In the name of God

The Effect of Learner- Oriented Task- Based Assessment on the Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners; The Need for a New Perspective in the Current Trends of Assessment

Fahimeh Gholizadeh

Semnan University

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Committee on oral examination:

…… Dr. A. Moradan (Advisor)

……..… Dr. A. Sadeghi (Reader)

……..… Dr. H. Farjami (Reviewer)

……..… Dr. Sh. Royanian (Reviewer)

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Abstract

For many years now, educators have utilized a variety of student-centered learning methodologies to enhance student learning. (DeBoer, 2002; Norte, 2005). Unfortunately, many instructors who incorporate these approaches often use assessment methods designed for traditional teaching. Research shows, however, that assessment methods should also be student-centered (Ma & Zhou, 2000). Indeed, one can hold students to higher performance standards when they play a role in establishing assessment criteria that are clear and reasonable (Shepard, 2010).

Assessment is an integral component of any successful teaching effort. Research has shown that students engage with subject matter based on their expectations about how their achievement will be evaluated. Educators who strive to bring authentic learning experiences to their students must devise appropriate and meaningful measures to assess student learning and mastery of concepts at hand.

Learning-oriented assessment seeks to emphasise that a fundamental purpose of assessment should be to promote learning. It mirrors formative assessment and assessment for learning processes. It can be defined as actions undertaken by teachers and / or students, which provide feedback for the improvement of teaching and learning. It also contrasts with equally important measurement-focused approaches to assessment, but tries to emphasise the learning rather than the measurement. A key element in learning-oriented assessment is feedback, where students are now, where they are trying to go, and how they can get there.

Therefore this study was conducted to investigate the effect of learner- oriented task- based assessment on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners. To this end, 70 English major students studying at Payam- e- Noor University of Behshahr were participated in the study. They were randomly assigned into two equal groups of control and experimental. During the course of the study, the control group was taught in the traditional way of teaching reading comprehension and the experimental group was given two sessions of teaching which was in traditional way and then one session of task- based assessment. At the end of each session, the teacher gave them individual and group feedback. These two sessions of teaching, one task- based assessment, and feedback were repeated 4 times (total 12 sessions).

To find out whether there was any significant difference in reading comprehension of two groups, a pretest prior to the treatment and a posttest after that were used. Also the results of the pretest

and posttest were compared to investigate the difference rate between two groups. Results of the data analysis indicated that the experimental group outperformed the control group, showing the positive effect of learner- oriented task- based assessment.

And then the questionnaire of attitude toward test was administered again to see if there were any changes in the view of experimental group toward tests and test situations or not. Later, a questionnaire about students' attitude toward feedback and rubrics was employed to know their views toward the feedback they took and also their ideas and attitudes about that specific kind of assessment. The results show the positive attitude of students toward the learner- oriented task-based assessment and also toward the feedback they got and the rubrics used.

A number of implications may be drawn but the first and foremost is that EFL teachers will recognize that assessments can be reformed to better aim at improvement of teaching and learning plus raising standard of student' achievements. Second, policy makers should implement new curriculums and find innovative ways to transform the outlook of EFL teachers in a way that assessment is taken more seriously in class. Likewise, policy makers should delve and dig more into teacher cognition to come up with hidden and somehow negative beliefs and conceptions, trying to abolish or modify them.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

Assessment, a powerful force in students' lives, is any deed of interpreting information with respect to student performance, gathered through numerous means or practices (Brown, 2004). This process is considered very effective since it may enhance or impede the development of learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Assessments are used for copious intentions such as certifications, enhancement of teaching and feedback on the quality of learning (Peterson & Irving, 2008).

Assessment is of central importance in education, and yet there is a lack of commonality in the definition of the terminology relating to it. Development of both theoretical and practical applications will suffer unless there is coherence and agreement in the definition of the terms. The term "assessment" may be defined in multiple ways by different individuals or institutions, perhaps with different goals. Palomba, C.A. & Banta, T.W. in Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education defines assessment as the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving learning and development.

The Higher Learning Commission defines assessment of student learning in the following way: "Assessment of student learning is a participatory, interactive process that provides data/information you need on your students' learning, engages you and others in analyzing and using this data/information to confirm and improve teaching and learning, produces evidence that students are learning the outcomes you intended, guides you in making educational and institutional improvements and evaluates whether changes made improve/impact student learning. Assessment is the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning."

But the true definition comes from the word itself. The word 'assess' originates from the Latin verb 'assidere' meaning 'to sit with'. In assessment one is supposed to sit with the learner. This implies it is something we do 'with' and 'for' students and not 'to' students (Green, 1999). Assessment in education is the process of gathering, interpreting, recording, and using information about pupils' responses to an educational task. (Harlen, Gipps, Broadfoot, Nuttal, 1992)

1.1. Why do we assess?

We assess to gather information about student learning that will inform instructional decisions. Teachers and students make decisions every day that drive learning. They need regular information about what each student has and has not yet learned. We make some decisions frequently, such as when we decide what comes next in student learning within lessons or when we diagnose problems.

Assessment can be thought of as assessment for learning and assessment of learning respectively. The purpose of one is to improve achievement, to support learning, and the purpose of the other is to measure and verify learning. In any assessment context, whether informing decisions along the way (assessment for learning) or measuring achievement after it has happened (assessment of learning), we must start by understanding the needs of the intended users.

Besides beginning with needs of intended users in mind, we must also start the assessment process with a clear sense of the learning to be assessed—the achievement expectations we hold for our students and the standards at the focus of instruction. We call these, learning targets. When our learning targets are clear to us as teachers, the next step is to ensure they are also clear to students.

Assessments can accurately or inaccurately reflect the current level of student learning. Obviously, our goal always is to generate accurate information. Next comes the challenge of creating an assessment that will deliver those results. This requires an assessment method capable of reflecting the intended target. Will it be selected response, written response, performance assessment, or personal communication? The task always is to choose a proper method for the intended purpose and learning targets on which the quality of our assessments hinges on.

Once the needs are clear, the learning targets are clear, and the information gathered is accurate, an assessment's results must be communicated to the intended user(s) in a timely and understandable way.

Classroom assessment is among an instructor's most essential educational tools. When properly developed and interpreted, assessments can help teachers better understand what their students are learning. By providing the means to gather evidence about what students know and can do, classroom assessment can help teachers identify students' strengths and weaknesses, monitor student learning and progress, plan and conduct instruction, ongoing informal and formal classroom assessment, is the bond that holds teaching and learning together, allows educators to monitor teaching effectiveness and student learning, can motivate and shape learning and

instruction, help teachers gauge student mastery of required skills, help teachers determine whether students are prepared for tests that are used for high-stakes decisions, and help students improve their own performances.

1.2. Drawbacks of final examinations

Final examination is meant to be just an examination of what a student has learned during his/her studies, verifying that all of the necessary skills to proceed on to the next level, has been achieved. If the project is designed so that a student must draw on all the skills and knowledge gained throughout the class, it thoroughly demonstrates a mastery of the material. These kinds of approaches has additional benefits, as it does not promote cramming the night before exams (leading to sleepy students who don't perform at their peak), does not cause test anxiety (leading to students with mental blocks on material they actually know), and it provides room for a personal touch on the student's part.

One of the main disadvantages of final exams is the pressure that such a test puts on the students to perform. This can cause lower grades. Other disadvantages include that these exams only indicate knowledge and learning on particular questions, the exams can miss a topic a student excels at and some students cannot remember everything they have learned, and they increase stress, tension and difficulties. There would be a lot of stress for the students to pass the examinations.

A study on the bad effects of final examinations, done by The National Survey on Drug Use and Health, released in 2010 showed that as the time of final examinations approaches, some students will push their bodies to unhealthy limits in attempts to study for long periods before exams. Some students use the drug Adderall to focus while they study. The survey stated 7 percent of all full-time college students aged 18-22 use Adderall. This was almost twice the percentage of reported usage among the same age group not attending college full-time.

Adderall, an amphetamine, is a prescription drug designed to treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and is classified as a schedule II substance under the Controlled Substances Act. This label means the drug has legitimate medical uses but has "a high potential for abuse." Terrence, a

junior biology major and pre-med student, said the stress of his major drives him to use Ritalin, a drug similar in composition to Adderall, so he can concentrate before and during exams.

"Normally I take Ritalin or something like that so I can stay up for 48 hours straight," Terrence said. "It helps short term, you don't retain anything, but it definitely helps short term. If I want to get into medical school I've got to get all As or close to, so I do it for that reason." Wellness Resource Center Director Kim Dude said drugs aren't the only concern during the last week of exams. "There are many things that can happen during the time of final examinations," Dude said. "Things like sleep deprivation, poor eating habits, no-dos to keep awake, but in reality none of these things will improve performance on finals."

Alex, a freshman who admitted to Adderall use, said he stays up for long periods before most of his tests. "I've studied for 12 hours straight without a break, without eating or anything," he said. Terry Wilson, coordinator of health promotions at the Student Health Center in University of Missouri, Columbia said the stress surrounding final exams causes many students to resort to dangerous measures. According to Wilson, "there are heightened stress levels because people want to do well on their finals, they want to make the grade and their stress response, if they don't have healthy coping mechanisms, can be negative." Dude said the best ways to prepare for a final are to get adequate sleep and begin studying at least a week before the test so "cramming" isn't necessary.

However, with final exams being such a big part of the teaching year, teachers are sometimes more focused on teaching students how to pass the exams rather than teaching the course material. The focus on final exams causes students to miss out on these other aspects of learning; therefore, final exams can hinder students from gaining all they can from a complete educational process.

While some good students will actually study weeks in advance for exams, it is found that many students have a very different approach to exam-learning. In most cases, students usually know the exam format, have past papers and model answers to look at and are given a formulae sheet or glossary list in the exam. All that is required of them is to learn all the given material and rock up to the exam feeling confident and prepared. The students who rote-learn in this way may not do as well as the students who put in the effort to study, but they will usually still pass. Generally, the

final exam determines the overall grade and this in itself is a great flaw in the idea of final exams. It encourages students to take short-cuts and learn only what is needed for the exam, rather than rewarding those who have worked hard to learn all that they can throughout the year. It also adds a lot of pressure to students and some students who work very hard but do not do well in exam conditions may end up getting worse grades than the student who crammed the night before and was cool under pressure. This is very unfair and makes the students' overall grades less credible as evidence of their academic ability.

Furthermore, it has been proven that rote-learning for final exams is not a good way to learn because everything is crammed into the short-term memory. Students will remember facts and figures just long enough to be able to write it down during the exam. That knowledge is all but lost almost immediately after the exam because nothing was retained in their long-term memory. Students may fool themselves into thinking that they must know everything, because they managed to pass. They will have no motivation to study during the year if they think they can get away with cramming a few days prior to the exam and pass. Year after year, students may fall further behind and may eventually graduate without a lot of the prerequisite knowledge they should have gained from the previous years. Aside from their lack of knowledge, students going to work in the real world will also lack the discipline to work hard and manage their time wisely, resulting in them doing only the bare minimum, and only at the last minute. Thus, final exams may not only hinder the education process but it will also instil in students bad habits and attitudes towards work which will hinder their careers and their future, too.

On the whole, the problem with final exams is that they have become an end rather than a means. They should be a means for gauging whether the examinees are prepared for the phase of their life that follows their exams. Instead what follows the test seems irrelevant and subordinate to passing the test. The result of this is a series of negative consequences that benefit no one.

Farhady (2007) elaborated on the emergence of language assessment as an alternative to language testing. Accordingly, while testing is product oriented, assessment focuses on an ongoing process. In harmony with this perspective, it is argued that since language learning is by nature a gradual U-shaped developmental process (Ellis, 2008), language assessment rather than testing can be effectively used helping not only the learner by getting constant feedback about his/her language