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Ahmadi Fatalaki, Javad

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Teacher – Based Language Assessment

Javad Ahmadi Fatalaki

Allameh Tabataba'i University

Email Address: Fatalaki2009@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT. Davidson's (2004) recommendations regarding qualifying teacher-based assessment have been considered as the basis for any discussion regarding the concept of teacher based-assessment because of the theoretical depth of his model. The present study, with noticing the comprehensiveness of Davidson's model, aims at presenting the background of the teacher-based assessment and its functional aspects in language testing. To this end, the study highlights the most important considerations for the development of the alternative assessment that serve the purpose of learning. Meanwhile, it focuses on the role of teacher-based assessment across different areas of language learning. For instance, the study considered pragmatic knowledge and, generally, competence as the possible areas that can be developed through teacher-based assessment. With regard to the practical sense of test development, the researcher reviewed several roles that have been noted as the steps and aspects that should be covered in order to maximize the learning process through assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

As Gensee and Upshur (1996) stated, the overall aim of the classroom based assessment is increasing the learning outcomes. Classroom teachers truly are the best assessor of their own students' performance in the classrooms setting due to their knowledge of the students' weak points. These sorts of assessment are also very much beneficial for the in-depth analysis of the teachers' instruction blind points. Gensee and Upshur (1996) also mentioned that the evaluation is the matter of comparison. This comparison is based on the different elements which are mostly related to the classroom instruction and the larger context in which students will be assessed based on the external factors. If the teachers' instruction does not match to the external context in which students face, teachers will be informed of their drawback to compensate for them. In this sense, one can emphasize the pivotal role of the evaluation in determination of the mismatches that occur few and far between in the educational settings. These mismatches can also have internal aspects to indicate whether what has been assumed by the teachers as the outcome of their instructions happened based on the upshot of the evaluation in different stages of the assessment. Therefore, the prophecy of the teacher in different stages of the assessment is establishing a well-organized match between students' learning and the desired outcome in broader sense. Some teachers, in circumstances that they have the responsibility to design a test for the educational purposes are afraid of the novelty that is the quintessential component of the teacher-made test and, therefore, they follow a more conservative approach and duplicate the previous well-known test in their disciplines. In a nutshell, one can say that the key role of the assessment is the identification of the degree of success and learning rather than concentration on the students' disability to cope with what they have not learned. In the very beginning of any decision on constructing a test, one should concentrate to answer why, how and what to assess.

2. TEACHER-BASED LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

2.1. The Necessity for Teacher-based Assessment

Wiggins (1998) took advantage of the term 'educative assessment' to call for issues that the test constructors should take into account while designing a test for the national and internal level.

Wiggins emphasized on the positive and negative effect of test and went as far to say that the testing and assessment affect the learning engagement. He also put more emphasis on the development of more authentic tests that are simply created with most degree of revision. In accordance with Wiggins (1998), Shepard (2000) mentioned that when assessment is integrated with learning procedure, it is more probable to test what one teach in the classroom setting. Teachers are more aware of the progress of their students and their level of proficiency after the implementation of the test because, this time, a test tests what it should test.

2.2. Teacher-Made Assessment

Assessment is the most important phase of the educational procedure across different disciplines. The importance of the assessment necessitates the widespread attention to the concept of the assessment and the way through which one can assess the learners' achieved proficiency and skill at the end of the educational periods or even during the instruction of the course to determine the level of achievement. In this regard, teacher-based assessment can serve the purpose. This type of assessment has been introduced through different terms such as alternative assessment and assessment for learning because the aim of the assessment is not just the grading. Rather, the assessment occurs for the language learners' development.

Newfields (2006) insisted on the role of assessment literacy in enhancing of the quality of tests that are designed by the teacher and he mentioned some criteria that teachers as the testers should gain in order to have the sufficient skill to design a well-organized test and interpret the result in the most reliable methods. He mentioned that foreign language testers should gain the following 15 key skills:

1. An ability to interpret statistical raw data in terms of common measures of centrality (mean, mode, median).
2. A basic understanding of the concept of measurement error and confidence intervals.
3. An ability to discern whether or not the difference between two or more data sets is significant.
4. A capacity to logically distinguish between correlation and causation.
5. An understanding of what constitutes ethical assessment – and what should be done if encountering unethical testing practices.
6. An ability to use a broad variety of assessment measures to assess students with minimal bias.
7. An ability to construct, administer, and score tests within a given field of expertise.
8. An ability to evaluate the reliability, item difficulty, item facility, and content validity of tests.
9. The ability to statistically determine where the cutoff point of a CRT examination should be.
10. The ability to intervene appropriately if students engage in unethical behavior during a test.
11. Skill in communicating assessment results effectively to parents, peers, and students.
12. A demonstrated concern for client confidentiality and test security.
13. Knowledge of how to detect poorly performing test items and how to factor out those items.
14. An ability to detect various factors unrelated to a target skill that are confounding examinees' test performance.
15. An ongoing commitment to test improvement and cyclic validation.

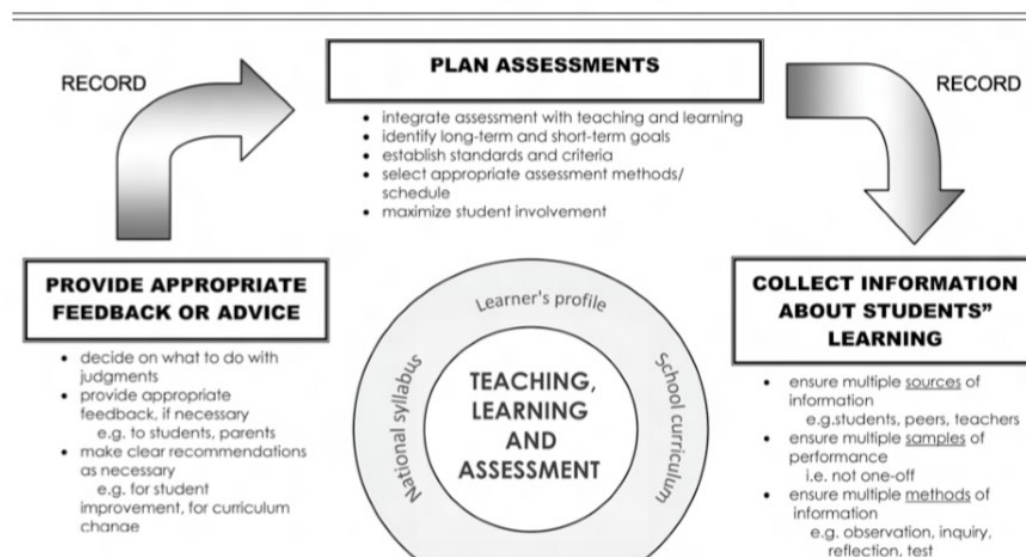
Davidson (2004) considered few roles for language teachers in teacher-based assessment system. Davidson stated that the language assessors have the role of technician, interpreter of law, pragmatic professionals, arbiter of community values, and God. He clearly explained these characteristics in the following table (table 1):

Table 1 Teacher-based assessment: a cline of assessor beliefs and practices

	Assessor as technician	Assessor as the interpreter of the law	Assessor as the principled yet pragmatic professional	Assessor as the arbiter of 'community' values	Assessor as God
View of the assessment task	Criterion-bound e.g., It's a checklist ... (A6)	Criteria-based e.g., It's just like a driving test (A10)	Criteria-referenced, but localized accommodations	Community-referenced e.g., It has to be like on the exam (HK1)	Community-bound e.g., It's hard to specify (HK3)
View of the assessment process	Mechanistic, procedural, automatic, technical, seemingly universalized e.g., I just follow the criteria (A9); I ticked the boxes (A5); The criteria are just there, so it's really easy (A6)	De-personalized, explicit, codified, legalistic, culturally detached. e.g., I have to be legalistic ... (A5); I would like to give a higher grade but I can't because of the criteria (A10)	Principled, explicit but interpretative, attuned to local cultures/norms/expectations e.g., It's very complex and ultimately you have to give more weight to one thing than another, it comes down to professional judgement (A4)	Personalized, implicit, highly impressionistic culturally – bound e.g., Can this child cop?e (A5); You've saying this child is not tertiary material (A5)	Personalized, intuitive, beyond analysis e.g., You just know...(H She's just got it...(A3)
View of the assessment product	Text-focused	Text-focused, but awareness of student	Text and student focused	Student-focused	Student-focused
View of inconsistencies	Seemingly unaffected by inconsistencies	Inconsistencies a problem, threat to reliability e.g., I worry when I make judgment...am I interpreting the criteria correctly? (A2)	Inconsistencies inevitable, cannot necessarily be resolved satisfactorily, teachers need to rely on professional judgement e.g., I have to juggle things, weight them up in my own mind and think what the alternatives are (A1)	Inconsistencies a problem, threat to validity, assessor training needs to be improved e.g., I think would my colleagues accept this as an A? (HK2)	Seemingly unaffected by inconsistencies
View of assessor needs e.g., for support/training	Need better assessment criteria	Need better assessor training (to interpret criteria)	Need more time for moderation and professional dialogue (to make basis of judgments more explicit)	Need 'better' assessors (to uphold standards)	System not open to scrutiny not accountable, operated by the 'chosen' few.

Later, Davidson (2008) proposed a model through which language teachers can implement tests that are designed for the sake of learning. In this model, the role of language teachers is kept crucial at every stage of language development. That is, the language teacher starts the instruction and finishes it with a type of assessment that can be considered some sort of learning itself.

FIGURE 1
A Framework for Teacher-Based Assessment (Davison, 2008)



2.3. Fundamental Principles of the Teacher-Based Assessment

Although a great number of studies focused on the techniques and principles that are applicable for those test constructions that teachers play the significant role in (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992; Cizek, 1997; McMillan, 2000), there has been little emphasis on the teachers' professional development to have the ability to design and construct a test and to look at other's work with critical points of view (Stiggins, 2000). Therefore, raising of the teachers' awareness about the concept, principles and techniques that are dominant in the test's structure is of utmost importance. This, in turn, can also give them a critical view by which they can criticize old-versions of popular tests and ask for the revision of those tests by proposing new appropriate models.

The first and foremost aspect of the assessment is ‘assessment Cognition’. In a study done by Yin (2000), different types of the assessment cognition has been discussed. Yin claimed that ‘strategic and interactive cognition’ have the highest influence on teachers’ perception regarding the matter of assessment and the way through which they implement tests. The former concept refers to the teachers’ belief and attitude about assessment and the latter deals with teachers’ perceptions and attitude regarding the students’ predicted level of proficiency. Brookhart (2011), in line with Yin (2000) and Rea-Dickins’ (2008), mentioned that teachers should have the skill and knowledge of their students’ level to develop a local test that is consistent with the perceived knowledge of the students. Brookhart used a new term instead of interactive cognition and kept insisting on the concept of ‘learning progression’. This concept encompasses the previous one that has been posed by Yin (2000) and has the influential role in identification of the students’ present level of achievement based on the predicted patterns.

2.4. Classroom Assessment and Evaluation

Biggs (1999) considered the classroom based assessments as the phenomena which serve two different functions for both teachers and learners. The first fundamental function of the assessment in this view is the identification of the successful instruction that has been discussed profoundly in the previous parts. The second function is the clarification of grasp of knowledge that should be internalized to satiate the teachers’ expectations of their students. This fact, in turn, leads into the enhancement of the students’ performances on the high-stake tests which are predominantly imposed by the individual outside the local contexts. Hence, active participation of teachers in assessment procedure will engender several outstanding results. As noted above, teachers can use the result of assessment to seek for the development of their teaching skills. This per se can play a significant role in the preliminary step for the classroom research due to the influential effect of the profound analysis of the students’ performance in conditions that the teachers are fully aware of their student’s reflection on different section of the test (Richards and Lockhart, 1994);. This awareness is the result of teachers’ exposure to students’ behavior for the long period of time in classroom setting.

Nowadays, the majority of the teachers in second and foreign language acquisition are, to some extent, test designers (Rudner and Schafer, 2002). They are sometimes as the reviewers or even the main person in charge of designing a high-stake test that has been designed and distributed to larger population of test takers. In order to design a high quality test, they have to adhere to the standard procedure of the test construction in their own fields. Necessity of the careful consideration for reliability and validity of the tests is worthy of re-emphasis because of their outmost importance in designing a high quality test. In this regard, Frey and Schmitt (2007) claimed that any point in the items of the tests that perverts the testees to identify the main aim of the items is called real distracter that should be avoided by the professional test constructor who designing test in larger contexts.

Koksal (2004) outlined some points that teachers don’t follow and construct tests which have low quality for the national and international purposes. These elements cause poorness in the internal and external aspects of the tests and lead into the harmful influence on the test validity and reliability. These elements are:

- (i) Non specification of the target audience, what skill or area of ability the test intended to measure, how much time allocated for each test item, and what points the test-takers would get for each correct response. (ii) Separate sections not clearly stated. (iii) Test items having more than one possible answer because they were not conceptualized. (iv) Not stating time allocated for each task on the papers. Only the total time available to perform all the tasks was given. (v) Non consideration of level of students in test construction. (vi) Unclear instructions. (vii) Tasks students are expected to perform not being in concert with the tasks they are told to do during the classroom instructions. (viii) Lack of representativeness of items concerning what the teacher intends to test. (ix) Collage-production of some test items (as cited in Agu et al., 2013, p. 432).

2.5. Teacher-based Assessment of Pragmatics

Language instruction and teacher-based assessment work hand in hand to develop the learners' performance. This relation becomes more meaningful when the learners make themselves ready to communicate with native speakers. In these circumstances, the language learners should receive sufficient instruction with regard to the features of communication. One of these features that have the pivotal role on the process and product of communication is pragmatic knowledge. This pragmatic knowledge can be achieved through the direct instruction or even through exposure. Regarding the direct instruction, one can refer to the teachers' assessments of their own learners' performance in communicative activities for the purpose of learning not testing. Through understanding the breakdown in communication, language teachers can provide language learners with valuable comment. They can also let them have some sorts of peer feedback. All in all, this is important to have assessment at all stage of instruction, especially for teaching pragmatics. This type of assessment is much like Vygotsky's socio-cultural framework.

3. CONCLUSION

The role of teacher-based assessment is proven to be quite essential as a step within the learning. The reason for this view is related to teachers' knowledge of their own learners' performances and to-the-point evaluation of the needs and weak points based on individual differences. This type of assessment should be applied with great care in order to serve the educational purposes because simple mistakes can result in total failure. In other words, teachers' failure to identify different purposes of assessment may mislead themselves to guide language learners to learn through assessment. For instance, some teachers misunderstand the concept of assessment and try to imitate norms and objectives of educational settings and do not consider the individual differences and also the contextual factors. In these cases, the development does not occur because the teachers limited themselves to assessment for the sake of assessment, which is not much advocated in formative assessment.

One of the most controversial aspects of teacher-based assessment is its fairness. This issue needs to be discussed in more details to indicate whether this type of assessment has the potential to evaluate different individuals. Thus, further research should be directed towards the merit of this type of assessment. What should be noted here is the identification of fairness in process and product. That is, the selection of both content and procedure through which the teachers select and provide materials should be considered in order to reify the objectives of formative assessment.

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