

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teachers' Perceptions of Fair Assessment

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Although assessment is crucial, we know less about how assessment is understood and administered by teachers. The following study explored insight into lower secondary EFL teachers' perceptions of fair assessment and the types of assessment that worked and those that did not work in their classes. The data was processed through individual semi-structured interviews with ten (grades 7-9) English as a Foreign Language teachers representing seven lower secondary schools in the Czech Republic. The concept of fair assessment and assessment that worked or not were identified, analysed and interpreted. The findings showed use of specific and focused assessment criteria and assessment that is non-judgemental, honest and transparent as fair assessment. Results indicated verbal assessment to be the best example of assessment that work while self-peer as assessment that doesn't work with students.

Keywords: Teacher perceptions; Assessment; Fair assessment; Assessment that works; Assessment that doesn't work

Introduction

Classroom assessment has received increased attention from many researchers, government, and education policyholders in the recent years. Over the past decades, several researchers have studied how assessment empowers and supports learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008). The OECD policy claims authentic, valid and reliable evaluation and assessment to be those which lead to the improvement of educational practices at all levels and boost student learning and are central to establishing a high-performing education system (OECD, 2013). Although classroom assessment has gained wider popularity in the recent decades, there has been little research done in understanding EFL teachers' perception of fair assessment. Since teachers are primarily responsible for assessing instruction and student learning, it is crucial to investigate how teachers perceive and judge their own classroom assessment practices. This is especially significant if the purpose is to support student learning. Nevertheless, it appears that there is a rather limited scope of research examining how teachers perceive or judge their own assessment practices. In addition, this is still an unexplored area in EFL classrooms in Czech lower secondary schools. Hence, using a qualitative interpretive method, this study seeks to explore classroom assessment practices of EFL teachers (Grades 7-9) by examining their perception of fair assessment and assessment that works and doesn't work in their classes, in order to assist student learning.

Background

Assessment is crucial to the education process. According to OECD (2013) the term assessment refers to a judgement made on individual student progress and the achievement of learning goals. It covers classroom-based assessment as well as large-scale, external assessment and examinations. In the words of Remesal, as

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assessment has been described as a complex process of collection, analysis and evaluation of evidence of the teaching and learning process and its learning outcomes (2010).

Although the most visible types of assessment are summative, that is, measuring what students have learnt through testing and examination, or holding schools accountable for student performance, there is also formative assessment, referring to frequent, interactive assessment of student progress and understanding. The difference between formative assessment and summative assessment is that the information gathered in the formative process is used to shape improvements, rather than serve as a summary of performance (OECD, 2013).

Smith (2001) asserts assessment as a pedagogical tool that requires a deep understanding of pedagogical principles to be practised beneficially in the instructional situation and claims it as a part of teachers' assessment literacy, which is a concept recently used for understanding assessment (Smith, 2015). Additionally, it allows teachers to adjust teaching approaches to better meet identified learning needs. Stiggins (1995) uses the terms sound and unsound assessment, which we choose to understand as effective and ineffective assessment focusing on the student and student learning. Suskie (2000) discerns that if we are to draw reasonably good conclusions about what our students have learned, it is imperative that we make our assessments and our uses of the results as fair as possible for as many students as possible. Consistent with Suskie (2000), Pettifor and Saklofske (2012) claim that following fair and equitable assessment practices should form the core value of respect for the dignity and well-being of all students being assessed. Referring to Pettifor and Saklofske (2012), Aitken (2012) points out "the perception of teachers not listening or honouring students' voices could indicate a breakdown of the pedagogical relationship that further weakens the potential for student learning." (p. 175). Hence, to ensure student dignity and respect for student learning, assessment should be made reliable, valid, transparent and fair (Race, 2009). Lam (1995) defined fair assessment as one in which students are given equitable opportunities to demonstrate what they know. Supporting Lam (1990), Race (2009) defines assessment fairness as a niche where all students should have equivalence of opportunities to succeed even if their experiences are not identical.

According to Lian, Yew, and Meng (2014) fairness of assessment means the assessment should allow for all students of different backgrounds and ethnicities to do equally well by granting equal opportunity to perform those skills and knowledge that are being assessed. Suskie (2018) explains equitable assessment as one in which the students are assessed using the most appropriate methods and procedures. For instance, they may vary from one student to the next, depending on the student's prior knowledge, cultural experience, and cognitive style. Hence, Suskie (2018) argues that it may not be possible to create custom-tailored assessments for each student, but nonetheless, there are measures we can take to make our assessment methods as fair as possible. Suskie (2000) suggests good assessment should be useful and must give reasonably accurate and truthful information. In addition, they should be fair, ethical, systematic, and cost-effective. Supporting Suskie (2000), Deluca, Lapointe-McEwan and Luhanga (2016) also assert assessment fairness to involve cultivating fair assessment conditions for all learners with sensitivity to student diversity and exceptional learners.

To enhance fairness and equity in the classroom, Vlanti (2012) indicated clarity in terms of purpose of assessment, the methods and tasks used for the assessment should be ensured. The gap between instruction and learning will come down if these elements of assessments are made explicit. In addition, Webber, Scott, Aitken, and Lupart (2014) claim that assessment should be evidence- rather than opinion-based. Based on their findings, a call was made for a more balanced consideration of assessment in the context of a civil society, for the importance of informed leadership in fair assessment practices and for incorporation of the stu-

dent voice into the assessment process as involving students in the assessment process and making assessment transparent is crucial in enhancing their learning.

Furthermore, Santos and Pinto (2014) found that students better understand the assessment expectations especially if they co-construct the criteria with their teachers. Recent study by Bourke (2016) points the importance of involving students' in the process of assessment. Student involvement is crucial in developing learner's ability to self-assess and contributes to understanding their own learning. This was supported in a recent study by Jonsson, Smith and Geirsdottir (2018) that points the importance of involving students in the assessment and feedback process in order to develop students' vocabulary of assessment. Developing students' vocabulary of assessment could yield better learning for them.

It is not enough for teachers to assume that learning goals can be attended by making assessment purpose, methods and tasks explicit nor by involving students. Another critical element is the need for assessment diversity to support learning. Seden and Svaricek's (2018) study with lower secondary EFL teachers supports the need for diversity of assessment to address learning differentiation amongst students.

Teacher perceptions of fair assessment and assessment that work and that doesn't is an unexplored area, hence, in light of the discussion above, it is crucial to develop an explicit epistemology of fair assessment. This literature has identified a gap in the knowledge of contemporary research on the Czech teachers' perception of fair assessment and effective and ineffective assessment practices. Hence, this shortcoming has helped me to formulate the following questions to find an answer to these queries.

The research questions underpinning this study are:

1. What constitutes fair and unfair assessment from the teachers' perspective?
2. What is teachers' perception of assessment that work and that doesn't in a EFL classroom?

The significance of the study is that findings from this study will contribute to existing theories on teachers' perception of fair assessment and assessment that works and that does not in an EFL class.

Research Method

The method adopted for this study is a qualitative interpretive approach as it allows to establish the meaning of the study area from the views of the participants.

Since the nature of the research is qualitative, semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2008) with the teachers were conducted to garner solid data on understanding the EFL teachers' perception of fair assessment.

The fair and assessment that work and that doesn't in the context of English as a Foreign language is being explored as the majority of the assessment practices in EFL are mostly based on theories, research and textbooks, unlike in many other subjects. In addition, the abundance of international studies on assessment in connection to EFL provides us the avenue to compare findings from this study with those of the international studies.

The purposeful sampling strategy has been employed in the beginning as it is helpful in providing valuable data by virtue of their knowledge and experience (Descombe, 2010) and this was followed by snowball sampling method. The participants were 10 EFL teachers from seven lower secondary schools in the Czech Republic.

Consent from the schools was solicited via emails and the researcher was granted permission to interview the teachers, and to observe lessons.

Data collection

The data consist of classroom observations combined with the teacher interviews. The interview guide was developed to structure the interview and to get a better understanding of teachers' perceptions of fair assessment. 15 classroom observations with 2 each for 5 teachers and 1 each for 5 teachers were made. 5 teachers could not be observed twice due to their tight schedule. 10 interviews were facilitated.

One aim of this study was to contribute to a better understanding of how teachers perceive and practice fair assessment, and so the research design was geared to investigate whether classroom assessment practice was perceived to be fair, unfair and/or useful to support learning. Interviews were held in the fall term of the school year 2017.

An interview guide was used to accomplish a smooth flow of the interview sessions. The shortest interview lasted 45 minutes and the longest 90 minutes. Pseudonyms were used for the participants.

Individual interviews were conducted to understand teachers' perception of fair assessment, the practice of fair assessment and most of all, to understand which assessment worked and which did not and for what reason, from the perspective of EFL teachers. In the interviews, the teachers were asked to describe and explain their beliefs of fair and unfair assessment, what type of assessment was useful for learning, which ones were not useful – and why, how and if assessment methods were to be used for further learning.

Analyses

Data analyses followed an interpretive approach where interview transcripts and notes from classroom observation were written and coding categories from teachers' interviews were developed (Creswell, 2007; Kvale, 2008). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and teachers' perceptions of fair assessment were categorised according to the perception of fair and unfair assessment and assessment that did or did not work. The reliability of the coding and data analysis procedures was ensured by an expert. Three categories related to classroom assessment were developed: first, teachers differ in their perception of fair assessment; second, teachers' notion of unfair assessment; and lastly, teachers' beliefs of assessment that works and that does not.

Findings

Three patterns emerged from teachers' perceptions of fair assessment: first, teachers differ in their perception of fair assessment; second, teachers' notion of unfair assessment; and third, teachers' beliefs of assessment that works and that doesn't.

Teacher perceptions of fair assessment

The teachers' concept of fair assessment varied from person to person. Each teacher that had been interviewed understood that fair assessment is a tool that should serve the purpose of learning. Therefore, they believe learning should be rendered in a fairer manner wherein each student is appreciated on the basis of their unique abilities and performance.

Teachers conceived the idea of fair assessment as having more choices on the grading scales, for example, a scale of 1 to 10 because they believed such ranges in the grading scales will offer them the capacity to assess each and every potential of the learner. Hence, this scheme would take into consideration the individual

learning differences among students in the class. The following statement by a teacher illustrates her preference for the broader grading choice:

I mean, grades are good, but it would be better if they had been 1 to 10 because it would be good for children. Sometimes 2 people get the same mark but they are not at the same level. So, it will be better if it were from 1 to 10 or 1 to 20. Maybe it is too much but will be better for children. (Rachel)

Teachers also understood fair assessment as being assessment whereby the teacher assessed the students based on their knowledge, but not in terms of face value. Meaning assessment has to be non-judgemental. Furthermore, teachers point out the importance of involving students in the process of assessment, and that students' views should be valued and considered equally to ensure fair assessment process.

The empirical data indicates that teachers perceived assessment as being fair when the students are tested after providing them with prior notification and at the same time giving ample preparation time as motivation. Giving the same assessment is indicated as fair assessment as the teacher believed such a technique ensures the same results and treats every student being assessed equally. In addition, it is also expected that clear and explicit criteria, for example, on what basis and how they will be assessed and why they are assessed that way, should be explained and provided to the students beforehand as evident in the statement below:

And if they are doing a writing assignment or if they are doing a test, then I use grade schemes or rubrics and I make notes about what they have done correctly, what they have done incorrectly, where they need improvement, and how they can be helped. And for major assignments, I actually type up detailed notes about each criterion that they are being assessed on and hand them out so they can see it and work on it for further improvement. (Paul)

Furthermore, assessment should respect the learner by avoiding hierarchy and without granting any special privileges regarding students' cultural, social and economic status. Such assessment has been identified as fair assessment.

Alongside this, teacher describes fair assessment as assessment that gives true and honest information about students' abilities and knowledge. Classroom observation data showed an example of teachers applauding or disapproving a student's responses. For example, when a student failed to perform a gap filling task correctly on vocabulary, the teacher offered honest feedback. He told the learner, "*you did some component of task fairly well, but you still need to work hard to get better.*" In another school, a further example of classroom observation data discovered a teacher scolding the student without any hesitation. For instance, the teacher criticized a boy publicly for not writing down the corrected version of work from the board into his notebook.

Tony, you have lot of circles in your sentences, so write the down the sentences in the notebook, you bad boy. (Jen)

Such examples of assessment, if given with rectitude and good intention, are perceived by the teachers as having a positive impact on student learning.

What is more, teachers explained that assessment should be based on grades or percentages because such assessment avoided personal or a subjective bearing. It also allowed the teacher to assess the learners based on scales, and following some criteria. Additionally, it allowed the teacher to reward students' effort, hence increasing the learner's motivation level. Furthermore, such assessment rendered accurate information about the marks they will score by the end of the term. This kind of assessment can be understood as fair assessment.

Although diverse perceptions existed within the teachers, a major revelation from the analysis of this section indicated the need for specific and focused rubric that will ensure greater honesty and transparency while communicating teachers' practice of assessment in the classroom.

Considering these views, it can be concluded that the theory of the fair assessment approach comprised the following characteristics: *Assessment that is clear, specific, focused, honest, non-judgemental and student involvement in the assessment process.*

Teachers' beliefs of assessment that work and doesn't work

Teachers' views on assessment techniques that work and those that do not in their class were also solicited to obtain greater understanding about classroom assessment practices. The results revealed profound dimensions of classroom assessment that work and don't work from the perspectives of the EFL teachers.

Although teachers believed both positive and negative assessment, if given constructively, can improve learning, teachers also viewed positive and progressive assessment (used in projects) to be built around final unit work rather than being strict and negative on occasion. Hence, these teachers shared that even if the assessment is negative, they try to find something positive.

Teachers pointed out that guided self-assessment works well, as it essentially teaches the students to assess their own work before receiving the final assessment from the teacher. The teacher revealed that they follow a general rubric and so students are shown how to use that rubric. Such assessment essentially contributes in building meta-cognitive evaluation skills in the students. This is apparent from a teacher's remark:

For example, when they have the presentation and projects: before giving them my assessment, I ask them to evaluate their performance first, so they are asked to say what they like about it, what they didn't like, what they think went well in their performance, what went wrong and what they really appreciate. They are able to identify the good things, the bad things and they are not surprised when I give them my own evaluation. And it's good for the future whenever they do a task, they are able to think about it and evaluate by themselves. I find this really helpful. (Carla)

Teachers expressed that one form of assessment that worked well was oral assessment because it allows the teacher to address the learning gaps of students by offering them individual attention and talking to them directly about their performance in detail. At the same time in the process of their interaction, it also allows the students to ask questions and to react to the teacher's comments. However, considering the positive benefits of oral assessment, the teacher also indicated that oral assessment is time consuming because of increasing numbers of students and workload. In contrast to oral assessment, a few teachers explained that assessing with grades does not work because they observed that it does not contribute in the learning process of students since it restricts teachers from offering their active feedback. The teachers explain that students find such assessment to be frustrating, as there are no suggestions made by the teachers in improving their work. Hence, teachers view such assessment as unsubstantiated and inconsequential. The statements below put forward an explanation for it:

I have tried only marks and oral assessment, so I think oral assessment is the best, but it is very individual and time consuming. It is better because they can ask questions, they can somehow react, otherwise I just write my comments, and to that they cannot react. (Taylor)

The findings showed teachers categorising grading as a form of assessment that does not work as it does not allow the teacher to offer their explanation or make suggestions as to why students got that mark. Hence, the teachers avoided this approach in their class. The following statement confirmed it:

Oh, it's usually when you give them a test and then, you give them the point score for it and don't explain why and what went wrong. Then, you know that they don't learn anything in the future. And they get angry because they got bad mark and they don't know why and they have no idea what to work on and how to improve. So that's why I don't use this. (Carla)

The empirical materials indicated peer- and self-assessment as almost never practiced assessment methods. Although they are used by a few teachers, teachers considered peer- and self-assessment as assessment techniques that do not work well. According to these teachers, students are not able to recognize the mistakes and at the same time they are not able to judge how good or bad they or their peers are, as there is no basis to measure that. Hence, they perceive peer- and self-assessment as a form of unreliable assessment as evident in the statement below:

In this group, specifically the peer evaluation doesn't work for them well because they are sometimes not able to recognize the mistakes of their peers. (John)

More than half of the students are completely wrong and I think it's logical because if you don't get the feedback you need, you cannot know where your mistakes are, how good or how bad you are. You have no measure to know. So, self-assessment simply doesn't work. (Terry)

The analysis of this section concludes that varied perceptions of assessment that work and that doesn't work emerged and these theories should be taken into consideration to transform teaching for the purpose of better student learning.

Discussion

Results are discussed in light of other research. Evidence shows the importance of assessment in assessing students equally and fairly in order to improve their learning. Our empirical data showed fair assessment as being assessment that gives true and honest information about students' abilities and knowledge. This finding is in agreement with findings by Hartley (2016) whereby they emphasised that if the feedback given to the students is not deemed useful and is not completely accurate, then it does not help them to develop. Hence, teachers are expected to provide true and honest information as feedback to avoid misleading the students. The findings showed that the teachers agreed that oral feedback is useful and helpful, as the teachers can talk to students in detail about their performance. However, teachers also point out that offering explicitly detailed feedback to individual learners was daunting because of increasing numbers of students and workload.

Lam (1995) defined fair assessment as one in which students are given equitable opportunities to demonstrate what they know. This was supported in our study whereby our study results indicated that fair assessment treated students with respect and impartiality and avoided hierarchy without considering their cultural, social and economic status. These findings lend support to Lian, Yew, and Meng (2014) whereby they described that a fairness of assessment means that the assessment should allow for all students of different backgrounds and ethnicities to do equally well by bestowing equal opportunity to exhibit the skills and knowledge being assessed.

Assessment should be designed in such a way that it examines the capabilities of the students. Stiggins (1987) stated that it is critical that the scoring procedures are designed to assure that performance ratings reflect the examinee's true capabilities and are not a function of the perceptions and biases of the persons evaluating the performance. This aligns with our study findings that indicated that teacher assessment should not

be personal and should not involve subjective views and that students should be tested based on their knowledge and abilities.

Furthermore, our findings indicated that fair assessment should involve students in the assessment process. This is consistent with Aitken (2012) who revealed that "the perception of teachers not listening or honouring students voices could indicate a breakdown of the pedagogical relationship that further weakens the potential for student learning" (p. 175). This finding is further supported by Bourke's (2016) study that explained assessment as having a powerful leverage on the way students conceptualize learning, therefore, the finding articulated the importance of involving students' in the assessment process. In addition, to ensure student dignity and respect for student learning, assessment should be made reliable, valid, transparent and fair (Race, 2009). This finding was supported in our study whereby the teachers agreed that assessment should be honest, trustworthy, balanced, equal and same for everyone without involving any personal or subjective views. This finding justifies an important point that if assessment is needed to support learning, then assessment must involve the student in the assessment process as students' participation in such processes will contribute to students taking responsibility for their own learning.

Our study results indicate teachers valued the practice of using a range of assessment methods because they believe as teachers it is fitting to exploit enough assessment procedures since some assessment methods may work exceptionally well, while other methods may not work with some of their students in the class which in turn validates finding by Suskie (2018) that explains equitable assessment as one where the students are assessed using the most appropriate methods and procedures depending on the student's prior knowledge, cultural experience, and cognitive learning style. Hence, to offer equitable and fair assessment practices, implementing a variety of assessment methods is deemed crucial for improving instruction and learning.

Tierney, Simon and Charland (2011) revealed that teachers repeatedly expressed concern about being fair in their comments and explanations about grading and points that a better understanding of essential principles is needed for grades to accurately reflect the students' achievement. This is consistent with our study results that argued that grading does not make provisions for teachers to make comments or explain students' performances, nor does it allow teachers to reward students' effort. Hence, the teachers' awarding of points and grades do not help students in their process of learning. This is a crucial factor for policyholders to re-examine so as to make grading more reliable and effective.

Although the majority of the study results supported previous findings, some of our study results, especially where teachers stressed self- and peer-assessment as the least practiced options and as assessment that does not work, contradicted findings by (Black and Wiliam, 1998), which stressed the importance of self- and peer-assessment in student learning. Their study asserts that self- and peer-assessment makes students think and engages them into the assessment process as reflective practitioners, mainly through the development of 'assessment conversations' in which students are encouraged to reflect on their work and to articulate their reflections.

Although teachers hold different perceptions and beliefs, most of their beliefs were influenced by the policies. Hence, if teachers' beliefs are to be taken into consideration, then the policyholders should reconsider this crucial aspect as teachers' perceptions on assessment seem to matter a lot in improving their own instruction and student learning as indicated by Brown and Remesal (2017). They assert that assessment practices are influenced by teachers' conceptions of what constitutes proper classroom assessment and their beliefs about the purpose of assessment matter as to how assessment is implemented in the classroom setting.

Hence, as pointed out by Brown and Remesal (2017), unless those constraining factors are considered to be more supportive of assessment for learning, teachers' current beliefs in assessment will have little room to be more effective and productive.

Conclusion and further research

This paper intended to reveal EFL teachers' perceptions of fair assessment and effective and ineffective assessment means used with their students.

The main findings of the study indicated fair assessment as assessment that is *clear, specific, focused, non-judgemental and that involved students in the process of assessment*.

Results further confirmed that verbal assessment, unlike written comments which is time consuming, is an excellent example of fair assessment.

The results of this study lend support to the conclusion that teachers' assessment, if given appropriately and honestly, improves teacher instruction and student learning. In addition, it makes students accountable for their learning and teachers and schools are also made accountable through assessment (Brown, 2004). Furthermore, it indicated that the results of such assessment can be reliable and trustworthy.

Future studies are needed to validate the results presented here by securing responses from a larger sampling of participants.

The teacher participants seem to have fair idea and understanding of the concept of fair assessment, however, to validate what they say and think is actually being practiced, a study involving students' perspectives is needed to understand teachers' practice and implementation of fair assessment in the classroom. This may contribute further in fostering ideas that may be useful in aligning, improving and reforming instruction, learning and assessment.

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