Assessment and Feedback in EFL: Theory and Practice

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Aassessments and feedback are two practical aspects that can be encountered at any educational domain. They are intersected in such a way that each of which may not only rely on the other, but also impact its implications as well. For instance, assessment should be accompanied with a real feedback that is suitable to that type of assessment to become constructive to student's learning. Not doing so, the purpose of the assessment becomes merely a testing one. It means that the students will be given a grade or mark (numerical judgement) with no more clarifications regarding their strengths or weaknesses. The main goal of this paper is to address assessment from different angles by critically revising the literature and relevant applications of assessment, testing, and feedback delivery to the EFL students. Then, some suggested recommendations from the author will be included as a reflection to the relevant research and literature.

Keywords: assessment, test, formative, summative, feedback

Introduction

Generally speaking, assessment (formative assessment) has the potential to be beneficial if its feedback is used to modify learning and teaching practices to meet student's needs. It is also important that assessment must be followed by feedback to be useful to student's learning. Otherwise, assessment becomes testing. Educators believe that testing is the main tool of assessing a language, though assessment does not mean testing. In a language, a test is an "instrument for measuring language ability" (Douglas, 2014, p. 2). The purpose of the test is determined whether it is for testing or assessing. It is assessing if the provided information from all the undertaken tests, from the teachers or by student's self-assessment, are "used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged" (Black & William, 1998a, p. 2). On the other hand, testing refers to a set of specified tasks to be performed by students, and solely measure their progress through a numerical judgment (Coombe, Davidson, & Lloyd, 2009, p. 47).

In addition, Ainsworth and Viegut (2006) further added another distinction between assessments and testing by stating that the real purpose of assessments must be primarily "to inform instructional decision-making" (p. 21), which otherwise assessments may be just purposeless to student's learning and to the entire teaching process. Therefore, the clear cut between assessing and testing depends upon the consequences that take place in within or after the examinations. For instance, if the students will be given a formative feedback that shows and clarifies their weaknesses and strengths on that test, then it is called assessment. It is assessment because of its future implications and the modifications that could be emerged as a result of adapting teaching practices, learning styles, and taught materials that cope with student's results and their

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cognitive needs. Conversely, testing has very narrowing impact on students learning and teaching practices since it ends by the time the students are given a grade or score in a particular test or quiz.

Hence, assessment has broader advantageous benefits on the mechanism of both of learning, and teaching process as well as student's self-development as stated by McMillan (2002, as cited in Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006, p. 22):

• Identify if the students have mastered particular concepts or skills in the standard(s);
• Evaluate the effectiveness of instructional strategies;
• Motivate students to be engaged in learning;
• Help students to learn content through application and other reasoning skills;
• Help students to develop positive attitudes toward a subject;
• Communicate expectations to students;
• Give students feedback about what they know and can do;
• Show students what they need to focus on to improve their understanding;
• Encourage student's self-evaluation;
• Communicate to parents what students presently know and can do.

However, there are several key factors that should be taken into account in assessment to maximise its constructive influence in promoting students leaning. These are that: 1) assessment must be planed carefully to meet the educational goals; 2) the implementation of assessment requires timing and frequency compatible with subject; 3) assessment provides students with immediate feedback; 4) assessment has the suitability of the assessment; 5) assessment requires transparency of process and procedures; 6) assessment has conditions such as duration of a test and types of the questions (Coombe et al., 2009).

Types of Testing in EFL

As stated earlier, testing is unlike assessing, even though tests are the veins of assessment. In this regard, therefore tests do not mean testing. A brief description of tests in terms of their definitions, types, purposes, and manners are essentially vital whenever the subject of assessment is addressed.

There are no much discrepancies in the literature regarding types of tests. The most common ones are listed as in the following:

• Placement test: Assessing student's language ability, so they can be placed in an appropriate place or course. It points to the level in which the students can learn more efficiently.

• Diagnostic test: Assessing the language areas in which the students need to be improved and transferred. It focuses on identifying the weaknesses of student's level more than success.

• Progress test: Measuring how much progress has students made regarding the well-defined course goals. They are conducted at various stages and times throughout a semester.

• Achievement test: Measuring learning outcomes as it takes place in the progress test, yet it is different in terms of timing. It regularly occurs at the end of the semester or year.

• Proficiency test: It is far different from the previous tests since it does not rely on a curriculum or particular learning materials. It is designed to measure student's overall language competency in different levels, and by external bodies, such as in The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examinations (Hughes, 2003, pp. 11-17)

Based on the above taxonomy, it can be claimed that placement test have dual purposes as it could function as diagnostic test at the same time. Students are tested "diagnostically" to be placed in their apt level. Thus, there is no much conflict between these two tests in the field of education in general, and in language testing in specific. This classification of these tests, moreover, has implicitly another dimension concerning with assessment types as well. For instance, progress tests are somewhat formative assessment while achievement tests are summative assessment. These two types of assessment will be discussed in detailed later.

Manners of Testing

The manner in which the test is designed is divided into two main categories as suggested by Coombe et al. (2009, p. 9):

- Objective vs. subjective:

> Objective means comparing students responses with the established correct ones on the answer key. Conversely, subjective test is scored by opinions and personal judgment.

- Criterion vs. norm-referenced or standardized test.

> Criterion referenced test is designed to enable the test user to interpret a test score with reference to a criterion level. The test criteria are set before the instruction itself begins, so the test should meet the teaching goals. In Norm-referenced or standardized test, the results are interpreted with reference to the performance of a given group or norm.

Bearing in mind, the suitability of having objective or subjected tests, or standardized test is certainly determined by some crucial factors that increase the test validity and prevent it from being haphazardly deigned. Among the most of these are the nature of the subject (spoken or written), the target tested skill (productive or receptive), the pre-set course goals (cognitive or educational), and the level of the students linguistic competency (low, medium, or advanced). For instance, assessing student's speaking skill through a subjective written test is undoubtedly invalid. Similarly, testing writing comprehension should not be via an objective multiple-questions test. In addition, cognitive goals that focuses on remembering and understanding requires specific (easy) tests, whereas learning goals that emphasis the evaluation and creation of the knowledge need more advanced and difficult tests accordingly.

Principles of Testing

The above discussion may take us to what is called testing principles that EFL teachers and test designers, in general, must be aware of to guarantee a high level of practicality in language testing. The review of the literature, as in Hughes (2003, pp. 26-53), Coombe et al. (2009, pp. 3-6), and Douglas (2014, p. 23) revealed that there are several controlling principles that assure not only well-organised test designing, but also the process of developing and analysing these testes. They are eight in numbers and summarised as in the following:

Validity

It generally means the test measures what supposed to be measured, and this is also called face validity. There are two main types of validity:

a. Content validity which means that a test assesses the course content and outcomes using format familiar to the students;

b. Construct validity refers to the degree of aptness between the underlying theories, methodology of language learning and the type of the adopted test.

Reliability

It refers to the consistency of the marks by giving the similar results if the test is conducted again. It worth mentions that reliability is normally influenced by three factors:

a. Test factors, such as formats and content of the questions as well the duration of test. Thus, having more items and sufficient time for testing resulted in increasing test reliability;

b. Administrative factors such as classroom settings (temperature, lighting, seating, and noise) and how the teacher run the test (rigorously or friendly);

c. Affective factors refers to how the teachers respond to student's requests while testing as teacher's ignorance, for example, may harm reliability and creates anxiety amongst the examinees.

Practicality

It refers to the notion that a classroom test needs to be "teacher-friendly" and the teacher himself has to be acquainted with the practical matters of the test, such as cost of the test development and maintenance, time for the test development and its length, and resources (marking, correction machines).

Washback

It refers to the effect of testing on teaching and learning positively and negatively. Positive washback occurs when a test encourages a good teaching practice and students perceive it as a sign of their progress towards learning.

Authenticity

It means that the test is a reflection of the authentic life of the target tested language. For instance, it assesses what could the other equivalent native test assesses in that target language. Assessing reading skill in Britain is somewhat the same in Saudi Arabia.

Transparency

It refers to the availability of clear and accurate information to the students about testing. This information includes the outcomes to be evaluated, format used, weighting of items and sections, time allowed to complete the tests, and grading criteria. Transparency makes students fully engaged in the test and become part of it.

Security

It part of both of validity and reliability. It means that a teacher spend much time and effort to design and develop the test that reflect the learning goals, and then become able to recycle the test. Cultural constrains, however, could be an issue in such a manner as collaborative test-taking can be seen as a threat to test security, while it is not in other disciplines.

Usefulness

It refers to the use in which the test is set for. In addition to evaluating the test, we can evaluate its development and implementation. Hence, test usefulness requires that any language test has to be developed with a particular purpose, a specific group of test-takers and precise language use in mind.

Types of Assessment

Now, the focus will be shifted on assessment as a process not as a means (testing). Educationally speaking, there are two major types of assessments: summative and formative. Summative assessments are those used by the teachers at the end of a unit or semester under a controlled conditions, and "letter grades assigned when a

course is finished" (Pelligrino Chudowsky & Glaser, 2001, p. 38). Formative assessments, on the other hand, refer to exams (verbal or written) that produce feedback for student's progress or failure in a certain learning aspect (Irons, 2008).

Even though each of summative and formative assessment(s) has its own distinctive features, Black and Wiliam (1998b) stated that there is a problem relates to the "possible confusions and tensions, both for teachers and learners, between the formative and summative purposes, which their work might have to serve" (p. 46). Yorke (2003, p. 478) also claimed that formative assessment is a concept that is "more complex than it might appear at first sight". Black and Wiliam (1998b) justified this dilemma by arguing that both of formative and summative assessments are inevitably interrelated, yet formative assessment remains always at risk because of the strong dominance of summative assessment.

It is also common that the first thing might come to someone's mind once he hears the word "assessment" is a mid-term or final exam applied by a teacher with summative scoring or grading purposes.

Types of Formative Assessment

According to the literature, formative assessment can be in itself informal or formal (Yorke, 2003; Irons, 2008). Informal formative assessment practices refer to the continuous observation of student's progress through daily interactions, questions, and note-taking. Also, group, pair, and self-assessment considered to be other forms of informal assessment that could take place in classrooms. Conversely, formal formative assessment includes short printed tests that are undertaken under restricted situations during a semester.

Therefore, formal formative assessment is different from summative assessment in terms of what it seeks or willing to achieve. Formal formative assessments can be characterised as those tasks that are implemented with reference to a certain educational assessment framework and involve activities required of the student (i.e., to do the work) and of the assessor (to assess the work and provide feedback from which the student can learn) (Yorke, 2003, p. 487). Thus, the most distinctive feature of this type of assessment that makes it also distinguished from summative assessment is to help students understand "the level of learning they have achieved" (Irons, 2008, p. 17).

Similarly, Yorke (2003) argued that formative assessment is aimed to enhance student's learning through "the provision of information about performance" (p. 478). This means students are provided with a formative feedback along with each executed test, so they can identify what they have or have not mastered. This reveals the strong adherence between formative assessment and feedback. Ainsworth and Viegut (2006) argued that formative classroom assessment results can offer "immediate feedback" for both of teachers and students regarding student's present understanding and the effectiveness of the adopted teaching methodology, while summative assessments "provide a final measure for determining if learning goals have been met" (p. 12). Hence, we can claim that the feedback of summative assessments has little impact on what students learn and how teachers teach since it only takes place once or, at best, twice a term. In addition, the information drawn from such a feedback as well as its timing is insufficient to make any further modifications to learning and teaching process.

The literature shows that formative assessment may also contribute positively to student's results in summative achievement. For instance, Peterson and Vali (2009) reviewed the research and found that,

> the use of formative assessment in the form of frequent, cumulative, time-restricted, multiple-choice quizzes with the immediate constructive feedback reveals the levels of conceptual understanding in a timely manner and improves student

academic performance on the summative assessment instruments is strongly supported by provided results. (pp. 98-99)

This finding discloses the superiority of formal formative assessment in the informal assessment as all these assessing tasks are formal ones. Additionally, the guarantee of assessment success is predominantly relied on providing feedback.

Limitation of Summative Assessment

Based on the above discussion, we can conclude that summative assessment is mostly disadvantageous in comparison with formative assessments for many reasons as in the following points:

• The focus of summative assessment is on testing (grading) rather than developing;

• It does not promote deep learning as formative assessment does since it takes place once or maximum twice a semester;

• Summative assessment can lead to negative washback and harm validity (more precisely construct validity);

• Students may have little chance to compensate (if they do badly in a test), and this could put them in high pressure and can create test anxiety;

• Summative assessment with its summative feedback does not have constructive future implications on student's learning as it could be seen in formative assessment and formative feedback.

In the same manner, motivation factor cannot be overlooked when it comes to compare formative assessment with summative assessment. Irons (2008) made this clear when he indicates that formative assessment leads to "intrinsic motivation" while summative assessment creates "extrinsic motivation" (p. 37). It means, in other words, students in formative assessment are encouraged to be fully integrated in learning through the on-going revision of their progress while summative assessment derives them to instrumental goals (grades, praising, or certificate). Hence, assessment can be assessment for learning as in formative assessment, and assessment of learning as in summative assessment. This is the clear cut between both of them.

Feedback and Learning

The term feedback in EFL can be addressed from different viewpoints such as purposes, manners, and approaches. Broadly speaking, feedback is defined as "information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way" (Ramaprasad, 1983, as cited in Black & William, 1998, p. 36). Feedback is a fundamental aspect in assessment to encourage students to learn from that assessment (Irons, 2008). Peterson and Vali (2009) argued that assessment cycle (more precisely formative assessment) is not complete "without feedback" (p. 94).

It is also vital that teachers must provide feedback about each student's particular mistakes and difficulties after each test, which otherwise assessment may become impractical to their future learning. Pelligrino et al. (2001) believed that learning is a process of constantly adjusting knowledge and skills and therefore feedback becomes crucial "to guide, test, challenge, or redirect the learner's thinking" (p. 234).

Thus, there is a consensus amongst researchers about the notion that feedback is not only an important aspect of promoting effective learning, but it is also a sign of a good assessment practice as well. For instance, some literature link formative assessment with feedback, which may otherwise called testing not assessing. There is a big difference between these two concepts (assessing and testing) as mentioned earlier.

Feedback Purposes

It is to be noticed that the content of feedback has two main purposes: summative or formative. Summative feedback is simply focuses on scoring and grading with no further clarification of how students do in that particular test. It only gives a numerical judgment about the student's work. For instance, one student might be given "B" or very good in one exam, but how does he get this grade or how could he improve it is not explained. Accordingly, such a feedback may not contribute student's learning. In contrast, formative feedback defined as all information, process, or activity which aimed at modifying and accelerating student learning based on comments relating to their assessment (Irons, 2008, p. 7). These comments address both of strengths (to be praised and reinforced) and weaknesses to be avoided in the future of their learning. Bearing in mind that these comments need also to be supportive, motivated, not criticising as well as friendly handled. Doing so, feedback is potentially creates positive washback on student progress.

Even though "the two concepts of formative assessment and feedback overlap strongly" (Black & William, 1998. p. 35), there might be some occasions where summative feedback accompany formative assessment. For instance, one teacher may adopt on-going and daily informal formative assessments, but the provided feedback is basically a numeric one not formative. Thus, teachers need to distinguish between the nature of assessment practices (formal, informal, and summative) and the content of feedback (summative or formative), and adopting one of them does not always mean using or including the other.

Feedback Delivery in EFL

In the discipline of EFL, feedback may have some distinctive features and applications since it address both of content and linguistic knowledge. Teachers, therefore, need to use the suitable form of corrected feedback that takes other variables into account such as the nature of errors, frequency, and student's level. The most common approach of class feedback is the oral feedback. It is direct, effective, and can have immediate result in student's learning if it is approached appropriately (Irons, 2008). The oral delivery of feedback is more effective than written delivery of feedback (Black & William, 1998, p. 37).

Lighbown and Spada (2011, p. 126) referred to all expected situations and domains of oral feedback that might be encountered in EFL classrooms, as summarized in the following:

• Explicit correction refers to the explicit provision of the correct form. When the teacher provides the correct form, he clearly indicates what the student had said was incorrect.

• Recasts correction (implicit correction) refers to teacher's reformulation of all or parts of a student's utterance, without the error.

• Clarification request indicates that student's utterance has been misunderstood or incorrect. Then, a clarification request is applied, for example, "excuse me", "pardon me", "say that again", or Teacher repeats utterance.

• Metalinguistic feedback contains comments, information, or questions related to the correctness of the student utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form. Metalinguistic comments generally indicate that there is an error somewhere, such as where is the error in your sentence.

• Elicitation refers to at least three techniques that teachers use to directly elicit the correct form from the students by asking them to complete, to choose or to formulate their utterance.

• Repetition refers to the teacher repetition of the student's mistaken utterance. In most cases, teachers adjust their intonation so as to highlight the error.

Research shows that Recasts correction (implicit feedback) is widely used in content-based second language classrooms (where the emphasis is on meaning not form), while repetition of errors is the least used one. Interestingly, students may assume that the teacher is responding "to the content rather than the form of their speech. Rod Ellis et al. (2001, as cited in Lighbown & Spada, 2011, p. 128) stated that most of the teacher's corrective feedback is in the form of recasts.

Besides oral feedback, there are also other approaches of delivering feedback in the EFL context, such as individual, public, written, and electronic feedback. Each of these feedbacks has its own distinctive applications. For example:

• Individual feedback is approached directly to one student (orally), and has some benefits, such as deepen student's understanding of his/her errors as well as boost his self-esteem. It is suitable for low class size since it takes time.

• Public feedback approached indirectly to all the class. It focuses on the common mistakes and it is suitable for a big class size. It is advantageous in a sense that it promotes class interaction and negotiation.

• Written feedback is given directly and mostly appropriate with written tests. It is has a benefit of being detailed and can be retained for a long time.

• Electronic feedback delivered through electronic machines. It requires that all students can access to these devices. Although it is not personal as the previous ones, it easier, quicker and has no time or location constrains.

Assessment and Feedback in the Saudi EFL Context

According to the research, assessment and feedback in the Saudi context may not have overwhelming difference as of those explained earlier. However, there are some raised issues and findings need to be illustrated.

For instance, Sadawai (2010, p. 11) stated that there is a necessity for Saudi Arabia to implement a national assessment program for primary and secondary school students. The absence of having such program, Sadawai added, resulted in the "falling competitiveness of the country's graduates and controlling education expenditures" (p. 11). This finding addresses the main issue of assessment which is "assessment standardization" that contributes to reliability and practicality of the tests as well as assures the quality of student's learning in general.

It is to be noticed that formative assessments are applied along with summative in assessing student's progress in the Saudi context. According to Umer, Javid, and Farouq's (2013) study, formative assessment consider to be the assessing type that helps students to "know their mistakes and improve their reading and writing skills" (p. 110). This study also reveals that Saudi students prefer multiple choice questions over essay-type questions. The overall reading of such study is that there is no much conflict between summative and formative assessment as both can be applied simultaneously. Also, this study asserts the strong relation between formative assessment and feedback as it indicated in Peterson and Vali (2009), and Black and William (1998b).

In ESP (English for specific purposes) context, Alshehri (2016) found out that applying formative assessment and formative feedback constantly can reinforce constructive teaching and learning practices as

well as have "positive impacts on boosting students' egos and motivation to learn English" (p. 51). Also, Alshehri's study revealed that students prefer formal formative assessment activities over informal ones. According to the study, this is attributed to some factors, such as "students' previous familiarity with this type of assessment in their early stages, the lack of language competency needed for such assessment, and motivational factors, particularly intrinsic, to be highly engaged in this ongoing evaluation" (p. 50).

Likewise, the main findings of Omer and Umer's (2015) research confirmed that student's preferences and views of formative assessment types aim to have effectual impact on their learning as well as "raise the standard of learning" (p. 113). The participants believe that formative assessment is useful in "diagnosing and improving their mistakes" (p. 109). Again, feedback is very consisted in all formative assessment practices as argued by Yorke (2003, p. 478).

Implications of Assessment and Feedback in the Saudi EFL Context

In this section, the writer endeavors to set some insights that hopefully aim at enhancing the assessment and feedback in the discipline of Saudi Arabia where English is taught as a foreign language EFL.

Policy makers as well educators should be aware of the close connection between assessment, testing, and feedback. Yet, each of them has its own distinctive applications in the assessment process and may not necessarily even go in parallel. For instance, one teacher may claim that he adopts formative assessment, with no (or limit) provision of feedback. So, this is not called formative assessment, but testing. Feedback should always accompany formative assessments to be really a formative one.

The guarantee of having good assessment practices (formal or informal) requires EFL teachers to be acquainted with testing principles and types mentioned above. Also, they need to provide a formative feedback after each conducted task. Doing so, this will resulted in what is called assessment for learning.

Applying summative assessment and summative feedback must be minimized as they both lead to what is called assessment of learning only.

In the field of EFL, formative assessment and consistent feedback will have the potential to increase student's motivation and class interaction.

Assessment becomes formative assessment' when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet the needs (Black & William, 1998b, p. 2). Thus, EFL teachers need to use the assessment results to increase the quality of their teaching methodology.

In delivering feedback, there is no superiority of one over the other, though oral positive feedback is highly recommended as it well-suited with communicative approach of teaching.

The quality of feedback is assured when it is delivered immediately, suitable with tasks, being consistent and contains sufficient information. This type of feedback will not only lead to feedback but also to feedforward (future purpose).

Being reluctant to provide a feedback, students may become unenthusiastic to be involved in learning process and become demotivated in their future learning as well.

Conclusion

Assessment and feedback play a great role in learning and teaching. The quality of any educational system is determined by the effectiveness of its assessment scheme. Formative assessment is fortunately appreciated in the Saudi context, yet informal assessment needs to be encouraged in the EFL. It stimulates class interaction

and language usage. Feedback is used to fill the gap between the actual level of the student's output and the target level of performance. If this gap is fulfilled, then we can call this feedback a formative or constructive one. Conversely, the permanent focus of feedback on the student's personality and weaknesses over strengths, and always seen as criticizing more than praising makes it negative feedback. Thus, no matter how the feedback is delivered, the quality and suitability of feedback are the key issues in this regard. Finally, applying formative assessment and feedback might be time consuming and add extra burden on teacher's shoulder. So, reducing teaching load and having a small class size can remedy this dilemma.

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