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Basic Level Students' Perceptions and Practices on Assessment

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Abstract

Assessment in a classroom context is a method of evaluating students' ability and knowledge with certain purposes. This phenomenological study shared the students' perceptions of assessment in the EFL context and explored the preparation strategies for the examination. The information for this study was collected via in-depth interviews with six participants studying at the Basic Level (Grades 6-8) in one of the private schools of Kathmandu Valley. The findings of the study showed that the students were somewhat dissatisfied with summative assessment. They suggested a balance between summative and formative assessment. The participants favoured project assessment as it provided the learners ample opportunities to learn from each other, and their performance was measured while engaging in the project activities. This study is expected to be useful for students, teachers, teacher educators, researchers, policymakers, and ELT experts by providing perceptions, insights, and assessment practices.

Keywords: Performance, examination, backwash, feedback, learning

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Introduction

Teaching, learning, and assessment have a triangular relationship, each supporting the other. The teacher teaches the subject matters to the learners, the learner learns what their teachers teach. Learners give their best when they are asked to write for their judgment. As a result, there is a regular, continuous, and direct involvement of students and teachers in the teaching and learning process, and assessment is an integral part of it. An assessment is a judgment of a person's knowledge, ability, and understanding for different purposes. In this regard, Brown (2003) states that an assessment as a tool helps to quantify one's ability, knowledge, and performance in a given domain. This definition is closely connected with summative assessment as it mainly focuses on assessing students' performance with some parameters. Similarly, Guskey (2003) argued that nearly every student suffers from the experience of spending hours preparing for a major assessment, only to discover that the material that he or she had studied differed from what the teacher chose to emphasize on the assessment. Such assessment practices may lead students to prepare for the assessment rather than engage in productive learning. Hughes (2003) states that summative assessment is used at the end of the academic session/semester/year to measure the achievement of the individuals. It suggests that the prime goal of summative assessment is to evaluate students' performance at the end of the academic session and provide guidelines to upgrade them to the next level or grade with some observations. Hence, it can be assumed that the summative assessment

helps to measure students' performance at the end of the course or program for upgrading and certifying students.

On the contrary, the formative assessment is a tool that helps to improve student's learning with continuous feedback from the teachers. In this regard, Hughes (2003) states that the progress of students' learning can be observed by formative assessment, and it further provides information to modify teaching plans for the teachers as well. Torrance and Pryor (1998) highlighted that the process of formative assessment is controlled to some extent by the teachers, so they suggested that the teachers involve students themselves in the formative assessment process. The progress and performance of the students can be assessed through formative assessment, and it also helps to provide necessary feedback to the students for their further improvement in their learning as this assessment focuses on a continuous process for helping learners to learn and improve as suggested by the teachers. Likewise, continuous assessment refers to the process of students' evaluation regularly for better learning. In this regard, Kellaghan and Greaney (2004) state, "Learning assessment in a classroom is 'subjective, informal, immediate, ongoing, and intuitive, as it interacts with learning as it occurs, monitoring student behaviour, scholastic performance, and responsiveness to instruction'" (p. 45). This suggests that there is a need for formative and continuous assessment to transform classroom instruction and help learners learn through timely feedback for productive learning in this present world.

Having experience as a teacher, assessor and student, I always had a question in my mind i.e. 'Why is there a compulsion for paper-pencil tests? 'How do students perceive assessment?', 'What are the major strategies for exam preparation?' etc. These questions led me to explore the assessment trends, perceptions and practices of the students of the Basic Level (grades 6-8) and discuss them along with some implications.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to explore students' perception of assessment in the EFL context. In addition, this study also aimed to explore the strategies of examination used by the students in EFL classrooms so that it could help the students overcome the difficulties they experience while appearing for examination. To fulfil the purpose of the study, I framed the following research questions.

- a) How do students perceive assessment in an EFL classroom?
- b) What strategies do they apply for the preparation of the examination?

Literature Review

Bevitt (2015) carried out a case study on 'Assessment Innovation and Student Experience: A New Assessment Challenge and Call for a Multi-perspective Approach to Assessment Research' in the business school which examined the impact of assessment preferences and familiarity on student attainment and experience. It is found that the students' experience must be perceived as a complementary layer within a complex multi-perspective model of assessment, and it supports on assessment of/for learning as a continuous process. Herrera-Mosquera and Zambrano-Castillo (2019) carried out a qualitative-descriptive study entitled 'Assessment of English Learning in a Language Teacher Education Program' at a Colombian public university to identify the perceptions that both teachers and students on assessment of the English language teacher education program (ELTEP), describe the assessment criteria and mechanisms commonly used by the teachers of the ELTEP, and determine suggestions provided by both students and teachers in regards to the assessment approach and procedures implemented in the ELTEP. The information for this study was collected via interviews, questionnaires, field diaries, and documentary records from 160 participants. The study revealed that the professors emphasized formative, fair and democratic assessment despite the general guidelines of the

assessment proposed by the institution. Rana and Rana (2019) in their longitudinal research study entitled ‘Teaching and Testing of English Listening and Speaking in Secondary Schools: Pretend or Praxis?’ investigated the effectiveness of cooperative learning (CL) for improving learners’ English language proficiency (ELP) level in Nepal. It is found that both students and teachers have perceived the test of listening and reading are important. However, the teachers are not assessing students based on the SEE Board framework for listening and speaking skills, and it is unethical and out of the policy. Acharya (2022) in his study on ‘An Analysis of Student Assessment Practices in Higher Education of Nepal’ explored the assessment practices by students and the problems they faced in higher education in Nepal. The findings of this study based on the primary (media’s teachers’ opinions, cases and issues coverage) and secondary data (archive and digital documents) suggest that the issues are prevalent in the assessment in the case of Nepal, thus it suggests further transformation and reformation of the assessment along with the use of digital tools. As the above studies and their insights guide me to explore the perception and practices of assessment at the Basic Level in the Nepalese context, I found that this gap could be filled to some extent and this study will support envisioning the assessment practices and working for its reformation.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study was guided by Critical Language Testing and regarding its origin (Shohamy, 2022) states that this theory is influenced by Michel Foucault’s ‘*Discipline and Punish*’, Samuel Messick’s ‘*Evidence and Ethics in the Evaluation of Tests*’ and Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘*Language and Symbolic Power*’. Shohamy (2022) states, “The term Critical Language Testing (CLT) refers to the misuse of language tests in education and society by raising critical questions and challenges about the misuse of language tests” (p. 1448). Critical Language Testing suggests that the test should not be influenced by the culture of test makers, political dimensions, and power in the society. As this study attempted to explore how the students (Grades 6-8) perceive and practice assessment, I believe that this theory guided me to underpin theory into practice through the eye of test takers and the power and political dimension of the assessment in the Nepalese context.

Policy Review

The Basic Education Curriculum, 2077 (Grade 6-8) was approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) on January 28, 2021 [Curriculum Development Center (CDC, 2022)]. According to this curriculum, there is provision for internal (50 %) and external (50 %) assessment. The internal assessment emphasized on portfolio of each student maintaining his/her regular performance, project work, test performance and participation (CDC, 2022).

Internal Assessment (50 %)		External Assessment (50 %)	
Assessment Area	Weightage (Marks)	Final Examination	Weightage
Participation (attendance: 2 & students’ performance in teaching-learning activities: 2)	4	Reading: 25 Writing: 25 Grammar is incorporated in the writing section.	(50 Marks)
Reading: 8 and writing: 8	16		
Listening: 10 and speaking: 10	20		
Terminal Test (2 times)	10		

Methodology

I carried out this phenomenological study under qualitative research design since the purpose of the research drives me to gather subjective information in narrative and experiential form to make

the information rich. This study was conducted at a private school in Kathmandu Valley and the information of this study was collected through an in-depth interview. A total of 6 participants were selected for this study to collect information purposively. The age of the participants ranged between 11-14 years old. During interviews, participants were asked to state their understandings and perceptions regarding assessment. I took consent from the school administration and students themselves orally since I was a teacher at that school which made it easy to have a good rapport with the students which helped me to get rich and sufficient information for this study. However, I gave due respect to the participants which supported me to protect them from the anticipated harm of this study.

Results and Discussion

I tried my best to make sense of the collected information in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities for data analysis and interpretation.

Examination: A Tool for Progress

The participants involved in the study reported that examination is a tool for their progress. They further developed a belief that examination helps to measure students' performance and encourages them for better learning. In this regard, P6 expressed,

I like exam because it gives me the platform to express my ideas and opinions openly. I can express my ideas openly during exams and it also can denote my talent and thinking capacity. It can support my study as well.

We have to take an exam to know what we have learned or gained from the course book. The exam is the time when we need to learn what we have learned and present our ideas related to a particular subject. It is good for students as everyone gets frightened and starts reading exams. (P1).

I do like exams as we can compare our capacity and knowledge with others. We get to know about our competitors. It is a way to know our competitors and perform well so that we would get an opportunity to express our learning through writing in the examination. (P2).

The above views of the participants show that examination helps to show their talents and capacities. It further provides them to explore the knowledge that they have gained from their regular class. This view is very similar to the study of Mussamy (2009) who stated that the forms of assessment are helpful in students' learning. Furthermore, it can be assumed that exam provides them to compare with others and it indirectly motivates them to engage in study for exam preparation. Burns (2008) found that if students spend more time on exam preparation, they are likely to perform well in their examinations. Hence, it is noticed that examination is an important tool for students' progress.

Examination: Realization of Comfort Zone

The participants involved in this study perceived examinations as a comfort zone for them due to numerous reasons. Regarding this, P1 said,

I feel comfortable writing my ideas during examinations because it is the time to expose our talents, inner ideas, and views and we are free to express our ideas in the form of writing. When we get a chance to share our ideas, the examiner also gets to know about our ideas and experience and it is where we can show our talents.

I would love to share my ideas and views as teachers would examine our thoughts according to the topic. If there is a mistake and confusion, we could clear our views. Ideas are expressed in terms of the knowledge we gain. (P2)

From the above responses, it can be argued that some students favoured written examination as it provided them the opportunity to share their learning in the form of writing. It is important to have progress testing (Moraveca et al., 2015) and such testing helps students prepare for their final examination. The data also revealed that students become more conscious and clarify their confusion by giving more time for examination preparation. Furthermore, it can be assumed that writing helps students to pose their ideas during the examination as a result it is favoured by them to express their ideas and learning.

Examination as a Phobia

The study found that students have a fear of examination since it provides their overall grade/result based on their performance. This aligns with the finding of Vogl and Pekrun (2016) who reported that test anxiety had detrimental consequences for most students. In the context of the school level in Nepal, students are required to rote the subject matter before they appear for their examinations. It needs a lot of preparation which might lead them to have a negative backwash. If students have a fear of examination, it is considered that they have a negative backwash. As per my own experience as a teacher and student, I would say that the teaching and learning process in Nepal is influenced by examinations which is one of the reasons to have a negative backwash. According to Struyven and Devesa (2016), “Sometimes, preference for traditional assessments persists despite the instructor’s best efforts to cultivate alternative attitudes” (p. 134). In response to the question of whether they like examinations or not, P5 explained,

No, I do not like exams. When the teachers announced the coming exam, it dreads and feels hopeless. Because I hate to be judged by some amount of marks given by someone. There is also a possibility to be in depression for the students which can hamper their creativity.

The above remarks indicated that many students perceived exams negatively. This perception was similar to Chatterjee and Rani (2013) who argued that the present practice of examination compels students to prepare for those topics in which students are not interested.

Regarding the examination system and their experiences, P1 shared,

I do not feel comfortable writing my ideas during examinations because, in our education system, there is no respect or value for our ideas. My idea and copy checker's idea may not match and I may get lower marks in the exams.

I do not feel comfortable writing my ideas during examinations because most of the teachers prefer the students who write the same answer that is pronounced in the classroom. However, I cannot memorize what is written in the textbooks or said by teachers. (P2)

I am afraid of exams because they dominate the inner qualities of the student. Our curriculum has enforced three-hour exams of a hundred marks. Appearing in the final examinations and writing what is memorized is a difficult task for me. Final examination brings a stressful environment and it is found less useful in comparison to practical and field knowledge. (P4)

The above remarks of the participants expressed that negative backwash is prevalent in the context of teaching and learning in an EFL setting. Prodromou (1995) states that negative backwash, as experienced by the learner, means language learning in a stressful, textbook-bound environment. As a result, it can be said that examination makes students anxious which represents negative backwash or harmful backwash. Therefore, teachers need to follow assessments along with corrective instruction so that students get the opportunity to show their improved competence and understanding (Guskey, 2003). From the above remarks of the participants, it can be assumed that they are afraid of examination. Most of the students perceived assessment as a practice having less to do with enhancing learning, motivating students and shaping classroom behaviours (Zeidner, 1992, as cited in Struyven & Devesa, 2016). Therefore, to some extent, it can be claimed that pencil tests may not judge students' overall knowledge and information for their regular improvement of learning. Hung et al. (2016) suggested involving students in peer assessment (PA) to assess the speaking performance of students and their study further suggests “needs awareness, scaffolding instruction, and proper training” (p. 465) for the PA classroom. This also suggests that there is a need for alternative assessments which might judge students' overall quality through continuous evaluation/formative assessment so that regular improvement is possible for a continuous learning process.

Project Work: A Good Assessment Tool

The participants of this study shared that the project work is supportive for them to learn and to be assessed in their learning situation. The reasons behind choosing this activity would be the advantages of the project work for the students as it fosters their creativity, skills and knowledge related to the given topic for better learning where their self-practice and self-performance are mandatory. They further reported that they would get a chance to learn many new things and get a good platform to show their ability and presentation. In this regard, P3 shared,

I love project-based assessment because it not only gives us information regarding the topic but also makes learning long-term, fun, and exciting and we develop leadership and confidence levels too. Such activities Project activity involves students in group work, discussing in a team and coming up with ideas to work for the best project to prepare and demonstrate in the classroom.

The above remarks showed the participants' positive perceptions of project work and its assessment as they developed a belief that it helps them to learn on their own and share their learning through discussion and presentation in their classroom. Gülbahar and Tinmaz (2006) state that students get an opportunity to deal with real-life problems in project based-learning so that such learning would be a source of permanent knowledge. Furthermore, the participants of this study revealed that project assessment helps increase the creativity and imagination of the students for better learning. Therefore, the teachers need to give numerous project works to the students so that they can learn by doing with active engagement during the teaching and learning process and activities.

Current Strategies of Examination Preparation

The majority of the participants of this study reported that the major ways of preparing for their assessment were making points, highlighting facts and understanding the content at a deep level. Regarding the strategies of exam preparation, P1 said,

I believe that studying in the morning time is a good one. I read the text and collect major ideas so that they can be remembered for a long time. I just revised the lessons by reading in-depth and even following the grid.

Similarly, P3 expressed,

The preparation for the examination depends on our creativity. If we are creative, we can express our ideas properly. The major strategies that I have been using are, i) by understanding various logics and facts, ii) by revising the lessons at surface level iii) by maintaining a timetable, and iv) by not being nervous and having a good sleep and thinking optimistically.

To avoid panicking during the exam, I always think of something positive that makes me relaxed before the exam. As I cannot memorize everything in my brain, I write simple tricks about it and understand it according to my theory. I go through the hints given by the teacher and friends. I also consult on mind games, cheats, and notes for preparation. (P4)

The above responses reflected that students are adopting different strategies for the preparation of examinations. The major strategies that are being applied by the participants are preparing notes, revising the lessons, getting relaxed and maintaining a timetable. This finding is similar to Entwistle and Entwistle (2003) who argued that reviewing the notes, producing the summary notes, checking understanding of the notes and memorization of the structures and supporting details are some of the prominent exam preparation strategies followed by the majority of the students. Similarly, Ha et al. (2021) reported that teachers' beliefs and practices on assessment are influenced by their experiences as students and traditional ones due to which their assessment practice is driven by exam-oriented situations. As teaching and assessment are influenced by teachers' old practices of assessment and somehow similar to their assessment, rote learning and memorization are observed as one of the major strategies for exam preparation which might be transformed if teachers bring innovation in teaching and assessment practices.

Conclusion and Implications

Assessment is a process of judging students' ability and knowledge based on certain criteria in the context of classroom teaching and learning. From this study, it is noticed that the majority of the student participants shared that the existing teaching and learning is influenced by the assessment and as a result it has a negative backwash in the teaching and learning process. Some of the student participants perceived examination as a tool for progress as it invites them to focus on their studies and improve their learning. As assessment is an integral part and mandatory in academia, it must help students judge, and provide regular feedback and support for learning. The findings of this study suggest that teachers are more supporters and facilitators rather than just assessors for better teaching and learning processes. Likewise, the balance of the use of formative and summative assessment is equally important for education. It is also noticed that project assessment is one of the best assessment practices as the majority of the students favored it. Regarding the exam preparation strategies, it is deduced that the individuals have different ways of exam preparation and the major ways of exam preparation highlighted by the participants are making notes, revising the lessons, and, reading the lessons with deep understanding.

Assessment is a part of everyday life in academia. It helps to test the skills and knowledge of the students and provides feedback to the students for their learning improvements or directs the teachers to upgrade their students in upper Grades. Assessment is mainly used for four purposes and they are a) summative, b) diagnostic, c) formative), and d) placement. As a teacher and teacher educator, I do believe that exams are necessary to find out the knowledge, skills, and talents of the students. Luthfiyyah et al. (2020) highlight an urgency to provide exposure to EFL teachers on assessment to improve students'

learning and teachers' assessment practices. Furthermore, this study helps students to improve their learning. It can be claimed that the examination allows students to express their knowledge and skills. Firstly, this study is believed to be significant for the teachers to explore how the assessment is being perceived by the basic level (Grades 6-8) students in the Nepalese context. Secondly, this study would be helpful for future researchers to take this study as a reference and plan to carry out research related to this area. Likewise, students of the Basic Level (Grades 6-8) and other levels would get some insights and strategies to know the trends of examination preparation if they get an opportunity to go through this study. Finally, this study would be equally beneficial for policy makers, ELT experts, and teacher educators to know the importance of assessment, strategies of examination preparation, project assessment and modify the assessment as per the students' interests and existing assessment practices.

This study was limited to exploring the perception and practices of assessment by the students (Grades 6-8) in a specific location under phenomenological study. Therefore, in Nepal, there are many areas of assessment which have not been explored. Future researchers may focus on the perceptions and practices of English teachers, narrow down their study for certain language skills and widen the study area based on the research issue and areas to cover.

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