

**THE NEEDS OF LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT TO FOSTER
STUDENT LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE**

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ABSTRACT

The assessment of students' skills of ESL has become a fundamental aspect of teaching and learning language at schools level. It can be seen as the process of collecting the information about students to help language teachers in decision making about students' progress and language development. In ESL instructional context, assessment practice essentially focuses on the process of making efforts and contributions for students to improve language learning outcomes. To achieve this goal, it is expected that language teachers should have literacy in assessment concepts, knowledge or skills and strategies to assist students to achieve the higher level of language learning performance and achievement. This is also an essential aspect of developing students' language competences in relation to acquire and learn English as a second language that involves the way language teachers evaluate students' performance in learning ESL and language aspects that needed to be assessed. Hence, ESL assessment practice should be implemented as a continuous evaluation in assisting language teacher to provide students with a better understanding on language learning.

Keywords: *Language Assessment; ESL*

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of ESL Assessment Practices

According to McDowell (1995) the communicative language ability is seen as a combination of knowledge or competence combined with the ability to implement that knowledge in language appropriate to any given context. Language competence in this matter is viewed as a part of communicative language ability and it is composed of organizational competence and pragmatic competence (Bachman (1990) as cited in McDowell, 1995, p. 14). Regarding this matter, language teachers need to understand how language is used to give significant impacts on students' learning and what knowledge of language that students need to assist them to achieve a better understanding in learning. In addition, teachers also need to know the relationship between language and learning in particular how language can enhance learning.

As a part of teaching and learning process at schools level, teachers need to conduct initial assessments of individual students in order to decide how learning should be effectively implemented in the classroom practices. As it claimed by Mincham (1995) ESL assessment can be administered to provide diagnostic information about students' learning needs. This information is essential for teachers to make appropriate decision about what kinds of learning activities that serves students with clear and understandable objectives for language learning. In this way, teachers can provide constructive feedback about students' progress especially the ways in which students can improve their learning performance. Furthermore, ESL

assessment might be very useful for teachers to plan the purpose of learning and students should be encouraged to become directly involved in the assessment process to give them great opportunities in managing and evaluating their own learning.

Brindley (1995) emphasizes the importance of ESL assessment to evaluate the ability of students to use a language for communicative performance. In his book, the author reflects that ESL assessment is useful to help teachers to make informed decision about teaching and learning activities. It may also provide teachers of ESL a shared reference document as they assess the progress of ESL students (Brindley, 1995, p. 37). He also concedes that the performance of ESL assessment is recognized as an effective approach for reviewing student language development and academic progress. In other perspective, the performance of ESL assessment also seen as a continuous assessment of student progress, possibilities for integrating assessment with instruction, assessment of learning processes and higher-order thinking skills, and a collaborative approach to assessment that enables teachers and students to interact during the teaching and learning process (Pierce & O'Malley, 1992).

As stated by Falsgarf (2005, as cited in Lourie, 2008), assessment literacy is the ability to understand, analyze and apply information on students learning performance to improve instruction (p. 399). He notes that being literate in assessment means having the capacity to identify the purpose of assessment, understanding about the fitness of assessment tools being used

and testing condition. Along the line of this perspective, Cummins (2001) also outlines the core competencies that language teachers should have in the area of ESL assessment. In this matter, he perceives that language teachers are expected to be well versed in current theory, research finding, regarding facets and language knowledge and use in order to implement assessment measures that are compatible with the current perspective. From these perspectives, it may be assumed that the purpose of ESL assessment is essentially to improve students' communicative language skill. For this reason, ESL students are encouraged to engage actively in interactive tasks and activities which provide them with opportunities to develop the ability to use language for a range of purposes. To help students to achieve this skill, language teachers need to have literacy skills to assist them to get better understanding on the ways in which different subject disciplines use language in order to construct the knowledge and concepts of their particular field (Mincham, 1995, p. 66).

Types of ESL Assessment And Skills Assessed

Assessment is one of the most fundamental aspects in teaching and learning that provides useful information on student's learning outcomes. In learning English as a second language, assessment can be administered to measure students' progress and achievement in learning ESL, to guide and improve instruction, and to diagnose students' knowledge of a topic before it is taught (Short, 1993, p. 630). To evaluate students' language comprehension

and production in this matter, language teachers can administer a type of assessment which is proposed by Pierce and O'Malley (1992) in their article called *Performance Assessments* that reflects on the tasks in the classroom practices or real-life settings. The authors regard this assessment as an authentic and meet with both the curriculum purposes and students' experience. According to them performance assessment is not limited to a single type of activity, but it can take various forms depending on their authenticity in relation to classroom activities. This includes: oral interviews, story retelling, simulations/situations, directed dialogues, incomplete story that requires students to complete it, teacher observation checklists, and student self-evaluation.

Other research also reinforces the three types of ESL assessment that might help language teachers to design clear and appropriate course objective: Selected-Response Assessment, Constructed-Response Assessment and Personal-Response Assessment (Brown & Hudson, 1998). The authors highlight that Selected-Response Assessment provides students with the language materials and requires them to choose the correct form among a limited set of option. This assessment might be seen as an appropriate way to measure receptive skill such as listening and reading. They also define Constructed-Response Assessment as an assessment that requires students to produce language by writing or speaking. This assessment is assumed to be the most useful way in evaluating the productive skills of speaking and writing. It can also be essential for observing the interaction of receptive and

productive skill. Moreover, Personal-Response Assessment also requires students to actually produce language. In its practice, this assessment enables students to communicate in the interactive ways, it also provide personal or individualized assessment and evaluate the learning processes in the ongoing manner throughout the term of instruction (1998, p. 658). In this matter, Brown and Hudson (1998) believe that these kinds of assessment may be effective to help language teachers to create strong relationship between the assessment procedures and the objectives which is useful to produce positive effects in assessing students' language skill.

More importantly, Short (1993) in her article highlights several skills in ESL that can be assessed to identify students' competences to use an academic English language. These skills are included the Language Use, Communication Skills, Individual or Group Behavior, and Students' Attitude in Learning a Language. More specifically, the author indicates that "The language use" is measured to know students' ability to use correct technical vocabularies or recognize similar terms. This involves an understanding of students to construct their ideas or thoughts in oral or written forms. "Communicative skill "is also evaluated to understand how ESL students convey information or opinions in a range of interactive activities. This includes the ability to explain clearly about certain topics, share ideas and discuss some concept or the ability to give and justify the opinion. Furthermore, the author sees "Individual or group behavior" as an element of ESL skills that might be evaluated to know students' ability to conduct and

complete work individually or in group. This includes planning and carrying through an assignment, researching a topic and preparing a report on it, exhibiting self-motivation, discipline, and independence. The skills of working collaboratively with other students in a group, contributing to the discussion, explaining to others, using social skills are also viewed as the most essential aspects to be evaluated in ESL assessment. Lastly, "Students' attitude in learning a language" may be possibly assessed to know how students behave toward the subject. This includes being comfortable doing content work, exhibiting confidence, showing a willingness to take risks, recognizing the relevance of a content area in one's life. If the attitude is not effective, teachers may then modify their instructional approach and learning activities (1993:638).

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ESL ASSESSMENT

ESL Assessment Tools or Measures

As mentioned by Short (1993) ESL assessment should be viewed as an integrated language and content course in which students are required to apply the knowledge and ability in several areas. For this reason, successful implementation of assessment in this matter requires that students be given frequent opportunities to demonstrate the growth of their language skill and knowledge. Essentially, Short (1993) outlines some ESL assessment instruments that can be used effectively by language teachers to evaluate

students' language skill. These instruments are Checklist or Inventories, Student Self-Evaluation, Interviews, and Oral Reports and Presentations. More specifically, the author infers Checklist or Inventory as an appropriate assessment tool in ESL to evaluate students' work or performance during the lesson or after the class. This helps students to reflect on their learning or activities they have demonstrated in the classroom practice. The checklist or inventories may be completed while observing students work individually or in the cooperative learning activities. She also concedes Student Self-Evaluation as the assessment tool to allow students to assess a specific piece of their own work or judge their learning progress using a checklist, scale, or written description. Self-evaluation in this matter may offer students opportunities for reflection and enable students to assume greater responsibility for the assessment of their proficiency and progress. It is also useful to help ESL students to diagnose their weak areas to get a realistic view of their ability and their skill profile and assist them to become more motivated and goal-oriented. Furthermore, the author notes Interview as a measure which is designed to assist language teachers to conduct an individual or group interview to understand student's knowledge, skills or attitude. It might offer opportunities for language teachers to investigate student knowledge in rephrasing questions and provides students with a chance to ask and clarify questions. Lastly, Oral Reports and Presentations are useful to enable ESL students to report and present orally knowledge they have acquired. These assessment tools also give valuable opportunities and

time for students to prepare their work in advance. From the perspectives mentioned here, the author believes that all these assessment tools are designed as language developmental measurement to assist language teachers to make a better choice in measuring students' fluency and accuracy in language use.

Other research also confirms that the implementation or strategies of ESL assessment should involve: planning, implementation, monitoring, and recording (Dickins, 2001 as cited in McKay (2005)). He infers that planning is conducted to identify the purpose of assessment, choose the assessment activities and prepare students for the assessment. Implementation involves the introduction o assessment itself, and Monitoring covers the recording evidence of students' achievement, interpreting evidence obtained from the assessment, sharing finding with other teachers and providing constructive feedback to students. The author highlight Recording as an activity in which teachers record and report the students' progress to school and parents and conduct a formal review for internal school purposes.

ESL Assessment Processes and Procedures

In assessing students' skills in ESL, language teachers need to make well design assessment procedures and processes to facilitate students to acquire and learn English as their second language. The process and procedure of assessment should be effectively conducted to meet their clear and specific purposes in developing students' skills in ESL. The article

written by Mincham (1995) emphasizes the need of an appropriate process in language assessment to assist language teaches in analyzing students' English language performance in a range of oral and written activities. The author begins with the discussion of the initial planning phases and key principles to guide the development of the assessment procedure. According to Mincham (1995) assessment should be viewed as an integral part of the curriculum process. For this reason, the implementation of procedure in language assessment should serve a useful developmental function, both in informing program planning and in enabling language teachers to become more active and skilled participants in the assessment process (1995, p. 75). Moreover, the author also notes that language assessment should reflect an underlying model of language. In this case, assessment of language performance is needed to define adequately the teachers' expectation about students' language performance which becomes a key factor in the development process.

The appropriate designed assessment procedures in ESL are necessary to meet students' needs in learning English language skills. In this matter, assessment procedures should involve many steps in their practices as suggested by Pierce and O'Malley (1992). In their article, the authors describe the performance assessment procedures for monitoring students' language development and academic progress. They begin with the discussion of the aspects of the performance of ESL assessment which requires language teachers to observe the behavior or evaluate the product

that is reflective to students' achievement. Language teachers also need to apply the appropriate performance criteria of assessment to make professional judgment on the level of proficiency of students in learning ESL (1992, 3). Continuing this matter, Piece and O'Malley (1992) provide some procedures in designing performance assessment tasks and instruments for assessing specific language areas (oral language, reading and writing) and their integration. They presume that language teachers can administer the performance assessment tasks or procedures to determine students' ability in oral language comprehension and production by designing the activities that reflect on the classroom or real life setting. In this way, students might be encouraged to conduct the oral interview, story telling, role plays or directed dialogues. The authors assume that by applying this method, students might have more time and opportunities to express their thought and ideas that are very useful to improve their language production.

More importantly, Piece and O'Malley (1992, 6-8) propose the way teachers evaluate the oral language proficiency that is categorized into the skill of comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. From each category, students can be scored at five different proficiency levels (level 1 – 5) with 5 indicating the highest level of proficiency and 1 refers to the lowest level of achievement. The total score then are combined from the result of each category of language proficiency. Furthermore, the authors also describe an assessment method in evaluating students' ability in reading comprehension. They note that assessment of reading skill is designed to

reflect the students' ability to perform functional reading tasks and measure their level of interest in reading materials. In practice, language teachers can use a rating scale to determine four types of students' reading comprehension: reading skill, interest, application and reading strategy. Teachers can collect information from the reading selection and asked students to work on the reading individually, in pairs or in small group. In this matter, the authors propose five levels of cognitive complexities in reading skills: Knowledge, Comprehension, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation that can be measured on English language proficiency. Lastly, an assessment of writing is also addressed by the authors to explain that writing assessment provides an indication of how well students communicate in the written language. They suggest that language teachers can determine students' progress in writing through direct measurement of functional literacy such as writing sample, process of writing and dialogue journals (1992, p. 14). It is important to note that, Piece and O'Malley (1992) also explain the way teachers assess students' ability in writing. The procedures of assessment are also recommended by the authors to assist language teachers in evaluating students' writing skill. These steps are included (1) Select writing prompt, as a sample, that is developmentally appropriate. It is suggested to use a prompt that encourages students to write on topics that are familiar and interesting to them. (2) Provide a choice of topics by giving options. In this way, teachers might increase the possibility that students will be interested in and capable to select one of the topics and write on it. (3) Check the topic for cultural bias.

In general, writing prompts may address relatively neutral themes. (4) Give clear direction including the amount of writing required, how much time they have to write and how their writing will be scored (1992, p. 14). Moreover, the authors provide the criteria for scoring which involves organization, mechanics, fluency, coherent and grammar. In scoring, they suggest a criterion which focuses on the communicative nature of the writing and ask one another teacher to score separately to make score writing more reliable. The point being assumed here is that the implementation of ESL assessment process should be effectively established to help students to achieve higher level of quality in learning English as a second language. The process and procedure need to be well designed to meet students' needs and assist language teachers to design the appropriate objectives and goals in learning and teaching ESL.

CONCLUSION

Assessment is recognized as an integral part of teaching and learning. In ESL context, it is regarded as an important aspect to evaluate or measure students' learning achievement in language as a second language. There are numbers of skills in English that can be taught by language teachers to ESL students to give them a better understanding on how these skills are effectively used for a range of purposes especially for their academic progress and achievement. For language teachers, ESL assessment may give valuable skills and knowledge to make better decisions in creating effective teaching

and learning activities that can motivate or foster students learning ESL. The implementations of ESL assessment need to be clearly conducted to meet students' needs in learning ESL and help language teachers to make a good judgment on the level of proficiency of students in learning ESL. Numbers of ESL assessment instruments are provided to assist language teachers to measure certain kinds of ESL skills and evaluate students' fluency, competency and accuracy in language use.

Overall, it might be said that ESL assessment is one of the most fundamental aspects in teaching and learning a language at schools level that provides a valuable knowledge and insight to develop students learning and teachers teaching of ESL.

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