

Assessment and Feedback Practices in the English Language Classroom

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Abstract

The study mainly focused on exploring the nature of English language classroom assessment and feedback practised within Junior Secondary schools of Bangladesh. A qualitative approach was used to collect data by using classroom observation checklists, English teachers' and head teachers' interview schedules and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students. Thematic analysis was conducted to pull out the findings of the study which showed that teachers assessed the students learning through questioning and the questions were closed-ended by nature. Most of the students liked written assessments. Students had contradictory opinions about liking speaking skills. In the classroom, teachers provided only verbal feedback to the students and in the observation it was found that teachers gave feedback on few occasions. Teachers recommended that listening and speaking test items be included within the national assessment system.

Key words: Feedback, Bangladesh, Assessment, Observation checklist

Background and rational of the study

English Language is treated as a skill based subject but not as content based one (National Curriculum and Textbook Board, 1995). Language learning is concerned with developing certain skills which are developed and perfected through practice. Communicative language teaching aims at the development of the four skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing (Kamaluddin cited in Foster, 2009). The English curriculum prescribed different aspects of the English Language teaching-learning process. Assessment is one of the important aspects which is being treated as a teaching-learning process as well (Stiggins, 1991). Assessing students is a very important part of teacher's teaching (Nitko, 1996). It is an integrated process for determining the nature and extent of students' learning and achievement (Linn & Gronland, 2005).

There are two types of assessment in general, formative assessment and summative assessment (Ahsan, 2009). Current English curriculum (NCTB, 1995) especially focuses on the summative

assessment through terminal examinations. Less importance has been given to formative assessment. Recently from 2007 a new dimension in assessment, namely School Base Assessment (SBA), has been introduced in national assessment procedures (Begum & Farooqui, 2008). This study aimed to focus on the classroom assessment and feedback practiced in junior secondary English classes. Among the different types of assessment classroom assessment is an important one. Classroom assessment is an effective aspect of teaching and learning and it is an integral part of the teaching and learning process (Black & William, 1998). Classroom assessment can be compared with "assessment for learning" which is likely to improve students' achievement (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Students' achievement can be measured from different perspectives of educational approach. According to the taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom, 1956), teachers can assess students skills from various levels of competencies. Sometimes those skills are from the lower level of competencies and sometimes those skills are from the higher levels of competencies. In

many countries, where teaching had become more communicative, testing remained the same within the traditional pattern, consisting of discrete items, lower order thinking and a focus on form rather than meaning (Brown, 2004). Even with an effective communication-oriented teaching programme the tests given to assess performance tend to emphasize the learners' knowledge of separate grammatical points because these are the kinds of tests and test items that exist (Eckes et al., 2005).

In Bangladesh, the system of assessment had always been guided by the curriculum though the system only covered the learners' ability of memorization and comprehension skills. Other categories of skills in knowledge such as application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation were hardly included in the assessment. Besides, some of the essential qualities such as oral presentation, leadership, tolerance, co-operative attitude, school behavior, co-curricular activities, and social values were not included in the assessment system. As a result, learners' had to rely heavily on their memorization skill which led them to become crippled, lacking required excellence to contribute fruitfully to the society (Begum & Farooqui, 2008). So it is clear that different studies identified the use of lower level competency-based assessments in the teaching-learning process. On the other hand research had shown that when students were assessed using higher levels of competencies their learning progressed better (McNeil, 2010) and earlier Sternberg (1985) provided the "Triarchic theory" of human intelligence which also gave importance to the higher order learning through focusing students' analytical, creative and practical skills.

Assessments are important in teaching and learning because they allow teachers to provide more effective instructions and to establish a basis for evaluating achievement (Hollowell, 2011). Like assessment on the other hand, feedback had also been considered as one of the very important pedagogical practices from educational perspectives. Studies conducted in different time periods provided the testimony of the importance of feedback in the teaching-learning process. Ovanda (1992) found that feedback had been emerged in the literature as a means to facilitate both the learning process and teaching performance. The context

of constructive, systematic feedback included evaluation as an important element in the process of decision making for teaching. Assessment and feedback help teachers to check the current status of their students' language ability through which they can know what the students know and what the students do not know. It also gives chances to students to participate in modifying or re-planning the upcoming classes (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Later on Hattie & Timperley (2007) argued that feedback was one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement. In a more recent study Akter, (2010) had proved that giving feedback to learners on their performance was an important aspect of effective teaching. Feedback can either be positive or negative and may serve not only to show learners how well they have performed but also to motivate them and build a supportive classroom climate. The above discussion proves the importance of classroom assessment and feedback in the teaching-learning practice. Formative assessment and feedback facilitate students to achieve better not only in their summative assessment but also to help them to improve attendance and retention of learning. Most importantly they help learners to improve the quality of work (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005). So, the importance of assessment and feedback in the teaching-learning process is inevitable.

This study particularly focused on these two aspects, classroom assessment and feedback, of the teaching-learning process very intensively. The study findings will be helpful to understand the nature and practice of current classroom assessment and feedback in English classes of junior secondary level. The study findings will identify the strengths and weaknesses of the application of assessment and feedback in English classes. By using the results of the study people related to educational practice such as teachers, educators, curriculum specialists, trainers, education policy makers, education specialists and researchers could be benefited. Teachers will be able to reshape their teaching practice if necessary. Trainers will be able to plan training sessions according to the necessity of teachers. Curriculum developers may find scope to introduce formative assessment in the

Table 1: Sampling of the Study

Research Tools	Respondents	Total Number	Sampling Procedure
Interview schedule for Head Teacher	Head Teachers	10	Purposive
Interview schedule for English Teacher	English Teachers	10	Purposive
Focused Group Discussion with Students	Students of Junior Secondary Level	10 FGDs 60 students total (6 per group)	Purposive
Classroom Observation Schedule	English class Observation	20 (2 classes of each English teacher)	Purposive

curriculum focusing on the aspect of “assessment for learning”. Findings of the study will be helpful to implement SBA properly. From the perspective of Bangladesh studies related to assessment (Khan, 2010; Akbar, 2008 & Das et al., 2011) mainly focused on summative assessment processes. Very few studies focused on classroom assessment and feedback (Ahsan, 2009; Rahman, 2009). The importance of classroom assessment is widely recognized in pedagogical practice. This study could be considered as a platform for interested researchers in the field of classroom assessment.

Objectives of the study

The main purpose of the study was to explore the nature of assessment and feedback practised in the English Language classroom teaching-learning process at junior secondary level. For fulfilling the purpose of the study special focus was given to English classroom practices and the skills teachers assessed in English classes. Teachers' understanding about the assessment procedures prescribed in the national curriculum and their opinions and suggestions regarding the assessment process were specially analyzed.

Methodology of the study

Gay and Airasian (1996) noted that, "the nature of the question or problem to be investigated determines either the study is qualitative or quantitative". The study was qualitative in its nature and was conducted based on primary data. Data were collected from Monohordi upazilla of Narsingdi district and Paba upazilla of Rajshahi district. Five secondary schools from each upazilla were selected purposively to conduct the study. Data were collected by using interviews for English teachers, interviews for Head teachers, FGD for students and semi-structured observation

for observing English classes. The total number of respondents of the study was 80. Ten Head Teachers and ten English teachers were interviewed. Ten FGDs were conducted in ten schools. In each FGD the total participants were 6. So the total numbers of students were 60. Respondents of FGDs were selected purposively to ensure the participation of students of every merit level. Three FGDs were conducted with the students of class six, and three were conducted with the students of class seven and four FGDs were conducted with the students of class eight. Two English classes of each English teacher were observed. Hence the total number of observed classes was 20. The table 1 summarizes the research tools, respondents, the total number of samples and sampling procedures.

A thematic approach of analysis was used for data analysis. To analyze the data the researchers followed the steps of organizing data, developing themes and then interpretation of data which was suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1999).

Major findings and discussion

Classroom assessment and feedback are both a teaching-learning approach and a set of techniques (Cohen, 1994). The major findings of the study are presented below.

Teachers' and head teachers' understanding about the assessment systems of the English curriculum

All teachers reported that there was no English curriculum in their school and very few teachers had an idea about the curriculum and those ideas were not clear. They thought that the curriculum was similar to the teacher's guide or syllabus. Most of the teachers mentioned that they did not have any ideas about the aims and goals of the

English curriculum. Some of the English teachers knew about the English curriculum from different trainings. They opined that the curriculum should be student-centered and should relate to the life of the students focusing on four language skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Like the English teachers, Head Teachers also did not have clear ideas about the curriculum, but they thought that there were instructions in the curriculum about practicing dialogue and doing pair work in the classroom. Most of the Head Teachers reported that they did not go through the curriculum. One Head Teacher reported:

“We teach according to the curriculum but at this moment if I want to say about the curriculum I have to look at the curriculum”.

From the above comment of the Head teacher it is very clear that he does not study the curriculum. Though he argued that he studied curriculum but he could not say anything about it. So, it can be assumed that curriculum is not studied at all.

The nature of English classroom practice

From class observations some general ideas about the nature of English classroom practice were found. From the observations activities such as warm up, greetings, delivering lesson, using materials, group work, pair work, student assessment, teacher's feedback, assigning home work etc were found in classroom practice. Now the present picture of English class activities is described below in detail.

Teaching methods and materials Used in the English classroom

It was found from the class observation and teachers' interviews that teachers used the Lecture Method most of the time in the teaching-learning process. Along with the lecture method teachers used some other methods like participatory method, demonstration method, question-answer method, etc. Teachers involved students in pair work, group work, brainstorming and in writing tasks. Students also reported that teachers involved them in those activities. One teacher explained the reasons for using those methods. In the case of the question-answer method a teacher reported:

“I use question-answer in teaching. Question-answer means after delivering the lesson I asked the student some short questions. If they listen to me attentively they can answer and if they cannot answer then I can understand that they didn't take anything from my teaching”.

From the above quotation it was clear that the teacher used individually favorite teaching methods and thought about the assessment techniques simultaneously. So a mutual relationship between teaching methods and assessment techniques was found.

In the case of materials teachers used mainly pictures and posters but the quality of the materials was not satisfactory. They also used the chalk board as a teaching aid. From one English class observation it was found that:

“The teacher used a poster where he attached four pictures of Pohela Boishakh festival but the pictures were not properly visible to the learners at the back of the class. The teacher asked different questions to the students from the picture”

From class observations it was found that teachers used some teaching materials and those were not only for providing a clear concept about the content, but also teachers assessed students by asking different questions using the materials relating to students' learning. The above mentioned quote gives the testimony. In interviews Teachers reported that they asked questions to the students by showing pictures and also involved them in eliciting answers from the pictures. Students also reported that teachers asked them questions showing the posters and also involved them in discussing the pictures. The whole picture regarding methods and materials used in the classroom is given in the table 2.

So it is very clear from the above findings that classroom assessment had a mutual relationship with the teaching methods and materials teachers used in the teaching-learning process.

Assessment in English language teaching and learning

In school courses two types of assessments are mainly practised. One is formative assessment and another is summative assessment. Formative

Table 2: Methods, Activities and Materials used in English Class

Methods and Techniques	Classroom Dynamics and Activities	Materials
Lecture Method	Group work	Picture, Poster
Participatory Method	Pair work	Chalkboard
Demonstration Method	Brain storming	Chart
Question-answer Techniques	Asking question	Model
Give and Take Techniques	Writing tasks	Mobile

assessment practised in the English classroom context was the main concern of this study.

Formative assessment practised in English classes

Formative assessment is more valuable for day-to-day teaching when it is used to adapt the teaching to meet students' needs. Formative assessment helps teachers to monitor their students' progress and to modify their teaching strategies accordingly. It also helps students to monitor their own progress as they get feedback from their peers and the teacher. Students also find opportunities to revise and refine their thinking by means of formative assessment. Formative assessment is also called as educative assessment and classroom assessment (Wikipedia, 2011). In this study data showed that teachers used different types of questions to assess students' understanding as a practice of classroom assessment or formative assessment. One thing that was remarkable was the question-answer session was only one dimensional. That is all the time only teachers asked questions to the students but the students never asked any questions to the teachers. Most of the time the front benches were found answering those questions. Students of middle and back benches hardly wished to reply to teachers' questions. Ahsan (2009) found the same result in her study that students of front benches mainly responded to teachers' questions. Almost every question was asked from the lower level of cognitive domain. More specifically from the knowledge sub-domain which assessed students' recalling ability. The questioning style mainly included open-ended questions (Tsui, 1995), close-ended questions (Tsui, 1995), yes/no questions (Thompson, 1997), questions to individuals and questions to the whole group. Close-ended questions were mostly recorded items asked by the teachers for which students could answer using one or two words. When students were asked whether they could answer teachers' questions

easily or they faced difficulties regarding this the majority of the respondents reported that they could answer most of the questions easily but some of the questions were difficult for them. Some examples of such questions observed were:

Close-ended Question

Q: Which Bangla year is this?

S: 1417

Q: Which is the first month of Bangla year?

S: Boishakh

Open-ended Question

Teachers seldom asked open-ended questions and it was rare in classroom practice. One example of an open-ended question was:

Q: Iqram, if you want to arrange a fair in your school what will be your function?

S: yes a fair... (Could not complete sentence)

The student could not answer to the teacher appropriately. He mentioned about a fair but could not describe his function properly. In that case the teacher asked other students and the the teacher did not give any feedback to the students.

Yes/No Question

Q: Do you celebrate Pohela Boishakh?

S: Yes

Q: Do you watch TV Programmes in Pohela Boishakh?

S: Yes

Teachers asked some questions addressed to the individual and sometimes to the whole class. Most of the time teachers asked questions to specific individuals. Examples of such questions are given below.

Questions to Individual

T: Who is talking to Samira?

S: Karim is talking to Samira.

Question to Whole Class

After showing the picture from the textbook the teacher asked the following question to the whole class:

Teacher: What can you see in the picture?

Student: a boy standing in the flower garden and a girl sitting in the mango tree.

From the above examples and the observed data it was clear that the nature of the questions was mainly close-ended whether teachers asked the questions to the individual or to the whole class. Another fact was also observed that teachers asked open-ended question but the student replied in close-ended style. As for example,

Teacher: How do you celebrate Pohela Boishakh?

Student: yes, cultural programme.

In this case students tried to answer each questions in one or two words. From classroom observations it was seen that teachers did not provide any feedback after such types of responses.

Hasan (2006) explained that questions were one kind of input by a teacher which form an integral part of classroom interaction (Edwards & Westgate, 1994; Ho, 2005). The result of the study had shown that questioning was the most used technique for classroom assessment purpose. In question-answer session teachers asked mainly the closed or display questions, and open or referential questions were found very rarely. Different studies from different time periods found the same results (Tsui, 1985; Harrop & Swinson, 2003; Burns & Myhill, 2004; Myhill; Jones and Hopper, 2006; Ahsan, 2009 & Yang, 2010). Students replied to teachers' questions in one or two words when they were asked closed or yes/no questions. Yang (2010) also found the same result. One interesting thing was that Yang (2010) found students trying to answer briefly even when they were asked any open-ended questions but they used to use more words only when teachers encouraged them to talk. From this study it was observed that when students did not feel comfortable to speak using

more words as an answer of any open-ended questions the teacher shifted to another student but did not encourage or help the earlier student to speak. Black et al., (2004) argued that for good questioning teachers needed to plan what to say and what questions to ask, as teachers were found asking similar types of questions. It proved that they did not plan well for asking different types of questions. So, teacher should think and plan about questioning.

Skills assessed in the English classroom

The English language syllabus aims to focus on all four skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing as learner-centered activities within communicative contexts (NCTB, 1995). From class observations it was found that teachers tried to assess all the four skills in classroom. In the case of listening skill assessment teachers used audio in one class only. Generally teachers read the text out loud and students were instructed to listen to the teacher carefully. Sometimes the teacher translated the English text into Bangla. After completing the reading the teacher asked some questions to the students from that reading text. In the case of reading skill assessment teachers instructed the students to read some text individually from the English book and then teachers involved them in question-answer sessions or sometimes asked them to fill in the blanks from the text. In the case of speaking skill assessment teachers involved all the students in choral dialogue practice. Sometimes teachers called a pair of students to the front of the class and involved them in speaking with each other in English. One common thing for pair speaking practice was that students read out the dialogue only from the textbook. Teachers involved students writing the answers of the questions from the textbook, true or false statements and fill in the blanks as writing practice. Teachers never involved students in any creative writing.

From students' FGD different information came out about the assessment of language skills. Students reported that teachers assessed their speaking, reading and writing skills. From the discussion with them it was found that they did not have any ideas about listening skill assessment. When they were asked about listening skill they reported that

teachers read out the text and instructed them to listen carefully and after that teacher asked those questions. In that way teachers assessed their listening skills. Students had different views about the language skills. Most of the students liked writing activities. Some of them mentioned that:

“We like writing because it helps us to improve our hand writing and we have to write in examinations.”

Students had contradictory views about speaking tasks. Some of the students liked speaking and some of them did not like it. Those who liked speaking said:

“We like speaking because if teachers involve us in writing other students copy from our writing and the teacher cannot understand who copied and who didn't, but if teachers involve us in speaking they can evaluate our individual skill as there is no chance for copying. Speaking helps us to remove our shyness”.

Students who did not like speaking reported that:

“We do not like speaking because we feel shy to speak in front of the class”.

The above quotes clearly showed that students had different aspects of thinking about the speaking and written assessment. It is also clear that like as teacher students also critically analyze the classroom assessment procedure as for example they talked about the transparency of written assessment and they recommended for speaking assessment considering the limitations of written assessment.

Feedback on students' responses in the English classes

From class observations it was found that teachers gave feedback to the students after various types of assessment but providing feedback was not regular practice. Feedback was given both to the whole class and to the individual student. Mainly teachers provided verbal feedback to the students. Teachers used words like *“Thank you, very good, okay, your idea is right, my students can answer”* etc for giving feedback. Sometimes the teachers gave written feedback on writing tasks. Written feedback was like, *“Good, very good, well etc”*. Sometimes teacher provided negative

feedback like *“wrong answer”*. Generally it was seen that teachers asked questions to the students and provided feedback on that responses. Some examples of such practice are given below:

Feedback to Individual Student

T: What is Chayanot?

S: an organization

T: What about the organization?

S: Cultural

T: Right, thank you (Feedback)

Feedback to Whole Class

T: what can you see in picture two?

Ss: Nagordola (Moving Wheel Chair)

T: Thank you, your idea is right.(Feedback)

In the case of reading teachers involved students to read out loud from the textbook and when the students made any mistakes in reading teachers corrected the mistakes instantly. Sometimes other students also helped the reader if s/he made any mistakes in reading. So students themselves also provided feedback. From class observations it was recorded that,

“Learners spontaneously corrected the mistakes of the classmates while they were reading out loud.”

English teachers' opined that feedback should be given to the students regularly because feedback would inspire students. They also mentioned that they provided feedback to the students but regular feedback was not seen from the classroom observation. Students also reported that teachers provided feedback sometimes. They mentioned that feedback helped them to correct their mistakes. One of the teachers reported very positively about feedback. According to the teacher:

“Of course feedback is important for students. I think if feedback is given, both students and the teacher become benefited. If feedback is given the children become very happy and learn the lesson very nicely in the next class. If a student can partially answer any questions I thanked him also. As a result I find the student learning the whole lesson in the next class . Students get inspiration

and good relationship created between the teacher and student.”

Like the students and English teachers the Head Teachers also believed that feedback was important for effective teaching and learning and they believed that feedback helped students to identify the weaknesses and it was important for good study. One Head Teacher reported;

“Feedback helps to understand the speed of work and also helps to know the criticism of any work. Feedback creates scope for one to think how to improve the weaknesses”.

The class observations data showed that teachers provided less feedback in the teaching-learning process although they thought that feedback was important for the improvement of the student.

Teachers' opinions and suggestions about present assessment process

Most of the English teachers and Head Teachers thought that the existing assessment system was appropriate for evaluating students' learning outcomes of English language and some of the teachers thought the assessment system was not totally appropriate. According to most of the teachers the assessment system should include listening and speaking skills tests. Khan (2010) found the same responses from English teachers. Teachers also mentioned that the existing examination system (three terminal examinations) was good enough. Teachers delivered three terminal examinations along with class tests when it was necessary. Teachers and Head Teachers had very positive views about the School Based Assessment (SBA) system. Some negative sides of SBA were also mentioned by the teachers. Some of the teachers believed that SBA increased extra work load for the students. One quotation from a teacher is given here regarding SBA:

“At present SBA is going on where students are assessed with respect to six activities. These activities are useful to the students but they also become bore with huge workload”

Teachers mentioned that the assessment system did not recognize the group work and pair work activities in the classroom. They thought that more weight should be given to these activities.

Teachers also suggested including oral tests in the assessment process. They believed that the new innovative step of introducing creative questioning for assessment purposes was a good step. One English teacher reported:

“Creative questioning is good for assessment. In the past students mainly depended on guide books, but now they give importance to the total textbook”

Teachers assessed the current assessment process from different points of view. Most of the time they appreciated the innovative steps like School Based Assessment (SBA), Creative Questioning, etc. while at the same time they recommended for further development of the assessment practice by including listening and speaking tests. They also recommended holistic assessment including group work, pair work, etc.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the assessment and feedback practised in the junior secondary English classrooms. Findings of the study showed that assessment and feedback were the inseparable part of classroom practice but assessment and feedback practised in the classroom were not up to the mark. One of the reasons for this was that both English teachers and the head teachers did not have adequate knowledge about the English curriculum. For assessment purpose teachers mainly asked questions for assessing students' understanding and most of the questions were taken from close-ended items which were asked from the lowest level of cognitive domain. Students answered those questions using one or two words and those questions did not give students any scope to think critically. Students showed different views about different assessment practice. They preferred oral assessment more because of its validity. They argued, in oral assessment nobody can copy, whereas in written assessment there is scope to copy from others. It revealed that assessment is a mutual practice of classroom where both students and teacher participated as well as they assess the assessment process. In addition, feedback practised in the classroom was not at the satisfactory level. As from different studies assessment and feedback practices has been identified as very effective and inseparable

part of classroom procedure so teacher should be more careful about assessment and feedback practice. At the same time the curriculum should be studied intensively for better understanding of the assessment system.

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