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A Sociocultural Perspective on Assessment for Learning: The Case of a Malaysian Primary School ESL Context

Sedigheh Abbasnasab Sardareh\textsuperscript{a*}, Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a,b}Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, 50603, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract

Social constructivists believe that formative assessments of students’ learning are of great worth to the learners. So, they consider assessment for learning (AFL) as an interactive process in which teachers and peers help learners use their zone of proximal development (ZPD) to progress to the next step in their learning. Based on Vygotsky’s socio-cultural perspective, AFL is an interactive process in which teacher and learners discuss about learning intentions and how best to improve teaching and learning performance and accomplish success. This study presents an investigation carried out in a Malaysian primary school ESL context to suggest how AFL is viewed from sociocultural perspective. The results suggested that AFL from sociocultural perspective put a great emphasis on authentic tasks and social interaction between teacher and learners.

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1. Introduction

The term formative assessment has its origins in the field of curriculum evaluation. Michael Scriven suggested the terms formative and summative in 1967 to explain two distinct roles that evaluation plays in evaluating curriculum. He maintained that formative evaluation focuses on the improvement of a person or program during an activity. Summative evaluation is aimed at assessing if the person or program has fulfilled the stated goals [1].

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +60-17-250-4682; fax: +603-7956-5506.
E-mail address: abbasnasab_sedi@siswa.um.edu.my
Later, Benjamin Bloom [3] and his colleagues suggested applying the same distinction to the evaluation of students’ learning—what nowadays we call assessment [2]. Formative and summative assessments are essential to understanding assessment in education. Summative assessment centers on summing up or summarizing achievement of students, classes, schools, and so forth [3, 4, 5]. In addition, formative assessment focuses on active feedback loops that assist learning [2, 4, 5]. In other words, unlike summative assessment, formative assessment focuses on assessing students minute by minute and day by day.

However, the power of formative assessment received little attention until Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam published “Assessment and Classroom Learning” in 1988. They subsequently reviewed over 160 journals from several countries during a nine-year period. Their analysis of material from 250 of their sources led them to conclude that formative assessment was clearly a means to improve students’ achievement [6].

Assessment for learning (AFL, hereafter) focuses on the purpose of formative assessment and is aimed at providing evidence of students’ learning progress. In an AFL classroom, teachers define and share the learning intention and success criteria with students at the very beginning of their learning. Students not only learn about learning intentions but they also learn about scaffolding they will receive in order to achieve learning intentions.

Learners play an active role in monitoring their progress. They constantly collaborate with their teacher to monitor their current level of achievement in relation to the learning intentions. During the learning process, students actively communicate their learning evidence to their teachers, other students, and parents. All in all, students have a key role in the assessment and learning process. They monitor their learning progress, control their success, and believe that they can achieve success if they try their best [7].

AFL has recently gained increased attention in education. Moreover, some studies have been conducted to align AFL with psychological learning theories [8, 9]. It seems that formative assessment practices have a good fit with constructivist learning theories. Especially with the part that focuses on the role of social interaction in knowledge construction. Social constructivists acknowledge the importance of social interaction and more knowledgeable peers in shaping learners’ experiences. According to social constructivists, teachers mediate students’ learning through assessment. In other words, assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and this is the main focus of AFL [10]. It is defined as the distance between an individual’s actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and potential developmental level as determined by problem-solving by the help of peers. Teachers and more knowledgeable peer’s assistance and scaffolding given to the students when they are in their ZPD helps them move forward in their learning [10].

As put forward by Stobart [11, p. 151], “the learning theory approach which underpins AFL, is probably best described as ‘social constructivism’. This seeks to hold in balance learning as a cultural activity and as individual meaning-making”. However, little attempt has been done to theorize AFL from a sociocultural perspective [12]. Therefore this paper aims to conceptualize AFL from a sociocultural perspective and provide a sociocultural model of AFL which might be useful for ESL teachers and educators.

1.1. AFL in Malaysian Primary Schools

Under Malaysia’s national education system, children begin their formal education at age seven. They undergo six years of primary or elementary education (Year 1 to Year 6). The six years of primary education are aimed at bringing about the overall development of the child through skills that cover reading, writing and arithmetic as well as inculcating thinking skills and values. Throughout the six years of primary education, there is continuous internal assessment to monitor the development of the child and to identify problems in the teaching-learning process. Primary schooling develops a solid foundation for lifelong learning in children.

As they reach the sixth year, pupils should sit for a standardized test, Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) or the primary school assessment examination. Following that, primary school students are promoted to Form One, which is the base year of the secondary school [13].
In 2008, the Ministry of Education began the trial implementation of the new modular and thematic primary school curriculum as well as school-based assessment in fifty primary schools in Malaysia. The reason for this curriculum and assessment transformation is to ascertain that schooling system fulfills students’ current and future needs by improving learners’ acquisition of communication and thinking skills, creativity and innovation. To achieve this goal, communication skills; students’ benefits; physical; spiritual; attitudes and values; humanities; and literacy in science and technology are accentuated in the new curriculum [14].

From the beginning of school term in 2011, the new Primary School Standard Curriculum known as KSSR or Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah was implemented in all Year One primary schools nationwide. The new curriculum improves the integrated curriculum for primary school (KBSR) that was introduced and implemented in late 1990s.

To implement the new English syllabus successfully, the Ministry of Education has provided teachers with a set of guidelines. The aim is to provide teachers with some practical suggestions of teaching methods. However, teachers themselves are in a better position to make appropriate decisions while planning their lessons. Teachers select a theme and then decide on appropriate speaking and listening, reading and writing activities. A coherent organization should be sustained between speaking and listening, reading and writing skills.

Assessment is considered as an integral part of the teaching-learning process. Continuous formative assessment is used as a means of gaining essential feedback and to keep track of pupils’ progress. Awareness of pupils’ capabilities will enable teachers to plan activities for further development. Teachers should set school-based assessments for learning standards dealt with in the classroom [15].

2. The Current Study

This qualitative case study was conducted in a selected primary school in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The selected school is one of the top schools in the state of Selangor and focuses on formative assessment. Three ESL teachers and their students (N= 64) in the selected school took part in this study. The participating teachers hold bachelor’s degree in TESL and their teaching experience range from 9 to more than 20 years. It should be mentioned that fictitious names were used to protect participants’ identities. To collect data, each teacher’s classroom was observed twice. Then, interviews were conducted with the teachers observed and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also carried out with 8 students from each observed classroom.

To develop the themes of the study, the researcher used Constant Comparison Method (CCM). In the first step of data analysis that is ‘open coding’, classroom observations, teacher interviews and students’ FGDs were transcribed and then the researcher examined the transcriptions to develop the codes. The second stage is ‘axial coding’. In this stage the researcher tried to make connections between subcategories and categories to develop core categories. And finally the emergent categories were reclassified as the analysis progressed and compared with the whole set of data that included reading and rereading within and across the responses of the participants to develop the themes of the study [16].

3. Findings

The themes that emerged from the data are discussed in this section.

3.1. Collaboration

Classroom observations showed that during the lesson students were constantly collaborating with each other and with their teacher. For example, while accomplishing a given task, students were seen sharing and exchanging ideas, commenting on other students’ work and also asking their teacher to comment on their work. One of the teachers, Marrien, mentioned that:
“I usually assign students into groups so that they can interact with each other and with their teacher. Collaboration helps students actively participate in their own learning … they not only learn from each other but have to comment on other students work as well.”

Teachers in this study put a great emphasis on the role of collaboration as a formative assessment strategy in students’ learning. They believed that social interaction is a means to learning. Farah, a participating teacher, stated that:

“To me it is clear that students learn better through interaction with other students and their teacher. Interaction helps students to improve critical thinking skills and use other students’ as well as teacher’s comments on their work to enhance their learning.”

Accordingly, social constructivism emphasizes the role of interaction and knowledge sharing in individual’s understanding and knowledge construction. Social constructivists believe that knowledge is socially constructed through collaboration. The results of this study indicated that in an AFL classroom, students actively collaborate with each other. They receive feedback on their work from their teacher and peers through peer assessment and use feedback information to improve their learning.

As Holt and Wilard-Holt [17] put it, in a social constructivist classroom there is a dynamic interaction between teacher, learner and task. This means that learners construct their own version of reality and then compare it to that of the teacher and their peers in order to get their own socially version of reality [18]. So, the learning task acts as an interface between the teacher and the learner. Katty, one of the participating teachers, stated that:

“Collaboration while accomplishing a task help students improve problem solving skills, reflect on their learning and move to the next step in their learning. Moreover, I think classroom interaction helps teachers to elicit evidence of students’ learning and help use to ensure students’ learning.”

A social constructivist teacher should ensure that all students collaborate in order to construct new understandings. In other words, during collaboration students learn about learning both from themselves and their peers. Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) has an important role in peer collaboration. When learners are in their ZPD, ‘scaffolding’ help them extend beyond the actual developmental level and achieve their learning targets [19].

The results of FGDs showed that participating students in this study learn better when their teachers ask them to work in groups. They mentioned that their teachers provide them with opportunity to interact with other students and give feedback on their work so that they know what to do next.

In order for assessment to support learning students should actively take part in the assessment process [6]. Thus, students can contribute to their knowledge construction and achieve learning targets [20]. This view of assessment is known as assessment for learning [21, 6]. Peer assessment is one of the assessment methods in which students assess each other, give and receive feedback and learn from one another. It is through collaborative discussion of learning criteria. Collectively, the results of this study indicated that assessment in a social constructivist classroom is collaborative and students have chance to receive descriptive feedback from their teacher and their peers in order to improve their learning.

3.2. Divisions of Labour

The results of classroom observations showed that teachers in this study had a key role in designing the challenge in their classrooms. But after that they only observed students problem solving activities so that
students had enough time to reflect on their own learning. However, teachers in this study pointed out that many teachers still do not have enough knowledge and skills in designing the challenge and their classes are teacher centered rather than student centered. Farah, one of the teachers, stated that:

“As a teacher we need to see the whole learning process. It was my first experience but I found it very valuable… you develop the challenge and sit back and watch students reflecting on their own learning.”

However, the results of classroom observations FGDs with the students showed that teachers in this study did not have enough knowledge and skill to use rich questioning techniques such as probing and prompting questions. The results of FGDs showed that teachers usually asked close questions in their classroom and expect students to give specific answer to questions. Therefore, teachers need more professional development courses to improve their skills in designing the challenge in their classrooms.

3.3. Authenticity

Constructivists consider assessment as an on-going and continuous process. In other words, teachers have a chance to use classroom activities as assessment tools that enable learners achieve curricular targets [22]. Schack [23, p. 39] defines authentic assessment as “assessment that gives students both feedback upon completion and guides their work along the way”.

The results of classroom observations and interviews with the teachers showed that in the current study, teachers mentioned that they try to provide students with authentic tasks to help them improve their higher order thinking skills as well as problem solving skills. They emphasized the importance of using assessment practices such as concept maps and portfolio in students’ learning.

Thus, as opposed to behaviourists and cognitivists, teachers in a social constructivist classroom emphasize active and collaborative learning rather than isolated knowledge and skills [24]. In a constructivist classroom teachers use authentic assessment practices such as role play and drama, concept maps, reflective journals, portfolios, debates, and so forth, rather than tests. That is to say, teachers monitor students’ knowledge construction and how they apply their new understanding in real life situations. Therefore, authentic assessment examines the quality of students’ learning and is beyond certifying their level of competence and includes activities and tasks that replicate the real life problems [25]. In the word of Marrien one of the teachers:

“Authentic assessment provides students with opportunities to reflect on their own learning. That is to say, metacognition provides students with opportunities to assess their own learning.”

Another important aspect of authentic assessment is providing learners with formative feedback [25]. On the other hand, formative assessment is a way to give descriptive feedback to the students. Feedback engages learners with their peers and helps them reflect on their own learning through the process of self-assessment so that learners can assess their own learning performance in relation to the learning criteria [26].

However, students in this study pointed out that they receive feedback on their work but they usually do not know what do next. Students in this study still have problem using teachers’ feedback to improve their learning. So teachers should give students feedback on their work and also provide them with explanation on what to do next. In other words, teachers should help students use this feedback and reflect on their own learning.

3.4. Reflection

One of the participating teachers, Katty, believed that Learning is a self-regulated process. Therefore, there are learning styles to be understood by teachers during the teaching and learning process. Black and Wiliam [21, 6]
believe that assessment is an integrated part of teaching and learning and should help students improve their learning. So, teachers in this study believed that for this to occur there should be an interaction between teaching, learning and assessment so that learners can reflect on their learning and take the ownership of their own learning. Therefore, in a social constructivist classroom students are provided with an opportunity to reflect on their own learning so that they experience assessment as an integral part of learning [27]. Katty added that:

“Students reflect on their own learning either individually through self-assessment or peer-assessment in a group. In order for students to engage in the process of reflective assessment, they need to receive feedback about their learning progress. They also need to have a clear picture of their learning target so that they can find out where they are going in the learning process.”

Students should use feedback from each assessment to discover where they are now in relation to what they want to be [28]. Wilson [29] mentions that through reflecting on their own learning, learners provide feedback to improve their learning. Teachers can also use the information from feedback to adapt their teaching to the students’ needs. Thus, the information provided from feedback through reflection informs both students’ learning and teachers teaching [30]. Orsmond et al [31, p. 24] also hold the same view; they state that feedback and students’ learning are integrated and “if they become uncoupled, the formative aspect of assessment is lost”. According to Taras [32] students can only take the ownership of their own learning when they are enough competent to reflect on own learning and can judge the quality of their own work.

The results of FGDs and classroom observations revealed that students don’t know how to use feedback given to them during self- and peer-assessment to reflect on their own learning and take the ownership of their learning. Students stated that most of the time it is not clear to them what their teacher expect of them.

3.5. Active Learning

Teachers in this study believed that learning is active and not passive or transitive. One of the teachers, Farah, mentioned that:

“Knowledge is actively constructed and embedded in learning. Therefore, teachers should not just follow what the curriculum states and transmit to the students but to respect students receiving and negotiating of knowledge. Learning materials should also be following this concept that there is no right or wrong answer or directly correcting their mistakes but to help students to be an expert. Assessment here is an important element because through correct assessment strategies learners negotiate, formulate their own meanings, and embed their meanings as knowledge constructors.”

Accordingly, in a social constructivist classroom, learners should take the responsibility for their own learning [33]. Glasersfeld [33] states that social constructivism emphasizes learners’ active participation in the learning and assessment process. In other words, through formative assessment, learners create their new understandings and the teacher only mediates by providing students with an opportunity to ask questions and experience new things.

Students in the observed class also maintained that they learn better when they actively participate in the learning process and reflect on their activities. Learners set their own targets and assessment criteria. During the process of AFL, students are active recipients of feedback given to them through self- and peer-assessment and they attempt to close their own learning gap [1, 4, and 26].
3.6. Scaffolding

Scaffolding is described as teachers’ support given to the learner when they are in the ZPD so that they can move to the next step in their learning. In the word of Marrien:

“Learning is a socially situated activity that is enhanced in meaningful contexts. Therefore, scaffolding is important to help students to be an expert in learning. Scaffolding concept helps learners who are weak at first but through the support of teachers, they learn to be an expert of the knowledge received through negotiation of meanings and interpretations.”

Classroom observations showed that students in this study stated that they usually interact and negotiate with their teacher in the classroom and it helps them move forward in their learning. Researchers argue that AFL should identify students’ current level of knowledge relative to the desired goal in the ZPD [5, 34]. In other words, “formative assessment collects and uses information about students’ knowledge and performance to close the gap between students’ current learning state and the desired state by pedagogical actions” [5, p. 3]. Thus, researchers consider formative assessment and scaffolding as complementary concepts [35].

3.7. Feedback

Research shows that feedback is the most important part of the assessment process and affects students’ learning and achievement [21, 6, 2, 26, 36, and 1]. There is ample evidence that students acknowledge receiving formative or descriptive feedback [36]. However, feedback practices are weak in classrooms [21, 26, and 1].

The results of FGDs indicated that participating students in the current study also like to receive feedback on their work. However, they do not know how to use feedback given by their teacher. This is in line with previous studies which showed that more often feedback is not understood by the students [37, 36].

Katty, one of the teachers, mentioned that another problem with feedback is that most of the time it is given too late when there is no ample time to take action. In the same way, Wotjas [38] states that when the emphasis is on mark or grade, it might make judgment only about an individual level of achievement and it might decrease students’ self-efficacy. This teacher added that teachers still lack knowledge and skill to provide students with effective formative feedback.

In a social constructivist classroom, students should be engaged with formative or descriptive feedback. Sadler [4] states that in order for feedback to be effective, students should have complete understanding of learning targets and success criteria, they also need to understand where they are relative to the targets and criteria, and how they can close their learning gap. This condition requires students to actively engage with the feedback. Sadler [4, p.78] adds further that:

“Students should be trained in how to interpret feedback, how to make connections between feedback and the characteristics of the criteria they produce and how they can improve their work in future. It cannot simply be assumed that when students are ‘given feedback’, they will know what to do with it.”

In other words, formative or descriptive feedback should provide students with information on how the learner can improve the learning. Moreover, feedback should be goal-oriented and provide students with the information about their current level of achievement relative to the learning targets [36].
4. Discussion of Findings

Looking at AFL from a sociocultural perspective in Malaysian primary school ESL context, the data from classroom observations, FGDs and interview with teachers indicated that collaboration, divisions of labour, authenticity, reflecting, active learning, scaffolding and feedback are crucial.

Social constructivists believe that formative assessments of students’ learning are of great worth to the learners. So, they consider AFL as an interactive process in which teachers and peers help learners use their ZPD and progress to the next step in their learning [35]. ZPD shows a persons’ potential ability for learning. This ability is greater than a person’s actual ability when other experts and peers in social environment promote learning [39].

In order to move students’ learning forward in the ZPD, teachers use strategies such as scaffolding. Scaffolding refers to teachers’ supports during the learning process [5]. Teachers provide students with scaffolding like encouraging students or providing them with hints or reminders, to assure successful learning [40]. Based on socio-cultural perspective, AFL is an interactive process in which teacher and learners discuss about learning intentions and how best to improve teaching and learning performance and accomplish success [35].

Furtak [41] characterizes AFL process as feedback loops that assist learning. Based on their interpretation, teachers provide students with feedback to decide where the student is relative to the learning intentions. Then teachers identify the size of learning gap through observation of students’ performance in classroom activities such as group discussion and assignments. Furtak [41] describes the distance between students’ current level of achievement and the desired goals as the ‘gap’. He mentions that classroom activities make students’ thinking perceptible and help teachers identify the gap. Heritage [42, p. 141] points out that when teachers identify the student’s current level of achievement, it is important to determine the distance between students’ level of achievement and the learning goal. If the distance is not too large, the students might do their best to achieve the goal. From the other point of view, if the gap is large, the students might think that it is unachievable and become frustrated. Heritage adds further that assessment for learning determines the “just the right gap”, what psychologists call “zone of proximal development (ZPD)”.

Based on the findings, we represent the following diagram:

![A Sociocultural model of AFL](image)

Figure 1. A Sociocultural model of AFL
The above diagram shows a model of formative assessment through the lens of sociocultural theory. It represents the interaction among individual students and their teachers and observation learning process. According to this diagram, students should have clear understanding of the task and success criteria. Questioning technique is used to elicit information about students’ learning and students are provided with feedback to move their learning forward.

Since the world around us is constantly changing and requires students to acquire 21st century skills, Vygotsky’s social constructivism help us understand important ways of knowledge construction. Teaching strategies like scaffolding and cooperative learning connect Vygotsky’s theory to teachers’ AFL practices. Based on this theory, AFL improves students’ learning and guides them to develop their learning. Therefore, teacher should provide students with an appropriate learning context that help them improve their learning. Thus, from the socio-cultural perspective, teachers should use AFL in an efficient way to fulfil the needs of ESL students [43].

5. Conclusion

Reflecting on current views and practices of AFL in Malaysian primary school ESL classes from a sociocultural perspective, the researchers have mentioned the importance of authentic tasks, collaboration and divisions of labour amongst students and teachers while accomplishing a task. As mentioned in passing, sociocultural learning theory goes beyond considering learning only as content acquisition. The results of the current study showed that looking at AFL through the lens of social constructivism requires students to actively participate in their learning process and reflect on their own learning. The results also indicated the importance of giving feedback to the students to move their learning forward.

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References

