

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF ASSESSMENT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING CONTEXTS

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to be aware of the important role of assessment in teaching and learning process to promote the performance of both EFL teachers and EFL students in technological and computer universities, Myanmar. Assessment is concerned with the quality of teaching as well as the quality of learning. The relationship of teaching, learning and assessment practices would support in deciding what can or cannot be achieved in a particular educational environment. Test plays a vital role in the teaching and learning environment. It can effectively be used as a valuable teaching device. Both teaching and testing are so closely interrelated that it is impossible to work in either field without being constantly concerned with the other. Tests can be taken on an additional role of assessing students' proficiency. Better teaching techniques are also considered to increase the proficiency of students in a school year. Therefore, teachers always try to modify their teaching methods with motivating activities that can arouse students' interests in language learning and assess their language performance. Overall, this paper may be a handy device for both teachers and students to know the teaching methodologies, different kinds of tests and the importance of assessment.

Key Words: *valuable teaching device, teaching methodologies, assessment practices, the importance of assessment*

1. Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language in technological and computer universities is of great use to students not only for communicating but also for helping them in learning their respective subjects. The main purpose of this paper is finding out problems and solutions to create a good relationship between teaching-learning process and assessment system for students who need to be proficient in English and apply it in their real-life situations. Since testing is an area of English language teaching,

teachers should realize how important testing and assessment are in teaching and learning contexts. Therefore, they should know different kinds of tests and their usefulness to be able to assess their students' language performance effectively. Teaching, learning and testing are directly proportional to each other. Teachers have to know this fact in order to make the most appropriate tests that match their teaching techniques with students' learning. If they can create the most effective tests that make the students' language skills improve, it can be said that they have also promoted their professional development to a certain extent. In fact, tests should be constructed primarily as devices to reinforce learning and to motivate the students as a means of assessing their language performance. Tests, indeed, serve as one of the assessment methods for collecting information about student learning. However, not all tests should be counted as assessment.

Assessment brings benefits for both students and teachers. It generates information to support and justify teachers' educational decisions, and it helps document evidence of teaching effectiveness. Formative Assessment is one of the processes which could help instructional means of a teacher to be more effective. It is difficult to notice students' actual ability in reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. Thus, teachers should try to know their students' needs by giving tests. It is a special responsibility for teachers to prepare students for an examination and also let them know how important to take test is. As a result, students should emphasize taking tests which play a vital role in language learning.

In addition, teaching methods may also be the key to assess students' language abilities apart from giving tests to students. Therefore, teachers need to improve their English-teaching capacity with innovative teaching techniques that can arouse students' interest and motivate them in their foreign language learning. That is why language teachers should always consider how to create effective

curricula that meet students' needs and that can increase students' proficiency, knowledge and passion for learning English as a foreign language. This paper may be an essential tool for both teachers and students to know the characteristics of a good test, different ways of assessment, a variety of teaching methods and relationship between them.

1.1. Literature Review

The purpose of most tests is to assign grades to students. They offer limited diagnostic information to identify areas for improvement. On the other hand, assessment is the systematic collection, review and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development (Palomba & Banta, 1999) [3]. A language test must provide a focus for purposeful, everyday communication activities. Teachers should be aware that formative assessment as well as day-to-day classroom assessment named by (Stiggins, 2004), which consists of weekly quizzes, tests, tutorials and even essays given by teachers to their classes, provides information of how students are progressing in their learning process, whereas summative assessment records or shows the state of students learning at certain end points in an academic year. By understanding these two assessment systems well, teachers can choose the most appropriate tests that can assess their students' language skills thoroughly.

In technological and computer universities of Myanmar, a few teachers who are selected Deans of respective years have a chance to be test-developers. In our English Department, five out of sixteen teachers of the whole department make a formal English test per semester by using some of the suggested questions given by the rest of the teachers. That is why most of the tests have reliability, but not validity. Few tests are both reliable and valid. How to solve this problem? This is also a necessary thing to be considered for test-developers.

There is a moderate and significant relationship between assessment and learning practices; and also teaching and assessment practices. Teaching and learning will be strongly impactful if the assessment practices are aligned with it. The current situation of EFL classrooms in technological and computer universities in Myanmar shows that the assessment system needs to be changed in order to be more effective in assessing students' actual language performance and teaching methodologies should also be innovated to meet students' needs.

2. Differences between Testing, Assessment and Evaluation

In an educational setting, testing, assessment and evaluation are all applied to measure how much knowledge students acquire from the assigned materials, how well they can learn from the materials, how much proficiency they improve through the activities based on the materials, how well they can apply their acquired knowledge in real life situations, and how well students are engaging the goals and objectives of the respective fields.

This is why teachers should know the distinctions between these three different terms and their respective benefits for the process of assessing how much students know from their learning. Teachers should use the term 'assessment' to measure what students know and how much they have learnt by using tutorials or some useful activities. Tutorials based on the students' submitted piece of work enhance students' development of ideas and give an opportunity for students to get feedback from their teachers. Therefore, both teachers and students can know their strengths and weaknesses in learning a foreign language through tutorials. 'Testing' can be useful for both teachers and students in promoting long-term learning. When teachers need to know students' required knowledge on something, they can not only assess their students' skills or knowledge but also specify their grades through 'a test' [6]. Tests can give students the ability to recall information they have learnt, to transfer information across multiple contexts, etc. and also help teachers know their students' performance and give appropriate feedback to their students. On the other hand, 'evaluation' can be used as a systematic approach to collect, provide, and utilize information about a course or program and to analyze the nature, quality and efficiency of the teaching-learning process in that course or program.

Tests today are mainly concerned with evaluating real communication in the target language. In this communicative era of testing, teachers, who are involved in testing some forms: invigilating, marking or actually writing tests, feel that the best exams are those that combine various sub-skills as they do when exchanging ideas orally or in writing. In particular, communicative tests need to measure more than isolated language skills. They should indicate how well a person could do in his or her foreign language.

In the EFL classroom, teachers need to consider the relationship between teaching and testing. Both teaching and testing are so closely interrelated that it

is virtually impossible to work in either field without being constantly concerned with the other. Therefore, teachers as well as test developers should know the two important characteristics of assessment instrument: reliability and validity. Reliability is the degree to which an assessment tool produces stable and consistent results. Validity refers to how well a test measure what it is intended to measure. A test can be reliable without being valid. However, a test cannot be valid unless it is reliable. An assessment can provide test-makers with consistent results, making it reliable, but unless it is measuring what they are supposed to measure, it is not valid. Test-developers have the responsibility of describing the target groups used to develop the tests.

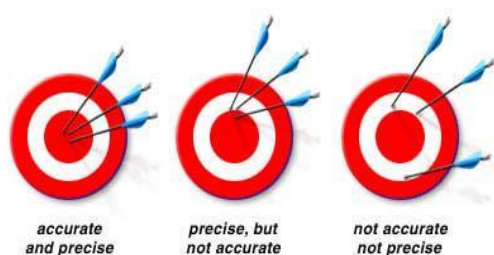


Figure – A **Figure – B** **Figure – C**

Figure- A: Good validity and good reliability

Figure- B: Good reliability, but has poor validity

Figure- C: Poor validity and poor reliability

Figure 4.1 Understanding the Relationship between Reliability and Validity Source:

www.slideplayer.com [8]

In our universities, most of the tests especially semester-end tests are achievement tests. Tutorials and some classrooms tests focus on proficiency and progress tests. Why these types of tests are implemented in our universities is that proficiency tests can measure overall mastery of English or how well prepared in a particular setting. They rarely take into account the syllabus that students have followed since they are concerned with future performance rather than past achievement and are often administered to students from various language learning backgrounds. Progress tests are often given to motivate students. They assess progress students make in mastering material taught in the classroom. They also enable the teachers to the degree of success of their teaching, helping them identify areas of weakness or difficulty. Progress tests can also be diagnostic to some degree.

On the other hand, achievement tests are more formal and designed to show mastery of a particular syllabus; for example, semester-end tests, end-of-year tests, school-leaving exams, and public tests. They are rarely constructed by classroom teacher for a particular class. They are primarily designed to measure individual progress rather than as a means of motivating or reinforcing language.

In a good class with a fairly narrow ability range, teachers give students specific feedback on the strong and weak points of their work through appropriate tests mentioned above. Good assessment is non-threatening to teachers and students. Apart from assessment of teachers, teachers should realize that self-assessment and peer-assessment are also important to develop students' communicative abilities. They provide for a wider range of input to learners than one person alone. Both self-assessment and peer-assessment devices are closely tied to specific classroom projects or tasks. One can get ideas from examples, but the teacher must generate these devices based on the specific nature of the course. When learners understand how these devices work, they should be asked for their input in generating self- and peer-assessment devices. Teachers need to work along with learners in using these devices, especially at the beginning. For the most part, this work should be done within class time.

3. Types of Assessment in Language Teaching

In education, assessment refers to the wide variety of methods or tools that educators use to evaluate, measure, and document the academic readiness, learning progress, skill acquisition, or educational needs of students. A great deal of the language teacher's time and attention is devoted to assessing the progress pupils make or preparing them for public examinations. Assessment includes any means of checking what students can do with the language. It also includes checking what they cannot do, but proper assessment gives due to the positive side of their achievement. Assessment may be carried out before, during, or after a course or it may not even be connected with a course. It may be of individual student or may be to check the capabilities of a whole class. This means that assessment is concerned with the quality of teaching as well as the quality of learning. To promote the professional development of an English language teacher, he or she should know not only the effective teaching methods but also how

to assess effectively to make students master in English language. The following types of assessment are commonly used in teaching and learning environment as educational assessments. [3]

1. Diagnostic Assessment

It is used as pre-assessment to know students' strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and skills prior to instruction. Students are not necessarily expected to know most, or even any, of the material evaluated by pre-assessments – they are generally used to establish a baseline against which educators measure learning progress over the duration of a program, course, or determine general academic readiness for a course, program, grade level, or new academic program that student may be transferring into. Diagnostic assessment looks backwards rather than forwards. It is often used before teaching or when a problem rises.

2. Formative Assessment

It is one of the processes which could help instructional means of a teacher to be more effective. This assessment provides information about learning process. It consists of the weekly quizzes, tests and even essays given by teachers to their classes. Teachers and students use the results of formative assessment to understand how students are progressing and to make adjustments in instruction. Rick Stiggins calls it “day-to-day classroom assessments” and claims evidence that it has triggered “remarkable gains in student achievement.” (Stiggins, 2004) [5]

3. Summative Assessment

It can be used to measure students' achievement at the end of a unit, course, semester, program, or school year. Summative assessments are typically scored and graded tests, assignments, or projects that are used to determine whether students have learnt what they are expected to learn during the defined instructional period. It provokes most of the controversy about testing because it includes “high-stakes, low-stakes and standardized” testing carried out by the states. Summative assessment records the state of student learning at certain end points in a student's academic career.

In order to transform the whole educational process, the change to assessment is being made hand-in-hand with the change to outcome-based education. Outcome-based education in many places offers broad cross-curricular statements, or essential outcomes of

how teachers want their learners to be, resulting from formal education and from life-long learning.

According to McTighe and Ferrara (1994) [2], assessment refers to the process of gathering and integrating information about learners from various sources to help teachers understand these students and describe them. Teaching is one type of assessment. Evaluation is the process of making a judgment of a product, a response, or a performance based on criteria. Continuous assessment in the classroom can be characterized as ongoing, informal assessment and evaluation combined.

3.1 Tests for Different Purposes

Testing is certainly not the only way to assess students, but there are many good reasons for including a test in the language course. There are different tests for different purposes.

1. Proficiency Tests

Proficiency tests can measure overall mastery of English or how well prepared in a particular setting. They rarely take into account the syllabus that students have followed since they are concerned with future performance rather than past achievement and are often administered to students from various language learning backgrounds. For example, do the students know enough English to follow a certain university or college given in the medium of English?

2. Achievement or Attainment Tests

These tests are more formal and designed to show mastery of a particular syllabus; for example, end-of-year tests, school-leaving exams, and public tests. They are rarely constructed by classroom teacher for a particular class. They are primarily designed to measure individual progress rather than as a means of motivating or reinforcing language.

3. Diagnostic Tests

Diagnostic tests are primarily designed to assess students' knowledge and skills in particular areas before a course of study is begun. Progress, achievement and proficiency tests can be used as diagnostic tests to some extent. They enable teachers to identify specific weaknesses and difficulties so that an appropriate remedial program can be planned.

4. Placement Tests

They can sort new students into teaching groups so that they are approximate. They have general ability rather than specific points of learning. The results of

placement tests are needed quickly. They are administrative load.

In a good class with a fairly narrow ability range, teachers give students specific feedback on the strong and weak points of their work through appropriate tests mentioned above. Good assessment is non-threatening to teachers and students. Apart from assessment of teachers, teachers should realize that self-assessment and peer-assessment are also important to develop students' communicative abilities. They provide for a wider range of input to learners than one person alone. Both self-assessment and peer-assessment devices are closely tied to specific classroom projects or tasks. One can get ideas from examples, but the teacher must generate these devices based on the specific nature of the course. When learners understand how these devices work, they should be asked for their input in generating self- and peer-assessment devices. Teachers need to work along with learners in using these devices, especially at the beginning. For the most part, this work should be done within class time.

3.2. The Role of Assessment in Teaching and Learning Process

Assessment plays an important role in teaching and learning process which intends to collect, interpret and analyze the student' language performance. The quality of learning can be determined by the quality of teaching and assessment practices in the classroom. There are many purposes of assessment focusing on the different aspects of educational development, however, the most influent purposes of assessment are developing students' learning and improving accountability measures for learning at classroom and school levels. For effective assessment, using appropriate assessment strategies is significant. Therefore, a clear understanding of using a variety of assessment strategies for learning is crucial in classroom. Teachers need to know the relationship between their assessment and students' learning. In addition, students need engaging in their own learning in challenging but enabling environment. The assessment practices and teaching strategies must encourage developing linkage of theory and real life. Assessment is meant to contribute in students' learning and therefore, need to be integrated in daily teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Through assessments, teachers can collect strong evidence of students' performance and progress. Teachers can provide qualitative and quantitative feedback to students on areas needing

improvement, "children require regular, immediate feedback while they are striving to understand new ideas and construct new knowledge system." (Jones & Tanner, 2006) [1]

Any assessment system should focus upon the following particular key questions:

1. Will the assessment benefit the pupils?
2. Will the information on attainment be useful?
3. Do the performance criteria identify positive achievement?
4. Are there important aspects of the course not covered by the assessment?
5. Are the assessment techniques appropriate or valid for the learning experience?

Whenever there is a strong assessment system integrated with teaching and learning, and the best use of evaluation system on continuous basis, the effectiveness of classroom is visible and there are substantial learning gains (Black & William, 1998) [1].

4. Findings and Solutions

The study has focused on the relationship between assessment on students' learning and EFL teachers' teaching techniques. Findings and solutions of this paper contribute a better understanding for EFL teachers from technological and computer universities in assessing their students' language performance in their respective EFL classes.

4.1 Findings

The finding reveals that there are different dimensions of assessment on students' learning such as identifying learning needs, providing feedback on their need improvement area. It has been found that there is still a gap between teaching, learning and assessment to be connected because of different levels of student in the large classrooms. It is also important for teachers to understand their focus on assessment and marking process of students' responses.

4.2 Solutions

The ultimate objective of assessment is to improve learning. That is why EFL teachers in technological and computer universities have found out solutions to bridge this gap among multi-level students. The *first solution* to close gap is that teachers should use appropriate teaching methods which match the students' learning preferences. Theoretically, the most effective teaching methods and instructional

activities that take students' preferred learning styles into consideration should optimize learning outcomes. The *next one* is effective teaching materials. Teaching methods and teaching materials are directly interrelated that teachers should choose the most appropriate materials that match the students' level, arouse their interests and increase their language performance. Choosing the most appropriate assessment that matches the student level is the *last solution* for the gap but is also considered as important as the former ones. If teachers know these three solutions to bridge the gap between teaching-learning and assessment practices, they can create the effective teaching-learning environment, give appropriate feedback to students and will also be more confident in their teaching. To make teaching-learning environment more active and reliable, teachers need to prepare teaching materials before teaching. During teaching period, they also need to analyze output data of the students and assess students' performance through student work. Then, they should adapt and re-assess their teaching methods and give feedback to their students. Finally, they can reflect their strengths and weaknesses through systematic teaching practices [7].

Most of the EFL teachers in technological and computer universities across Myanmar Country find themselves difficult in teaching English in large classes containing many students due to their traditional teaching styles. Student-teacher ratio is 40-80 students per teacher. For a language teacher, a class of more than 40 students is generally considered a large class. That is why they are trying to overcome these difficulties by creating and applying innovative teaching methods for improving their students' language proficiency through effective assessment systems. They have realized that teaching and learning environment needs to be harmonized to engage their goals of teaching to students and they need to change their teaching styles and assessment systems to persuade their students to be interested in their teaching and to participate actively in activities during teaching periods. They understand that making changes can raise the education standard higher in some way. Therefore, question formats were modified over the period. The current question formats are quite different from the old ones. One unseen passage is asked for reading section for 20 marks in today's question. Only 40 marks out of 100 are seen. From 2017-2018 academic year, the new marking system has been conducted: 50% for exam and 50% for classroom activities out of 100. This new system may

be effective because most of the students are actively participating in classroom activities. Their active involvement in teaching and learning process has changed the classrooms from boring into dynamic ones.

5. Conclusion

This paper attempts to launch an investigation into the relationship among teaching, learning and assessment practices to promote not only the professional development of teachers but also students' ways of learning. In order to help teachers understand how important a good test is for enhancing students' language performance and for making appropriate tests, different kinds of testing and assessment are mentioned. Moreover, the paper can be a useful tool for teachers to notice and bridge the gap between teaching-learning practices and assessment because it also includes common problems and solutions in EFL classroom. To ensure effectiveness in teaching, new teaching methods plus effective assessment systems should be adapted into traditional teaching and learning contexts. It is hoped that the paper may be of great benefit to both teachers and students in educational society.

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