Assessment of Learning Skills of EFL Students

Ahmedova Xalima, Xudaynazarova O`g`lanoy

Teacher, Termez state university

Annotation: The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of classroom performance assessment on the EFL students' basic and inferential reading skills. A pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was employed in the study. The subjects of the study consisted of 64 first-year secondary school students in Menouf Secondary School for Boys at Menoufya Directorate of Education (Egypt) during the academic year 2006/2007. These subjects were divided into an experimental group and a control group. Both groups were pretested to measure their basic and inferential reading skills before conducting the experiment.

Keywords: design, secondary, assessment, student, checklist

During treatment, students in the experimental group used the KWL chart and the self-assessment checklist for assessing their own reading strategies and comprehension in each reading session. The KWL chart and the self-assessment checklist were then compiled in a portfolio for each student. This portfolio was read by the teacher every week to provide both 'feedback' and 'feedforward' for improving each student's reading strategies and comprehension. Students in the control group answered a traditional discrete item test at the very end of each lesson and unit. This traditional test focused mainly on the phonological, lexical and grammatical elements of the reading skill, and students were judged on the basis of how well they achieved as compared to each other. The experiment lasted for six months. After treatment, the same pretests were readministered to both groups. The collected data were analyzed using the t-test. The pre-test data analysis revealed that there were no significant differences in the basic and inferential reading skills between the experimental group and the control group ($t=0.48$, $p > 0.05$; $t=-0.46$, $p > 0.05$, respectively). However, the post-test data analysis showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups of the study in the basic reading skills in favor of the control group and in the inferential reading skills in favor of the experimental group ($t=-2.61$, $p=0.01$; $t=7.75$, $p=0.000$, respectively). These findings suggest that classroom performance assessment is less effective in improving secondary school EFL students' basic reading skills, but more effective in developing their inferential reading skills than traditional assessment. In light of these findings, the researcher recommends that a multi-dimensional comprehensive approach to classroom assessment is more likely to improve both the basic and inferential reading skills of intermediate-level EFL students.

This study provides direct evidence that traditional assessment does help first-year secondary school EFL students improve their basic reading skills, and performance assessment does help them develop their inferential reading skills. This indicates that both types of assessment are complementary and that one type cannot significantly improve both basic and inferential reading skills, nor can it be responsive to individual differences. Therefore, a multi-dimensional comprehensive approach, that encompasses both traditional and performance assessments, is more likely to improve intermediate-level EFL students' basic and inferential reading skills. This implication is in line with Smith and Levin's (1996) contention that "no single type of assessment can always meet all purposes, in all situations," therefore, the solution, as they argue, is to "make the best use possible of various assessment strategies in order to meet the diverse criteria of and purposes for the overall assessment" (p. 111). The same implication is consistent with Lane and Stone's (2006) notion that performance and traditional assessments should be combined to capitalize on the advantages of each type as follows: Performance assessment tasks … [should be] combined with multiple-choice items in assessments to capitalize on the advantages of each type of approach. Performance assessment tasks, for example, offer the potential for more direct assessment, more complex items and more response information. Multiple-choice items, for example, offer the potential for more domain coverage, thus yielding higher reliability and more precise individual-level scores. An assessment that combines these different item

formats offers the potential for more direct assessment, more complex items, more response information, and at the same time adequate domain coverage and high reliability for individual-level scores. (p. 417) With respect to reading, the results of the study indicate that inferential reading comprehension is not simply a decoding activity, but an interactive process between the reader's background content knowledge and the text. Therefore, it requires activation of prior content knowledge and a transaction between the reader and information in the text through employing a wide range of strategies before, while and after reading. When this occurs, the reader can draw successful inferences related to the text. In line with this implication, Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert and Goetz (1977) state that "every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world" (p. 369). Along with the same implication, Aebersold and Field (1997) state: "If the topic…is outside [students'] experience or base of knowledge, they are adrift to an unknown sea" (p. 41). The results of the study also suggest that focusing on basic skills out of context does not lead to inferential reading comprehension improvement because such isolated skills remain in isolation and cannot compensate for students' lack of content knowledge. In other words, the basic blocks of reading are not enough for constructing meaning from the text and inferring what is between the lines because readers create meaning and make inferences depending on their prior content knowledge and on the strategies they employ to activate and connect this knowledge to the text they are reading. Therefore, one cannot expect students to think inferentially if they do not have enough prior content knowledge to base their thinking on. In support of this implication, some researchers found that content schema was more important for reading comprehension than formal and linguistic schemata. Freebody and Anderson (1983), for example, found that familiar text content aided comprehension more than familiar vocabulary. Nunan (1985), for a second example, found that the text which was linguistically easier but with unfamiliar content seemed to be significantly more difficult to comprehend than the text that was linguistically more difficult but with more familiar content. Taft and Leslie (1985), for a third example, found that third grade children with high prior content knowledge could comprehend up to 75% of the texts that were at a 5 th-6th grade readability level and concluded that readers with high background content knowledge can not only read better, but also comprehend beyond what is considered their normal reading level. Carrell (1987), for a fourth example, found that unfamiliar content schema negatively affected reading comprehension to a greater extent than unfamiliar formal schema and that reading familiar content even in an unfamiliar rhetorical form was relatively easier than reading unfamiliar content in a familiar rhetorical form. Moreover, of particular importance for foreign language students, Keshavarz, Atai and Ahmadi (2007) found that content schema had a greater effect than linguistic simplification on both reading comprehension and recall. The results of the studies mentioned above are in line with the implication that prior content knowledge plays a more significant role in reading comprehension than linguistic knowledge because readers can compensate for their linguistic deficiencies by guessing the general meaning according to assumptions derived from their content schema, but not the reverse. However, this does not mean that linguistic knowledge is not necessary for reading comprehension, but it is not enough for achieving a higher level of comprehension. The experimental group students in the present study reached a higher level of reading comprehension than the control group ones not only because they activated their own content schema and responded to whole texts, but also because they had a threshold level of foundational reading skills before the beginning of the study. This in turn enabled them to use global reading strategies to read strategically and inferentially. The implication here is that a certain amount of linguistic competence is needed before applying performance assessment particularly in the initial stage of learning a foreign language. In line with this implication Takahashi and Beebe (1987, cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 181) state that "learners may need to reach a threshold level of linguistic proficiency before pragmatic transfer can take place." In support of the same implication, Smith et al. (1997) reported from their study that nearly two thirds of teachers believed that pupils "need to master basic skills before they can progress to higher order thinking and problem solving" (p. 41). Also, in Feinberg's (1990) opinion, it is important that students acquire a foundation of basic skills on which to build their thinking skills. In support of this implication, subordinate data analysis of the pretest and posttest scores of the present study, using the paired samples t-test, showed that the mean scores of the experimental group on the basic reading skills post-test were higher than those of the pre-test, though statistically insignificant (t= 1.75, df= 31, p= 0.09); and the mean scores of the control group on the inferential reading skills posttest remained nearly the same as those of the pretest (t= 0.37, df= 31, p= 0.71). The same

implication is supported by Rodgers, Paredes and Mangino's (1991) study, in which they looked at the effects of the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) on high school students' basic and higher-order thinking skills. The study took place over five years, using 12,404 eleventh grade students from Austin Independent School District. The test focused on language arts and math. Rodgers et al. found that the basic skills, as measured on the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP), increased as a result of the minimum competency test, but higher-order thinking skills remained the same. They concluded that districts should be cautious about narrowing the curriculum and letting higher order skills suffer for the sake of improving test scores. In further support of the same implication, Amrein and Berliner (2002) examined data from 18 states of America, that implemented traditional high-stakes testing, to assess whether students gained any knowledge that they could apply elsewhere other than learning the necessary facts for doing a state's high-stakes test. From the data analysis they concluded: "[I]f the intended goal of high stakes testing policy is to increase student learning, then that policy is not working. While a state's high stakes test may show increased scores, there is little support … that such increases are anything but the result of test preparation and/or the exclusion of [low proficient] students from the testing process" (p. 2). In light of the results of the study, the researcher recommends a comprehensive classroom assessment approach, which encompasses students' learning processes and products and treats assessment as part of the teaching/learning process, to provide both teachers and students with ongoing information to adjust teaching and learning accordingly. Just as we need a link among teaching, learning and assessment, so too, do we need a link between classroom formative assessment and external summative assessment. None of them should constitute the sole basis for assessing students' learning particularly when making critically important decisions for grade-level promotion and graduation. In this respect, the researcher recommends that the portfolio, in which the teacher keeps the student's classroom assessments throughout the academic year, should make up 50% of the final grade. This portfolio should be read by the class teacher every week to diagnose each student's strengths and weaknesses and suggest remedies for her/his weaknesses, and by a jury of raters in the end of the academic year to score it blindly in terms of standardized rubrics.

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