

Strategies to Enhance Assignment and Feedback Practices in the 21st century Classroom: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine assignment and feedback practices of students in a B. Ed TESL programme. It also identified strategies to enhance the implementation of formative assessment in higher education. Questionnaires and interview questions were used to collect data. The study indicated a moderate level of assignment and utilisation of feedback practices by B. ED TESL students. Three important strategies that have been identified were “giving constructive feedback”, “improving the conduct of assignment practices” and “improving the utilisation of feedback”. The findings imply that there is a need to further improve assessment strategies which would assist lecturers to plan and conduct assessments to cater to the needs of students.

Keywords: Assignment, feedback, formative assessment, higher education, practices

INTRODUCTION

According to Popham (2008, pp. 7-8), the concept of formative assessment process is a planned process which consists of several tests or assignments in multi-steps. These tests or assignments assess the learners’

capabilities and through the teacher’s feedback, the materials and assignments can be further refined. In this context, assignments refer to assigning learning tasks during teaching (Black & William, 2009). This is also known as formative assessment which can be in any form as long as the task is meant to close the knowledge gap between learners (Black & William, 2009). The different tasks are effective in obtaining an accurate picture of the student’s learning abilities (Regier, 2012). Usually in higher education, the tasks are synonymous with ‘assignments’.

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Assignments play a significant role in enhancing learning. According to Elliot, Suda, Hamilton, Curry, and Byrd (2014), the elimination of learner-centred assignments has led to a decline in students' academic performance. Decrease in out-of-class assignments has reduced student-centred learning because they have fewer chances of applying the course content outside the classroom. Students also have less opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of course content and received less feedback on their progress in the course (Elliot et al., 2014). The findings of this study point to the importance of assignments in enhancing learning and thus, proper instructions are important.

In formative assessment, assignments practices can be enhanced by making feedback compulsory, and by providing immediate feedback (Fulton, Ivanitskaya, Bastian, Erofeev, & Mendez, 2013; Garner, Gusberg, & Kim, 2013; Mullet, Butler, Verdin, Borris, & Marsh, 2014). Fulton et al (2013) also emphasise the importance of deadlines in assignments. They found that deadlines enhanced learning by allowing students to gain control over their pace of learning with short delayed information retention and near information transfer in their learning processes (Fulton et al., 2013). In making feedback compulsory and immediate, Mullet et al (2014) found that students who received delayed feedback felt disconnected between actual and perceived effectiveness. On the other hand, Garner, Gusberg and Kim (2013) found that immediate feedback encouraged students'

learning in addition to developing positive relationship between the students and their lecturer. Accordingly, assignment practices can be implemented in the program to intricate all of the advantages of immediate feedback by upgrading its' conduct.

The idea of formative assessments still needs to be promoted vastly to the lecturers in general, although some institutions have implemented it effectively. A study on 534 lecturers in 33 public and private higher institutions in Malaysia on assessments on learning suggests that the Malaysian lecturers do implement assessment for learning practices though they are several limitations during the implementation, for instances, in giving feedback, using a diverse method, or employing grading system which promotes the students' effort in finishing the task (Tunku Ahmad et al, 2014). The study also depicts that the lecturers conduct less formative assessment because of their lack of exposure to formative assessment which is different than the traditional assessment practices (Tunku Ahmad et al, 2014). The surfacing of formative assessment in language studies has also been reviewed by Derrick and Ecclestone (2006). In their reviews, most of the studies on formative assessments in language learning discovered the issues of pedagogy, applicable in general to the subjects as well as the contexts. For example, the shortcomings of summative assessment processes on deeper learning and the importance of formative assessments techniques to carry more weightage than summative assessments in instruction and learning. Most of the studies were also more

inclined to the learning of younger learners in which the researches were conducted more in primary schools than in secondary schools or tertiary learning institutions. It seemed that scarce literature has been done on formative assessment in the area of higher education learning, focusing on the demographic factors of the learners. Therefore, this study deems to investigate on the assignment and feedback practices experienced by students as well as strategies to enhance the implementation of formative assessment in a program in higher education.

METHODS

This study was designed to address the key issues of student-driven assessment strategies in the 21st century classroom in higher education in Malaysia. The researchers utilized a set of questionnaire which contained open and closed ended questions. Besides that, a set of semi-structured interview questions was also used to obtain information to answer the research questions. The research questions of this study were identified as follow:

- What are the student-driven assignment practices which have been observed in the classroom?
- What are the best student-driven practices of feedback that have been observed in the classroom?
- What are the strategies to improve the implementation of formative assessment in higher education?

The population identified was the undergraduates from a B. Ed TESL program in a public university in the state of Selangor. A total of 105 undergraduate respondents were selected using random cluster sampling to answer the questionnaire. As for the interview, four students and four lecturers were purposely selected for the interview sessions. The questionnaire was adopted from Chan's earlier study entitled "Current Practices of Assessment in Higher Education in the United States" (2011). The reliability of the instrument was determined through Cronbach Alpha and it was confirmed to be reliable with the value of .76. The validity of the interview questions and the questionnaire were examined through subject experts. The criteria for student respondents were, they must be the undergraduates of B. Ed TESL program and have experienced formative assessment for at least a semester. While as for the lecturer respondents, they must have at least three years of teaching experience in B. Ed TESL program in higher education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Student-Driven Assignment Practices

Table 1 shows the mean scores for student-driven assignment practices in the programme. All of the items had the mean scores between the ranges of two to four. It was deduced that the average level of assignment practices was in the range of 'Agree', 'Almost Agree' and 'Disagree'. Items which gained higher mean scores in the assignment practices dimension were

identified as ‘When I do small assignments, I learn better’ (M=4.10, SD=.76), ‘I feel that tackling the assignments really makes me think’ (M=4.07, SD=.75) and ‘I need to analyse, synthesize and evaluate while completing my assignments’ (M=4.00, SD=.77). Meanwhile, the three items of assignment practices with comparative lower mean scores only at almost agree level were ‘When I tackle an assignment it is not clear what I would count as successful answer’ (M=2.52, SD=.89), and ‘I feel

that the assignment are very challenging’ (M=2.31, SD=.82).

The findings from the questionnaire were supported through the responses from the open-ended questions and the interview. It was found that when students finished their assignments, they learned more and better. From the open-ended questions, four student respondents stated that when they did small assignments, they learned better in understanding the topics of the course, and improved their interpersonal skills.

Table 1
Student-driven assignment practices in B.Ed TESL programme

Student-Driven Assignment Practices	Mean	SD
When I do small assignments, I learn better	4.16	.76
I feel that tackling the assignments really makes me think	4.07	.75
I need to analyse, synthesize and evaluate while completing my assignments	4.00	.77
My lecturer uses small assignments in the course	3.95	.80
I self-reflect on my own work in finishing the assignments	3.84	.89
The assignments give very clear instructions about what I am expected to do	3.84	.75
Doing assignments are better than exams, because I can get assistance from others	3.81	1.01
I learn more from doing the assignments than from studying the course material	3.48	1.01
In completing the assignments I can get away with not understanding certain concepts but still get high marks	3.20	1.14
When I tackle an assignment it is not clear what I would count as successful answer	2.52	.89
I feel that the assignment are very challenging	2.31	.82
Overall Mean=3.54		Overall SD=.35

(Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Almost Agree, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree)

For example, respondent R1 said that assignments are really helpful since it is an ongoing activity throughout the semester.

“It shows progress of my understanding and ability to apply

it better than final examination.”
(Respondent R1)

Meanwhile, respondent R2 also highlighted on the benefits of feedback on his interpersonal skills.

“It would help me to gain a better understanding on a particular topic as well as gaining experience from interacting people which helps on my interpersonal skills.” (Respondent R2)

The findings from the interview conducted with the lecturers also supported that the assignments were helping the students to learn better. A lecturer, respondent L2 explained that assignments were given to the students as a means to guide them in a continuous learning process.

“Assignments are given for the purpose of assessment and also as part of their continuous learning process.” (Respondent L2)

Overall, the findings obtained from the open-ended questions and interviews supported that the use of assignment had enhanced the learning in higher education. The assignment practices were perceived to be at the moderate level, based from the result in the questionnaire. It is found that assignments can be delivered more effectively if they are given in a focused scope, and should be able to stimulate the learners' thinking. Assignments should also promote brain activities such as analysing skills, synthesizing skills and evaluating skills. As a result of lecturer-student communication through feedback, students should develop their interpersonal skills while working on their assignments. Lastly, assignments must be a form of guidance

in students' learning process for it to be effective as a student-driven assessment in the 21st century education. The result is congruent to the findings in a study done by Elliot et al (2014), in which the elimination of learner-centered assignments in a course has decreased the students' academic performance and their satisfaction on the course. Coherently, Lee (2002) found that learner-centered assignments helped in the students' strategy and self-regulation which aided students in planning and revising their learning. This proves that from doing assignments, students learn better by developing their strategies in self-regulated learning.

Utilization of Feedback Practices in B.Ed TESL Programme

Table 2 depicts the mean score of utilization of feedback practices experienced by the students. From Table 2, most of the respondents strongly agreed that they tried to avoid similar mistakes for revising (M=4.20, SD=.86), read the feedback carefully and tried to understand what it meant (M=4.04, SD=.81), used the feedback to go back over what they had done in the assignment (M=4.03, SD=.73). Conversely, most of the respondents moderately agreed that the feedback did not help them with any subsequent assignments (M=3.99, SD=.77), they tend to only read the marks given without referring to the feedback provided (M=3.94, SD=.90) and the feedback prompted them to go back over material covered earlier in the course (M=3.61, SD=.87). The computed construct

Table 2
Student-driven feedback practices in B.Ed TESL programme

Utilization of Feedback	Mean	Std. Deviation
I try to avoid similar mistakes for revising	4.20	.859
I read the feedback carefully and try to understand what it means	4.04	.808
I use the feedback to go back over what I have done in the assignment	4.03	.727
The feedback does not help me with any subsequent assignments	3.99	.766
I tend to only read the marks given without referring to the feedback provided	3.94	.960
The feedback prompts me to go back over material covered earlier in the course	3.61	.872

(Scale:1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Almost Agree, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly Agree)

of 'Utilization of Feedback Practices' was done to find the overall mean score on the utilization of feedback practices.

Based from the open-ended questions, the students agreed that they mostly used the feedbacks to avoid doing similar mistakes again. For example, one student, student respondent R16 claimed that the feedback helps him to reflect on his mistakes and he would avoid them in the future. He said:

"The feedback makes me reflect on mistakes that I have done and I am more careful so that I would not do the same mistakes in the future."
 (Respondent R16)

On the other hand, two of the lecturers felt that students who utilized the most feedback were the students who came to see them to have further consultation to discuss on the feedback which were given to them. For example, lecturer respondent L4 claimed that students who met him for further consultations and asked about the feedback stated in their assignments to

improve their mistakes would be the group who would learn much.

"So those who care to actually listen and maybe come face to face and see me are the students whom I believe will learn much. Most of the students would, normally won't come back to me to ask me after they receive back their assignments.. Only a few, who are usually the same person would come and these people would usually perform in the class. This is because, they have the positive attitude to come to me. Sadly, majority of the students do not like to come to me." (Respondent L4)

According to another lecturer respondent, L1, students who met her face to face and engaged her with questions would improve further than the others.

"Yes, some students improve more than others especially those who see

me face to face, those who engage me with questions.” (Respondent L1)

According to Samah (2013), negotiation of meaning is one of the ways of helping students grasp the understanding on feedback given to avoid mistakes in the future. Students were recommended to have oral and impromptu discussions with the teacher during the class to understand the feedback. Shamsad and Faizah (2009) found students to fully utilize the feedbacks given to improve their draft in writing tasks by reading and carefully understand the feedback. Ene and Upton (2014) supported this finding by positing that feedback could prompt revision to revise the mistakes corrected and improve them in their next draft. Moreover, Kleitman and Costa (2014) found that feedbacks which develop metacognitive skills were effective in making the students realized of their strategies in learning such as revising back the materials in order to know the instruction expectation and to avoid doing silly mistakes in the assignments. Feedbacks were seen to be used most when they revised and reflected (Kleitman & Costa, 2014). Therefore, it is clear that feedback can be used to avoid mistakes by negotiating its meaning with the lecturer, to improve the next draft through revision on the materials and the previous tasks.

Thus, it was inferred that the student respondents do utilize the feedback by trying to avoid similar mistakes for revising, reading the feedback carefully and try to

understand what it meant and used the feedback to reflect on what they had done for the assignment. From the interview, it was found that the students who asked further about the feedback given for their assignments would be the most to learn from the mistakes and developed in their learning.

Strategies to Improve Formative Assessment in the 21st Century Classroom

Analysis of data provided three important assessment strategies: “provide constructive feedback”, “ensure utilisation of feedback by the students” and “improve the conduct of giving assignments” in the course. The three important themes are portrayed in Figure 1.

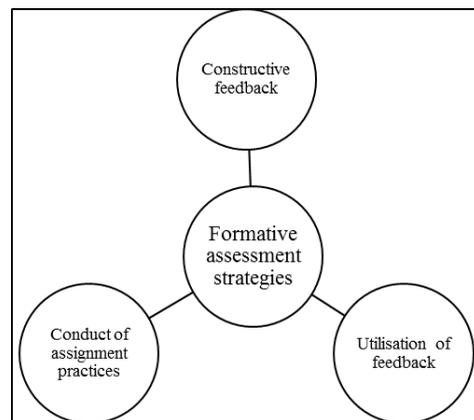


Figure 1. Strategies to improve formative assessment practices in B. Ed TESL programme

Providing constructive feedback. In order to improve formative assessment practices, more than 80% of the respondents suggested constructive feedback from their lecturers

whereby the latter should highlight student mistakes to improve their learning.

“The students should know where the mistakes are and by having feedback, students can actually improve themselves. I also think lecturers should provide feedback for every assignment so that students know their strength and weaknesses.” (Respondent R42)

The feedback should also be more specific: “I think every lecturer must give guidance and help regarding on how to complete the assignments and give feedback through written” (Respondent R43). “Feedback should be given personally and it should be honest with the intention of preparing students to face the real-world problems” (Respondent R44). Respondents also prefer written rather than verbal feedback.

Encouraging feedback from their peers could also help reduce the lecturer’s burden in providing feedback to every student. “The lecturer should initiate peer evaluation, especially for presentation and group work. Encourage peer to provide immediate feedback, so it’ll become more effective” (Respondent R46).

There was suggestion also of feed-forward type of feedback to the students before they began with their assignments. “Give rubrics to students before introducing and giving the assignments so it would make and help the students to get clearer image of the assignments” (Respondent R48).

Thus, respondents also agreed that feedback should be constructive, be it negative or positive.

Wiggins (2012) pointed that quality feedback were those which were constructive, goal referenced, tangible and transparent, actionable, user friendly, timely, ongoing and consistent. Li (2007) suggested that feedback from peers should be constructive which would improve the students’ learning experience. Therefore, respondents suggested providing constructive feedback which are focused on their strengths and weaknesses.

Utilisation of feedback to improve learning among the students.

In order to enhance formative assessment practices, about 12% of the respondents suggested that students must utilise the feedback given to them. Students should realize their responsibility to review the feedback in order to acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of their learning. “Maybe ask students to meet with lecturers personally for consultation if they need verbal feedback” (Respondent R50).

Lecturers also played a significant role to ensure the students learn from the feedback. Lecturers were urged to check students’ progress on their assignment regularly because this will avoid procrastination and enhance students’ understanding.

“Lecturers need to check students’ progress with their assignments. This will avoid procrastination. It will help enhance students’

understanding. This will help lecturer to give feedback.”
(Respondent R51)

Findings indicate that lecturers do provide assistance for the students to complete their assignments.

“Normally I’d say that they would come to see me only when the due date for the submission is near. So, that shows their attitude, like procrastinating. When the due date is near, then would only they be worried about the assignment.”
(Respondent L4)

Willis (2011) suggested that learners’ autonomy emerged when formative assessments are applied. The students acted as a knower and expressed their identities through the explicit and tacit of learning as well as negotiating with the lecturers on their learning. Yan and Cheng (2014) also explained that instructors who had a favourable instrumental attitude, a positive subjective norm and high level of self-efficacy would commit highly to formative assessment. In addition, Ruiz Primo (2011) inferred that dialogues with lecturers would assist students to think conspicuously based on the feedback discussed to construct their learning. Hence, lecturers and students play significant roles in utilisation of feedback. The utilisation of feedback was found to be a step to improve formative assessment in the programme. Utilisation of feedback can be enhanced through student and lecturer

awareness of the importance of feedback in learning and instruction.

Improving the conduct of student-driven assignments. Another way to improve formative assessment in the programme was to improve the conduct of assignments. About 8% of the respondents believed to improve the conduct of assignments, feedback must be made compulsory and immediate when giving and returning assignments (R52, R53, R54). They also suggested for the lecturers to fix the deadlines of assignments accurately in order to enhance the conduct of assignments and feedback practices. It was suggested the assignment due dates are scheduled to have adequate interval period to allow the assignments to be returned to the students with feedback. “Assignments should be given fixed due dates and there should be time interval for each assignment given” (Respondent R52).

The conduct of assignment could be improved by giving feedback immediately. Feedback should be provided instantly after giving the assignments to students so that they can response to it as soon as possible and improve. “It depends on different courses. But the lecturers should provide instant feedback so the students can response and improve better” (Respondent R53).

Students also suggested for the feedback to be compulsory and immediate. If feedback was made compulsory, all assignments would be returned back with comments from their lecturer. “By making feedback

compulsory, all assignments would be returned with feedback from the lecturer” (Respondent R54).

The findings are consistent with those in the literature. Mullet et al (2014) agreed with the importance of feedback, in which they found that students who received delayed feedback felt disconnected. Hence, students felt that assignments should be given fixed due dates to encourage immediate feedback. Fulton et al (2013) supported the findings by stating that frequent deadlines boost distribution of practices and improved learning by helping the students to gain control over their pace of learning with short delayed retention and near transfer in their learning processes. Furthermore, Garner et al (2013) found that immediate feedback had helped enhanced learning and eventually contribute to positive relationship between students with the lecturer.

Obviously, the 21st century assessment could be enhanced by fixing their due dates, providing immediate feedback in the assignments and making the practices of giving feedback compulsory when returning the assignments to the students. The conduct of assignments should be immediate with feedback and fixed due dates as compulsory elements. Besides, feedback practices could also be enhanced by giving constructive feedback, by ensuring the utilisation of feedback among the students and by improving the conduct of assignments in the programme. Lecturers were advised to give quality feedback which could assist in student learning. Feedback can be enforced

when both students and lecturers play their role in learning.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study pointed to the importance of assignments and feedback practices in enhancing learning. Thus, without formative assessment practices, it would be difficult for the lecturers to gauge the students’ current mastery of their learning based on the content syllabus.

Lecturers should also be more sensitive about the quality, quantity and timing of feedback for the students to take advantage.

This study has also shown that students welcome written and constructive feedback and assignments should follow a schedule.

As we move further into the new millennium, it becomes clear that the 21st Century classroom needs are very different from those of the 20th Century (21st Century Skills Assessment, 2008). If students are to be productive members of the 21st century workplace, they must master the skills needed in the 21st Century.

Teachers are facilitators of student learning and creators of productive classroom environments in which students can develop the skills they need in the workplace. The primary instructional method is no longer whole group discussion. Instead, the teacher must draw on a variety of instructional and learning methods to meet the needs of all the students in addition to using a variety of performance-based assessments to evaluate students. Tests that measure a student’s ability to memorise

and to recall facts are no longer the sole means of assessing student learning. Instead, teachers use student projects, presentations, and other performance-based assessments to determine students' achievement and their individual needs. These changes are necessary because the goal of the 21st Century classroom is to prepare students to become productive members of the workplace.

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (Higher Education) outlines 10 shifts that will spur continued excellence in the higher education system. The focus is on talent excellence and transforming higher education delivery to boost higher education in the country.

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