able to enhance learners' learning and help them to close the gap between their current status and their target level (Sadler 1989).

Further, Mckay describes that 'classroom assessment or teacher assessment refers to assessment carried out by teachers in the classroom' (2006, p. 140). He then notes that classroom assessment may be formative, for instance, when the purpose is to provide feedback to help learners improve learning, or it may be summative, when the purpose is to record and report pupils' achievement and attainment (Rea-Dickins 2000). As can be seen, the purposes for classroom assessment may lead to using assessment information formatively or summatively by teachers. For example, they may need to use formative assessment to identify learner needs and use summative assessment to provide learners' achievement to school authorities in the end of a school year. In fact, there are a variety of purposes for teachers to use

classroom assessment. Rea-Dickins suggests three objectives of using classroom assessment: 'teaching', 'nurturing learning', and 'measuring learning' (2000). In other words, teachers may use classroom assessment to modify their teaching methods and materials, provide appropriate help to learners and meet the bureaucratic demands.

Classroom assessment plays a significant role in collecting information about learners' learning and can also be used to support teachers' teaching and learning (Rea-Dickins, 2001). It is a continuous and integrated process which can be planned in advance as well as be unplanned, such as observing learners' language performance during the course of teaching and assessment activities. The roles of teachers may have an impact on learners learning in the classroom, whether as facilitators to develop learners' language development or as assessors to measure learners' language learning, (Rea-Dickins, 2008). Teachers may use both formative and summative assessment as pedagogic tools to scaffold learners, adjust their teaching, and assign grades for learners in the classroom. It is important for teachers to develop classroom assessment skills and strategies, and bring about positive change in classrooms. The aims of adopting classroom assessment strategies are to support learners learning and teachers' teaching, and to meet the ultimate achievement of the curriculum goals.

Rea-Dickins (2001) provides a model of classroom assessment which illustrates teachers' roles in four stages in the classroom assessment process (see Figure 2.1). It also reveals the fact that teachers may need to play a mediating role in order to deal with various demands from improving learning and modifying teaching. For instance, in stage 1, the Planning stage, teachers may be interpreters to explain the learning goals and assessment criteria with learners and evaluators to identify learners' needs and levels. They may become supporter in stage 2 in order to scaffold learners and provide feedback to them. As for stage 3, teachers may also need to be interpreters to interpret the learning evidence and improvers to refine the assessment process; meanwhile, they may need to be reports to report and record the learning progress to administrative authorities.

Stage 1: Planning

Identifying the purpose for the assessment?(why?)

Choosing the assessment activity(how)

Preparing the learners for the assessment

Who chooses/decides for each of the above

Stage 4: Recording & Dissemination

Recording & reporting progress toward NC

Formal review for LEA or internal school purposes

Strategies for dissemination of formal review of learners

Stage 2: Implementation

Introducing the assessment(why, what, how)

Scaffolding, during assessment activity

Learner self-& peer monitoring

Feedback to learners(immediate)

Stage 3: Monitoring

Recording evidence of achievement

Interpreting evidence obtained from an assessment

Revising teaching and learning plans

Sharing findings with other teachers

Feedback to learners (delayed)

Figure 1 Process and strategies in classroom assessment

However, teachers may not be able to predict the complex interaction between these two assessment purposes before actually implementing the assessment active. For instance, teacher-planned summative assessment may also provide formative assessment opportunities for students during the teaching process. Rea-Dickins (2006) points out that the boundary and interaction between formative and summative purposes of assessment 'cannot be identified in any watertight way in advance, as they will unfold and be enacted through the classroom discourse' (p. 183). As can be seen, teachers need to be flexible with their classroom assessment practices and be able to use both formative and summative assessment as pedagogic tools to scaffold learners, adjust their teaching, and assign grades for learners in the classroom. Thus, it is important for teachers to understand the functions of both formative and

summative assessments and how to use them to modify their teaching, enhance pupil achievement, and report to school authorities, parents and other stakeholders.

2 | THE FUNCTIONS OF CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT: FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

On the basis of the definition of classroom assessment (2.2), classroom assessment may be used as a variety of instruments by teachers to collect data in relation to learners' needs, ability, knowledge, understanding and performance in the classroom. This seems to imply the primary role teachers play in classroom assessment process and the importance of linking formative and summative assessment to effectively enhance learners' learning and report it to other stakeholders, including parents, other teachers, learners themselves, and school authorities. In this section, the functions of classroom assessment, in terms of formative and summative assessment, will be discussed, particularly with assessment for learning, through a review of the literature in relation to the role of both formative and

3 | THE ROLE OF FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Classroom teachers are in the front line of assisting learners to develop their ability and enhance their learning, thus, it is crucial for teachers to recognize the different functions and characteristics between formative and summative assessments and to integrate them into everyday teaching and learning. Harlen and James (1997) share the different roles of formative and summative assessment in classroom assessment. They urge the need to distinguish the differences between formative and summative assessment, in terms of the functions and characteristics, and then connect and wave them together. To reveal the complexities of the differences between formative and summative, some research reports have provided a variety of interpretations to help teachers

to clarify the concept of formative and summative assessment.

According to the report of Task Group on Assessment and Testing, known as TGAT, it defines formative and summative assessment through clarifying the different purposes and timing between them. For formative assessment, teachers may use it to understand the 'the positive achievements of a pupil' (DES/WO, 1988, para. 23) (Oksana: This is quite an old reference, is there anything newer/more recent on this point?)and then plan their teaching in order to help the pupil to reach to the next step. It highlights the dynamic process of teaching and learning in the classroom and more importantly, it points out the future direction through using the results of assessment. Formative assessment is a continuous process of adjusting teachers' teaching and learners' learning; meanwhile, summative assessment is used for systematic recording of learners' overall achievement. In other words, teachers may use summative assessment to note learners' performance, such as recording the grade or scores of teacher made and standardized tests, after a certain period of time.

In 2001, Clarke expressed similar views in providing a clear illustration for formative and summative assessment:

If we think of our children as plants summative assessment of the plants is the process of simply measuring them. The measurements might be interesting to compare and analyse, but, in themselves, they do not affect the growth of the plants. Formative assessment, on the other hand, is the garden equivalent of feeding and watering the plants – directly affecting their growth (p2).

As can be seen, the main function of formative assessment is to nurture pupils and improve learning, which is a continuous process of interaction between teachers and learners. For instance, in classrooms, teachers provide guidance for learners toward improvement through formative assessment feedback during the processes of teaching and learning. As for summative assessment, it takes place after the teaching and learning. Teachers may grade or make judgments in relation to learners' learning in order to inform and report to other stakeholders. In the classroom, teachers use formative assessment to help

learners learning as well as modify their own teaching methods and materials. They also use summative assessment to assign grades and report attainment at the end of a school year for administrative purposes (Bachman & Palmer 1996). As such, formative assessment requires the ability of the teacher to diagnose learner's performance, in terms of what causes him or her to get struck, and to help learner to understand what to learn, how they learn, and how well they have learned.

4 | FORMATIVE CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT: ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

More recently, the focus of the classroom assessment studies has shifted from forms of test to the interactions between assessment and classroom learning. This shift also highlights the importance of the improvement of learning through formative teacher assessment. Black and Wiliam (1998) review a variety of past research studies in relation to classroom formative assessment. They point out that several empirical studies show evidence to support the claim that improving formative assessment do raise standards and help pupils learning, particularly with low ability pupils. They also present evidence in relation to how teachers use formative assessment practices and strategies to enhance pupils learning in the field of general education.

A broader explanation of formative assessment is provided by Black and Wiliam, they illustrate that 'all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged' (1998, p.7). Their interpretation not only points out that formative assessment activities can be used by both teachers and learners but also indicates how teachers and students use feedback to adjust the teaching and learning. From this perspective, formative assessment is embedded in teaching and learning and can be used to prompt learner learning. Key formative assessment strategies, such as effective teacher feedback, teacher scaffolding, self- and peer- assessment, and raising learners' self-esteem and motivation, may be

integrated and embedded within teacher-learner(s) interactions(Rea-Dickins 2006).

As can be seen, the activities that conduct by teachers, such as observation, teacher made tests, take-home tasks, and learners, including self- and peer-assessment, would provide information to help both teachers and learners improve themselves. Further, Brindley (2001) points out formative assessment should undertake by teachers 'during the learning process', by doing so, teachers can use 'the results to improve instruction' (p. 137).

In addition, Sadler (1989) connects formative assessment with feedback and believes that feedback to teachers and to learners are separate. He suggests that the aim of using feedback for teachers is to diagnose learners' performance and modify their teaching in order to help learners to enhance their abilities; meanwhile, for learners, the purpose of using feedback is to monitor their performance and understand their own learning weaknesses and strengths.

Further, Tunstall and Gipps (1996, p.393) identify two types of feedback used by teachers in classrooms: evaluative and descriptive feedback respectively. They suggest that the former seems to be more close to 'affective and conative (effort-based) aspects of learning' with a performance goal, whereas the latter places the emphasis on the cognitive development with a mastery goal. Teachers act as facilitators in providing descriptive types of feedback, such as 'making suggestions and questioning as part of discussion, rather than directing' (p. 401). As can be seen, there is a greater links between descriptive feedback and formative assessment.

However, Torrance and Pryor (1998) point out that teacher feedback may have a negative influence on learners, for instance, when the teacher tries to correct learners' mistakes which may lead to the impression of learners producing 'wrong' answers. It may even be seen as criticism by the pupils and discourage learners' self-esteem. Further, teacher feedback with 'praise' may result in encouraging competition among learners instead of increasing learners' motivation. Thus, it is important for teachers to recognize the influences and impact of formative assessment feedback on learner motivation and self-esteem.

To sum up, classroom assessment is used by teachers to collect data in relation to the process and attainment of learners with aim of responding to individual needs and curricular demands. Formative assessment is crucial in enhancing learner learning and closing the gap between learner's actual level and potential level. The following section explored assessment of young language learners in a foreign classroom context through review of past research studies in relation to classroom assessment in practice.

5 | CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT OF YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

Rea-Dickins (2000) points out that since the 1990s research studies in relation to assessment for foreign language learners has been more in evidence (e.g., Low et al., 1993; McKay et al., 1994; Edelenbos and Johnstone,1996; Breen et al., 1997; Leung and Teasdale, 1997). Language Testing proposes a special issue that is focusing on assessment for young language learners, who ages 5 to about 12, in the school system. The key idea of these reports in this issue is related to a variety of purposes for assessment for young language learners within an early years language learning curriculum which results in raising the awareness of wider issues in relation to assessment of young language learners, such as how the validity of classroom-based assessment is achieved.

Teadeale and Leung (2000) draw the attention to the validity of implement alternative assessment and monitoring learners' learning performance through teacher assessment. Rea-Dickins and Gardner (2000) also look at the same issue in relation to the implementation of formative classroom assessment, in terms of keeping track of learners' language development, in the English as a Second Language (ESL) context. Their findings suggest the potential variables which may influence the validity of teacher assessment during the assessment procedure. This is followed by Gattullo who explores the way to implement formative assessment in the Italian primary foreign language classroom, where English is taught since grade 3 (age 8). She investigates different formative assessment processes through analyzing classroom assessment discourses and she also observes the everyday interactions between teachers and learners. The results suggest that instead of using formative assessment actions which may be more beneficial for learning, including observing process, examining product and metacognitive questioning; teachers use more common actions, such as questioning, correcting and judging.

Continuing the theme of formative assessment of primary learners in the EFL context, Zangl (2000) provides the methods of assessment to gain information in relation to primary-age learners' language skills. She argues that teachers may be able to draw a developmental picture for individual learners, including their general interactional skills and specific language skills, through ongoing assessment throughout primary school. Hasselgren (2000) looks at the innovative ways to develop materials, such as tests, teacher assessment, and learner's self-assessment, which can improve both teachers and learners' assessment skills in Norwegian primary schools. In the context of Norway, one significant difference is that there is no tradition of testing for young language learners due to local policy. This contributes to high-demand assessment methods, particularly in materials development and task design, and to the implementation of formative assessment, in terms of assessment for learning. Both teachers and learners are encouraged to develop their ability to assess. As can be seen, the national policy is one of important variables that influences teachers' attitude towards integrating classroom-based assessment into their everyday language teaching.

It is also crucial to take variables, such as learners' prior cultural knowledge, teachers' knowledge and ability in assessment, and the English curriculum, into account when assessing primary-age learners of English as a foreign language. Teachers should choose and design the appropriate assessment material for Young language learners. The material should be well adapted to learners' cognitive and linguistic skills and to their interests.

6 | CONCLUSION

English teaching and learning for young learners has become increasingly important in Asian countries, such as Iran, Iraq, Japan and Korea, where learners study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) over the past few decades. At this point it is useful to clarify some terminology before introducing the English educational context in Iran. The term English as a Second Language (ESL) used in countries, , such as Canada, North America and Australia, which refers to 'learners who are using English as the medium of instruction in school contexts but who are not English first language (L1) speakers' (Rea-Dickins, 2000, p. 115). On the other hand, the term English as Foreign Language (EFL) refers to when English is taught to non-native English.

Although English is not a second language in Iran, it has become an inseparable part of many Iranian people's lives and is becoming more and more widespread. This high demand has caused a significant increase in the number of private English language institutes in Iran. Although English is a compulsory course in schools and universities, the majority of Iranian people are unable to communicate easily in English. This paper reviews the current state of teaching and learning English as an international language in Iran. Attitudes and motivations about learning English are reviewed. Five different aspects of using English within the country are analysed, including: English in public domain, English in Media, English in organizations/businesses, English in education, and English in private language institutes. Despite the time and money spent on English language courses in private language institutes, the majority of learners seem to forget what has been learned within months of completing their course. That is, when they are students with the support of the teacher and formal classes, they appear to make progress and use English more or less fluently. When this support is removed, their language skills either stagnant or regress. The findings of this study suggest that a dependant approach to learning is potentially one of the main reasons for English language learning problems and this is encouraged by English course books and approaches to teaching.

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