

Towards Formative Assessment: Perceptions and Practices of ESP Teachers

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Abstract: *Along with the global trend and internationalization, English acts as a supporting tool of connecting the world across the border. English has been attached its importance in Vietnam since the launch of National Foreign Language Project 2020. The innovation in language teaching, learning and assessment in English for specific purposes (ESP) accordingly, is seen in some Vietnamese universities. While summative assessment is still a dominant type of assessment, formative assessment (FA) has not been captured a sufficient attention. This study is to investigate teachers' perceptions and practices of FA in ESP class. The challenges faced by teachers in implementing FA will be also uncovered in the study. This may help to provide meaningful suggestions for teachers, course designers and policy makers to help the successful implementation of FA in ESP.*

Keywords: formative assessment, FA, ESP, perceptions, practices

1. Statement of the Problem

Knight (1994) has stated that globalization in higher education (HE) is the flow of knowledge and technology across borders while internationalization in HE is a means in which a nation reacts to the effect of globalization. Under the increasing influence of globalization and internationalization, teaching English, especially English for Specific Purposes (ESP) such as English for Economics, English for Finance and Banking, English for Tourism, etc. has gained the popularity. ESP serves as among the driving forces between graduates and industries to provide job opportunities in many disciplines such as aviation, engineering, business, legal and textile, to name but a few. Accordingly, the urgent demand for assessing ESP students has become one of the key issues in ESP approach (Dashtestani & Alavi, 2016). Assessments in ESP include summative assessment (Kellaghan and Greaney, 2001), authentic assessment (O'Malley and Pierce, 1996); continuous assessment (Plessiss and Prouty, 2007), etc. has been discussed. In the words of Bennet (2011), formative assessment (FA), known as assessment for learning, provides validity, reliability and pedagogical paradigms. Accompanied by FA, feedbacks include peer feedbacks and interactions, teachers' scaffolding techniques and assistance is of great necessity in ESP teaching and learning (Hyland, 2006). The findings of the previous studies on FA offer a surplus of benefits for learning and teaching. To be more specific, these merits involve upgrading in students' learning, growth in student's concern for learning, prospects for self-assessment, and support of student learning (Sach, 2012; Mohammed, 2013; Berry, 2004).

Regarding ESP stakeholders' perceptions and practices in class, a number of publications have been introduced. Among which, several studies investigated student involvement in classroom assessment from a practitioner's perspective (Chew & Lee, 2013, Chan, 2014, Brown, 2004). Based on the results of previous studies on the practices of FA illustrate that instructors adopt optimistic attitudes towards FA though there are challenges and resistance to the use in different education contexts (Sach, 2012; Aitken,

2000; Berry, 2004). The obstacles to the use of FA include teachers' absence of knowledge and confidence of FA, shortage of training on FA and the knowledge of assessment and testing methods (Sach, 2012; Aitken, 2000; Berry, 2004). Bennet (2011) suggests that teacher have massive knowledge of the implementation of FA to take full advantages of class materials, teaching methodologies and assessment types used in class. Sharing the same opinion with Bennet (2011), Mohammed (2013) recommends the employment of in-service training, seminars and workshops to help teachers gain background knowledge of how to implement FA in classroom. Also, he adds that leaders and policy makers are open to talk to teachers to provide support if needed to promote the widespread use of FA in educational contexts.

Vietnamese Educational System

According to Hoang (2010), since 2002, all Vietnamese students in grade 3 have started learning English as an optional course and it becomes a compulsory subject for students from grade 6 to grade 12.

With a view to improving English language teaching and learning in Vietnam, National Foreign Language Project 2020 has been launched for the period 2008 to 2020 and extended to 2025 (MOET, 2008; MOET, 2018). The goal of the project is to enhance Vietnamese youth to confidently communicate, study and work in English in such a multi-cultural and integrated environment, making English as a plus for Vietnamese people, best serving for the cause of modernization, industrialization and globalization of Vietnam (MOET, 2008). The demand for English teaching and learning is of great urgency. Moreover, some international universities have been built in Vietnam such as RMIT, British University or American School to attract Vietnamese students (Altbach and Knight, 2007). Some universities offer students with English-major or double major programmes. However, quality assurance, teaching and learning quality and the correlation between social expectations and universities supply are still matters of concern. Nguyen (2017) has reviewed 2020 project and concluded that it is time for revisiting assessment toolkits of an English programme. Several authors (Chen, 2003; Chan,

2014; Chang, 2014, to name but a few) point out that teacher beliefs, demographics, class size, teacher training and teacher experience may weight the assessment practices of teachers. The study on FA in ESP classroom, therefore, will significantly provide to enlighten the teaching and learning merits in HE setting. While the education reform emphasizes on the changes in assessment method, reliance on summative approaches and final tests is still common in most of Vietnam universities (Tran, 2014). In reviewing the gap between the graduates and industry, Tran (2014) suggests that the curricula should be adopted and adapted to be more suited to the industries. Teaching methods, assessment approaches and syllabus design should come from students' need analysis, expectations from recruiters and educational contexts (Tran, 2014). Though introduced in Vietnam, the implementation of FA has been limited. What is more, how to use FA effectively in classroom is also a new demand for language teachers, as it would take more time and effort to follow students' progress over the semester. Timely comments and quality feedbacks are also increasing the amount of workload and pressure for teachers. While the studies on FA in the world can be seen abundantly, especially from stakeholders' viewpoints, research on FA in Vietnam remains neglected and uninvestigated. In addition, there is still a big gap between the teachers' perceptions towards FA and the practice of FA in class. The discrepancy between what they perceive and what they actually use may be related to barriers and challenges that hinder them from using FA.

Research aims, research questions and rationale

This study addresses the issue by investigating teachers' perspectives and beliefs in ESP formative assessment. The research adopts both qualitative and quantitative research method to explore how teachers perceive and apply formative assessment in ESP classroom. To be more specific, the study occupies the spotlight on the teacher's perception on ESP formative assessment, which leads them to the practices in ESP classroom. The research, therefore, provides a scald-folding tool to support new inexperienced ESP teachers in assessing students and reflective opportunities for accomplished lectures in the formative assessment practices in ESP. The study, then, seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are ESP teachers' perceptions in formative assessment?
- 2) What types of FA are frequently adopted and used by ESP teachers?
- 3) What are likely the teachers' selection criteria for formative assessment practices?
- 4) What are the challenges faced by ESP teachers in implementing FA?

Significance and scope of the study

Watching the constructivism and constructionism of ESP learning and the practicality of FA, the researcher finds it important to conduct an intensive understanding through teachers' lenses towards the combination of these two things. The study will make an effort to address this complexity and focus on the teachers' viewpoints. The study is considered to be significant for several following reasons. First, the result will provide teachers perceptions towards ESP learning as a FA. Teachers will learn from the

perceptions to be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of assessment method, to be able to adjust the most appropriate techniques of teaching and assessing for the future. Secondly, from what they actually use, from their selection criteria for FA, and from what hinders their implementation of FA, syllabus design and material development can be flexibly adopted and adapted to be more suited to the teaching and learning context. Thirdly, it can pave the way for the leaders and policy makers in Vietnam to provide support if necessary. Finally, it can act as a reference for further research in ESP instruction.

The practice of FA in the world and in Vietnam

FA in other countries in the world and in Confucian heritage culture countries

The practice of FA in ESP has been found in many countries in Europe, America and Australia. Allal and Mottier (2005) examined over 100 journal articles in assessment in French speaking countries and concluded that FA is strongly favored by teachers and students. It acts as a powerful improvement strategy (Huges, 2003) and has a very positive impact on students learning (Sadler, 1989). Likewise, some Confucian heritage culture nations support the use of FA practice such as in China (BEING.Org.cn, 2005), Hongkong with the emphasis on assessment for learning (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). In Malaysia, FA is deployed to provide support for teachers in lesson preparation and improve achievement (Pham & Renshaw, 2014) or in Singapore with the introduction of holistic assessment (Klenowski, 2009) to enhance teaching and learning. In Korea, assessment results are introduced to improve education (Pham & Renshaw, 2015)

Vietnam national policy and practices of FA

Vietnamese government now has attached the importance on the reformation of education system in general. When it comes to the improvement on assessment in particular, reducing pressure and stress among students, parents and educators. The traditional type of assessment, commonly known as summative assessment has been switched to FA (Nguyen, 2017), assessment for learning to enable the effectiveness of language teaching and learning. The practices of FA can be found in peer-assessment, students' reflections, portfolios, case-based studies or project-based learning in many Vietnamese classrooms (Duong, Nguyen & Griffin, 2011). However, there are local structural and cultural factors that hinder the practice of FA in Vietnamese classroom (Pham, 2013). The high-stake university entrance examination, which focuses on the summative assessment, leads to the popularity of teaching and learning towards the effective performance on exams (Pham, 2013). In addition, the hierarchical relationship in a power distance index like Vietnam (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) where the teacher is considered the transformer of knowledge and students are passive learners obstruct the application of FA in class (Pham, 2013).

Proposed research methodologies

Design

The study is an effort to explore the perceptions and practices of FA in class. Therefore, a mixed method design

comprising survey questionnaires and semi-structured interviews will be employed. Follow-up interviews may be used to present a methodological triangulation. The questionnaires and interviews are treated on the same basis so that results can be triangulated.

Participants

The research centers on the practitioners' perspectives towards ESP FA in the University of Languages (UL) with the sample of at least 80 teachers of ESP for survey questionnaires and about 10 teachers for in-depth interviews. According to Creswell (1998), such sampling well reflects the aim of the study and adopted paradigm. In the words of Sandelowski (cited in Chang, 2014), the value is more meaningful than the amount of data as it generates determined samples (Merriam, 1998). Thus, it is apparent that the choice of sampling should be taken into serious consideration (Creswell, 1988).

All participants will be informed about (i) purposes of the research project, (ii) the benefits and responsibilities they will have when participating in this research project and (iii) ethical issues relevant before they make a choice whether or not to take part in the research project by having a consent form signed.

Instruments and analysis

Survey questionnaires

The survey questionnaires using Likert scale will be used and delivered online and offline. Some open-ended questions will also be given to collect more qualitative data. As there is no survey questionnaire available that can fit-to-all purposes of the researcher, a self-adapted questionnaire from those of Dashtestani (2015) will be employed. The questionnaire will include (1) Teachers' perceptions of FA, (2) Preferred types of FA among teachers, (3) Selection criteria of ESP teachers in implementing FA, (4) Challenges faced by ESP teachers in implementing FA. The items of questionnaire will be sent to colleagues and senior teachers for adjustments and suggestions.

Interviews

Semi-structured interview questions to ensure the validity of the research help to explore their views of ESP teaching and evaluation and the perceptions towards FA. So as to triangulate the data collected, the interview questions will be similar to the questionnaires parts to uncover the 4 items as mentioned in the survey questionnaire part. Specifically, the questions are as follows:

- 1) What do you think of FA in ESP class?
- 2) What types of FA do you commonly adopt and use?
- 3) What are criteria for your choices?
- 4) What are your challenges when you use FA in your class?

The results of survey questionnaires will be shown in percentage. In the analysis, standard deviation and mean will be employed with the support of SPSS. The interview parts will use content analysis with themes and coding to support findings in the survey questionnaires.

Reflection on the research project

Current research project: Key insights

For each module, I have different learning projects. Some of these have been applied into my teaching such as the action research related to assessing effectiveness of a project-based learning. The educational reform in Vietnam since 1986 has been spread out in all levels of education where higher education has been seen noticeably. One of the reformations is about the type of assessment. Many subjects in my faculty have switched from only two summative tests including mid-term test and end-of-term test to formative assessment with the grading weight of participation and attendance, presentation, writing portfolio, group work activities and project. These activities help students more actively participate in learning activities and teachers act as a facilitator, instructor and supporter of students' learning process. As a lecturer, who learns a number of theories from this journey, I take a great passion for a research related to how teachers perceive and practice formative assessment in a language class so that obstacles in adopting and implementing assessment in class can be dealt with.

Impact on professional context

The trend of globalization and internationalization can be seen in all walks of life, in all fields in society. The renovation in education in general and in assessment in particular is an inevitable tendency. To meet the demand for job market, case-based studies, project-based learning, simulation-speaking activities are extracted from daily-life situations. Students are supposed to develop their critical thinking, problem solving, information searching, group-work, presenting skills, etc. in addition to their language competence. The research on formative assessment will raise more awareness of the importance of formative assessment among teachers and students.

Challenges faced by teachers

One of the common challenges faced by teachers when using formative assessment is the feeling of opposition to changes. It can be explained by the nature of human (Bradutanu, 2015). Teachers in my University appear to hesitate to the application of formative assessment with the increasing amount of workload and the call for professional development. For the old type of assessment, testings are used for mid-term tests and end term tests. Meanwhile teachers used to provide knowledge and mark their performance through tests, they have more workload by providing scaffolding techniques to support students' learning via project-based learning. In addition, teachers have to update the use of technology, innovate teaching styles and integrated skills in their teaching, to name but a few. However, in my context, the infrastructure is not modern enough to meet the demand of the project learning. In particular, the use of projector is really necessary while not all classrooms are equipped with modern facilities. For some projects in English for Tourism, English for Economics, students are supposed to conduct interviews with companies. However, the administrative procedures such as asking for a letter of permit from University and financial support take long time, which hinder the motivation of students. Moreover, teachers' salary seems to be a matter of great concern. As the financial budget is not

sufficient for their living standard, most teachers pursue part time jobs. While project based learning and formative assessment requires teachers to provide timely and instant support and feedbacks to follow students' progress, teachers cannot fully devote to their students' outside class learning. They even do not have their own working panel at school to let students make an appointment when they are in need. Therefore, the support from the top-notch is of great necessary (Champoux, 2016). The support can come from open talks in which leaders lend a sympathetic ear to issues and obstacles of teachers and sit together to find the most feasible solutions.

2. Conclusion

I used to be the one with low self-esteem. Before I started this journey, I have never thought of one day I could reach the end of the modules. I have also experienced through ups and downs over the last 2 years with my family stuff, my general health condition, my workload and my insomnia. It was my instructors that have helped me to lay my trust in myself and have seeded and grown my love for research. There have been times when I really want to give up, but thanks to the spiritual support and academic guidance, I have realized myself getting mature year by year. I am deeply grateful to all instructors from Module 1 to Module 9, tutorial sessions of DDPs for what they have done to me regardless of day or night. The journey is still tough ahead but I have a faith in myself like the way they lean me against their scaldfoldings as my research capacity is still too weak to stand alone on its feet.

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