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Formative assessment in the EFL context of kermanshah high schools: Teachers' familiarity and application

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Abstract

Formative assessment in language teaching classes is gaining significance as one tool for successful teaching. For the teachers, administers, district managers, policy makers, and all those who lend a hand with the learning/teaching process, formative assessment can act as key factor in determining their exact whereabouts, and specifying where to go in the process .The debatable issue, however, is whether English langue teachers , as the key role players of the learning-teaching process, in the formal high schools of Kermanshah district are familiar with and employ realized-as-the-most-significant assessment techniques (questioning, feedback without grades, self-assessment, peer-assessment, and formative use of summative assessment) by Black and colleagues (2004) in their teaching act. With reference to such debate, the present study aimed at eliciting the extent of familiarity and employment of five assessment techniques from high school teachers in the formal context of education in Kermanshah district.
To this end, two questionnaires, one open-ended and one 20-item Likert scale was distributed among 200 high school teachers (100 male and 100 female) in Kermanshah province. The results of statistical survey manifested that, despite highly positive perception and evaluation of the five assessment techniques, high school teachers in Kermanshah province employed just questioning technique in their classes significantly, with the four other techniques remained unemployed to a great extent.

Keywords: formative assessment, EFL context, high schools, assessment techniques.

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1. Introduction

Assessment, in general, is a key factor which can make teachers, administers, district managers, and policy makers realize where they are with regard to their professional progress, where to go, and how to reformulate and renovate their own specialized tasks. In education, in particular, assessment is one key component which can , if applied precisely and concisely, be of priority in the field of professional pedagogy as students need to know what their abilities are, how much progress they are making and what they can (or cannot yet) do with the skills they have acquired. Obviously, without such knowledge, it would not be easy for them to learn effectively and efficiently.

Regarding the interval between assessment phases, and the kinds of decisions and purposes wanted from, assessment has been classified into three tiers: summative, interim, and formative. Summative assessments are synonymous with high-stakes one-time tests most often associated with accountability at the school, district, or state levels, and typically are used to measure mastery of a set of prescribed standards or content as a part of accountability system or to inform policy (Perie, Marion, Gong & Wurtzel, 2007). Interim assessments, commonly known as medium-cycled assessment, fall between summative and formative assessments and are given multiple times during the year. The results of interim assessments are used for both teacher-learner diagnosis of learning development and pinpointing whether the standards are reached in a timely fashion. Formative assessments, in contrast to the two mentioned ones, is the most instructionally sensitive type of assessment which is considered as an ongoing process or activity. According to Prier et al. (2007). it is embedded within the instructional activity and directly linked to the classroom teaching-learning activities. It has been defined as ''making instructional adjustments based on feedback about student performance'' (Popham, 2005), ''tools to monitor student progress during learning'' (Earl, 2003), ''qualifying any set of activities or tools as- ''formative''- when information is used to inform or adapt instruction'' (Black & William, 1998). In fact, various definitions of the term formative assessment sometimes evoke a range of perspectives among teachers, school principals, and district leaders, however.

Formative assessment has been shown to be highly effective in raising the level of student attainment, thereby increasing the equity of student's outcomes, and improving the student's ability to learn. Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshal, and William (2004) have identified the significant formative assessment strategies as questioning techniques, feedback without grades, peer assessment, self assessment, and formative use of summative assessment, the strategies which are going to be focused in the present study with regard to both their familiarity and application on part of EFL teachers teaching in Kermanshah high schools.

2. Literature Review

Literature on the effect of assessment in general and formative assessment in particular is not new. However, in recent years, research has highlighted the importance of different kinds of assessment – summative, interim, and formative- on desirable achievement of the learners (Earl, 2003; Harlan, 2007; Stiggins, 2002; Volante, 2010, among others). In particular, four large reviews on formative assessment (Black & William, 1998; Crooks, 1998; Kluger & De Nisi, 1996; Natriello, 1987) are among the outstanding works that support the claim that using formative strategies such as questioning techniques, feedback without grades, self-assessment, peer-assessment, and formative use of summative assessment can significantly influence the rate of learning in a positive way. More importantly, the research findings by Black et al. (2004) that formative assessment can reduce the gap between high-and low-achievers by helping low-achievers is a finding which can be of high significance if it is looked into more deeply.

In the context of Iran, some work has been done around the current topic. Moradan and Hedayati (2011) investigated the impact of portfolios and conferencing as two versions of formative assessment on writing skills of Iranian EFL learners and found that these two types of assessment were more significant than traditional assessment techniques. Javaherbaksh (2010) found that self-assessment had a significant effect on writing ability of Iranian EFL learners.

Hayatdavoudi and Nejad Ansari (2011) found that formative assessment is not only an assessment tool but it also serves as pedagogic tool to improve thinking and learning. However, no research, to the researchers' knowledge, has been conducted on the EFL teacher's extent of familiarity on those five techniques or their application in the High school EFL contexts, thereby necessitating conducting of the present research.

3. The Purpose of the Study

As stated by Brown (2004), teacher's perspective of assessment is important because evidence suggests that teacher's perception of teaching and learning strongly influence what the students learn and achieve. To this end, the researcher is interested in, first, eliciting the types of assessment strategies that are most famous and are of high frequency of application among Kermanshah province high school EFL teachers, and, second, measuring and evaluating perception of high school EFL teachers in formal context of education in Kermanshah Province regarding the five most effective assessment strategies put forward by Black and colleagues (2004).

Based on the purpose of the study, the following two questions will be answered in the planned study:

a- What kind of formative assessment strategies Kermanshah high school EFL teachers apply in their classes?

b- To what extent Kermanshah high school EFL teachers perceive and positively evaluate formative assessment strategies?

4. The Significance of the Study

The introduction of formative assessment into Formal Iranian Context of Education has been around for more than a decade. It has been so highlighted that a significant portion (about one-third)of the requirement for pass mark in standard high-stakes tests depends on the total assessment the instructor considers for the year-long formative performance of the students. Yet, awareness regarding assessment techniques and strategies which seems to be raised as vital in pre-service, in-service, and developmental programs in developed countries lags behind in the teacher evaluation and improvement programs in formal instructional context of Iran. Besides, in Kermanshah province, failure in formal educational EFL courses has been a point of debate for at least a decade. In fact, it has been so sensitive that it has been one of the topics of research plans calling for investigators to work on from the part of Kermanshah Education and Research authorities and experts. So, with so much emphasis on formative assessment in the formal educational context of Iran, and with that lagging behind in the outcome of English EFL courses in the educational context of high schools in Kermanshah province , the conduction of the present research gains its own significance.

5. Methodology

5.1. Participants

Participants of the present study consist of 200 high school female and male English teachers, 100 of each sex, all over Kermanshah province. They were selected randomly and through classified sampling strategies from different high schools of Kermanshah province and its related cities. Care was taken to involve teachers from different types of schools on the basis of random selection so that the participants be representative of all kinds of schools like schools for the genius, schools affiliated to Kermanshah state and Azad university, technical high schools, and schools in suburbs. The academic degree of the participants included BA and MA in TEFL, Linguistics, English Literature, and English translation, mostly with BA in teaching.

5.2. Design and the instrument

Since the researchers wanted to find out those kinds of assessment strategies applied by high school EFL teachers in the formal context of education, and also find out the degree of familiarity of the high school teachers with five key formative assessment techniques by means of a questionnaire, the design of the research is survey.

The data collection instrument consisted of an open-ended questionnaire eliciting the reaction of the teachers on the assessment strategies they employ in their year-long assessment cycle to see what kind of assessment strategies they apply most in their classes, and also, the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity in their application of formative assessment strategies. The open-ended question asked'' What formative assessment techniques do you as an English teacher use to assess the student's learning?''

Next, a questionnaire containing 20 questions related to five assessment strategies, four questions for each, but not necessarily in order, were given to the teachers to gain insight to the extent of their perception and evaluation of the five proved-to-be most effective assessment strategies in the classroom.

6. Data Collection and Analysis

After gathering the data through the designed questionnaires, frequency and percentage for all the responses were computed.

For the open-ended question eliciting the type of the techniques English teachers apply in high school classes in Kermanshah Province to assess students' attainment, the following frequency and percentage was tabulated.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of formative assessment techniques applied in formal English classes in Kermanshah high schools

Type of Assessment	Questioning	Feedback Without grades	Peer Assessment	Self Assessment	Formative Use of summative Assessment	Summarizing
Frequency	124	14	32	12	24	7
Percentage	64.0	7.0	16 16.0	6.0	12.0	3.5.0

As the table one shows, majority of high school teachers, 64 percent, in Kermanshah district employ questioning, one of the five major assessment techniques put forward in the study. With regard to the other four assessment techniques, however, the percentage who seem to employ them is rare. 7 percent employ techniques related to feedback without grades, 16 percent employ peer-assessment techniques, 6 percent employ self-assessment techniques and 12 percent apply techniques related to formative use of summative assessment. Other than the five put-forward techniques, 3.5 percent of the participants use summarizing techniques most often in their classes. Overall, it seems that, as far as application of assessment techniques in Kermanshah high schools is concerned, many of the teachers apply questioning techniques in their classes. But, with regard to the other four assessment types namely feedback without grades, peer assessment, self assessment, and formative use of summative assessment, the teachers , according to their opinions elicited through the open-ended questionnaire, do not use them in their teaching classes.

Next, the data related to the next question put forward '' To what extent Kermanshah high school EFL teachers perceive and positively evaluate formative assessment strategies? '' is going to be tabulated for the frequency and percentage of evaluation that the participating teachers have given to it.

With regard to the first assessment technique, questioning technique, the following data was collected based on the questionnaire.

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of the data for items related to questioning techniques

		Fully agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Fully disagree
Item 1	Frequency	98	102	0	0	0
	Percentage	49.0	51.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Item 2	Frequency	136	60	0	0	4
	Percentage	68.0	30.0	0.0	0.0	2.0
Item 3	Frequency	116	80	2	2	0
	Percentage	58.0	40.0	1.0	1.0	0.0
Item 4	Frequency	94	96	2	6	2
	Percentage	47.0	48.0	1.0	3.0	2.0
Total	Frequency	444	338	4	8	6
	Percentage	55.5	42.25	0.5	1.0	0.75

As the data in table two shows, the great majority of the participants are for the questioning technique, which is in line with the data collected by the open-ended questionnaire. 55.5 percent of strong agreement and 42.25 percent of agreement (totally 97.75 percent) is a proof to the fact.

Next formative assessment technique that is going to be dealt with is feedback without grades assessment technique. The data for this technique is manifested in the following table:

Table 3. Frequency and percentage of the data for items related to feedback without grades assessment techniques

		Fully agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Fully disagree
Item 1	Frequency	30	78	58	30	4
	Percentage	15.0	39.0	29.0	15.0	2.0
Item 2	Frequency	20	124	14	36	6
	Percentage	10.0	62.0	7.0	18.0	3.0
Item 3	Frequency	28	46	16	60	50
	Percentage	14.0	23.0	8.0	30.0	25.0
Item 4	Frequency	48	80	28	34	10
	Percentage	24.0	40.0	14.0	17.0	5.0
Total	Frequency	126	328	116	160	70
	Percentage	15.75	41	14.5	20	8.75

With regard to feedback without grades assessment technique, 15.75 percent fully agreed with the idea, 41 percent agreed, 14.5 percent had no ideas, 20 percent disagreed, and 8.75 percent fully disagreed. For the present assessment technique, 55.5 percent of full agreement and disagreement versus 34.5 percent of full disagreement and disagreement, as a whole, is a clear indication of the fact that EFL teachers in formal context of high schools in Kermanshah district positively perceive and evaluate feedback without grades assessment techniques despite the fact that , according to their opinions from the open-ended questionnaire, only 7.0 percent of the participants employed the related techniques in their classes, the point which requires much consideration and thought.

For the next significant formative assessment technique, peer assessment, the data collected is given in the following table:

Table 4. Frequency and percentage of the data for items related to peer assessment techniques

		Fully agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Fully disagree
Item 1	Frequency	48	86	18	40	8
	Percentage	24.0	43.0	9.0	20.0	4.0
Item 2	Frequency	36	62	48	48	6
	Percentage	18.0	31.0	24.0	24.0	3.0
Item 3	Frequency	40	118	32	8	2
	Percentage	20.0	59.0	16.0	4.0	1.0
Item 4	Frequency	48	54	30	66	2
	Percentage	24.0	27.0	15.0	33.0	1.0
Total	Frequency	172	320	128	162	18
	Percentage	21.5	40.0	16.0	20.25	2.25

With regard to peer assessment techniques, 21.5 percent fully agreed with the idea, 40 percent agreed, 16 percent had no ideas, 20.25 percent disagreed, and the remaining 2.25 percent fully disagreed. As the opinion data in table 4 shows, the same as questioning and feedback without grades, the English teachers in formal context of high schools in Kermanshah province positively perceive and evaluate peer assessment techniques. 61.5 percent of full agreement and agreement versus 36.25 percent of disagreement and full disagreement, as a whole, is a clear indication of the fact that high school teachers in formal context of Kermanshah province high schools, to a significant extent, are in line with peer assessment techniques in their classes in theory. However, according to their opinions from the open-ended questionnaire, only 16 percent of the participating English teachers in Kermanshah district, in practice, employed the related techniques in their classes, the point which requires more investment and full consideration.

For the next significant formative assessment technique, self assessment, the data is tabulated in the following table:

Table 5. Frequency and percentage of the data for items related to self assessment techniques

		Fully agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Fully disagree
Item 1	Frequency	34	84	14	54	14
	Percentage	17.0	42.0	7.0	27.0	7.0
Item 2	Frequency	58	114	18	8	2
	Percentage	29.0	57.0	9.0	4.0	1.0
Item 3	Frequency	40	88	38	32	2
	Percentage	20.0	44.0	19.0	16.0	1.0
Item 4	Frequency	54	96	22	24	4
	Percentage	27.0	48.0	11.0	12.0	2.0
Total	Frequency	186	382	92	118	22
	Percentage	23.25	47.75	11.5	14.75	2.75

With regard to self assessment techniques, 23.25 percent fully agreed with the idea, 47.75 percent agreed, 11.5 percent had no ideas, 14.75 percent disagreed, and the remaining 2.75 percent fully disagreed. As the opinion data in table 5 manifest, the same as questioning, feedback without grades, and peer assessment, the English teachers in formal context of high schools in Kermanshah province positively perceive and evaluate self assessment techniques. 71 percent of full agreement and agreement versus 17.5 percent of disagreement and strong disagreement, as a whole, is an absolute indication of the fact that high school teachers in formal context of Kermanshah district high schools , to a highly significant extent, are in favor of self assessment techniques in their classes in theory. But, in practice, as the elicited data

from the open-ended questionnaire show, only 6 percent of the participating teachers used self-assessment techniques in their classes, the point which needs full consideration and logical attention.

Next, the data for formative use of summative assessment comes in.

Table 6. Frequency and percentage of the data for items related to formative use of summative assessment techniques

		Fully agree	Agree	No idea	Disagree	Fully disagree
Item 1	Frequency	116	80	0	4	0
	Percentage	58.0	40.0	0.0	2.0	0.0
Item 2	Frequency	70	84	26	20	0
	Percentage	35.0	42.0	13.0	10.0	0.0
Item 3	Frequency	56	48	28	56	12
	Percentage	28.0	24.0	14.0	28.0	6.0
Item 4	Frequency	52	116	16	10	6
	Percentage	26.0	58.0	8.0	5.0	3.0
Total	Frequency	294	328	70	90	18
	Percentage	36.75	41	8.75	11.25	2.25

With regard to formative use of summative assessment techniques, 36.75 percent fully agreed with the idea, 41 percent agreed, 8.75 percent had no ideas, 11.25 percent disagreed, and the remaining 2.25 percent fully disagreed. As the opinion data in table 5 manifest, the same as the previously-mentioned four assessment types, the English teachers in formal context of high schools in Kermanshah province much positively perceive and evaluate formative use of summative assessment technique types. In fact, 77.75 percent of full agreement and agreement versus 13.5 percent of disagreement and strong disagreement is an absolute indication of the fact that high school teachers in formal context of Kermanshah district high schools, to a highly remarkable degree, are in favor of formative use of summative assessment techniques in their classes. However, in practice, as the elicited data from the open-ended questionnaire shows, only 12 percent of the participating teachers used formative use of assessment technique types in their classes, the point which is hotly debatable and requires full consideration.

7. Discussion

The data elicited by both the open-ended questionnaire and Liker-scale opinion seeking questionnaire gave out debatable points.

Regarding the open-ended questionnaire, great majority of the participating high school teachers, 64 percent, employed questioning as one of the five significant formative assessment techniques in their classes. The other four formative assessment techniques were rated very poorly with 7 percent for feedback without grades, 16 percent for peer assessment, 12 percent for self assessment, and 12 percent for formative use of summative assessment techniques. Meanwhile, 3.5 percent of the participants believed in summarizing as a good formative assessment technique.

As for the opinion seeking 20-item questionnaire, the following data were elicited. For the questioning technique, 97.75 percent of the participating teachers positively valued and perceived the use of the technique in their classes. Moreover, great majority of the participants, according to the open-ended questionnaire, 64 percent used the technique in their classes. For the second formative assessment technique, feedback without grades, 56.75 percent of the participants had a positive perception towards the technique which is a promising percent. However, 14.5 percent were neutral and 28.75 percent were in disagreement with regard to the

technique. In viewpoint of practical use of the technique, however, only 7 percent of the participants claimed that they employed it in their classes which is not promising at all.

When it comes to the third formative assessment technique, peer assessment, 61.5 percent of agreement and full agreement with the assumption is a good sign of its being positive. 22.5 percent of participants declined it as a good technique and the remaining 16 percent expressed no idea with regard to it. Interestingly, just 16 percent of the participants, according to the open-ended questionnaire claimed that they applied it in their classes.

For the third formative assessment technique, self assessment, 23.25 percent of full agreement and 47.75 percent of agreement (71 percent in totality) leaves no room for doubt the ELT teachers in the formal context of Kermanshah high schools enthusiastically embrace such an assessment technique as something valuable. 17.5 percent of non-agreement and 11.5 percent of indifference to the assumption is not something significant enough to be concerned with. Amazingly, with regard to the open-ended questionnaire, only 6 percent of the participating ELT teaches claimed that they employed such techniques in their classes, the point which, for sure, taps the curiosity of those who lend a hand with curriculum development, and teacher pre-service and in-service education in Iran.

As for the last question on significant formative assessment techniques, the data seems suggestive, too. 36.75 of full agreement and 41 percent of agreement (77.75 altogether) makes it crystal clear that the ELT participating teachers much highly positively perceive and evaluate the assumption of formative use of summative assessment in their classes. 13.5 percent of non-agreement and 8.75 percent of neutrality on the issue is not of enough significance to manure on. Interestingly although, only 12 percent of the participants, according to the open-ended questionnaire, employed the technique in their classes.

8. Conclusion

From the participants' responses to the questionnaires ,one can safely claim that the ELT teachers in the formal context of education in Kermanshah district, in fact, highly perceive and very positively evaluate the employment of five significant formative assessment techniques put forward by Black and colleagues (2004). However, the results of the open-ended questionnaire shows that , except from questioning technique which was claimed to be used by the majority of the teachers, the practical employment of the other four techniques , feedback without grades, peer assessment, self assessment, and formative use of summative assessment, despite being perceived and evaluated positively to a high extent, is not regarded. For the question one of the study, besides the five significant formative assessment techniques put forward by Black and colleagues (2004), summarizing was, also, referred to as a formative assessment technique but just by 3.5 percent of the participants.

To make the significant formative assessment techniques of Black and colleagues (200) practical in the formal context of education in Kermanshah district, the findings of the present study inspire a number of suggestions. First, now that the majority of ELT teachers in the formal context of education in Kermanshah province do not employ all various formative assessment techniques in their classes, much more positive look into the assessment and evaluation techniques in pre-service and in-service training programs is required. In the overall context of formal education in Iran, a lot of attention has been given to formative assessment, despite the fact that enough pre-service or in-service training is not provided in this regard. This could apply to the assessment as a whole in the Iranian educational context since, due to centralized programs of education, the employment of present research countrywide might give the same results. Second, curriculum planners are deemed responsible for not providing required grounds for assessment according to international standards, something which calls for much deeper investigation.

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