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Types of Assessment in Language Teaching

El Hacen Moulaye Ahmed¹

¹ Professor of English Linguistics in the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, University of Nouakchott. Head of Academic Affairs, in the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, University of Nouakchott; hacentwo@hotmail.fr
Address: residence 124, street Sahraoui, Hay Nejah, Nouakchott Phone: 0022236001919.

ORCID iD:

0000=0009-0004-0396-3168.

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Address for Correspondence:

El Hacen Moulaye Ahmed, University of Nouakchott, residence 124, street Sahraoui, Hay Nejah, Nouakchott. (hacentwo@hotmail.fr)

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Abstract

This paper sets forth the different types of assessment in language teaching. It starts with clearing up concepts, “evaluation” and “test,” which are often used interchangeably with assessment in literature. The types of assessment are described as either formative or summative. Formative assessment contributes to the teaching and learning processes by providing guidance to the teacher about the effectiveness of his or her teaching strategies and to the student on how to bridge the gap between his current level of language and the desired one. Unlike the summative assessment, which has an air of finality, formative assessment is frequently carried out during the learning journey. Summative assessment, however, gauges the student’s final achievement. It is also revealed that the different functions summative and formative assessments serve do not mark an existing dichotomy between them. In contrast, they make them complete each other.

Keywords

Test, evaluation, summative assessment, formative assessment, language teaching

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1. Introduction

The core mission of all institutions of education, of all levels from primary, secondary to higher, of all shapes and sizes, from metropolitan universities to small institutions, is to teach the students to the best level possible. To meet this goal and based on quantitative and qualitative evidences, researchers found that teaching, in general and language teaching in particular, must incorporate formative and summative assessments both of which help the teacher to use effective instruction in order to raise the levels of students' achievements ("Assessment for Learning Formative Assessment," 2008, p. 1). This shows that in order to produce truly flexible, creative and adaptable graduates, various types of assessment must be carried out. As such, this paper sets forth the two main types of assessment, formative and summative, and their sub-types; nevertheless, before talking about the types of assessment, it is worth clearing up other concepts, "evaluation" and "test," that are often used interchangeably with assessment in literature.

Christ (1997) stated that evaluation goes beyond student assessment to look at all aspects of language teaching and learning to consider how the educational decisions can be formed by the result of the assessment (p. 103). Assessment is used as an umbrella term to cover all types of testing, and to distinguish alternative assessment (informal procedures: peer assessment, teacher interview and learner diaries) from testing (often by paper-and-pencil: mid-term and final exams) (Clapham, 2000, pp. 150-152). These quotations reveal that evaluation is the widest basis of collecting information as it is concerned with the overall program. While assessment covers all possible procedures that can measure student's achievement, test is always associated with paper-and-pencil procedures. Thus, test is a subcategory of assessment.

2. Formative assessment

2.1 Definition

It was described variously as the "developmental role" of assessment (McKay, 2006, p. 68), "assessment for learning" (Shermis & DiVesta, 2011, p. 86), "alternative assessment," "authentic assessment," or "informal assessment" (Yang, 2007, p. 9; Bagley, 2008, p. 10). These terms seem different, but they, in fact, "overlap with a common core meaning that denotes non-standardized... assessment activities" (Yang, 2007, p. 10). Formative assessment refers to "frequent, interactive assessments of student progress and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately" (OECD, 2005, p. 21).

This illustrates that formative assessment has different characteristics: continuous process, both teacher and student assess teaching and learning, check student understanding and language ability, seek to identify student's deficiency, and modify the teaching procedures accordingly.

In addition, Tuttle (2010) argues that another characteristic of formative assessments is that teacher does not give grades but rather gives formative comments, for when the student gets back corrected essay with grades, s/he will not look at the comments. However, if the essay is returned with comments only, the student will read them and thus find out about his or her strengths and learning gaps (p. 53). Therefore, Benjamin (2008) remarked that student approaches formative assessment with less anxiety and competitiveness (p. 3). Formative assessment also provides both the student and the teacher with information about when they will be ready to take summative assessment (Ollin & Tucker, 2012, p. 57).

2.2 Types of formative assessment

The types of formative assessment are difficult to catalogue in this limited space. The listed below are meant to be representative not exhaustive.

2.2.1 Interactive activities- interviewing the student and giving him or her feedback about their progress and asking him or her about the difficulties they might be facing (Shrum & Glisan, 2010, p. 401).

2.2.2 Observations- in class activities such as student's non-verbal feedback during lecture where the teacher can see if the student is satisfied with the class activities (Luongo-Orlando, 2003, p. 6).

2.2.3 Anecdotal records- teacher writes notes on student skill development including vocabulary and tense s/he use (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2010, p. 112).

2.2.4 Homework exercises- teacher will measure student writing skills and gives formative comments (Brookhart, 2010, p. 5).

2.2.5 Self- assessment and peer- assessment- (student reflects on his or her own language proficiency and asks his or her classmates their opinions about their language abilities, for example) Knowing about others' judgment and setting it against one's self judgment is of much help in recognizing one's own weaknesses and strengths (Zhang & Yang, 2013, pp. 45-46).

2.2.6 Presentation- student's skit performance is assessed (Avis, Fisher & Thompson, 2010, p. 170).

As noted above, both teacher and student get feedbacks about the work in progress (language teaching and learning) from different sources- teacher, peer and student. This denotes that formative assessment is a characteristic of student- centered classroom because the student is engaged in his or her learning assessment and even in assessing the teaching effectiveness. The teacher seems to play the role of the facilitator rather than the manager as s/he seems to be open to discuss, revise or modify his or her teaching methods to meet the student's needs.

3. Summative assessment

3.1 Definition

In addition to formative assessment, summative assessment is an integral part of language teaching and learning. Summative assessment is termed variously "traditional assessment" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 124), "standardized assessment," "statewide assessment" (Abrams, Southerland & Silva, 2008, p. 149), "assessment of learning" (Johnson, 2009, para. 1) or "formal assessment" (Lenski & Verbruggen, 2010, p. 136). Summative assessment is used for giving grades (usually numerical) and making determination about what the student has achieved (Ellington & Earl, 1999, p. 186) such as whether the student has acquired the required proficiency in language which allows him or her to move to the next level (Murray & Christison, 2011, p. 181). Thereof, it takes place at designated points during or at the end of the course (Kassing & Jay, 2003, p. 186).

This shows that, unlike formative assessment which is a conductive monitoring and improving of the processes of teaching and learning, summative assessment centered on assessing the product- language use ability. It reveals also that student language competency is measured through giving numerical grades usually at the end of the course unlike formative assessment which is conducted through providing frequent formative comments on the student works throughout the course.

Moreover, Leibowitz, Merweand and Schalkwyk (2009) stated that summative assessment forces the student to review learning materials more than s/he will do under normal circumstances (p. 175). Interestingly, Hui and Grossman (2008) argued that student is most likely to buy into formative assessment in order to orient and focus his or her study behavior in the planning for the summative assessment (p. 10). These illustrate that summative assessment encourages student to review his or her works and adapts his or her study habit through using formative assessment as rehearsal. In contrast with formative assessment, student approaches summative assessment with high anxiety and competitiveness; therefore, it discriminates against student with summative assessment anxiety who performs badly because s/he is afraid of failure (Ur, 2012, p. 169). In effect, this anxiety might even lead the student to drop out of school (Fisher, 2008, p. 35).

3.2 Types of summative assessment

Common types of summative assessment are listed below.

3.2.1 Mid-term exam is conducted at the end of the course and covers the whole material

studied in the course. It can be written, oral or both. In the written exam, student's writing skills and reading comprehension are assessed. In the oral exam, student's skit performance is assessed from grammar rules, vocabulary knowledge to pronunciation (Frankland, 2007, p. 373; Mori, 2008, p. 36).

3.2.2 Final exam (or year-end exam) is conducted at the end of the year to measure the student's language ability s/he acquired during the whole academic year. As mid-term, it can be written, oral, or both. The student is assessed based on his or her mastery of the language skills- writing, speaking, listening and reading (Hobbs, et al. 2011, p. 121). The grades of this exam are always added to the mid-term grades to form the final grade of the student. The usual way of forming the final grades is to give weight to each of the exams- mid-term exam weight 30% and final exam weight 70%. The student will pass to the next level if s/he gets 50% average (Bouyssou, et al. 2000, p. 36).

These two exams show the toughness of the summative assessment. The student is given only two possibilities to show his or her proficiency in language. It is clear also that the student is not part of his or her assessment. The whole assessment is the teacher's responsibility. Accordingly, these types of assessment are likely to be conducted in a teacher-centered classroom where the teacher plays the role of the manager and the student plays the role of the worker.

In fact, Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009 argued that because of the anxiety which is associated with summative assessment and the little chance given to the student to prove his or her competency in language, educators called for the use of formative assessment as a complement for summative assessment (pp. 362-365). Some of these educators proposed giving vocabulary quizzes every three or four weeks (Nagatomo, 2012, p. 172), and others suggest the uses of presentations and written assignments (Allen & Turville, 2010, p. 77). Indeed, these additional types of formative assessment provide the likelihood for the student to pass his or her classes. For instance, if s/he performs poorly in one or two of the exams s/he can make up in the others.

4. Conclusion

This paper hashed out the types of assessment in language teaching. They were described as either formative or summative. Formative assessment contributes to the teaching and learning processes by providing guidance to the teacher about the effectiveness of his or her teaching strategies and to the student on how to bridge the gap between his current level of language and the desired one. Unlike the summative assessment which has an air of finality, formative assessment is frequently carried out during the learning journey. Summative assessment, however, gauges the student's final achievement. In the end, the different functions summative and formative assessment serve do not mark an existing dichotomy between them. In contrast, they make them complete each other. What is more, recent studies showed that summative assessment provides information to teachers and when used to give feedback to the student, its function is formative (Roux, 2012, pp. 140-141). Moreover, as noted above, the difference in the functions of these assessments is blurred or going to be since many educators started to call for implementing many types of the formative assessment (quizzes, presentations, and written assignments) in the summative assessment.

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