



Formative Assessment in EFL Classrooms in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Analysis of Teachers' Judgements at Oicha Senior School

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Abstract

Formative assessment is among the teaching strategies that can benefit both teachers and learners in the teaching and learning process. This study examines the judgment of EFL teachers at Oicha Secondary School regarding why they use assessment activities in their English classrooms. All the EFL teachers (nine in total) participated in the study and qualitative practices were used to collect data (interview, focus group and class observation). The data analysis reveals that EFL teachers of Oicha Secondary School plan assessment activities in order to have grades and know who is first or last, and the bulk of these activities are done at the end of a period or a term. Also, the assessment activities they give to students only check the first level of Bloom Taxonomy and most of the pupils are not able to listen, speak, read and write, and this weakens their ability to reason, to think, and to make sound decisions.

Subject Areas

TESOL

Keywords

Formative Assessment, Assessment Activities, Learning Objectives, Higher Order Thinking Skills, EFL Teachers

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning journeys involve a variety of techniques and strategies. Using these techniques helps both the teachers and the learners to think about how to redesign the instruction on one hand and design the learning strategies

and/or objectives on the other. Among these techniques and strategies include assessment, which can either be formative or summative. According to Gottlied [1], formative assessment is a method that judges the worth of instruction while still ongoing or in progress. The teacher, here, plays the role of a monitor who checks on a daily basis the progress of learners. Formative assessment, thus, informs instruction. Reference [2] said that the judgment that a teacher has on the learner's final product is understood as a summative assessment. Many times the summative assessment takes the form of grading to check whether learners demonstrate learning.

This study has been conducted in Oicha where I have seen a lot of English teachers who teach (English) and who organize some assessment activities in their English classrooms. I am now wondering about the judgment these teachers have towards all the assessment activities they organize in their EFL (English as Foreign Language) classrooms. This wonder has pushed me to ask some questions whose answers will help me learn what is happening in Oicha EFL classrooms, and the answers to those questions will also help me figure out some suggestions: 1) Why do EFL teachers in Oicha organize assessment activities in their EFL classrooms? 2) What judgements do they have on the reasons for assessing their pupils? 3) How do they organize these activities?

My aim in conducting this study is to analyze the judgments EFL teachers of Oicha high school have on the assessment activities they organize in their classrooms and/or outside their classrooms. In addition, I intend to examine the manner these assessment activities are organized within the Oicha Secondary School. I therefore aim at analyzing, describing and examining the reasons and the manner of organizing assessment activities by EFL teachers in Oicha Secondary School.

2. Literature Review

2.1. General Features of Formative Assessment

Formative assessment was borrowed from evaluation research [1] and it has features that can be displayed in an EFL classroom context. Firstly, Gottlied [1] said that the formative assessment monitors the learner progress. The monitoring strategy that the teacher utilizes in the classroom gives him or her the possibility to decide whether to change the instruction materials, techniques, outcomes and so forth. Secondly, formative assessment occurs within the instruction and learning [1]. As the teacher facilitates the acquisition, he or she; at the same time, assesses the learning process. Thirdly, Gottlied [1] argued that formative assessment provides constructive feedback and it is a process rather than a product oriented.

In the language of Brown and Lee [2], formative assessment helps learners check how they are progressing, and by doing this they discover areas that need improvement. For a teacher, formative assessment helps him or her tailor their instruction in order that students meet their learning objectives. Reference [2]

also added that formative assessment is authentic, which means the language in the assessment is natural and items are contextualized (not isolated), topics are interesting and enjoyable. Moreover, tasks represent approximately real-world tasks.

2.2. Benefits of Formative Assessment

There is a great deal of benefits of the formative assessment to all the educational agents. For example, Kandri [3] argued that formative assessment is beneficial for learners, teachers and parents. For learners, formative assessment helps them see their strengths and weaknesses in a particular topic, subject or learning in general [3]. For teachers, Kandri [3] claimed that formative assessment gives them an idea about the learners' understanding. Teachers then become aware of parts that were well understood or difficult in the course of learning. For parents, the formative assessment gives them a view on their children's progress at school.

Reference [4] asserted that formative assessment is a way to gauge what learners know and what they do not know. He carried out an experimental study that consisted of teaching two groups of students for a period of two months and half. In the first group, he used formative assessment and in the second he used summative. At the end of the teaching period, there was a test. His research reveals that students who attended the formative assessment class increased learning, confidence, test score and preparedness.

Reference [5] discovered that formative assessment had a positive impact on students' success. In addition, they believed that formative assessment has effect on academic achievement and it improves learners' academic achievement and Shana, Zuhriel, Baki and Abd to add "formative assessment improves student progress" [6].

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted at Oicha in North Kivu Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Participants are English teachers of Oicha Secondary School that I intentionally selected for this study. My selection of Oicha Secondary School was motivated by the fact that it is the oldest school of the milieu (it was created in the 1960's) and has trained a great deal of English teachers of the area.

The sampling model, in fact, I used in this study is extreme case sampling. Reference [7] argued that an extreme case sampling is a type of purposeful sampling in which a researcher studies an outlier that shows characteristics that are extreme [7].

Participants for this study, thus, are made of all English teachers from Oicha Secondary School. The English team of Oicha Secondary School is composed of four permanent teachers, two visiting, two interns and one headmaster.

3.2. Data Collection

The focus for this study was to analyze the judgment that the English teachers of Oicha have on assessment activities they organize in or outside their EFL rooms. In fact, I used qualitative practices in data collection processes. The most data, then, was collected through focus group, class observation and interview.

Regarding the aim of this study, it was important to gather all English teachers in order to learn from the reasons, judgements, and manners they organize assessment activities in their different classes. Also, I visited their different EFL classes to first learn how they facilitate English language acquisition before checking their assessment and grades copybooks.

The qualitative practices I used in the data collection for this study included the focus group and interview protocol that was made of these key questions (these questions opened the room to some follow up questions) and the period for the data collection was segmented from February 2021 through August 2022): 1) When is a good time to organize quizzes, tests, class works, homework, assignments, etc. for your students? 2) What is (are) your objective (s) when you organize quizzes, tests, class works, homework, assignments? 3) Do you have any reasons why you plan quizzes, tests, class works, homework, and assignments? 4) How do you organize your assessment activities (quizzes, tests, class works, homework, and assignments)?

4. Finding

This section presents the great findings I got during the study I conducted at Oicha Secondary School. I specially analyze, interpret and discuss them in the light of the research objectives I would like to achieve.

The findings I present and analyze here were got through different questions, and class observations I did with EFL teachers at Oicha Secondary School. As I was discussing different questions, my aim was to learn the judgements that these teachers had on assessment activities they were organizing in their different EFL classes. Also, I wanted to learn the manner by which they assess the acquisition of the English language they teach.

Question One: When is a good time to organize quizzes, tests, class works, homework, assignments, etc. for your students?

The purpose for asking this question was to learn from teachers whether they regularly organize assessment activities in their lesson room, which could help them (the teachers) know if there is acquisition/learning from the learners. Different answers the research participants gave are summarized as follow:

- We always organize assessment activities by the end of *the period* (the DRC School calendar has four *periods*. Two *periods* make a semester and the school agents want to know the *period* results of each learner.)
- Intensifying assessment activities at the end of the *period* allows us to have grades.
- Head teachers want to see how learners worked during the *period*.

- We sometimes plan quizzes at the end of a chapter and some other times we give them works to be done at home.
- The homework we give them to be done at home are poorly done. They cheat each other, and this discourages us to regularly do that. We prefer to plan quizzes and other assessments activities at the end of the *period* when things are taken seriously.
- Pupils like assessment activities on which you will give grades. If it is an ungraded activity, they look down on it and rarely take it seriously.
- Regular assessment is tiring. We have crowded classes and correcting the learners' sheets gives us hard time and headache.
- We like organizing assessment activities with our pupils, but when we look at the curriculum; we feel that organizing regular activities will hinder the process of covering the curriculum. Also, when inspectors come to observe our lessons; they give strong instructions that we should respect the National Program and do our best to cover all the curriculum because we don't know where questions of the State Exam will come from. In addition, parents like schools where they full pupils' copy books with summaries/notes. When they (parents) check them (pupils' copy books) at home they feel unhappy to see only a few pages of the notes.

It is revealed from the informants' answers that EFL teachers of Oicha Secondary School are happy to organize assessment activities, but these activities are intensively organized by the end of the *period* when they need grades. The activities, then, are organized in order to adjust the local cultural behavior whereby quizzes, test, assignment, exam, etc. are organized in order to have grades and hardly to check the learning process. Moreover, lack of organizing assessment activities is explained by the fact that teachers have pressure from the head teachers and inspectors who want them (the English teachers) to cover all the curriculum/the planned materials according to the National Program. Teachers, thus, put all their energy on covering the program and forget that they need to regularly plan assessment activities in order to check whether their pupils are learning and improving their English in order to improve the academic achievement.

Questions Two and Three: 2) What is (are) your objective(s) when you organize quizzes, test, class work, homework, assignments? 3) Do you have any reasons why you plan quizzes, test, class work, homework, and assignments?

The questions two and three aim at knowing reasons why EFL teachers of Oicha Secondary School organize assessment activities in their English classrooms. These questions are asked to research participants in addition to the question related to time (when) that I first asked. It was revealed from the first question that EFL teachers of Oicha Secondary School organize assessment activities by the end of the *period*.

Reasons and/or objectives for organizing assessment activities were given by

the research participants, and here down I present the summary of their answers.

- We organize assessments activities because we need grades for the periods or semester.
- We need to know whether our pupils have mastered the materials we taught them.
- In the class room, there is always the first and the last, and a good way to know this is through a quiz, an exam or homework.
- In order to know the results of the pupils, grades are needed and when grades are there the head teacher is able to publish the results in order that parents know how their children worked.

On the follow up questions related to assessment as a tool for checking pupils' learning process, the participants said that assessment activities should aim at checking students learning, and give the teacher an idea about whether to change teaching techniques or materials. They added that because of the pressure they have from the inspectors, head teachers, parents and the size of the class, they are not able to do what is required. They run after time in order to finish planned materials that they made according to the National Program; and also, parents who regularly check their children's copy books are happy to see a lot of notes and summaries in these copy books.

It is revealed that EFL teachers of Oicha assess their children for grades and hardly do they assess for checking their pupils' learning progress and/or improvement. They just need grades in order to know who is first and last. They put much of their energy into curriculum and filling their pupils' copy books with notes that unfortunately do not help these learners improve their English skills.

Question Four: *How do you organize your assessment activities (quizzes, test, class work, homework, and assignments)?*

This fourth question aimed at learning the manner the EFL teachers of Oicha administer questions. Research participants gave some answers, but I was interested in their questionnaire book they gave to me when I went to observe some of their lessons.

When I looked at the teachers' pedagogical documents, I noticed that their questionnaire copy book was almost empty because there were only a few works to be done by the learners. Among these works, I present some questions here as I analyze them:

- Conjugate the verb to be in simple present, simple past, simple future and past perfect.
- Put the tag question.
 - You love God.
 - They don't eat snakes.
- Give the characters of the text "The Football Match"? Who went to see the *dibia* (witchdoctor)?

- What season was in the text Hyena and Hare? What was in Hyena's bag?

When looking at these questions, we noticed that EFL teachers of Oicha only check the first level of Bloom Taxonomy. Their pupils remember by exhibiting memory of past learned materials by recalling some facts and answers. Of course, learners need to recall some concepts and fact but they also need to understand some facts and ideas as they explain, classify, compare, infer, contrast, illustrate and so forth. In addition, they (learners) need to solve some problems as they apply the knowledge they have acquired. Also, the learners should be able to analyze and make inferences in order to find evidence to support generalizations. Moreover, learners need to present opinions. They also need to defend opinions as they make judgement about facts, ideas and information. Learners, thus, should be able to create. As they create, they should adapt, build, change and compile ideas together in a diverse way by combining elements in a new pattern.

Questions that EFL teachers ask to the learners should aim at checking all the levels of Bloom Taxonomy in order to make sure the learners are able to remember the materials they were taught and use the knowledge to propose alternative solutions to problems. Our English learners should not only remember materials we teach them. We should make sure they understand different facts, ideas, concepts and be able to use them in order to propose a solution to a real problem in the society.

5. Discussion and Interpretation

5.1. Specific Time for an Assessment

Assessment activities are among the teaching strategies that favor learning and acquisition in the classroom. They help the teacher be aware of the pupils' learning process. Also, they inform the teacher about different techniques he/she uses. Moreover, they inform the teacher about the input (whether it is comprehensible) and about the learners' interest and needs as well as their learning strategies. Furthermore, assessment activities help students build their learning confidence.

Assessment activities should be process-based rather than product. It should be done regularly and not at a specific time in the course of the school calendar. Reference [8] claimed that assessments activities should be done on daily basis because this way of doing will help the teacher discover which skill he/she needs to work on in order to help students succeed. Brookhart [8] called daily assessment as formative assessment; and once this type of assessment is applied in the classroom, students find success as they meet their need and interest [8].

In our discussion with the English teachers of Oicha, it was revealed that the time for assessing students is at the end of the term. In their research, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [9] discovered that assessments that happen between and in the instructional units (that they called medium-cycle assessment) as well as assessments that happen within and between classes (that

they called short-cycle assessment) improve the achievement of students. In the contrary, NCTM [9] continue to assert that assessment across marking periods, quarters, semesters or years does not improve learners' achievement.

It is, thus, crucial to organize assessment activities on a regular basis, in and between lessons and in instructional units.

5.2. Reasons for Assessing Students

Organizing assessment activities in a classroom should aim at transforming the learners; this means, the instructions we give them (learners) should change the way they speak, see things, think, etc. Also, the instruction we give to learners should bring them to the level of translating the knowledge they have acquired in order to be a tool for proposing and/or solving different problems in their respective communities. In order for teachers to be able to bring the learners reach this level, there is a need of organizing assessment activities on daily basis, within and between lessons.

Our students need to grow. They need to progress. They also need to improve academically in order to reach success. The technique (among many others) that EFL teachers can utilize in order to bring their learners to success includes formative assessment that Brookhart [8] called "daily basis assessment". Reference [6] agreed that formative assessment improves learners' progress and growth. Meanwhile Orheruata and Oyakhinome [5] claimed that formative assessment improves the academic achievement of the learners, Brookhart [8] stated that daily basis assessment leads learners to success. Unfortunately, EFL teachers of Oicha organize assessment activities in order to have grades and check who is first and last, yet assessment should inform instructions. Teachers should master the basics of assessment including the reasons why they need to assess the learners.

5.3. Assessment as a Tool to Promote Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

We want to see the students we are training to be capable to propose solutions, to be problem-solvers, to be solution-providers, to analyze and evaluate evidence, arguments, beliefs and claims. Also, students should be capable to synthesize and link information and arguments; and to interpret information and draw conclusions based on the best analysis [10].

The focus group we conducted and the class observation we organized revealed that EFL teachers of Oicha Secondary School check only the first level of Bloom Taxonomy. Of course, learners need to remember. They also need to understand, to use, to apply, and more importantly to analyze, to evaluate, to think and to design/create. Assessment activities that we give to our students should aim at checking all these levels and bring them to be able to think and create. Pupils of Oicha schools still have a long journey in order to be thinkers, innovators, solution-providers, designers, etc.

When teachers assess the learners' learning, knowledge, and acquisition,

Brookhart [8] advises that they pay close attention to what she calls higher-order thinking (HOT). She defines HOT as transfer, critical thinking and problem solving [8].

HOTS as transfer. Brookhart [8] stated that educational goals promote retention and transfer. Retention is remembering what was learned, but transfer is not only remembering but also to be able to understand what was learned and to be able to use this knowledge. A teacher who wants to develop their students' HOT at the transfer level, should design assessment activities that check understanding and equip students with skills to use their knowledge [8]. EFL Teachers of Oicha only promotes retention and this practices lowdown their capacity to think.

HOTS as critical thinking. Brookhart [8] believed that a teacher who designs assessment activities that engage learners to reason, to think, and to decide what to believe or do is developing these learners' HOTS. She, thus, said, "the goal of teaching here is seen as equipping students to be able to reason, reflect, and make sound decisions" [8].

HOTS as problem solving. Brookhart [8] understood problem solving as "the mechanism behind learning for understanding" [8]. Bransford and Stein-classified problem solving into stages they called the IDEAL Problem Solver: 1) identify the problem, 2) define and represent the problem, 3) explore possible strategies, 4) act on the strategies and 5) look back and evaluate the effects of your activities [8].

In the language of Popham [11], cognitive, affective, or psychomotor assessments are to be considered by classroom teachers when they think about what to assess. Cognitive assessment deals with student's intellectual operations; which means, the student acquires knowledge and is able to demonstrate thinking skills that include decision-making and/or problem-solving. Affective assessment, in addition, deals with learners' attitudes, interests, and values that may include their (learners') self-esteem, risk-taking tendencies, or attitudes towards learning. Reference [11], thus, added that psychomotor assessment deals with students' large-muscle or small-muscle skills.

English learners of Oicha will not be able to develop their language skills if their teachers organize assessment activities that only check the first level of Bloom Taxonomy. These learners need to be able to listen, to speak, to read and write English language, and they will develop these competences if only their teachers assess their retention, understanding and how they use their knowledge. Not only that, teachers should engage their students in activities that will ask them to think, to reason, innovate, create and so forth.

One student asked me (Mashauri) "why aren't our secondary school finalists able to speak and write English?" The answers I gave him have been confirmed by this research: Teachers do not teach; they only give a piece of information to learners. They full their copy books (learners') with notes that they do not understand. They don't have data on the learners' progress. They assess them only

when the head teachers are squeezing them about grades. They run after the curriculum and the language learning seems not to be a priority, etc. EFL teachers of Oicha should take assessment activities as a learning tool that they use to transform their English learners. By transforming their English learners, I mean that teachers should use assessment activities to learn from the pupils' needs, interests, levels, and to check at what level learners are transferring their knowledge on one hand and analyzing, reasoning, reflecting, creating, and propose solutions to the communities' problems on the other.

6. Conclusions

Formative assessment is very important in the learning journey of the students. It should be done on a daily basis [8] in order that both the teacher and the learner enjoy the benefits it yields. The literature showed how beneficial and impactful is formative assessment in the learning route: it improves students' progress [6] and their academic achievement [5], leads to success [8], and helps learners check how they are progressing. And by doing this, they discover areas that need improvement [2].

This study, whose aim was to know the judgments EFL teachers of Oicha have on the assessment activities, has revealed that assessment activities are often organized at Oicha schools in order to have grades and to know who is first and last. Teachers know that the reason should not be getting grades, but they find themselves under pressure from school heads, inspectors and parents. School heads and inspectors always ask them not to stay behind on the National Curriculum and should cover all the planned materials. Parents too feel happy when they see a lot of notes and summaries in their children's copy books. They design, thus, assessment activities just to have grades and seldom pay attention to developing the learners' HOT skills.

This study strengthens the argument that assessing for grades does not lead to learning and acquisition. In addition, assessment activities that fail to develop learners' higher-order thinking skills deviate from the reason why we teach. Reference [8] said, "The goal for teaching is... equipping students to be able to reason, reflect, and make sound decisions" [8].

The limitation of this study is that it was conducted using a few research participants who were selected from one school. The researcher, therefore, is suggesting that the next researcher uses the quantitative approach with a big number of the population of the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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