

ASSESSMENT OF OR FOR LEARNING? DEVELOPING A NEW APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT AS A TEACHER-RESEARCHER: A GUIDE FOR IN-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMMES

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Introduction

Reflection is considered as a key concept in teacher development (Richards, 1990). Some researchers (e.g. Wallace, 1991) have even referred to a 'Reflection Model' as one model for teacher development. As a teacher researcher, in this article, I intend to reflect on my previous teaching experience and how what I gained from the professional practice project I was involved in as a part of my Master's studies in the UK can help me with my own professional development. As well as the impact on my own teaching practices, I will also propose suggestions for how the outcomes of this project can be implemented in my previous teaching context, in my home country as well as similar contexts, as a part of INSETs.

Prior to undertaking my MA programme in ELT (with a specialism in assessment and testing), I was involved, as an educational expert, in teacher development programmes in a language school in Iran. At this institution, which is a private language education provider, the evaluation system is predominantly summative in nature. It consists of three exams, including a mid-term exam, a story quiz, and the final exam. These exams are mainly summative, providing a snapshot of learners' achievement. The scores obtained in these exams form the final mark which is used to decide whether a student can proceed to the next level.

Throughout the research for my professional practice project, I realised that, in recent years, studies of assessment have contained a growing interest in the interactions between assessment and learning and teaching practices. The use of assessment is no longer confined to measuring learners' achievement; it is also used as a means of providing information that can facilitate learning and instructional practices. Tests that serve such a formative function are known as 'formative assessments' (William & Black, 1998). Formative assessment is regarded as a powerful method of enhancing student achievement: 'Formative assessment and formative feedback are very powerful and potentially constructive learning tools' (Irons, 2008).

Considering such a method of assessment and its efficacy in improving student performance on the one hand, and the lack of such exams in my teaching experience on the other, resulted in participating in a project in which, together with two other teacher-researchers, we developed a resource for evaluating receptive language skills for formative purposes. The resource we designed was an FA booklet that offers English teachers a theoretical background on formative assessment, as well as suggestions for using different methods in developing FA tasks for the evaluation of reading and listening skills. Given that, as the developers of this booklet, we had come from diverse teaching backgrounds, each of us contributed to this project based on the context in which we were going to implement this booklet, and the feasibility of this practice in our own contexts. (This booklet is an open access resource which can be accessed through the link available at the end of this article.)

As mentioned above, in the three exams used in my previous institution, learners receive an overall mark with little or no feedback on their performance. When reflecting on the assessment practices employed in my previous teaching experience, I realized that the only type of feedback provided to students which can be used for formative purposes is the feedback learners receive from the writing section of the mid-term exam. In addition to the writing feedback, some teachers may offer some general feedback on some common errors in the grammar and vocabulary sections. These types of feedback, though, may vary in their formative power, since there is no standard style for offering feedback that teachers can use for formative purposes. As with their performance in reading and listening, learners do not receive any feedback which can be used to improve learning attainment. Regarding other diagnostic efforts during each course, according to my reflections, common practice includes the use of mini-quizzes, which are usually taken from online resources and generally focus on enabling skills, or devoting some time to

checking the workbook, which is used as the main resource for homework. These activities, however, are not iterative or cyclical and are used with little or no follow-up. Thus, evaluation is mainly practiced as assessment *of* learning, and there is little evidence of using assessment *for* learning.

Considering such a lack of practicing formative assessment and the possibilities of developing FA tasks in my previous institution, I contributed to the FA booklet project by proposing suggestions for adapting reading and listening tasks in textbooks. But before presenting these suggestions on how language teachers in my previous teaching context and other similar contexts can use textbooks to develop FA tasks, it is important to address some fundamental aspects of formative assessment which shaped the rationale behind the FA booklet, and need to be considered when designing any FA task assessing any aspect of the language through the learning process.

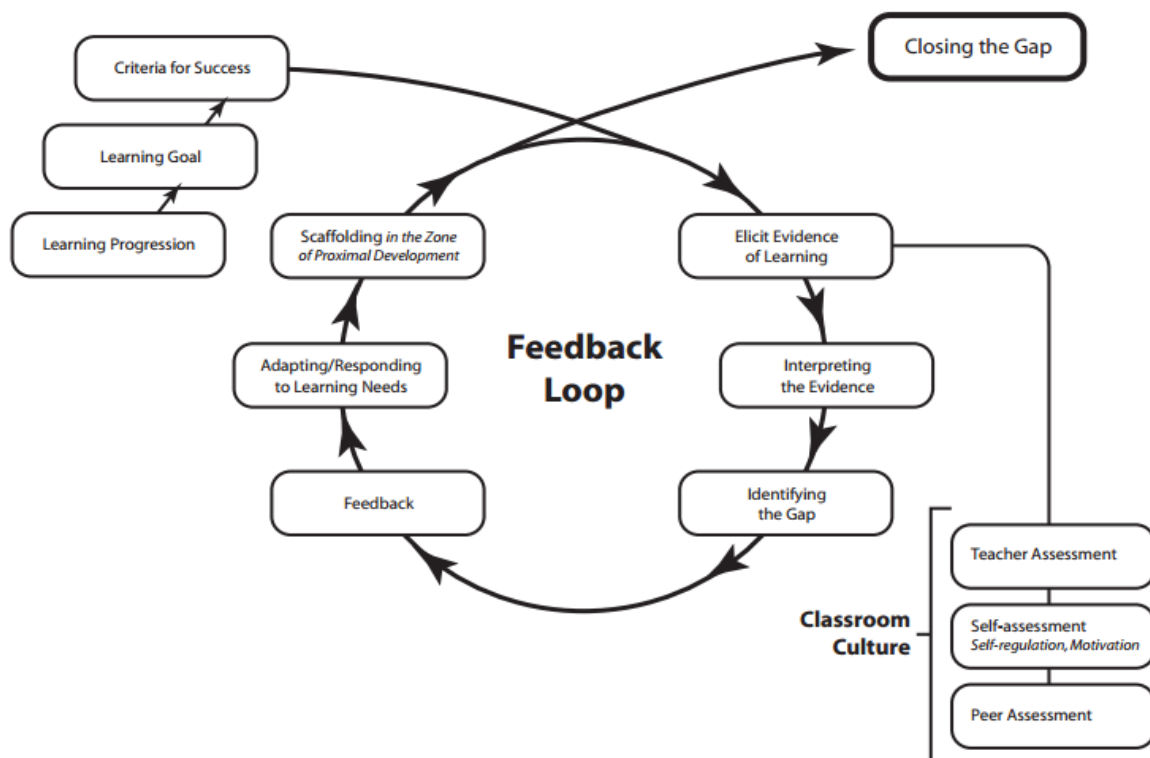
Conceptualisation and Implementation of FA

Formative assessment was originally proposed by Scriven (1967) as one method of curriculum evaluation. This form of assessment, which can be contrasted with summative assessment, was later thought to be useful in the evaluation of learners’ learning process – assessment *for* learning (Bloom et al., 1971). While summative assessment, or assessment *of* learning, provides a snapshot of

students’ achievements, FA functions as an iterative process, with feedback loops as its central component assisting students as their learning progresses. Although the interest in, and research on, summative assessment outweighs that of formative assessment (Stiggings, 2005), a considerable body of research exists to support the positive benefits of FA (Crooks, 1988; Natriello, 1987; Sadler, 1989; Fuches & Fuches, 1986; Black & William, 1998). Despite the consensus on the effectiveness of FA, diverse conceptualizations and implementations of this concept still remain among scholars. For the purposes of this article, FA refers to any task that can provide teachers and students with feedback that will help to reduce the gap between learners’ current level of achievement and their desired level of attainment. As Wiliam and Black (1996: 543) note: ‘in order to serve a formative function, an assessment must yield evidence that, with appropriate construct-referenced interpretations, indicates the existence of a gap between actual and desired levels of performance, and suggests actions that are in fact successful in closing the gap’.

As well as various ways of conceptualising FA, there is a possibility of implementing FA differently, and sometimes incorrectly.

Figure 1. Heritage’s (2007) formative assessment model.



For instance, some teachers may assume that giving regular tests to students and merely informing them of the results is a valid example of FA practice. In fact, as Chappuis (2007: 4) notes, ‘formative assessment is not an instrument or an event, but a collection of practices with a common feature: they all lead to some action that improves learning’. In order to avoid such miscommunication, and to implement FA appropriately, it is important for teachers to first familiarize themselves with salient features of the FA process addressed in different models of FA in the literature (e.g. Clarke, 2005; FASTSCASS, 2008; Heritage, 2007). Heritage’s (2007) formative assessment model (see Figure 1) is an example which suggests guidelines for the appropriate implementation of FA. According to Heritage’s model, there are four key elements of the FA process: learning progressions (learning objectives and success criteria, identifying the learning gap, and learning evidence), teacher assessment, effective feedback and learner involvement.

As the model shows, a fundamental aspect of FA is its cyclical nature with ‘closing the gap’ as the end target. According to this model, the FA process begins with identifying the learning gap (i.e. the gap between the current learning and the desired learning stage), followed by teacher assessment and effective feedback through learner involvement. This process should then result in minimizing the learning gap through observing the learning evidence.

Similarly, and in another framework, Sadler (1989) refers to three conditions for ‘assessment for learning’. According to this framework, effective FA should enable learners to answer three questions in relation to their learning. Atkin et al. (2001: 14) describe these questions as follows: ‘Where are you trying to go? Where are you now?, and How can you get there?’. In fact, by considering the key features of FA suggested in Heritage’s model above, teachers are taking one step towards meeting the three conditions of assessment for learning. In other words, setting learning objectives and success criteria will help learners explore their learning goals and where they are going. Furthermore, teacher assessment can apprise students where they currently stand in the learning process. And, finally, formative feedback and learner involvement can guide students in discovering the best ways of how to reach their desired goals. The three conditions of assessing for learning, and the key attributes of this type of assessment, shaped the rationale behind the tasks developed in the FA project.

More details on these models are available in part one of the FA booklet.

The Importance of Feedback in FA

Feedback is another key component of FA, and one of the key conditions of assessment *for* learning. According to the research in the literature (Corbett & Anderson, 1989; Bangert-Drowns et al., 1991; Azevedo & Bernard, 1995; Pridemore & Klein, 1995; Epstein et al., 2002; Moreno, 2004), feedback is crucial to learning achievement. For example, in Hattie’s (1999) effect size list, feedback falls into the top ten influences on students’ learning and achievement. It is important to note that there is variability in the power of different feedback types. According to Hattie’s list, the most powerful are those that provide students with information about a task and ways and processes for improving future performance. In contrast, less powerful feedback types are more extrinsic in nature, such as rewards and punishment. There are several reasons why effective feedback plays an important role in FA. One important use of precise and practical feedback, as mentioned above, is to reduce the gap between the current level of understanding and the desired level. In other words, formative feedback can show learners how well, or poorly, they have performed in a task. This can motivate learners, since it helps them gain a clearer image of their level of progress (Song & Keller, 2001). Another use of feedback for learners concerns cognitive load. Learners, especially those who are struggling, can benefit from the external support provided through formative feedback (Paas et al., 2003; Sweller et al., 1998). Formative feedback can also provide learners with more effective task processes and strategies, correct procedural errors, and clarify misunderstandings (Mason & Bruning, 2001; Mory, 2004; Narciss & Huth, 2004).

Interested readers are recommended to refer to part one of the FA booklet, where they can find basic principles of effective feedback and suggestions for the format of effective feedback for assessment *for* learning.

Conceptualizing Receptive Skills’ Construct

Like general education, the interest and research in FA has been growing rapidly in English language education (Davison, 2007; Davison & Leung, 2009; Gattullo, 2000; Leung, 2005; Xu & Liu, 2009). A plethora of products has also been designed that provide tools for the evaluation of language skills for formative purposes. Most of the materials available share common features with FA tools used in other fields of education (e.g.

journals, logs and self-assessment sheets). Few studies and resources, however, have addressed FA in relation to English language proficiency test standards (Arkoudis & O'Loughlin, 2004; Breen et al., 1997, as cited in Llosa, 2011; Brindley, 2001). For instance, many resources comprise only materials and tools for FA of skills or enabling skills, without distinguishing them from good teaching practice. There is a risk, therefore, that teachers with limited literacy in language testing use these materials as teaching activities rather than for testing purposes.

As mentioned earlier, regarding the receptive skills in my teaching experience in Iran, students do not usually receive any specific feedback on their progress in these skills, and merely receive a score for their performance. One reason for this could be that, unlike productive skills, the processes of receptive skills are not easily observable. As a result, teachers and learners find it difficult to explain which parts need improvement. Defining the measuring construct, is one way to help teachers and learners to have a clearer picture of what these abilities include. This, in essence, is a fundamental step towards developing FA tasks. As with receptive skills for example, this can help teachers to find out what reading and listening abilities learners possess at different stages of learning, and which skills need improvement. This, in fact, addresses the first element of FA in Heritage's (2007) model, which helps teachers and learners to define learning objectives and goals according to individual students' needs.

This shaped a part of the professional practice project I was involved in, where I managed to familiarize myself with construct definitions for receptive skills using various models of reading and listening skill proficiency in the literature (e.g. Alderson, 2000; Buck, 2001; Sainsbury, 2006). This review resulted in lists of sub-skills for English language receptive skills (i.e. reading and listening). These key concepts of receptive skills, which played a key role in the implementation of sample tasks designed in this project, can be found in parts two and three of the booklet.

Using Textbook Exercises for Developing FA Tasks for Reading and Listening Skills

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the FA booklet was designed by three teacher-researchers who had come from different teaching contexts. This, in turn, resulted in proposing different methods for developing FA tasks. Considering my previous teaching contexts, I proposed adapting textbook exercises as a means

of developing FA tasks. There are several advantages to using textbooks. First, as O'Neil (1982: 107) inserts, 'no other medium is as easy to use as a book'. Most language schools and institutions in modern English education in Iran use textbooks as a basic source of instruction. In my previous institution in Iran, for example, textbooks are used as a core material for instruction in general English programmes. Developing FA tasks using the listening and reading activities in these books can therefore help teachers in saving time and energy which would otherwise be spent on finding other sources for designing these tasks. Second, in contexts where there is limited access to other resources (e.g. the internet and authentic printed materials), using activities in the book is a convenient way of designing assessment tasks. Third, using the activities in student books saves a lot in printing and copying, most suitable for contexts where such facilities are scarce or not available.

The remainder of this article contains suggestions on how the teacher development team in Safir Language Academy can use the FA booklet in their INSET as a means of introducing teachers to FA. Since the FA booklet was designed for general English courses, I will focus on these programmes specifically, and how teachers can use this source to formatively assess receptive skills for general English purposes.

Implementing the FA booklet in INSETs in a Language School in Iran

All general English programmes at Safir consist of twenty sessions each lasting for ninety minutes. At this language academy, these programmes consist of four main proficiency levels, from Elementary to Upper intermediate, each with five or six sub-levels. All four language skills and enabling skills are practiced at all levels, using textbooks and supplementary materials, such as graded readers and vocabulary practice books. Considering the lack of FA and formative feedback, especially with respect to receptive skills, using the FA booklet, and implementing FA tasks, can provide teachers and learners with formative information which can potentially facilitate learning and teaching practices.

The conditions in these courses make using FA tasks feasible in these programmes and programmes alike. First, each course consists of twenty sessions, three times a week over two months. This timetable allows teachers to use FA tasks on a regular basis with some tasks done in the class and some assigned as homework. In addition, the maximum number of students in

each class is fifteen, which makes individual support and feedback possible. Moreover, the resources used in these programmes have the potential to be adapted for FA tasks. For example, the textbook pack (student book and workbook), which is used as the main source of syllabus objectives at each level, has a separate section in each unit focusing on receptive skills. In each 'skill focus' section, sub-skills are clearly defined, which can be used to define the construct assessed in each listening and reading task. With a clear and narrow focus in reading and listening tasks, this textbook is a suitable resource for developing FA tasks. Teachers and learners can then use the adapted tasks and the FA tools (e.g. reading log, self-assessment form, listening log) suggested in the FA booklet for collecting formative information about students' progression. Using FA tasks can enable learners to make a link between different reading and listening tasks they do and their progress in these sub-skills. Likewise, teachers can use this information as a needs analysis guide to providing support for individual learners, and to improve their pedagogical practice accordingly. In addition to course books, the grader readers could also be used as another source for developing FA tasks to assess reading. Instead of assessing learners' memory of detailed information in the story book quiz, these books can be used as another source for developing FA tasks. For developing FA tasks, a group of teachers who teach a similar level could adapt FA tasks using the textbooks or the story books as their resource and the FA booklet as a guide. Students then can use these tasks and the reading logs and self-assessment sheets to assess their progress in each reading and listening sub-skill.

The following steps are suggested for developing FA tasks from teaching activities in the textbooks and supplementary materials used in Safir. These steps are as follows:

- Aligning the receptive skills' sub-skills model with textbook syllabus objectives
- Select (a) specific(s) sub-skill to focus on
- Selecting the textbook reading/listening activity
- Selecting the FA instruments

The first step in adapting textbook exercises for formative use is to align the receptive skills' sub-skill(s) model available in the FA booklet with the textbook objectives. In the case of Safir language school, each unit in the textbook has a separate section focusing on receptive skills. In these

sections (i.e. skill focus section), sub-skills are clearly defined and can be used to define the construct assessed in each FA task. A list of receptive skills' sub-skills and a sample of alignment table for the textbook used in Safir are given in appendix A of this article. A clearly defined list of sub-skills enables teachers to select the sub-skills they want to assess in a certain FA task. In this way, teachers can monitor students' progress in certain reading and listening sub-skills and provide them with feedback for improvement.

After aligning and selecting the receptive skills' sub-skills to focus on, the textbook exercises which suit the FA tasks need to be selected. These tasks can be selected from either the student books used in the class or the practice books used for homework. The tasks selected should be suitable for assessing the sub-skill in focus. For example, if the purpose of the task is to assess learners' abilities in reading for gist, the selected reading exercise needs to contain a text with enough factual and detailed information. In addition, the questions for the task should also be suitable for assessing the focused sub-skills. If questions in the task are already designed to assess certain sub-skills then they can be used for the FA task as well, however, if they are not suitable for assessing the focused sub-skill, then new questions need to be designed which directly assess those sub-skills.

The final step in designing FA tasks using textbook activities includes selecting the FA instruments that best suits the aim of the FA task. Some of these instruments which can be integrated to textbook activities for receptive skills' FA tasks include, reading/listening logs, self-assessment checklist, reading/Listening comprehension skills profile chart, reading/listening rating chart, teacher feedback sheet, etc. (for more samples of FA instruments for receptive skills please refer to the appendix section of the FA booklet). There are some points which need considerations when using these resources. First, teachers may need to adopt the items in these instruments according to the focus of the FA task. For example, if the purpose of the FA is to monitor students' progress in reading for gist and detailed information, the items in the self-assessment checklist should check the strategies students used in reading for gist or reading for detailed information. Second, it is very important that teachers adopt the language of these instruments according to the learners' proficiency level. Some of the FA instruments presented in the FA booklet are designed for students with higher levels of language proficiency. Therefore, if

teachers intend to use those instruments for students in lower levels of language proficiency, they need to adopt the level so that students can easily understand instructions of the instrument. Third, students need to be trained how to use FA task instruments and how to keep a record of them in their portfolio.

It should be noted that the steps mentioned above can be used in other context which share similar features with the materials used in the institution mentioned here.

Conclusion

What I gained from the professional practice project, which has certainly had an impact on my professional development, is that assessment can be used for learning – and be a friend. It can even be fun! ‘Innovations that include strengthening the practice of formative assessment produce significant and often substantial learning gains’ (Black & Williams, 1998: 140). The conclusion quoted above has truly changed the face of assessment in different fields of education. In this professional practice project, I, as a teacher-researcher, realized that assessment can go beyond measuring achievement for summative purposes, and can also be deployed as a means of monitoring and enhancing learning. In fact, assessment in today’s educational milieu is no longer solely teacher-centred assessment of learning, but a means of enhancing learning through greater learner involvement and effective feedback - using assessment for learning. Throughout this project, I became aware of the existence of extensive research showing the real possibilities of FA in improving educational outcomes. I would, therefore, strongly recommend that teacher education providers in my previous teaching contexts, and, indeed, in any other similar contexts, open up new avenues for the practice of assessment for learning and use the FA booklet as a step towards familiarising teachers with this aspect of assessment.

Link to the Formative Assessment Booklet:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/degrees/ma/practitioner_corner/formative_assessment

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Appendix A
(Sample alignment table)
Theories and models of reading and listening construct¹

Summary of reading sub-skills

1. Skimming to understand the gist
2. Scanning to locate specific information
3. Reading for main ideas and supporting details
4. Understanding meaning of words
5. Deducing meaning of unfamiliar words from the context
6. Understanding explicitly stated information
7. Understanding information when not specifically stated
8. Drawing inferences
9. Recognizing the communicative purpose of a passage
10. Recognizing a writer's purpose, attitude and tone
11. Recognizing the organization of information in a passage
12. Distinguishing important information from minor details

Summary of Listening sub-skills**Direct meaning comprehension**

1. Listening for gist
2. Listening for main idea(s) or important information; and distinguishing that from supporting details, or examples
3. Listening for specific, including recall of important details
4. Determining a speaker's attitude or intention towards a listener or a topic

Inferred meaning comprehension

5. Making inferences and deduction
6. Relating utterances to their social and situational contexts
7. Recognising the communicative function of utterances
8. Deducing meaning of unfamiliar lexical items from context

Contributory meaning comprehension

9. Understanding phonological features
10. Understanding grammatical notions such as comparisons, causes, result, degree etc.
11. Understanding discourse markers
12. Understanding the main syntactic structures of clauses or idea units
13. Understanding cohesion, especially references
14. Understanding lexical cohesion, especially references
15. Understanding lexis

Listening and taking notes

16. Ability to extract salient points to summarise the text
17. Ability to select relevant key points

(Sample alignment table: aligning receptive skills' sub-skills model with syllabus objective)

English result level	Skill focus Listening	Theory of language ability (Receptive skills)	Skill focus Reading	Theory of language ability (Receptive skills)
Elementary Sub-level 1	Listening for specific information in a conversation (unit1)	3	Scanning signs and labels for specific information (unit 1)	2
	Listening for key words in a conversation(unit 2)	2	Reading for gist in short descriptions (Unit2)	1
Pre-int. Sub-level 1	Listening to a description for gist and details (unit2)	1,3	Reading a magazine article for gist and specific information	1,2
	Listening for key words in informal dialogue	3	Guessing word meaning in a personality test (unit3)	4,5
Intermediate Sub-level 6	Listening to short explanations to follow directions (unit 11)	3,6	Reading a website advice page for the main points (unit 11)	3,12
	Listening and predicting content in a joke(unit 12)	6,7	Reading and following the main events in stories with a moral (unit 12)	6,12
Upper-int.	Listening for main points and details in a phone call(unit 10)	3,7	Reading a magazine article and comments to follow points of view (unit9)	10
	Listening to a radio program for details (unit 10)	2,5	Reading for details following related words; understanding idiomatic expressions (unit 10)	4,5

¹ From Formative Assessment Booklet Pages: 8 and 17