

The Impact of Formative Assessment on English Language Learners at University Level

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1. Abstract

This study investigates the impact of formative assessment on English language learners at university level. In this regard, the study explores benefits of incorporating formative assessment on university students' achieving English language proficiency in all four skills – reading, writing grammar and speaking. This study is carried out on the first year students in Core English Language (CEL) lectures conducted by the Department of English Language

Teaching, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka. The existing procedure of holding 'Continuous Assessment'

(CA) throughout the semester is taken into consideration with the aim of identifying its effects on English language learning process of undergraduates. The main objective of this research is to find ways and strategies to enhance English language proficiency and communicative competence of students at Sabaragamuwa University. Two groups of first year students were involved in this study as the experimental and the comparison. The students in the experimental group learnt English under techniques of formative assessment whereas the other group under comparison had language exercises and activities in a conventional English language learning setting. Pre-test post-test design is used as the methodology of this experimental research. Proficiency levels of the two groups were compared through the results of pre-test and post-test. In addition, through student behaviour observation and a questionnaire survey, students' perceptions towards formative assessment were considered. The results of the study revealed that there is a considerable gap in the way students performed during the pre-test and the post-test. The experimental group revealed better performance in the pre-test than the comparison group; however the comparison group indicated better achievement only in the post-test. Finally study revealed that using formative assessment in Core English Language lectures proved positive influence on the learners' proficiency in all four skills in English as opposed to the existing evaluating procedure of CAs because of its exam-oriented nature.

2. Introduction and research problem/issue

Assessment is very often misinterpreted as a method of testing through standardized examinations. However, there are other methods that teachers can incorporate in evaluating students' achievement of English language proficiency. This paper stresses that it is important to distinguish the gap between tests and assessment. In order to gain a better understanding of students' progress in acquiring a second language like English, teachers can look for a variety of assessment tools that may move beyond tests and examinations. In the field of English language teaching, there have been various assessment procedures conducted by teachers in order to evaluate the students' achievement of English language proficiency.

Summative assessment is the most commonly used one which deals with testing the students' progress at the end of a learning activity or a course through a proper test or an examination.

Interim assessment deals with testing students' progress over certain units or lessons of a course. In Core English Language (CEL) course at Department of English Language

Teaching (DELT), there is an assessment procedure called 'Continuous Assessment' providing students an opportunity to score marks during the semester which are finally added to the semester exam results.

In this study I intend to explore the effects that formative assessment can have on English language learners at Department of English Language Teaching, Sabaragamuwa University. In addition, the research aims to investigate the existing evaluating procedure named 'Continuous Assessment' at DELT, Sabaragamuwa University and how it affects the students' English learning progress both positively and negatively. The study questions whether the existing procedure of Continuous Assessment at DELT is equal to the requirements of formative assessment; because superficially CAs can be considered as a method of formative assessment, but in reality CAs make students more stressful to earn some marks rather than learning English keenly.

3. Research Methodology

As this is an experimental research, 'pre-test post-test design' is used in which the participants were studied before and after the experimental manipulation. The study involved two groups of first year students as the experimental and the comparison. The students in the experimental group learnt English under techniques of formative assessment whereas the other group under comparison had language exercises and activities in a conventional English language learning setting. Proficiency levels of the two groups were compared through the results of pre and post-tests. In addition, an attitudinal questionnaire was given to students to get their perceptions about formative assessment. There were informal discussions with students about the existing procedure of CAs and the extent to which this CA system helps them achieving English language proficiency. Furthermore, the researcher has maintained field notes through observations of students' behavior in order to make inferences about their learning progress. The data collected through the questionnaire and the field notes were analyzed qualitatively.

4. Results and findings

The analysis of the pre- and post-tests indicated a significant difference between the experimental and the comparison groups of students. The experimental group revealed better performance in the pre-test than the comparison group; however the comparison group indicated better achievement only in the post-test. The study revealed that using formative assessment in Core English Language (CEL) lectures proved positive influence on the learners' proficiency in all four skills in English. The study proved that formative assessment enables producing more powerful effects on students' achievement of English language proficiency than the existing procedure of Continuous Assessment (CA) at Department of English Language Teaching. The CA procedure creates an unnecessary tension in students as marks given to the CAs should be compulsorily added to the semester examination results, thus, there is no space created to improve their English language proficiency through

Continuous Assessments. CAs are always exam-oriented and they do function as a method of

scoring marks whereas formative assessment is highly effective in enhancing the English language proficiency of undergraduates throughout the semester. It is further revealed that the goal of a formative assessment is to provide constructive feedback to support the English language learning, but not to give marks or assign a grade.

Results of informal discussions, field notes through student behaviour observations and questionnaires revealed the perceptions of the students with regard to the way the lecturer deals with formative assessment techniques in the English language classroom. These results further revealed that formative assessment techniques helped students become actively involved in their learning process and motivate them to learn the English vocabulary, grammar, reading and even speaking skills.

5. Conclusions, implications and significance

The study concludes with the revelation that formative assessment plays a key role in enhancing students' achievement of English language proficiency as it moves away from the established system of Continuous Assessment procedure at Department of English Language Teaching. The study promotes a shift from achieving marks or grades to enthusiastic learning process during lectures. As an ongoing assessment focusing on the learning process, formative assessment helps teachers check the current status of their students' language ability, that is, they can know what the students know and what the students do not know. The study revealed how formative assessment provides feedback for lecturers themselves as it helps them make changes in instruction where necessary and to reform or to modify the upcoming lessons and language activities according to the needs of students. Importantly, lecturers get a great opportunity to inform students individually about their current progress in English language learning in order to motivate them for further improvement.

6. References (Selected)

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