

Assessing Students in an Authentic and Ongoing Manner in the English Classroom

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Abstract—These days, assessment has a central role in the teaching-learning process of different subjects. Teachers are expected to shift away from traditional, dominant testing procedures and employ authentic, genuine assessment practices in today's education. When authentic assessments are incorporated into the classroom, teachers are more likely to obtain a more complete picture of what their (language) students know and can do over the course of instruction. Thus it is imperative to get a solid understanding of Performance-Based Assessment (PBA) and Formative Assessment, as the application of these kinds of assessments can have a positive impact upon (language) learning and enhance teaching as well. Therefore, in order to better apply the aforementioned assessments in the language learning classroom, this article examines authentic assessment vs. standardized assessment, PBA, authentic strategies of PBA, the historical background and conceptualization of formative assessment, the fundamentals and attributes of formative assessment and its applications, as well as it discusses formative assessment within ESL/EFL educational contexts.

Index Terms—assessment, authentic assessment, performance-based assessment, formative assessment, strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Currently, assessment is a critical component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum and in today's language education there is a trend from shifting away from traditional, dominant testing procedures and embracing authentic assessment and formative assessment practices. Within the context of an English curriculum in non-English speaking countries, assessing language learners by means of authentic assessments and formative assessments should have a central role in EFL teachers' professional practice. As they implement these two assessments into the classroom, they are more likely to obtain a more complete picture of the knowledge and skills their students possess. Additionally, by employing formative assessment language teachers can gather evidence about their students' strengths and weaknesses while teaching is still taking place. Thus teachers are better equipped to make well-informed decisions aimed at adjusting their subsequent instruction with the aim of enhancing student language learning. Therefore, based upon the importance of being able to assess language learners in a genuine, authentic and ongoing manner in the language learning classroom these days, this paper puts forward key notions with regard to authentic assessment vs. standardized assessment, performance-based assessment (PBA), authentic strategies of PBA, the historical background and conceptualization of formative assessment, the fundamentals and attributes of formative assessment and its applications. In addition to these, the use of formative assessment in ESL/EFL educational settings is highlighted. The information presented in this paper has the aim of helping teachers be aware of the beneficial, positive impact and key classroom implications the two aforementioned assessment types may have in the English language classroom.

II. AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT VS. STANDARDIZED TESTS

Assessments need to be appropriate and authentic and when educators are checking students' learning, it is essential for them to use an assessment practice that best fits a specific learning situation (Gallavan, 2009). Standardized, or norm-referenced tests, are commercially published tests that contain a set items and have a uniform procedure for administration and scoring (ERIC, 2001). They provide a comparison of individual performances to that of state or national samples (Kellaghan, Greaney & Murray, 2009).

First and foremost, authentic assessment is also referred to as naturalistic assessment, play-based assessment, contextualized assessment or performance assessment, which assesses learners in their natural environment (When applying authentic assessment in the classroom, the instructor is able to gather information by doing constant observations for adjustments, modifications, and adaptations regarding student's learning. Essentially, authentic assessment help educators to reflect upon their instruction and be aware of when, how and why to assess their students in order to gather authentic evidence of students' learning and knowledge (Gao & Grisham-Brown, 2011).

Since, authentic assessment allows teachers to gather valuable evidence for monitoring students' behavior as well as students to demonstrate their knowledge, it addresses not only the product but also the process (Mintah, 2003).

According to Mintah (2003), authentic assessment is grounded in the constructivist theory and believes that all students have prior knowledge before entering school. According to Herrera, Morales and Murry (2013), “authentic assessments identify and build on student’s strengths such as language, prior experiences, interests, and funds knowledge to facilitate learning” (p. 23). Any time teachers assess their students during the learning process, the content of the assessment has to be closely related to what they have taught to their students; however, standardized tests have been disapproved for the lack of this crucial aspect at the time of assessing students’ knowledge (Shepard, 2001)

Wiggins (1998) brought to light the following points about authentic assessment: it evaluates students’ skills in a real life context; it allows students not only to demonstrate knowledge through actions or performances, but also employs the knowledge acquired to deal with difficulties; it permits students to use several skills at once to complete a task; and it constantly provides opportunities for educators to give feedback throughout the process (as cited in Janesick, 2001). When using authentic assessments, educators are measuring or evaluating not only what students are able to do but also what they know. Activities within this approach are both demanding, beneficial to integrate students’ skills for completing them, and are students centered thereby boosting critical thinking (Finch, 2012).

III. PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENT

Key examples of authentic assessments are performance-based assessment and formative assessment. In order to have a clear understanding on how to use these two types of authentic assessments in the classroom, their most critical notions are highlighted in this paper. Performance-based assessment is first analyzed and then the discussion moves on to formative assessment.

Herrera, Morales and Murry (2013) noted that Performance-based Assessment (PBA) is a type of authentic assessment. That is to say PBA typically involves the actual doing of task. PBA encompasses a variety of ways to observe and monitor student learning over various spans of time and involve much more authentic applications than do traditional paper – and – pencil tests.

As Herrera et al. (2013) noted, since performance based assessment require that students actually perform the task, the amount of learning, reasoning and communicative skills that can be addressed are enormous. In this regard, Finch (2002) went on to explain that this type of assessment concentrates on student-centered and student-managed ongoing assessment, which helps to develop other areas of language acquisition, such as collaborative learning and individual learning styles and preferences. By focusing on the time that teachers devote when they have to plan, analyze, select, organize, intervene, and report assessment tools, it is decisive for them to have a clear understanding of performance-based assessments. Although the effective implementation and management of performance-based assessments contribute to evaluate students’ knowledge accurately, teachers still elude using these type of assessments since they find the application of these assessments in their instruction as a complicated and unclear process (Gallavan, 2009).

McMillan (2001) stated that all the activities in which the students are able to show and apply their knowledge or skills they acquire by producing a product, generating an answer, or explaining a topic are called Performance – based Assessments. “In an English classroom setting students do the aforementioned activities with the lively use of the second language” (McMillan, 2001, p. 196). In addition to this, it is imperative to consider that since Performance – based Assessment is extremely related to instruction in planning, it allows the teacher to be aware of what, how, when, where to assess in some meaningful ways (Gallavan, 2009).

Many authors (e.g. Kane & Mitchell, 2009; McMillan, 2001; Gallavan, 2009) agreed that performance – based assessment involves students active learning as a part of the assessment. In so doing, students are provided with many opportunities to demonstrate knowledge in different ways besides paper-and-pencil tests. In the search of strategies that provide students with many opportunities to show what they have learned, teachers identify multiple specific-criteria to measure progress (Stiggins, 2005). Since in performance – based assessment students are provided with these criteria before the assessment actually takes place, students are able to meet the criteria throughout the assessment. The moment that students are using the aforementioned criteria they are also evaluating themselves as a form of self-assessment (McMillan, 2001).

AUTHENTIC STRATEGIES OF PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENT

PBA incorporates authentic strategies and techniques that prompt higher order thinking and the integration of skills. Some of those authentic strategies are as follows: Self- Assessment and Peer Assessment, Cooperative Group Assessment, and Rubrics.

Gallavan (2009) stated that learners assess their own outcomes first or their peer assesses one another’s outcomes for authentic assessment. Student self-assessment is a valuable tool for learning as well as measurement. Herrera, Morales and Murry (2013) agreed that when students are engaged in assessing their own work, they more thoroughly and purposefully understand the criteria for high-quality products and performance and experience greater motivation for meeting the established criteria. Students involved in effective self-assessment work toward a positive vision of the instructional goals. This vision is enhanced and authenticated by students’ own perspectives and interpretations.

Teachers who gather observational data frequently find it a powerful tool for measuring learning over time. Effective classroom teachers use rubrics to plan observed academic language performance according to established criteria. Rubrics provide benefits for the classroom teacher by heightening her or his awareness of key criteria throughout the instructional day. Rubrics based on the stages of language acquisition (preproduction, early production, speech

emergence, intermediate fluency, advances fluency) are also a popular means of quantifying student progress (Herrera, Murry & Morales, 2013).

Gallavan (2009) stated that rubrics can be used with individual activities and assignments for a particular learning experience or for an entire unit of learning. Creating a template is ideal for preparing rubrics for an entire unit. In addition, it is essential that rubrics are given to students ahead of time, that is, before an assignment is submitted. Rubrics serve as the schedule, agenda, and frame for the unit of learning.

Another authentic strategy to assess students is Cooperative Group Assessment (CGA). As Herrera et al. (2013) argues schools and educators are increasingly recognizing that many students are better able to demonstrate their genuine skills, knowledge, and proficiencies through cooperative learning and assessment activities. Planning for CGA requires teachers to consider both group rewards and individual accountability (Slavin, 2006).

Cooperative learning implicates more than students working together on a lab or field project. It requires teachers to *structure* cooperative interdependence among the students. Five key elements differentiate cooperative learning from simply putting students into groups to learn (Johnson et al., 2006). These key elements are the following: Positive Interdependence, Individual Accountability, Face-to-Face (Promotive) Interaction, Interpersonal and Small Group Social Skills, and Group Processing. They can be implemented in a variety of ways. Assessment activities can be implemented at different stages of the cooperative learning exercise and can be conducted by either the instructor, the student, or group peers.

IV. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In addition to learning about performance-based assessment, this paper now deals with formative assessment. When implementing these two types of assessments into the language classroom, we are better able to know about what our students know and do in the target language.

According to Greenstein (2010), formative assessment can be traced back to Socrates' days (fifth-century). In his role as a practitioner, Socrates instructed his students, and then asked them about the subject matter as a way to check for comprehension. Using his students' responses, he evaluated their gained knowledge, which directed his further instruction. It is also indicated that educators have employed the Socrates' practice and "other forms of meaningful questioning" (Greenstein, 2010, p. 20) for a long time. The situations described above can be understood as the very early days of formative assessment in practice.

In contemporary days, a debate regarding what formative assessment and summative assessment involve has been raised. Therefore, in 1967, Scriven came up with a work, which aimed at distinguishing the terms formative and summative based on the idea that they had two different roles in educational evaluation. Scriven (1967) noted that they differed in how the information was collected and the ways the same information was later utilized. He went on explaining that while a program was being planned and developed it could still be modifiable, and the way of doing it was through the data obtained along the program, which in turn contributed to needed changes or improvement (as cited in Greenstein, 2010).

With regard to formative assessment, as indicated by Patel (2012), it was discussed in Benjamin Bloom's (1968) book titled *Learning for Mastery*; there the term was referred to as "a tool for improving the teaching-learning process for students" (p. 28). Patel (2012) pointed out that the creation of the influential book *Handbook of Formative and Summative Evaluation* written by Benjamin Bloom, Thomas Hasting and George Madaus came into existence in 1971. In the book, Bloom and colleagues demonstrated ways of connecting formative assessments to course content in different school subjects. In other words, Bloom and associates (1969) recommended the idea of applying Scriven's (1967) distinction of formative and summative assessments to the evaluation of student learning in the classroom setting (as cited in Iowa CORE, 2011a).

The Black and William's meta-analysis work "Assessment and Classroom Learning" was brought to light in 1998. This work included a comprehensive review of 250 reports, which were used in the final meta-analysis, and it reported significant student gains in learning sparked by formative assessment. Then, in the same year, Black and William published an article titled "Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment," which was an abridged version of their meta-analysis (Popham, 2008). In their second work, Black and William (1998b) demonstrated the effectiveness of formative assessment classroom practices. Black and William's (1998b) key finding in their study was that "improved formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students—and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall" (p. 3).

After Black and William's critical contribution, according to Popham's 2008 book, a critical event in the history of assessment took place in the U.S. in 2006. That year, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) came up with an initiative that highlighted the necessity of a better, more balanced method of teachers' educational assessment. From that year to the present time, the initiative has reported long-lasting influence upon assessment in U.S. public schools. In addition, in the same year, a newly-created group adopted the name of State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards (SCASS), which was part of the CCSSO's initiative. The group started operating by having formative assessment as its focus of attention. Later on, it came the creation of a new SCASS group known as Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers (FAST) in mid-2006. FAST SCASS embarked on the task of implementing formative assessment in classroom settings to influence positively the process of teaching and learning.

Popham (2008) explained that in October 2006 in Austin, Texas, FAST SCASS had a four-day meeting, and one of the aims of the meeting was to create a nation-wide, common definition of formative assessment. The definition was based on the latest research findings about the improvement of quality in student learning, the discussion of early definitions, and thoughtful conversations about assessment practices. After this process, FAST SCASS adopted this definition in order to help educators to better understand this type of assessment: “Formative assessment is a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students’ achievement of intended instructional outcomes” (as cited in Popham, 2008, p. 5).

A. *Defining Formative Assessment*

In order to obtain a more complete picture of the type of assessment under discussion, it is important to take into account more definitions on formative assessment besides the one provided by FAST SCASS above. In so doing, Popham (2008) referred to formative assessment as an approach, and an appropriate definition of such approach needs to include essentially what the most relevant was about it. According to Popham (2008), the approach involves a planned process consisting of multiple, varied activities, such as formal and informal assessment procedures. These assessments allow educators to obtain evidence about what students know and can do. Such evidence enables teachers to guide and modify their subsequent instruction as well as it helps students become aware of adjustments they may need to make for successful learning. All of these actions are aimed at improving student learning as a whole. Additionally, formative assessment has been described as an approach having specific characteristics within a teaching-learning environment. According to Heritage (2011), assistant director for professional development at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing (CRESST) at UCLA, “the important thing about formative assessment is that it is not a test, nor an instrument, but rather an approach to teaching and learning that uses feedback as its centerpiece in a supportive classroom context” (p.19). In her article, the researcher then went on discussing the teacher’s role, the students’ role, the importance of feedback, and classroom climate—key considerations for an effective, consistent formative assessment. Such assessment consists of day-to-day tools designed for improving student learning and, consequently, enhancing teaching (Heritage, 2011).

Formative assessment is not only regarded as an approach as noted above but also as a system. Frey and Fisher’s 2011 book talked about a formative assessment system that consists of four major components: 1) feed-up, 2) feedback, 3) checking for understanding, and 4) feed-forward. Each component is associated with a guiding question. These questions are as follows: 1) Where am I going?, 2) How am I doing?, 3) Where am I now?, and 4) Where am I going next? Feed-up involves students’ clear comprehension of the purposes of various learning activities that teachers use during the instructional process. This component also involves informing students on how they will be assessed. Checking for understanding is intended to direct instruction and identify students’ progress regarding established learning goals. Feedback is concerned with providing students with helpful information concerning their achievement and necessities. Lastly, feed-forward includes building upon feedback from the previous component and making use of students’ performance information to help students improve their achievement (Frey & Fisher, 2011).

B. *The Fundamentals and Attributes of Formative Assessment*

After providing a thorough conceptualization with regard to formative assessment, so a better understanding about this topic can be obtained, it is now critical to learn about its essential fundamentals. In this regard, in Greenstein’s 2010 book *What Teachers Really Need to Know About Formative Assessment*, these three fundamental concepts of formative assessment are analyzed: “(1) formative assessment is student focused, (2) formative assessment is instructionally informative, and (3) formative assessment is outcomes based” (p. 15).

According to Greenstein (2010), the first concept is concerned with the act of learning in a purposeful manner, and it emphasizes how students learn rather than how teachers instruct. It is aimed at examining student processes of receiving, understanding, and applying new knowledge. The second concept involves an action in which practitioners modify their teaching practices to promote student learning by means of data collection from formative assessment procedures. In this way, educators and learners have the opportunity to analyze and reflect on the results drawn from formative assessments. Lastly, the third concept states that, based on evidence, teachers are better prepared to guide future instruction with the purpose of helping students achieve learning goals. In order for students to achieve established goals, constant and practical feedback is needed in the process of teaching and learning.

After Greenstein’s (2010) key notions regarding the above-mentioned fundamentals were highlighted, the Iowa CORE (2011b) enters the scene by providing six critical attributes of formative assessment, which lead to increased student learning. Therefore, educators need to have a good understanding of all six attributes so that they can effectively take formative assessment into practice. These attributes include “learning progression, clear learning goals, instructional modifications based on elicited evidence of learning, descriptive feedback, self-and peer-assessment, and a collaborative classroom climate” (Iowa CORE, 2011b, p. 2). With regard to learning progression, it allows teachers to effectively plan pre-assessment practices, plan assessment practices for student learning tasks, find out students’ future development levels, and provide differentiated instruction. Having an understanding of clear learning goals is crucial in the teaching-learning process. In this respect teachers and learners both need to stay focused on learning goals throughout the course of instruction. Work samples of low and high quality are suggested to be used in order to let students know what is actually expected from their own work in the future.

An inherent part of formative assessment is based on the idea that instructional modifications are based on evidence (or assessment-based evidence). In this regard teachers document ongoing evidence of each individual student and identify how every student is doing towards the achievement of learning goals. After student learning gaps are identified, teachers provide “descriptive feedback to students and plan instructional modifications based on the students’ zone of proximal development” (Iowa CORE, 2011b, p.3). With regard to descriptive feedback, teachers need to tell their students how well they did on different learning activities. Also, students need to know what areas still need improvement and receive recommendations on how to improve and advance their learning.

Iowa CORE (2011b) pointed out that formative assessment enables students to engage in independent learning as well as to take responsibility for their own learning. In so doing, self-assessment and peer-assessment both are critical in student learning process; therefore, teachers should encourage their pupils to use these two strategies along the way. By taking part in stress-free, less formal ways of assessing, learners can become active participants by providing and receiving feedback to help improve their own and others’ work. A collaborative classroom climate, the fifth attribute, involves a learning environment that is a partnership between students and teachers. In this partnership, first and foremost, students need to feel respected. Additionally, the key components of this kind of classroom environment are “a sense of trust ..., appreciation of differences, and transparency in the learning objectives” (Iowa CORE, 2011b, p. 4).

C. Applications of Formative Assessment

After looking at the fundamentals and attributes of formative assessment, it is critical to be aware of when this type of assessment can be more beneficially employed in the process of teaching and learning. In this respect, Popham (2011) suggested a framework that consists of five applications. The framework is aimed at informing teachers on when formative assessment could be best employed at the classroom setting. Popham (2011) asserted that these five applications are intended to enhance pupils’ learning: “To make an immediate instructional adjustment. To make a near-future instructional adjustment. To make a last-chance instructional adjustment. To make a learning tactic adjustment. To promote a classroom climate shift” (p. 14).

According to Popham (2011), when the initiative of implementing formative assessment emerges in the classroom setting, a teacher’s crucial decision is concerned with what specific application to use. Therefore, in order to facilitate decision-making the five applications need to be discussed in greater detail. With regard to the first application, immediate instructional adjustments, Popham (2011) noted that teachers need to collect information, examine it, and decide if whether or not it is the right moment to modify instruction during the learning process. “Immediate instructional adjustments can be based either on (1) teacher-administered assessment procedures ... or (2) student-reported levels of understanding” (p. 15).

As reported by Popham (2011), application two, for near-future instructional adjustments, focuses on teacher decision making about what to do differently in subsequent classroom instruction once evidence is gathered about students’ current state of learning. Application three, for last-chance instructional adjustments, involves identifying areas that need improvement in order to help students to achieve established curricular goals. Application four, for learning tactic adjustments, is concerned with the idea that collected evidence from formative assessment procedures can allow students to better monitor their own progress and to enhance students’ strategies used to learn the subject matter on their own. Finally, the fifth application, for promoting a classroom climate change, emphasizes a necessary shift from a traditional learning environment into a place where every student has opportunities to learn and progress.

V. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN ESL/EFL SETTINGS

As previously mentioned, formative assessment has come a long way in the educational world. However, it is a relatively new practice in ESL/ EFL classroom settings, so the need for more research is evident in order to better understand the key role it may have for the language acquisition process of English language learners (Ketabi & Ketabi, 2014). Ketabi and Ketabi (2014) pointed out that studies concerned with formative assessment in the field of English language teaching started in 2000. Scholars (e.g. Rea-Dickins & Gardner, 2000; Cheng, Rogers & Hu, 2004) have contributed along the way by conducting studies and taking initiatives towards an integration of formative assessment practices into English language teaching and learning. According to Ketabi and Ketabi (2014), these contributions have helped English teachers be aware of the need for more consistent, authentic assessment procedures that truly reflect English language learners’ growth of acquired knowledge and new abilities as well as their attainment of learning goals during the course of instruction.

Rea-Dickins and Gardner’s 2000 study was aimed at interviewing and observing English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers. These scholars found out that teachers’ decision-making towards subsequent instruction based on students’ performance was key. However, if decisions were made carelessly, they could not help enhance students’ current level of L2 proficiency. In order to make informed decisions during the process of instruction in the English language classroom setting, teachers should employ varied assessment procedures in order to ensure the reliability and validity of L2 classroom assessment (Rea-Dickins & Gardner, 2000).

Cheng, Rogers and Hu (2004) carried out a research study in three different learning contexts—Canada, Beijing, and Hong Kong. Their study investigated the aims, practices, and methods of assessment in EFL/ESL classrooms. Cheng and colleagues (2004) pointed out that little was known about classroom assessment of EFL/ESL instructors. The

scholars argued that the presence of formal testing was evident in large classes within the research contexts, having an impact upon classroom assessment. In addition to this, course subject matter, instructors' teaching experience, and students' proficiency levels were found to influence classroom assessment as well. The study findings were reported to be complex, and they differed in the three research settings. For instance, there were fewer assessment practices and objective scoring procedures among English teachers in Hong Kong than among their counterparts in the two other settings.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, there are many ways to apply authentic assessments to evaluate students' academic achievement and monitoring their progress. When selecting an assessment strategy, EFL/ESL teachers must be aware of when, why and how to apply that specific strategy to succeed and push themselves to do better. Therefore, teachers have to consider the application of authentic assessment in a variety of ways to benefit our EFL students' learning, and change some of the traditional(formal assessments) ways of assessments that show only valid inferences about the student's performance, and that still are common in education. When we assess, our main goal must not just be to want students to *know* the content of the disciplines when they graduate. We, of course, want them to be able to *use* the acquired knowledge and skills in the real world. So, our assessments have to tell us if students can apply what they have learned in authentic situations. If a student does well on a test of knowledge we might infer that the student could also apply that knowledge. But, we could more directly check for the ability to apply by asking the student to use what they have learned in some meaningful ways (Mueller, 2016). Then authentic assessments provide the most direct and authentic evidence of students' knowledge and allow educators to know student's competences and different learning abilities. Besides, it is significant the application of formative assessment to prepare students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills on high level tests and contexts. Since formative assessments are tools and strategies that educators use to determine what and how students are processing the information they are being taught, they provide opportunities for teachers to gather data during the lesson as they observe students using their sociocultural, language, academic, and cognitive backgrounds to make sense of new content and skills. Such observations then allow teachers to modify the lesson while students are still actively engaged in learning (Herrera, Perez, and Escamilla, 2010).

Therefore, it is essential for EFL/ESL teachers to utilize formative assessment at everyday learning activities to obtain evidence of students' knowledge and understanding from almost everything they do in the classroom. Besides, these assessments will allow educators to modify their instruction and provide scaffolding based on students' needs.

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