The challenge of classroom-based assessment

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How formal high-stakes tests relate to actual language learning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you agree that …… is a(n) effective way to learn English</th>
<th>useful TOEFL preparation activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%*</td>
<td>rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing essays</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giving oral presentations</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listening to real-life English</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>reading real-life English texts</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing a summary of something you have read</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing a summary of something you have listened to</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giving an oral summary of something you have read</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giving an oral summary of something you have listened to</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completing listening comprehension exercises</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>having conversations in English</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>completing reading comprehension exercises</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doing group projects</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>studying an English language learning textbook</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>learning grammar rules and doing grammar exercises</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doing timed TOEFL tests</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>studying test preparation materials</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>memorizing examples of good essays</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>memorizing vocabulary lists</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentage of positive responses (Agree and Strongly agree)

Table 12: Comparison of students’ beliefs about useful TOEFL preparation activities and effective language learning activities
What is the fundamental issue?

- How teachers teach matters.
- How teachers integrate assessment into their teaching matters.
- Black & Wiliam defined formative assessment as “all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (1998, pp.7-8)
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More than one challenge

- Terminology/definition
- Identifying principles
- Relating principles to second/foreign language learning and teaching
- Classroom assessment literacy
Terminology

In the last decade-plus, a good deal of attention in the field of educational assessment has been turned to various forms of assessment that are not ‘testing’:

- formative assessment
- assessment for learning
- school-based assessment
- classroom-based assessment
- learning-oriented assessment
- (and more)
Principles:
Questions to be considered

- Is classroom-based assessment necessarily formative? Are there conditions under which it may not be formative?
- Is overt, explicit feedback a necessary element of classroom-based assessment?
- Can assessment be “for learning” (as in Black & Wiliam 1998; Black et al 2003) if it is taking place in the classroom but being reported upwards to accountability systems?
Classroom Principles

- Setting clear goals
- Designing appropriate learning and assessment tasks
- Communication of assessment criteria to teachers and students
- Provision of high-quality feedback
- Conscious provision of opportunities for self- and peer-assessment
Technical principles

Teacher assessment should be the product of professional judgement involving:

- critical interpretation of evidence from student performances
- multiple sources of evidence
- application of knowledge of appropriate measurement principles
- value judgements about the meanings of results

Decision consistency
Ethical principles

- Classroom assessment must be fair.
- It must be aware of its unintended as well intended consequences.
- It should positively influence students’ motivation and learning.
- It should be efficient and feasible for teachers.
- It should be empowering for teachers.
A new kind of fairness

- In the US, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) wrote an important paper in which she argued that while standardized testing is not equitable, alternative assessment may not be equitable either. She argues that all kinds of assessment “depend not only on the design of the assessments themselves, but also on how well the assessment practices are interwoven with the goals of authentic school reform and effective teaching” for their fairness. (p.5)
Underlying processes or data collection methods that can inform assessment in the classroom

- Observation
- Recorded lessons
- Portfolio collection
- Journals, questionnaires
- Interviews
- Recall protocols
- Peer-peer talk recordings
A different way of seeing

- We can see that all of these are tools to create a ‘window’ through which we can see into the student beyond the product of their learning.

- For classroom assessment, we want to know not just what happened, but how and why it happened.

- We also want to know that soon enough to put the knowledge to use.
Principles for language classrooms?

The third challenge in the context of a group such as EALTA is to consider whether (and perhaps which of) the principles hold true when working with second, third or fourth language learners, and also whether there may be some additional principles that apply specifically to the teaching and learning of languages.
Is the medium the message?

- The temptation will always be to operationalize a classroom-based language ‘assessment’ as a series of mini-tests of specific linguistic knowledge – instead we must always look to the **purpose** of the assessment.

- But we must also look to the underlying message about language that is projected by the types of assessments we use. Some mini-tests of discrete language areas serve a useful purpose; but need to be balanced by assessments that focus on the real-life value of language.
Rea-Dickins (2007): “the means by which to achieve consistency in making judgments about language samples are well rehearsed, but much uncharted territory remains in the development of quality formative assessment.”

The types of criteria that become important in classroom language assessment must include “the provision of a rich array of opportunities for learners to use and stretch their linguistic resources” (p.516)
In the context of language assessment

Hamp-Lyons 2007, Figure 1: two extremes of assessment cultures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom-based assessment</th>
<th>Classical testing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fluency-focused</td>
<td>Accuracy-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual-focused</td>
<td>Group- or ‘norm’-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement/progress-focused</td>
<td>Proficiency-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner-focused</td>
<td>Language-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process-focused</td>
<td>Product-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’/students’ voices</td>
<td>Rule-makers’ voices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leads to assessment of learning</td>
<td>Leads to ‘teaching to the test’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Message about language or about learning?

Black & Wiliam (1998) say: “the core of the activity of formative assessment lies in the sequence of two actions. The first is the perception by the student of a gap between a desired goal and his/her own state (of knowledge, and/or understanding, and/or skills). The second is the action taken by the learner to close the gap in order to attain the desired goal.” (p.21)

This puts the student at the centre of their own assessment.
Students as assessors

- It is becoming clear that progress on effective classroom-based assessment will not move far forward until a body of practical support is developed to help teachers learn how to teach their student to assess their own language development.

- Among the very many studies of the value of student feedback, most fail to convince because the support given to students was inadequate.

- We take it for granted these days that teachers need to learn about assessment— the same is true for students.
The fourth challenge...

- ... is perhaps the greatest.
- Since classroom-based assessment is both new and different, and yet at the heart of what good teachers already do, how can teachers learn and practice the skills of assessment in their classrooms?
- Furthermore—how can they learn and practice the skills of language assessment using formative principles?
Classroom assessment—simple (?) tools for teachers

- **Questioning**
  - Probing questions (‘stretch’ questions)
  - Switchback questioning (drop/raise level)
  - Collaborative questioning

- **Feedback**
  - Comment-only ‘marking’
  - Peer feedback
  - Feedback as feed-forward

- **Wait time**
Teacher strategies that require advanced understanding of how language works

- Teachers sharing criteria with learners
  - Setting targets
  - Deconstructing criteria
  - Group use of criteria
  - Identifying progress

- Self-assessment
  - Peer-to-peer commentary and revision
BUT--

“an activity or elicitation procedure in itself is neutral. It is only in its implementation and the use to which the data that emerges from a given activity is put that there develops its formative or summative potential”

“teachers may be trapped in their thinking about assessment between two potentially competing paradigms: to measure achievement and progress on the one hand, or to facilitate through different means their students’ language learning on the other.” (Rea-Dickins 2011, p. 514)
The dual roles of teachers

- This the main site of tension in assessment
- In the Hong Kong SBA we not only developed as humanistic and interactive an assessment of speaking as we could conceive within our parameters, we provided a large amount of teacher PD, and on-site support, and we did this over a 5-year period.
BUT still longitudinal research and PhDs by our students show that some teachers have interpreted SBA in ways different from each other and in some cases far from the original intention and philosophy, but also sometimes far from the specifications and guidelines provided in detail.
Understanding the tension

- Black & Wiliam (1998) argue that it is not possible to introduce or strengthen formative assessment in classrooms without some radical change in overall pedagogy because formative assessment demands a ‘constructivist classroom’.

- A classroom in which formative assessment is the norm and is effective requires changes in the teacher and in the students as well as in the assessment methods.
Rising to the challenge

- Muchun Yin (2010) strikes a positive note when he talks about the spread of teacher thinking research into research on assessment.

- We are increasingly coming to the understanding that, if we are to change assessment practice, we must impact teachers’ core beliefs and understanding about what testing/assessment is for, and how they might affect practice.
Teacher assessment literacy

- Professional development, training materials for specific classroom assessment methods, guidelines for giving feedback – these and many other resources are needed BUT first teachers need to be ‘assessment literate’.

- Good language teachers are already and always looking, listening, monitoring – they are collecting data about their students - all their students.

- The problem for many teachers is that they have no schema with which to process the data and make systematic judgements.
Where are we now?

- Stiggins (2001) told “a story of disregard by policy makers, school leaders, and the measurement community” for classroom assessment that has “kept classroom assessment from even approximating its potential” (p.5)

- Have things changed since then?

- In the measurement community and in language testing/assessment, there are many signs of small changes.
Classroom language assessment and politics

- It is policy makers, school leaders, and to some extent parents who are slower to change.

- There are positives: the Hong Kong SBA now spreading to Singapore and Brunei; European initiatives such as DIALANG and the European Language Portfolio.

- Portfolio assessment of writing in many countries.

- But…
Who makes change happen?
Re-defining classroom-based assessment

“...any reflection by teachers (and/or learners) on the qualities of a learner’s (or group of learners’) work which has the potential for the use of that information by teachers (and/or learners) for teaching, learning (feedback), reporting, management or socialization purposes.”

“...the ‘assessment opportunity’ (‘any actions, interactions or artefacts (planned or unplanned, deliberate or unconscious, explicit or embedded) which have the potential to provide information on the qualities of a learner’s (or group of learners’) performance’), enables consideration of the more intuitive forms of teacher decision-making in CBA.”

(Hill & McNamara 2012: 396)
Some References