

FACTORS AFFECTING EFL TEACHERS' CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT OF HIGH SCHOOL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract: On the implementation level of the National Foreign Language Project for the period 2008 – 2020, now extended to 2025 in Vietnam, the new English curriculum for Vietnamese highschools was promulgated and guiding documents were officially launched supporting EFL teachers in teaching and assessing language learners effectively to achieve the required learning outcomes - level 3/6 – VNFLPF (B1- CEFR). This paper reports the findings from an investigation into influential factors on EFL teachers' classroom assessment of high school language learners in Thua Thien Hue, Vietnam. The findings collected from interviews with 25 teachers' show that EFL teachers' classroom assessment of high school language learners is strongly influenced by contextual factors, learner variables, and teacher variables. From the findings, practical suggestions are made with the hope to provide a valuable basis for both learning improvement and teaching development.

Key words: classroom assessment, influential factors, high school language learners

1. Introduction

The decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg dated 30 September 2008 by the Vietnamese Prime Minister approving the National project named “Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Formal Educational System in the period of 2008-2020” (now extended to 2025) (henceforth the National 2020 project) was launched to comprehensively renew foreign language teaching and learning in the national education system. A new English curriculum for Vietnamese high schools with specific objectives has been developed and have made English language learning at all levels promising but challenging not only to learners but also to teachers. English language teaching for high school learners is not an exception.

In the implementation of this English curriculum for Vietnamese high schools, teachers are offered some training workshops including language teaching methodology, language testing and assessment and new curricula accompanied with new textbooks (MOET, 2013). Among these groups of significant knowledge and skills, English language testing and assessment is of great concern as effective assessment provides valuable information to students, educators, parents, and administrators for making right decisions or setting upcoming goals maintaining learners' interests and improving learning quality (McKay, 2006; Shohamy, 2001). Teachers' classroom assessment of high school language learners hence play a significant role in helping learners and teachers achieve the expected learning outcomes.

From the new reality of English language teaching and learning in Vietnam, this study was conducted to explore influential factors on EFL teachers' classroom assessment of high school learners in the implementation of the National project 2020.

2. Literature review

2.1. Classroom assessment

The assessment practices occupying thirty to fifty percent of teachers' professional time in language classroom activities is an integral part of learning and teaching (Azis, 2014). It is continuously carried out to collect information about learners' knowledge, abilities, and skills, to interpret, record and use learners' responses for educational purposes. In other words, assessment is considered as conscious and systematic activities and techniques employed by teachers to collect information, to analyze and interpret it, aiming at taking appropriate actions to improve teaching and learning (Berry, 2008).

Classroom assessment is usually classified into two types: formative assessment and summative assessment, which would be implemented at high school EFL teachers' classroom assessment being investigated in this study (Berry, 2008). Formative assessment is an on-going process of assessment involving all kinds of formal and informal assessment taking place continuously during teaching and learning process in the classroom to collect evidence of learners' knowledge, ability, attitudes and motivation (Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou, 2013) to inform the results for teaching. Unlike the formative assessment, summative assessment including one-period tests or end of term tests occurs at the end of the learning periods or courses, summarizing what learners have done at the end of a learning process. The summative assessment does not usually include timely feedback for improving learning quality, but is used for judging learners' achievement, and its results are for selection, grading, and school accountability purposes (Brown, 2004).

2.2. Factors affecting EFL teachers' classroom assessment

Teachers' perceptions and practices of classroom assessment have been influenced by many factors defined in many research. Teacher perceptions were shaped through schooling in the process of acquiring knowledge as language learners and language teachers. As language learners, teachers received knowledge consciously; meanwhile, as language teachers, teachers received knowledge either consciously or unconsciously through extensive experience in the language classroom. These two types of knowledge were noted as received or formal knowledge and experiential or practical knowledge and guided teachers' instructional classroom practices (Zangting, 2001). Johnson (1992) concluded that teachers' perceptions might be based mainly on images from their formal language learning experiences, and represented their dominant model of action during the practicum teaching experience. Borg (2003, 2015) suggested that teacher perceptions influence what teachers do in the classroom.. Ebsworth and Schweers (1997) also emphasized the influence of teachers' experiences on their teaching practice. Teachers' prior learning experiences acquired during teacher education establish cognition about language learning, which forms the basis of their initial conceptualizations of language teaching during teacher education, and which might continue to be influential throughout their professional lives (Borg, 2003). It was then inferred that background knowledge shaped teachers' new learning, which eventually influenced teachers' practical knowledge. Practical knowledge was content-related and guided teachers' actions in the classroom (Egitim, 2017). Sardareh (2013) stated that teachers' perceptions about the nature of

assessment were informed by their knowledge of the field of language teaching and learning and by contextual background and sociopolitical factors that rule their employment conditions. Teacher perceptions were also shaped by professional coursework in teacher education programs. In the paper review on teacher perceptions, Borg (2003) concluded that teacher education influenced trainee's perceptions, and the nature of this impact varied amongst different trainees in different contexts. In his study (2011), the findings from a substantial database of semi-structured interviews, coursework, and tutor feedback suggest that the program of an intensive eight-week in-service teacher education program in the UK of six English language teachers had a considerable, if variable, impact on the teachers' perceptions. In the same vein, Almarza (1996), Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000), Borg (2003) agreed that teacher education brought some changes to teacher knowledge. In other words, teachers' assessment expertise or teachers' knowledge and experience of assessment were significant factors affecting their classroom assessment (Cheng, Rogers & Hu, 2004).

Social, psychological, and environmental factors, which teachers may perceive as external forces beyond their control in the classrooms, could impair their ability to implement their practices. These factors include institutional requirements, school policies, classroom layout, learner proficiency and motivation, and resources. Additionally, contextual factors, such as a prescribed curriculum, time constraints, and high-stake examinations mediated the extent to which teachers could act in accordance with their beliefs (Borg, 2003; Jia & Burlbaw, 2006; Wang, 2006; Sardareh, 2013; Izci, 2016; Egitim, 2017; Rahman, 2018). Severe working conditions such as heavy workloads and shortage of time also hinder language teachers from turning their perceptions into practices (Hargreaves, 1992; Crookes & Arakaki, 1999).

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

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

Realizing the importance of guidelines in implementing the English language teaching program effectively, a sequence of official documents has been issued. Dispatch No.5333/BGDĐT-GDTrH of the implementation of assessing English language learners at secondary school from the school year 2014 - 2015 was issued by the MOET on September 29th, 2014. This document was written pursuant to Article 7, Section 2 – assessment of language learners' competences in Circular No. 58/2011/TT-BGDĐT dated December 12, 2011 by the MOET promulgating the regulations on evaluating and grading lower and highschool

students officially issued as a replacement for two previous documents (Decision No. 40/2006/QĐ-BGDĐT dated 05 October 2006 and Circular No. 51/2008/QĐ-BGDĐT dated September 15, 2008). Formative and summative assessment are used for assessing language learners in which formative assessments assess separated language skill; meanwhile, summative assessments are required to integrate language skills (reading, listening, writing) with language focus and aim at assessing learners' language competences.

From the review of the literature of classroom assessment, influential factors on teachers' classroom assessment of high school language learners in some of the latest research as well as the high school English education in Vietnam, this study was conducted to explore influential factors on EFL teachers' classroom assessment in a new language teaching and learning context in the implementation of the new language policy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research participants

The study involved 25 EFL teachers – 3 males and 22 females - with their age ranging from 21 to 50 from 8 high schools implementing the 10 – year English teaching curriculum launched on November, 23rd 2012 by the Ministry of Education and Training in the implementation of the Vietnam's National Project 2020 as a national strategy with a mission to renovate the foreign language teaching and learning in the National educational system in Thua Thien Hue province. These EFL teachers taking part in the study graduated from the university and college, respectively with at least a degree of English or English language teaching in general. 92% of these have spent more than 5 years teaching English at high schools and have also achieved the English standard proficiency level (level 5/6 VNFLPF – C1 CEFR) as required in the document dated April 3rd 2013 (MOET, 2013) providing guidelines for teacher selection in implementing the new English teaching curriculum at some high schools all over the country. In addition, these teacher participants have already attended at least one workshop or training program relating to English language teaching methodology and language assessment organized by the provincial department of Education and Training. These teachers are in charge of approximately 16 – 20 periods a week with an average number of around 40 students in each class.

3.2. Data collection

Twenty-five EFL teachers from twelve high schools implementing the new English curriculum were invited to take part in in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted to collect data for the research question:

What are influential factors on EFL teachers' classroom assessment of high school language learners?

4. Findings and discussion

The findings showed that EFL teachers' classroom assessment were strongly influenced by three groups of factors, including contextual factors, learner variables, and teacher variables.

4.1. Contextual factors

The most remarkable factors were contextual factors, including language curriculum, assessment resources, time, and workload.

Firstly, it was believed by most of the teacher participants that curriculum was the most influential factor to the teachers in the implementation of learner assessment. The curriculum with its overall objectives, content, methodology, assessment, and facilities played a significant role in implementing the curriculum effectively as teacher interviewees stated that it was essential to understand that at the end of the high school level, learners are required to achieve the overall objectives as levels 3.1/6, 3.2/6 and 3.3/6 (VNFPLF) or levels B1.1, B1.2 and B1.3 (CEFR) with detailed performance objectives for each level. Additionally, the content of 12 topics categorized into four themes works as the reference for teachers to choose appropriate language assessment tasks as being required as criteria in the choice of assessment tasks. Regulations on learner assessment taking the curriculum were also of great importance for the teachers to guide their learners achieve the learning outcomes.

One teacher asserted, “I often use the curriculum, especially learners' required performance objectives, as the main guidelines for my teaching and assessment” (TI3).

Another teacher shared, “I always choose reading tasks with the same topics of those in the curriculum so that learners can more opportunities to improve their vocabulary” (TI5).

Secondly, one problem that most teachers faced in the practices of assessing high school learners were associated with assessment resources. Many teacher interviewees said that there was a lack of resources for assessing language learners as this new English curriculum was launched in a short time, and a lack of proper and systematic preparation for resources impacts negatively on the learning outcomes (Nguyen, 2011).

As shared by one typical interviewee,

I find it difficult because there are not many learning resources as the new curriculum with new textbooks have been applied recently, so my colleagues and I have to explore, design, and edit assessment tools/tasks, especially for formative assessment. Summative tests are more available as official summative tests are designed by EFL teachers or by the DOET using a limited number of resources with assessment tasks matching the requirements for learners' learning outcomes guided by the curriculum. (TI1)

It can be seen from the quote that there was undoubtedly a lack of assessment resources for formative assessment; therefore, policies with solutions to this issue should be put into consideration for the implementation of the new curriculum effectively.

Thirdly, time and workload were two other factors to consider in implementing any assessment activities. Time in this context was related to the time the teachers spent preparing and conducting assessment tasks or tools matching the criteria required by the official documents and delivering feedback as teacher interviewees shared,

I know that I should spend much time on formative assessment to improve my learners' learning, but there is a lot of lesson content for each unit or section... I don't have time. (TI25) or I know that it is important to provide timely feedback for my learners to better their learning; however, I do not have much time for this. (TI5)

Teaching English in many large classes with about 40 learners prevents us from carrying out any assessment tasks and providing feedback effectively as it takes time to give marks and constructive feedback. (TI6)

Workload also hindered the teachers from conducting any assessment activities effectively as it was not easy to practice within a limited time allowance as one teacher shared,

I sometimes fail to make relevant adjustments in my instructions though I am aware of the need for changes to help my learners improve learning because of being overloaded with working hours” (TI7).

This influential factor was also confirmed in Crookes and Arakaki (1999), Hargreaves’ (1992) and Vu’s (2017).

4.2. Learner variables

Another highly influential factor in teachers' classroom assessment of high school learners was learner variables, including learner characteristics, learners' language competence, and learners' required learning outcomes. Significant principles of assessing language learners were developed based on high school learners' characteristics as it was believed that language assessment tasks should respond well to the level of physical, emotional, social, and cognitive growth of the age group of high school learners. Therefore, it was obvious that learner characteristics were considered to be influential. The findings also showed that teacher language competence was another factor teachers considered when selecting assessment tools, especially formative assessment. Some teacher interviewees stated that although learners are required to achieve VNFLPF level 2 or CEFR level A2, their language competencies were not the same. The dissimilarity in language learner competence took teachers time in selecting appropriate tools for assessing them effectively as one teacher interviewee shared, “The different level of learners’ language competence prevents us from conducting assessment activities effectively, especially for formative assessment” (TI5).

Moreover, learners’ expected learning outcomes by the authorities were also paid much attention to in the implementation of learner assessment, especially summative assessment.

4.3. Teacher variables

The third group of influential factors, known as teacher variables, were teaching experience and assessment expertise. These findings are supported by Cheng, Roger and Hu (2004), which considered teacher assessment expertise or teachers' experience of assessment as important factors affecting their perceptions and practices. Additionally, Almarza (1996), Borg (2003), and Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) agreed that teacher education also brought some changes. This study's findings showed that though the teacher participants had ever attended at least one workshop or training program in English language assessment for high school teachers, they still suggested that they should have more opportunities for taking part in some specific workshops or training programs as they

still found it challenging to design test items in a full test for their assessment in the classroom.

The data from the interviews clarified the fact that teaching experience and assessment expertise had influence on their classroom assessment. On the one hand, most teachers agreed that their teaching experience and assessment expertise helped them to conduct assessment activities confidently and effectively as one teacher shared, “The knowledge I’ve gained during my teaching career helps me a lot. I feel confident to carry out any assessment when necessary” (T21). Additionally, one of them agreed that, “It is a good idea for us to learn how to make assessment tasks or tests to assess our students effectively. I mean formative assessment tasks” (T14)

TI14 also added,

Taking part the training workshop on language teaching methodology really helps me more confident in making instruction, especially instruction for assessment. (T14)

On the other hand, a few experienced teachers said that assessment expertise did have influence on teachers’ classroom assessment, but it was not the most influential factors on classroom assessment, especially summative assessment as it was usually guided by official documents from DOET and the schools they were working for.

Influential factors on teachers’ classroom assessment of high school language learners were discussed to give insights into the process of implementing learner assessment.

5. Implications

The study's findings provided insights into influential factors on EFL teachers' classroom assessment of high school language learners. From the data collected from interviews, some implications would be suggested with the hope to implement the new curriculum effectively and to improve teaching and learning quality.

First of all, the results suggest that the teachers should be provided with more assessment resources relevant to the language curriculum. Teachers find it challenging to choose appropriate language tasks to assess their learners because there are not many assessment resources aligned with textbooks designed in the implementation of the new curriculum.

Second, teachers should also be encouraged to participate in professional development activities such as professional forums, training workshops frequently to be equipped with sufficient knowledge of language testing and assessment. They need to be offered more theoretical and practical knowledge to effectively adapt or design assessment activities in the teaching context.

Third, teachers should be relieved from the pressure of learners' learning outcomes and workload to conduct assessment activities effectively. The number of learners in each class should be decreased to about 20-25 to ensure that learners are equally and actively engaged in all classroom activities.

Last but not least, classroom facilities such as interactive boards, CD players should be upgraded for better teaching and learning quality. Listening skills and speaking skills should be given more priority than two other skills and language knowledge.

5. Conclusion

The findings from the analysis of interviews showed that teachers' assessment of language learners was strongly influenced by some factors, including contextual factors, learner variables, and teacher variables. The most remarkable factors were contextual factors, including language curriculum, assessment resources, time, and workload. Another highly influential factor in teachers' perceptions and practices of assessing school learners is learner variables, including learner characteristics, learners' language competence, and learners' expected learning outcomes. Other influential factors known as teacher variables including teaching experience and assessment expertise made some positive changes in teachers' classroom assessment.

Some implications made from the study's findings providing insights into influential factors on EFL teachers' classroom assessment of high school language learners would be suggested with the hope to implement the new curriculum effectively and to improve teaching and learning quality.

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NHỮNG YẾU TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐẾN VIỆC KIỂM TRA ĐÁNH GIÁ HỌC SINH TRUNG PHỔ THÔNG TRÊN LỚP HỌC

Tóm tắt: Trên cơ sở thực hiện mục tiêu của Đề án ngoại ngữ Quốc gia "Dạy và học ngoại ngữ trong hệ thống giáo dục quốc dân giai đoạn “2008 - 2020”, nay được mở rộng đến năm 2025 nhằm đổi mới toàn diện việc dạy và học ngoại ngữ, chương trình dạy và học ngoại ngữ mới được triển khai ở các cấp học với nhiều mục tiêu cụ thể mà trong đó chuẩn đầu ra bậc 3/6 the khung năng lực ngoại ngữ Việt Nam (B1 – CEFR) được đặt ra cho nhóm học sinh tốt nghiệp trung học phổ thông. Để đạt được chuẩn đầu ra này thì việc kiểm tra đánh giá học sinh trên lớp hiệu quả là một trong những tiêu chí cốt lõi bởi kiểm tra đánh giá học sinh trong lớp học đóng vai trò quan trọng. Bài báo này sẽ cung cấp kết quả nghiên cứu về những yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc kiểm tra đánh giá học sinh trên lớp học của giáo viên tiếng Anh trung học phổ thông ở Thừa Thiên Huế, Việt Nam. Kết quả thu được từ các phỏng vấn với 25 giáo viên cho thấy có nhiều yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc kiểm tra đánh giá học sinh của giáo viên. Đề xuất đưa ra từ kết quả nghiên cứu sẽ góp phần làm cho chất lượng dạy học và kiểm tra đánh giá môn tiếng Anh được tốt hơn.

Từ khóa: kiểm tra đánh giá, yếu tố ảnh hưởng, học sinh trung học phổ thông