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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Assessment Samples in EFL Teachers' Practices of Classroom Assessment: Implications for Learning Improvement and Teaching Development**

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**| ABSTRACT**

On the implementation level of the National Foreign Language Project for the period 2008 – 2020, now extended to 2025 in Vietnam, Level 3/6 – VNFLPF (B1- CEFR) has been set as the learning outcomes for high school language learners. The English curriculum for Vietnamese upper secondary schools was promulgated, and guiding documents were launched, officially supporting EFL teachers in teaching and assessing language learners effectively to achieve the required learning outcomes. This paper reports the findings from an investigation into high school EFL teachers' practices of assessing language learners in a city in Central Vietnam using interviews and assessment samples. From the findings, practical suggestions are made with the hope of providing a valuable basis for both learning improvement and teaching development.

**| KEYWORDS**

Assessment samples, practices, high school language learners.

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

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### **1. Introduction**

The decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg dated 30 September 2008 by the Vietnamese Prime Minister approving the National project named "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Formal Educational System in the Period of 2008-2020" (now extended to 2025) (henceforth the National 2020 project) was launched "to comprehensively renew foreign language teaching and learning in the national education system, to implement new foreign language teaching and learning programs at different education levels and training levels in order to remarkably improve human resources' foreign language proficiency, especially in a number of prioritized domains, by 2015; by 2020, most young Vietnamese graduates of professional secondary schools, colleges and universities will have a good command of foreign language which enables them to independently and confidently communicate, study and work in a multilingual and multicultural environment of integration; to turn foreign languages into a strength of Vietnamese to serve national industrialization and modernization" (Prime Minister, 2008). These objectives have made English language learning at all levels promising but challenging not only to learners but also to teachers. English language teaching for upper secondary learners is no exception.

In the implementation of this English curriculum for Vietnamese upper secondary schools, a variety of issues, such as selecting entrance learners at the CEFR-A2, selecting high schools well-equipped with necessary facilities, and teachers well-qualified with level CEFR-C1, are required. Teachers are also offered some training workshops, including language teaching methodology, language testing and assessment, and new curricula accompanied by new textbooks (MOET, 2013). Among these groups of significant knowledge and skills, English language testing and assessment is of great concern as effective assessment provides valuable information to students, educators, parents, and administrators for making the right decisions or setting upcoming goals,

maintaining learners' interests, and improving learning quality (McKay, 2006; Shohamy, 2001). Teachers' practices of assessing language learners hence play a significant role in helping learners and teachers achieve the expected learning outcomes.

From the new reality of English teaching and learning in Vietnam, this study was conducted to explore high school EFL teachers' practices of assessing school learners and to examine the extent to which their practices of assessing have changed or not to meet the new English teaching and learning context and to help learners meet the English standard by the Ministry of Education and Training in the implementation of the National project 2020.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Language assessment**

Language assessment is considered an integral part of the learning and teaching process, which happens continuously aiming at gathering information about learners' knowledge, competencies, and skills, interpreting, recording, and using learners' responses for educational purposes (Bachman, 2004; Brown, 2004; Cameron, 2001). In other words, assessment is considered a "conscious and systematic activity used by teachers for gathering information, analysing and interpreting it, drawing inferences, making wise decisions, and taking appropriate actions in the service of improving teaching and learning" (Berry, 2008, p.6).

The literature review of assessment shows that assessment has played significant roles in English language teaching and learning. Basically, its primary purposes can be varied from diagnosis, support of learning, selection and placement, and accountability, which aim at improving learning and making judgments of the performance of individuals and the effectiveness of the system as well. Firstly, assessment helps diagnose learners' English learning process by collecting information about learners' strengths and weaknesses, determining what skills and knowledge learners have learned in a specific lesson, and comparing learners' learning with specific setting goals and standards. Secondly, assessment provides learners with timely, effective feedback and teachers with information for instant decisions to improve the process of learning and teaching, respectively. Thirdly, assessment makes teachers accountable for their teaching, assisting teachers and schools in monitoring learning progress (Berry, 2008; Brown, 2008; Brown et al., 2009; Heaton, 1990; Popham, 2013).

Assessment may occur mainly inside and outside the language learning environment, depending on its specific purposes. It might be an assessment of learner language proficiency that focuses on assessing basic language skills and aims to check learners' proficiency for selection or placement purposes. Assessment might also be applied for language learners taking a fixed curriculum at a specific educational level, aiming at gathering information about learners' progress and monitoring and bettering teaching and learning quality. The latter refers to classroom assessment, which will be the focus of this research. Classroom-based assessment provides opportunities for teachers to collect information about students' strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs in relation to learning outcomes, enables students to demonstrate what they know and can do, helps teachers make judgments of their instructions, and improves and motivates students' learning with effective feedback. Classroom assessment has two forms: formative assessment and summative assessment (Black & William, 1999; Stiggins, 2007). Formative assessment is an ongoing process of assessment informing teachers about how well the students are doing, helping teachers make constant and instant decisions to decrease the level of anxiety of learners in taking tests and to increase learners' comfort zone and feeling of success through timely and effective feedback (Black & William, 1998; McKay, 2006; Shaaban, 2001); meanwhile, summative occurs at the end of the learning periods or courses summarizing what students have done at the end of a learning process.

### **2.2. Major principles of assessing language learners**

#### **2.2.1 Choice of assessment tasks**

Assessment is believed to play an important role in the process of learning and maintaining learners' motivation. Appropriate language assessment tasks that set learners in a psychologically safe environment encourage them to make more efforts to take risks (McKay, 2006; William & Black, 1998). Thus, assessment tasks, whether designed or adapted, should meet learners' expectations to some extent.

- Language assessment should be oriented towards age-related interests of upper secondary students;
- Language assessment themes/topics should be familiar to high school students;
- Language assessment tasks should be engaging and motivating with timely and effective feedback and
- Language assessment tasks should be well-instructed with a variety of task types.

#### **2.2.2 Choice of assessment tools**

- Assessment tools should be suitable for both formal and informal assessment;
- Assessment tools should help collect information on students' ongoing development of English learning and
- Assessment tools in the classroom should be multi-dimensional (coming in different forms, lengths, task types)

### **2.2.3 Feedback on assessment results**

Feedback can be very powerful if it is done well; therefore, it is significant to bear in mind some principles of giving effective feedback described as follows:

- Being timely;
- Being accessible with adequate details, Emphasizing what they CAN do;
- Informing what they still CAN NOT do;
- Giving suggestions on how to improve;
- Keeping encouraging and constructive;
- Matching assessment objectives with criteria and
- Requiring students' act on feedback

The following types of common feedback are of great importance in the process of language learning: motivational, evaluative, and learning feedback.

- Motivational feedback, including good grades or marks, positive comments, and rewards, helps maintain students' motivation in the learning process;
- Learning feedback corrects students' language use accuracy by not only pointing out errors but also showing why it is incorrect and giving advice on what to do next to improve their performance;
- Evaluative feedback is used for summative as it gives judgment on the pupils' performance being represented by giving a grade or mark to indicate the different performance of students' work so that they know where they stand in relation to other students (Berry, 2005, 2008; Black & William, 1998; Gipps et al., 2000; Ur, 1996).

### **2.3. The high school English education in Vietnam: Curriculum, Testing and Assessment policy**

The launch of the National Project 2020 proved the importance of improving the quality of teaching and learning foreign languages in globalization time. Following the objectives set by the National Project 2020 in which all learners are required to achieve level 3/6 VNFLPF (B1 – CEFR) when they graduate from upper secondary schools (specifically B1.1, B1.2, and B1 at the end of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade respectively), the pilot English curriculum for Vietnamese Upper Secondary schools was promulgated in accordance with Decision No. 5209/QĐ-BGDĐT on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2012 (MOET, 2012). This curriculum aims at offering students the opportunities to express their ideas individually, independently, and creatively, to achieve more success in their studies and work, and to improve their ability to solve global problems through English and apply the knowledge they learn to cultural and social activities.

Realizing the importance of guidelines in implementing the English language teaching program effectively, a sequence of official documents has been issued. Dispatch No.5333/BGDĐT-GDTrH of the implementation of assessing English language learners at secondary school from the school year 2014 - 2015 was issued by the MOET on September 29th, 2014. This document was written pursuant to Article 7, Section 2 – assessment of language learners' competencies in Circular No. 58/2011/TT-BGDĐT dated December 12, 2011, by the MOET promulgating the regulations on evaluating and grading lower and upper secondary school students officially issued as a replacement for two previous documents (Decision No. 40/2006/QĐ-BGDĐT dated 05 October 2006 and Circular No. 51/2008/QĐ-BGDĐT dated September 15, 2008). Formative and summative assessments are used for assessing language learners; formative assessments assess separated language skills; meanwhile, summative assessments are required to integrate language skills (reading, listening, writing) with language focus and aim at assessing learners' language competences.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Research participants**

The study involved 25 EFL teachers – 3 males and 22 females - with ages ranging from 21 to 50 from 8 upper secondary schools implementing the 10-year English teaching curriculum launched in November, 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012 by the Ministry of Education and Training in the implementation of Vietnam's National Project 2020 as a national strategy with a mission to renovate the foreign language teaching and learning in the National educational system in Thua Thien Hue province. 76.3% and 23.7% of EFL teachers taking part in the study graduated from the university and college, respectively, with at least a degree in English or English language teaching in general. Most of these have spent more than 5 years teaching English at high schools (96.1%). 89.5% of these teacher participants have also achieved the English standard proficiency level (level 5/6 VNFLPF – C1 CEFR) as required in the document dated April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 (MOET, 2013) providing guidelines for teacher selection in implementing the new English teaching curriculum at some high schools all over the country. In addition, 92.1% of these teacher participants have already attended at least one workshop or training program relating to English language teaching methodology and language assessment. These teachers are in charge of approximately 16 – 20 periods a week, with an average number of around 40 students in each class.

### 3.2. Data collection

Data collection instruments, including interviews and assessment samples, were employed in this study to explore EFL teachers' use of assessment samples in assessing language learners at upper secondary schools.

The interview was conducted to find the answers to the three following questions:

1. Which tool(s) do you often use for formative and summative questions? And why?
2. How often do you use an assessment tool to assess your high school learners?
3. How do you give feedback to your learners?

A collection of 55 tests, including 10 fifteen-minute tests, 20 one-period tests, 20 end-of-term tests, and 5 portfolios were collected.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The findings collected from the interviews and assessment samples showed that teachers were well-prepared with the knowledge of learner assessment by guiding documents in terms of the test format and test content. Two types of assessment are required in the language classroom by the MOET official documents of English language learner assessment, which are formative and summative, as regulated in the documents (MOET, 2012). Formative is intentionally conducted during the process of learning English in the classroom; meanwhile, summative is implemented at the end of a learning process, specifically in the midterm or at the end of the first term/ school year.

### 4.1. EFL teachers' assessment tools in formative and summative assessment

The findings show that oral tests and fifteen-minute tests are two common tools used in formative assessment by all of the teacher participants, and these tests are summative-test oriented. Fifteen-minute tests usually focus on separate language knowledge (grammar, vocabulary) or skills (writing, reading, and listening). Oral tests are usually in the form of questions and answers; additionally, some other language activities like quizzes, role-play, story-telling, and pair/group work are also EFL teachers' favourite activities in formative assessment. These activities might be used as oral tests or as extra assessment activities during class time. A small number of teachers explain that they use one-period tests including either content of language knowledge or language skills (except Speaking) or combine both contents in formative assessment as a tool to collect information about students' English learning over a long period of time (T1).

Observation, peer, and self-assessment are practiced by the same number of EFL teachers as it is believed that incidental observation during class activities like oral interaction drafting process in writing or reading provides valuable information about what students are thinking, feeling, and guiding them for making teaching decisions (McKay, 2006; Puckett & Black, 2000). Planned observation is rarely done because of the time limit. Peer and self-assessment are believed to make learners more active and responsible for their process of learning as these two strategies make them aware of the performance criteria. Both of them are conducted *sometimes* by teachers when they need to save time in giving feedback; teachers can clearly explain the criteria in advance to help learners become more conscious and responsible for their work. These two tools have proved to be good in helping build learners' ways of expressing themselves, confidence, and independence and increasing their language awareness (T5 and T7).

Practice tests, including learning portfolios and learning projects, are practiced by most EFL teachers in formative assessment in their classrooms. Learning projects are conducted more often in groups or pairs as teachers say that every unit in the course book has one project activity at the end, so learners are assigned to present with clear explanations and assessment criteria in advance. Group work or pair work depends on the number of learners in each class, but most of the time, learners work in groups to save time and reduce teachers' work load, as most English classes have from 35 to 40 learners. Additionally, this activity helps learners perform their skills of organising ideas, working in groups, and being confident, especially speaking – one of the four skills which has not been paid much attention to in the context of Communicative English language teaching.

In summative assessment, one-period tests and midterm or end-of-term tests are the most frequently used by all of the teacher participants for assessing English learners in the classroom. Usually, all learners will take the same one-period tests at the same time. The tests are designed by teachers using the DOET format.

### 4.2. Common assessment samples in EFL teachers' practices

The findings from the collection of assessment samples showed that paper tests are the most common tools used for not only summative but also formative for high school language learners. Paper tests are also teachers' favourite tools in conducting formative and summative assessments in the classroom. Paper tests, which include three language skills (Listening, reading, and writing), are designed together with language knowledge (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary). Assessment forms and

formats are closely related to the summative tests, and their tasks are chosen from the list of official documents by the authorities for assessing learners.

Language assessment tasks are well-instructed, with a variety of task types oriented towards the age-related interests of upper secondary students and engaging and motivating learners. Language assessment tasks focus on both knowledge (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) and skills (listening, reading, and writing). Speaking is not spent as much time as the other skills. Speaking tests are only conducted if required in end-of-term tests. In addition to speaking tests, learners' speaking skills are also assessed when presenting the projects in group work, as mentioned above.

Each fifteen-minute test includes either each section of language knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) or language skills (reading, listening, and writing). One-period and end-of-term tests include all of these above sections with around 30-50 items. Each section has two sub-sections with at least 8 questions. These suggestions are described as follows (MOET, 2014):

- Listening: Listen and match; Listen and number; Listen and tick; Listen and complete; Listen and select the correct option; Listen and give short answers.
- Reading: Read and match; Read and number; Read and tick; Read and complete; Read and select the correct option; Read and rearrange the information; Read and find the right information; Read and summarize.
- Writing: Complete the sentences with a word or a phrase (pictures can be used); Arrange the words to make complete sentences; Use the provided words or phrases to write complete sentences; Transformation; Sentence completion; Use the provided words or phrases to write a complete paragraph; Use the provided words or phrases to write a short passage; Reordering; Write short passages about relevant and familiar topics; Composition/Essay writing.
- Language knowledge: Multiple choice questions – MCQs; Matching; Gap filling; Information gaps; Reordering; Word form.

Selected-response items are mainly used in official tests like one-period and end-of-term tests for summative assessment as well as in fifteen-minute tests for formative assessment as it is believed by most teachers that "It is easy and time saving when marking tests with selected responses" (T2) and "there are many learners in each class so it takes time to mark tests and gives specific comments" (T6).

Written feedback in numbers (marks) is the most frequently used. Most teachers often use assessment results to give feedback to the whole group or the whole class, as they do not have enough time. This result aligns with the result collected from teachers' practices of assessing learners in difficulties facing teachers in assessing learners. Some teachers state that they sometimes give feedback directly to each individual learner, especially when they really have difficulties in learning English and need timely support from teachers. Contradictory to the reality of having little time for giving feedback, most teachers manage to take little time to give feedback after certain assessing tasks conducted rather than wait until the end of the term or school year because they believe that their feedback during the process of learning and in a timely manner can help their learners learn effectively.

## **5. Conclusion**

The results suggest that tests are the most frequently used in assessing high school language learners because of their availability and reusability; therefore, teachers should be provided with more assessment resources that are relevant to their language curriculum. In addition, they need to be offered more theoretical and practical knowledge to apply assessment effectively in the teaching context. Teachers should also be encouraged to participate in professional development activities frequently to be equipped with sufficient knowledge of language testing and assessment, as some research mentions that little formal training on assessment practices was provided in teacher education programs (Brookhart, 2011; Stiggins, 1991)

The study only focused on upper secondary school EFL teachers' practices of assessing learners. Further research can be done by focusing on lower secondary school teachers. Additionally, further studies can be done to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of learner assessment from many different teaching and assessing contexts to see if there are any similarities and differences.

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