RESEARCH ARTICLE

Student Assessment in Formal Education: Nepali Community School Teachers' Perspectives

Mohan Singh Saud[1] 🆔**, Samjhana Aryal[2]** 🆔**, Jib Lal Sapkota, PhD[3]** 🆔
[1]Kailali Multipe Campus, Far Western University, Dhangadhi, Nepal
[2]Saraswati Secondary School, Tikapur, Nepal
[3]Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

The present secondary level English curriculum of Grade 9 and 10 in Nepal has made the provision of 25 marks internal assessment system as part of summative evaluation. In this context, this study examines the existing internal assessment practices adopted by the English language teachers in the Secondary Education Examination of the community schools in Nepal. Employing the qualitative phenomenological research design, five secondary level English language teachers were selected purposively as research participants. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were used as tools for collecting data. The data were analyzed inductively as content analysis using the internal assessment criteria of participation, listening, speaking, and score from terminal examinations as determined by the curriculum as part of summative evaluation. The result was interpreted through the perspective of Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development and the theory of scaffolding in relation to the assessment for learning, assessment as learning, and assessment of learning. The prominence of assessment of learning as the dominant practice has resulted in the marginalization of the other two purposes of assessment. The findings of the study highlight the need for a more balanced approach that encompasses assessment for learning and assessment as learning, ensuring a comprehensive and holistic evaluation of students' progress and development.

KEYWORDS: Secondary level English curriculum, internal assessment, external assessment, summative evaluation, formative evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Assessment in education is the practice of evaluating the achievement and performance of students in relation to the formal education system. Educators often use a wide variety of methods to evaluate and measure the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and learning progress of students. Formative and summative assessment systems are often

used as part of student evaluation in order to measure their content achievement and performance (Dixson & Worrell, 2016; Dolin et al., 2018; Yüksel & Gündüz, 2017). The result of such assessment is used to judge the success and quality of education (Brookhart, 2001; Kellaghan & Greaney, 2001; Yilmaz, 2017) in relation to achieving the learning objectives of a course determined by the curriculum. The success or failure of curriculum can be determined based on the result of the assessment, and hence it shows the importance and relevance of assessment in education.

Formal education system in Nepal came into existence with the establishment of Durbar School by Jung Bahadur Rana in 1854. Since then, there have been many reforms about the education system of Nepal including the changes in curriculum. The education system of Nepal seems to be changed in accordance with the political changes from the Rana regime to the Panchayat system to multiparty democracy to the present Republic system. As such, the existing school level curriculum has been revised and developed in line with the spirit of the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2019). Piloting in 2019, it was implemented in Grade 1 in 2020. The new curriculum of Grade 11 was implemented directly in 2020. But the Secondary Education Curriculum 2021 was piloted in Grade 9 in 2021 and implemented in 2022. However, it has been implemented directly in Grade 10 since 2023.

There has been a provision of formative assessment and summative assessment systems in the present secondary level English curriculum of Grade 9 and 10. Formative assessment is conducted regularly to provide timely feedback to students for improvement. However, summative assessment certifies the competence and ranking of students. The overall understanding of the standards of the curriculum is assessed and graded through summative assessment. Summative assessment is conducted through both internal and external assessment systems. Internal assessment carries 25 percent weightage whereas 75 percent weightage is allocated for external assessment of Grade 9 and 10 compulsory English (Secondary Education English Curriculum, 2021).

The past studies show that there are three overarching purposes of assessment: assessment for learning, assessment as learning, and assessment of learning (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Earl & Giles, 2011). Assessment for learning is a formative assessment taken for the purpose of improving teaching and learning activities as the continuous assessment system. Assessment as learning values students as participants in their own learning. Assessments of learning, also known as summative assessments, are generally "high stakes" assessments and used to get the final assessment of how much learning has taken place, that is, how much a student knows (Gardner, 2010). All these three purposes of assessment systems are prevalent in the present secondary curriculum of English in Nepal.

The Secondary Education English Curriculum (2021) has made a provision of internal assessment as part of the summative evaluation. Before the end-of-year examination, it has to be taken by the concerned teachers and the marks have to be added to the final examination. Internal assessment evaluates the performance of students based on their internal performance throughout the year, thereby engaging themselves in their study. As per the revised assessment criteria for Secondary Education Examination (SEE), this study has only focused on the internal assessment system. It offers valuable insights that can benefit educators, students, teachers and policymakers in their consideration of internal assessment.

The study has adopted Vygotsky's (1978) the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as a theoretical framework including Wood et al.'s (1976) scaffolding theory to support this study. The ZPD has been defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of

potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Mcleod (2024) defines the ZPD as the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner. Vygotsky's ZPD theory is synonymous with Wood et al.'s theory of scaffolding. The theory of scaffolding is defined as a process that "enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts" (Wood et al., 1976, p. 90). Scaffolding or supportive activities are to be provided by the teacher to lead students through the ZPD. In this case, assessment for learning can be a reform agenda in the evaluation system (Berry, 2011).

In the past, various studies have been conducted in the field of formative assessment (Arrafii, 2020; Dahal, 2019; Graney, 2018; Joseph, 2022; Maryoto, 2014) and summative assessment (Ishaq et al., 2020; Nurwahidah et al., 2022; Pratiwi et al., 2019; Ridhwan, 2017). However, a little study has been carried out on internal assessment in the world (Barrance, 2019; Krajnc, 2006) and, not a single study has been conducted in the context of Nepal in English at school level. Therefore, this study justifies to be a pivotal work in research in relation to internal assessment of English at school level education in the context of Nepal.

Realizing that gap, this study examines the internal assessment practices adopted by the secondary level English teachers at Grade 9 and 10 in community schools of Nepal. Although the same criteria of internal assessment are used throughout the country, this study has just chosen one municipality located in Sudurpashchim Province Nepal as the research site. Therefore, the findings of the study may not be generalizable in other contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

Using qualitative research method, this study adopted phenomenological design in which internal assessment is a phenomenon and teachers expressed their lived experiences from their practices of the internal assessment system. Five secondary level English teachers were selected from five community schools of Tikapur Municipality of Kailali District. Teachers were selected purposively teaching in Grade 10 having at least five years of experience in teaching English at the secondary level. Semi-structured interviews and participant observation were the main tools of data collection. In-depth-interviews were conducted regarding the internal assessment practices in their classrooms. The interviews were focused on the practices of the internal assessment criteria of participation, listening, speaking, and scores from terminal examinations determined by the curriculum as part of summative evaluation for compulsory English. Along with the interview, a participant observation was conducted in their workplaces.

To address ethical considerations, we provided clear explanations to our research participants that their responses would be used strictly for information purposes only. The personal right and freedom of respondents were also maintained in the course of data collection. The anonymity of respondents is preserved during the data analysis through pseudo names as Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D, and Teacher E. The information provided by the respondents was informed for the member check and cross-checked using an interview with selected sampled respondents. The results were drawn concerning the assessment criteria and the findings of the study were declared based on the assessment purposes that teachers have been using in their classrooms such as assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning.

All the five teachers were the Master's degree holders teaching in different community schools; out of whom two were permanent teachers and three temporary relief teachers. The following table shows the details of the participants.

Table 1
Profile of the Respondent Teachers

Teacher	Gender	Qualification	Teaching Experience	Appointment Type
Teacher A	Female	M.Ed.	12 years	Permanent
Teacher B	Male	M.Ed.	9 years	Permanent
Teacher C	Male	M.Ed.	14 years	Rahat (Relief)
Teacher D	Male	M.Ed.	9 years	Rahat (Relief)
Teacher E	Male	M.Ed.	7 years	Rahat (Relief)

In the existing curriculum of Grade 9 and 10 English, the concerned teachers take international assessment as part of the summative evaluation. The weightage of internal assessment is classified into four aspects as the table below shows.

Table 2
Criteria for Internal Assessment

S.N.	Assessment Areas	Marks
1	Participation (attendance and participation in classroom activities)	3
2	Listening test	8
3	Speaking test	8
4	Score from terminal examination	6
	Total marks	25

Note: Secondary Education English Curriculum, 2021

The data of this study were analyzed through content analysis based on four aspects of the internal assessment system prescribed in the curriculum as part of summative assessment. The data were analyzed critically using the general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) through the theoretical perspective of the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978), including the theory of scaffolding in relation to assessment for learning, assessment as learning, and assessment of learning.

RESULTS

The present curriculum of secondary level English for Grade 9 and 10 has given four criteria (see Table 2) for internal assessment as part of the summative evaluation. The secondary level English language teachers' internal assessment practices are analyzed critically as content analysis based on the assessment criteria prescribed in the curriculum, using the information collected during the fieldwork of this study.

Participation

Assessing the class participation covers students' attendance, participation in classroom activities, and their performance on classwork, homework, and project work assigned to them. The teacher needs to maintain the record of students and the same record is to be consulted to award the marks for internal assessment. Three marks are allocated for this criterion. The aim of assessing the class participation is to encourage students to participate in the discussion, motivate students to engage with the background reading, and prompt students to prepare for a learning session.

From the information collected through observation and interviews with all respondents, it was found that they were well-known about the division of the criteria along with allocated marks. However, the implementation depends on the teachers' decision. For instance, Teacher A expressed her opinion: "I evaluate the participation simply through students' performance in teaching-learning activities inside and outside the classroom. I have already told them that your participation also carries marks."

The large class size can be a problem for a teacher to evaluate continuously and keep their records accordingly. In this context, as Teacher E reacted, "Due to the large size of the class (80 students), I give students marks for participation simply looking at their terminal examination result." His practice of internal assessment seems to be against the spirit of assessment as there is a separate provision of marks for terminal examinations.

The project work can be one of the ways for internal assessment. By involving students in different project works, teachers can record the students' individual performance through their presentation of the work. In this regard, Teacher C said, "I give students some project work to complete within a time framework and then I ask them to present in the class. The students try to do their best because I tell them it will be marked for internal assessment." Similarly, the view of Teacher D was in line with Teacher C. These teachers agreed that if teachers tell students that the assignment contains marks for practical, they will try to complete it in time. However, when they are given the identical assignments, students tend to resort to duplicating their friends' work. With the methods of assessment, the approach with students should be discussed for them to see the relevance and value and to understand how they will be measured. They said that they can prepare certain rubrics to evaluate the students' performance in class. The respondents Teacher C and Teacher D replied that they have not prepared any rubrics to assess the performance. They evaluate the students' presentation skill and their participation in class activities on their own randomly.

The practice of assessing students' participation is not the same for everyone. It is not planned properly for the specific objective achievement. Everyone agreed that the time limitation does not encourage them to conduct in well-documented format and form. Moreover, the weightage of the marks also does not give much priority to performance and attendance. Everyone agreed that instead of flipping through the pages of the attendance register to record the students' presence, a single column labeled 'participation' was created to encompass both attendance and classroom engagement. From their expressions, it is clear that the internal assessment of the aspect 'participation' as prescribed to be evaluated is not following the spirit of assessment for learning, assessment of learning, and assessment as learning. It is more of formality rather than what actually should have been done.

Listening

Testing listening skills is one of the criteria included in internal assessment of compulsory English in the present secondary level English curriculum of Nepal. Listening skill is a primary receptive skill to learn a language. It is the most significant part of communication as it is pivotal in providing a substantial and meaningful response. It is said that without listening skills, language learning is impossible. However, only eight marks are allocated for assessing listening skills for the Secondary Education Examination (SEE). In this assessment, the teacher has to select two listening tasks on two different sound files and each task should consist of four questions. The type of questions includes multiple choice questions, matching, fill in the blanks, and short answer questions. The sound files should be authentic and clearly articulated at the

normal speed of delivery and each sound file should be of three minutes' maximum time in length.

From the information collected through participant observations and interviews with all respondents, it was found that all respondents make students practise the listening exercises of the textbook, but the implementation of teaching and testing varies. In this regard, Teacher A revealed, "I often make the students practise the listening exercises of the textbook after completing two units because two listening exercises can be conducted in one class." As she expressed, everyone accepted that students enjoy doing listening exercises. The listening audio is of native speakers and they enjoy the accent. Students even list some words and try modelling it. Knowing the context of the listening text and the purpose for listening greatly reduces the burden of comprehension. Regarding this, Teacher D explained,

> In the first listening, they seem confused, but the second and third listening makes them a bit comfortable. Before letting the students listen, I discuss the content, characters and setting. In this way, the students find it easy to get the information to complete the exercises.

Thus, according to Teacher D, students are more comfortable after the first listening time. Furthermore, clarification about the listening task by the teacher help students get the required information in solving the tasks assigned to them.

However, the provision of listening test may not be taken in its true sense. Teacher B's opinion demonstrates this issue as he complained, "We do not give much emphasis on teaching listening skill. It might be because it is given less priority in Secondary Education Examination." Similarly, Teacher E commented that the marks allocated for testing listening skills is not sufficient because it is the primary skill that helps learners to acquire pronunciation, word stress, vocabulary, and syntax.

In regard to testing and marking listening skills, the practice of teachers was not the same. Teachers seem to follow their own way of testing and documentation. For example, Teacher B explained, "I do not prepare a new set of papers for listening test. I prepare the tests items from the exercise of the textbook. I give a listening test on the practical day of terminal exam." The respondents like Teacher A and Teacher C shared that they take listening test after completing four or five units. They select anyone listening to audio from the text and slightly modify the test item from the book. Out of five respondents, three said that although they give listening tests several times, they document only the marks obtained from the final test. Everyone agreed that they do not make anyone fail despite the fact that they secure less marks. They provide pass marks to each student. All the remarks of the teachers demonstrate that they do not follow the spirit of testing listening as it was intended.

Speaking

Speaking skills allow everyone to communicate effectively. The Secondary Education English Curriculum (2021) expects students to achieve competency to communicate with reasonable accuracy and confidence on a familiar topic. According to the test specification chart, the speaking test will be administered practically. The test starts with a greeting and introduction to make students feel comfortable. This will not carry any marks. The speaking test consists of three sections. First, introduction and interview contain two marks. Second, describing pictures carries three marks for which students are expected to describe the picture in at least six sentences. Third, speaking on a given topic is of three marks. Here, students will be given one minute to think over the topic and then they will speak on the topic. In this way, 10 to 15 minutes per student should be provided to test speaking skills.

Most teachers expressed that they assess speaking tests only once at the end of school days. However, during teaching and learning activities, they ask students to describe the picture or to speak about the topic. In this context, Teacher B said, "At the end of school days, before the final examination, I tell students that I am going to give a speaking test for internal assessment." Thus, most teachers disagreed that they follow the marking scheme as directed by the curriculum. As Teacher E viewed, "I have to manage three days for testing speaking skill as the number of students is more. Therefore, I do the testing before the theoretical examination. I could only invest 8 to 10 minutes per student." This opinion reflects that testing speaking is not taken seriously; rather it is just taken as a formality since it is provisioned in the curriculum as part of summative assessment.

Each participant accepted that speaking can be assessed in the classroom, too. The textbook includes various activities in the speaking section. During teaching and learning, students take part in speaking activities. For instance, Teacher C stated, "The students who are shy and weak in English feel uncomfortable speaking in front of their friends. Therefore, it is the teachers' role to encourage and make them speak."

The opinions expressed by the participants clarify that speaking skill is tested not to reflect the spirit of the curriculum but to fulfil the formality because it is provisioned to be assessed. The theoretical construct of assessment for learning, assessment as learning, and assessment of learning is often ignored in the internal assessment of testing speaking skills as part of summative evaluation for SEE.

Score from Terminal Examinations

The obtained score from terminal examinations is one of the criteria for internal assessment. Most of the schools take two terminal examinations before the final examination. Thus, the marks that students secure in the terminal examination are placed on a score from the terminal examination criteria.

All the teacher participants responded that they have maintained a file to record the marks of the first and second terminal examinations. We were curious to know if the teachers record the same marks secured by students. In this regard, Teacher C responded, "I share the checked paper with students each time. I give them the paper and ask them to complete all the questions again in their notebook. Even if the student fails, I record the minimum pass marks on my mark ledger sheet." Thus, Teacher C's statement suggests that he gives the checked papers to the students in the class asking them to complete the questions not solved. It further reveals that nobody fails even if they fail. Other participants also accepted that while recording the students' results, they do not make anyone fail in terminal examinations.

There is a body of examination committee in Tikapur Municipality, where all the community schools of the municipality are the members of it. Therefore, every government school follows the same paper. According to the teachers, the paper for the first and second term examinations carries 75 marks. The teacher has to convert 75 marks to three marks for each terminal examination.

Although the present curriculum has made a provision of adding certain marks from terminal examinations, there has been the problem that students do not take these examinations seriously. To reflect this fact, it seems here relevant to quote Teacher E who complained, "The student does not seem serious about the terminal exam as they know that only three marks are allocated for each term. Therefore, the teacher has to make clear that each of them has to secure pass marks for the terminal exam." Therefore, Teacher E reflects the problem and solution of adding the marks of terminal

examinations as part of summative assessment. In fact, it is necessary to make students realize that they get at least pass marks in their first and second terminal examinations.

All the participants shared that they have maintained a ledger for recording all the criteria of internal assessment. For example, Teacher B stated, "A teacher has to show the ledger how their marks are scored to the students. This will make them a bit serious about these assessments too." This showed that students are less concerned about internal assessment.

From these remarks of the teacher participants as informants, it is inferred that schools take terminal examinations using the same paper prepared by the examination board of the municipality. The marks recorded in the ledger sheet are added for the final examination. However, each student passes in the internal assessments.

DISCUSSION

The assessment system is a core part of any formal education, which needs to maintain the standards and fair judgment by the evaluator. Similarly, it should be reliable, valid, and trustworthy, thereby maintaining the ethics of assessment. To establish a strong and systematic assessment system, the formative assessment (assessment for learning and assessment as learning), rubrics as assessment tools, deep learning, and research and innovation are important elements to be considered. In the realm of internal assessment, the provision of feedback to learners acts as a guiding beacon, illuminating the path toward learning. However, within the confines of this study, the presence of feedback and motivation seems to be eerily lacking and shrouded in silence, leaving learners without a clear sense of direction. In fostering self-reflective learners, feedback plays a paramount role, and one effective tool for this is the use of portfolios. However, it appears that teachers only partially utilize portfolios, treating them as mere record-keeping files. Unfortunately, the valuable records within these portfolios seldom find their way back into the classroom to facilitate meaningful changes and improvements in the teaching and learning process. As such, assessment for learning and assessment as learning are rarely materialized through internal assessment. Teachers should "use a variety of assessment strategies and assessment tasks to allow a range of different learning outcomes to be assessed" (Berry, 2011, p. 99).

The main purpose of assessment for learning as conceptualized in William (2011) is to provide feedback so that the learners can have improvement in the areas of weaknesses in learning. As such, it works as scaffolding. The scaffolding used in the classroom contexts refers to the interventions that teachers make within the students' ZPD to facilitate their learning and improve their current knowledge and skills (Gonulal & Loewen, 2018). In the realm of school education, the growth of learning is greatly enhanced by establishing connections between various scaffolding methods, ultimately reducing the scope of the ZPD. To effectively minimize the ZPD area, feedback plays a critical role, complemented by the inclusion of portfolio records. However, these essential components of internal assessment appear to be lacking in the current practices of assessment system as practised by the English teachers teaching in community schools of Nepal.

The teachers are well-known about the assessment criteria prescribed by the secondary level English curriculum. However, they are influenced by the traditional way of marking the students' internal assessments. The observation reflects that 'assessment of learning' has been found dominant as compared to assessment for learning and assessment as learning. Internal assessment was focused on evaluating to give students marks rather than remedial teaching and motivation.

The primary purpose of internal assessment is to foster and enhance the improvement of students' achievement rather than solely evaluating their current level of accomplishment. Engaging learners in student-centered activities and providing them with meaningful feedback significantly enhances the quality of teaching and learning. The learner-centric approach ultimately leads to a more dynamic and impactful educational experience, where both students and teachers collaborate to achieve meaningful growth and achievement. In this context, the internal assessment criteria prescribed for SEE must exhibit the quality of teaching and learning. These assessment criteria should reflect assessment as learning rather than assessment of learning. Therefore, to equip learners with the necessary skills for thriving in the twenty-first century society, it is essential to reconsider the criteria for internal assessment, shifting the focus from assessment of learning to assessment as learning. This way of assessment will encourage learners to actively engage in the learning process, fostering their preparedness for a successful and adaptable future.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the internal assessment practices of English language teachers teaching at secondary level of the community schools in Nepal. In this study, content analysis of assessment aspects prescribed by the curriculum reflects that internal assessment is most often formality rather than the materialization of the spirit of assessment. The large class sizes and lack of professional honesty seem to be the crucial factors for not taking internal assessment in the real sense of evaluating learners making it a part of summative evaluation. Teachers seem to be following the traditional ways of assessing students before the end of formal classes of teaching and learning activities.

This is a small-scale qualitative study conducted in a municipality of Kailali District with five teachers as participants. Therefore, a large scale quantitative study can be conducted surveying a large number of English teachers about the internal assessment practices at secondary level. This study explored the internal assessment practices by the English language teachers in Grade 9 and 10. Exploring the formative assessment practices by English teachers at secondary level can be a further area of research to be carried out in the context of Nepal.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This is a collaborative work of three authors. The first author prepared the manuscript, the second author collected data preparing the results section, and the third author reframed the overall manuscript.

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