Practices of Assessment Tools in Teaching-Learning Activities in Public Schools of Nepal

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Abstract

This study explores the practices of assessment tools in the teaching-learning activities practiced by the public schools of Nepal. Different theoretical ideas regarding the assessment like forms, purposes, and issues are discussed thematically based on the data-related literature. To find out the issues or gaps in assessment practices in Nepal, both primary (interviews with the Headteachers, students, and teachers) and secondary sources of data are analyzed. The non-random purposive sampling procedure is used. Data collected from the interview and questionnaire are discussed thematically in a descriptive way. Finally, as finding, it is concluded that very limited forms or tools of assessment like terminal and final examinations are used to evaluate the student's learning achievement. Although both formative and summative assessments contribute equally to enhancing the students' learning, tools of the formative assessment such as portfolio, project work, classwork, etc. are rarely implemented during teaching-learning activities in the public schools of Nepal.

Keywords: Achievement, assessment, evaluation, formative, learning, summative

Introduction

Assessment is the process of gathering data using several activities. Traditionally it was used to measure how much our students have learned during a particular time. But at present, assessment is accepted as a broad term that has included overall aspects of the learner and learning process. Several arguments have been found about the assessment of learning in terms of process, product, practice, policies, and so on. Especially, in the public schools of Nepal, Continuous Assessment System (CAS) is introduced up to the basic level, where teachers make a portfolio of each student and judge the overall aspects of the learners and the learning process continuously. Traditionally the assessment process was regarded as a tool to discipline the students and build pressure on children as well as parents (Awasthi, 2003). In this way, in some cases, assessment is a means of punishing the students instead of improving learners' learning achievement.

Formative and Summative Assessment

Generally, assessment refers to any method, strategy, or tool which helps the teacher to collect necessary evidence and information regarding the learners' learning process with pre-established goals. Without the proper assessment, teaching-learning can't be a success. Regarding this fact, Heaton (1985) states that both testing and teaching are so closely interrelated that it is virtually impossible to work in either field without being constantly concerned with the others.

Similarly focusing on the nature of assessment, Bachman (2004) states that "assessment is a process of collecting information about something that we are interested in, according to procedures that are systematic and substantially grounded" (p.6). In this way assessment is a process of teaching which continuously provides insights into language teaching. In another way, the process of assessment is designed systematically which is directly linked with other fields of teaching such as learning activities, designing instructional materials, and so on.

There are two types of assessments in general, formative and summative assessments which equally contribute to providing necessary feedback for further improvement and validation of the learned learning. But on a deeper level, they are used for totally separate purposes in teaching fields. A summative assessment is used to validate the learning. Summative assessment summarizes or evaluates what students learned during a course and it is usually done at the end of the semester (Brown, 2004). Likewise, Alderson (2005 No reference) associates summative assessment with long traditional tests which were so stressful to students.

Any kind of test which lacks further feedback and the only possible use of it is gathering scores in the eyes of students can be summative even if teachers have primarily designed the test to facilitate learning and teaching. In his view, summative assessment creates some stress on the student's side which does not provide any feedback for the students' improvements. This view of assessment is related to the old traditional testing system using the old language test but at present, the concept of summative assessment has been changed and it has been taken as a means of further improvement in some cases (Stiggings, 1991).

Formative assessment in another hand is a type of assessment that primarily focused on providing constructive feedback on the student's learning which helps the learners to improve their further learning tasks based on previous practices. Accepting this fact, Lewy (1990) mentioned that formative assessment takes place during learning and is aimed to help learning and teaching by giving appropriate feedback. Similarly, another scholar, Nitko (1993) mentioned two purposes of formative assessment: (a) selecting or modifying learning procedures, and (b) choosing the best remedies for improving weak points in learning and teaching.

While analyzing these two views it is very clear that formative assessment is mainly designed to provide necessary suggestions to achieve the established objectives of teaching, which helps the learners to improve their teaching-learning competencies. So, formative assessment is a major means of modifying the methods, techniques, materials, and procedures of teaching especially being based on past experiences and results. In this way, both formative and summative assessments are practiced for separate functions, although both are an essential part of teaching and assessment.

Purposes of Formative and Summative Assessment in Teaching Learning

It is no doubt that both types of assessment are essential for effective teaching. But while utilizing them in our real teaching field we found separate functions and purposes of both assessments. It is essentially feedback both to the teachers and to the pupil about present understanding and skill development to determine the way forward. But Sadler argued differently in this matter (Hanna & Dettmer, 1997, p. 369). Similarly, Rahman & Ashrafuzzaman (1998) states formative assessment is an assessment that is specifically intended to provide feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning (p.77). While analyzing both arguments, it is clear that the main aim of utilizing formative assessment is to provide feedback to enhance learning. In another hand, formative assessment is beneficial for both the teachers and students to improve their further performance by fulfilling their missed learning achievements.

We generally practice the summative assessment to measure the whole educational process at the end period of the session not intending to provide feedback. Summative assessment summarizes or evaluates what students learned during a course and it is usually done at the end of the semester (Brown, 2004). So, summative assessment is used to evaluate the learners' learned knowledge during the whole educational period and is done specifically at the end time of the academic period.

Assessment practices in Nepal

Both formative and summative assessments can give equally contribute to enhancing learning. In the absence of one, there is not any existence of another in the evaluation process. In Nepal, generally at the school level, there is a blended system of the evaluation process which includes both formative and summative procedures (Regmi, 2014). National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2063 made a policy regarding the assessment system introducing both types of the assessment system at the school level. It shows that there is a policy of 70% formative assessment (40% CAS and 30% terminal exam) and a 30% summative assessment (final exam) at the basic level (class 1-8).

Regarding the secondary level, a 40% terminal exam i.e., formative assessment, and a 60% final exam which belongs to summative assessment is practiced till

now, although the grading system is implemented. The government of Nepal has introduced the system of continuous assessment system (CAS) up to the basic level for the liberal promotion of the students but because of ineffective implementation, it couldn't work properly (Nepali, 2012). The policies are revised time and again accepting the emergence of both formative as well as summative assessments in course of teaching-learning but the implementational aspects are not satisfactory.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to draw out and explore the practices of assessment tools during teaching-learning in public schools in Nepal. Furthermore, gaps (issues) between policies, purposes, and implementation of formative and summative assessments in the teaching-learning process in the public schools of Nepal are the secondary objective of this study.

Methodology

This study followed mixed methods as both qualitative and quantitative data are discussed. Five public schools in the Baglung district were my major areas of study where I collected data related to assessment practices. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used The primary sources of data were collected from the students, headmasters, and teachers from selected public schools of the Baglung district.

As a secondary source of data, I consulted the government's policies like the National Curriculum Framework, assessment records of the schools, and different research articles and books regarding testing and evaluation as mentioned in the theoretical part. Using the non-random purposive sampling, I selected 12 students and 12 teachers from each selected public school, as a sample who were teaching and learning in different five public schools in the Baglung district. A set of questionnaires was administrated to the teachers and semi-structured interview was conducted with students, teachers, and headmasters separately. Collected data were discussed descriptively.

Result and Discussion

Findings Based on Teachers' Responses

I included nine different questions regarding the assessment, its practices, and the challenges faced by the teachers. Regarding the practices of assessment, all of the teachers used both formative and summative assessments in their teaching-learning tasks. But they used limited means or tools of assessment. Tools used for the formative and summative assessment by different teachers are presented following table.

Table 1

Forms used by the teachers for the formative assessment

SN	Forms of formative assessment	Number of teachers
1.	Attendance	1
2.	Homework	2
3.	Participation	1
4.	Classroom test, Unit test, and/or weekly test	1
5.	Observation	0
6.	Project work	0
7.	CAS	2
8.	Portfolio	2
9.	Terminal Examination	12

While analyzing this table, most of the teachers of Nepal used only terminal examinations as a major means of formative assessment. In another way, the process of formative assessment is guided by terminal paper-pencil tests. No other innovations are practiced in the field of teaching and testing. Despite the clear provisions about compulsory maintenance of the learners' portfolios, only a few teachers have made the individual portfolio of the students.

Similarly, the teachers emphasize the other means or forms of formative assessment than examinations. From this, we can say that the formative assessment process at the school level in Nepal, is guided by the examination and other effective means such as classroom discussion, observation, maintaining the portfolio, unit test, classroom test, homework, project work, and participation of the learners in learning are rarely considered.

Table 2

Forms or means used by the teachers for summative assessment

S. N.	Descriptions of forms	Number of teachers
1.	Final Exam	12
2.	Project Work	0
3.	Practical Work	1

In table 2, all teachers are practicing the final exam as a means of the summative assessment. In Nepal, there is no trend of using other means such as project work, practical tasks, computer-based tests, etc. but only final examinations. Despite the several provisions regarding the means of summative assessment in the curriculum as well as policy documents, most of the teachers are neglecting the other innovative and recent tools of language testing except the final test.

Findings Based on Students' Responses

While analyzing the responses given by the students, I found a positive match between the student's expectations and the government's plan. In the context of using the only final exam as a major means of evaluation, the learners have been demanding other varieties of tools such as practical tasks, project work, interviews, etc. Most of the students responded that they felt bored writing the long examination paper. Instead of fulfilling the learners' desires by involving them in several assessment tasks such as field visits, experiment tasks, project work, and so on, the teachers are imposing old-fashioned examination trends which do not meet the needs of the learners. One of the respondents states:

> *I am very interested to engage in different project works and creative tasks but my teachers force me to prepare for the exam by practicing questions asked in previous exams.*

According to the student's responses, the teachers deliver teaching content focusing on the examination, not for the further improvement of learners' learning. Students rarely participated in other extra activities like games and songs. Teachers provide much time preparing the questions for the examination but they hesitate to allocate some time to bring variation in terms of assessment tools except terminal exams.

> *I want to participate in different collaborative tasks like conversation, drawing, and group readings but teachers judge our learning as per the writing during the exam period.*

From the students' arguments, both formative and summative tools of the assessment are practiced in formality i. e, to upgrade the learners to the upper level but students' desires, expectations, capacities, performance, and creativities are rarely considered when choosing the means or tools of formative as well as a summative assessment.

Findings Based on Head Teacher's Responses

Implementing and practicing different tools of assessment in teaching-learning is not the task of only teachers and students. Headmaster's responsibility is equally important for effective teaching and testing. I conducted a semi-structured interview with the headteachers of the selected schools. While analyzing the information collected from the headteacher, I found that there is not any proper monitoring and supervision from the concerned authorities like the school supervisor and representatives of the school management committee. Ranjan Sharma (pseudonym) expresses:

> *I am serious about the usefulness of the different assessment tools in teaching-learning activities but lack of proper supervision and supports from stakeholders like parents we are facing difficulties.*

The administration is not providing essential materials for teachers which directly affects the implementational aspects of the assessment in the school. According to the Headmasters, there are not any physical facilities for testing from the side of the government which is directly affecting the whole education process. Sajina Malla (pseudonym) adds:

> *We do not have a proper budget to manage different tools such as individual portfolios, practical labs, project materials, etc. The government only provides limited financial support for administrative purposes which is not sufficient to use in the management of different assessment tools.*

Another respondent highlights the teachers' passive roles in the practices varieties of assessment tools in teaching-learning:

> *Frequently I have monitored teachers' activities and suggested practicing other tools like an individual portfolio in the assessment process, but teachers do not take my suggestions seriously and teach as usual.*

As the respondent expressed, teachers are not accountable and responsible for the suggestions and feedback are given by the principal and supervisors. Despite the Headmaster's suggestions except for the first term, mid-term and final test, teachers do not use any other activities in the class for students' evaluation. Some of the teachers rarely use other means of assessment; it may due to the lack of proper supervision and monitoring from the side of upper administration like a municipality and other agencies.

Sixty percent of the mark is allocated for CAS which is in practice from classes one to seven but the teachers are not satisfied with CAS. Liberal class promotion from class one to three is implemented in schools but not based on the result from the CAS and students' portfolios but the only achievement from the final and terminal examination. As replied by the Headmaster, policies related to the assessment are not fully implemented in school. Teachers are less focused on classwork, homework, term exams, and attendance which are effective tools for both formative and summative assessments and directly related to meaningful learning on the part of the learners.

Based on the ideas given by the headmaster it is clear that both types of assessment are equally necessary for the betterment of public schools but due to the lack of teachers' accountability, lack of proper materials and institutional support,

lack of proper monitoring and supervision from the stakeholders, the real intention of the students' assessment and teaching-learning is not fulfilled. The major problem that the headteacher found is, that most of the teachers are not utilizing several means or tools of formative and summative assessment as they are only assessing the students by the terminal and final examination.

Conclusion and Implication

There is no doubt that both formative and summative assessments, along with their several tools are equally significant for better educational achievement. As stated by Ur (2013), formative assessment is necessary to improve the current situation with necessary modifications in trends, methods, and evaluation process, and summative assessment is required for providing the validation of learned knowledge which shows reliability and authenticity in the learning process. But despite this fact, most of the teachers, teaching in public schools, are emphasizing a few means of summative assessment such as terminal and final examinations to assess the learning.

Here in Nepal, there is not a perfect trend of using formative assessment to provide feedback for further improvement. An examination is used to grade the learners, not for further improvements. The Government has introduced several innovations in the field of testing and evaluation such as the provision of liberal promotion, maintenance of portfolio, task-based evaluation, project work, CAS, and so on through the legal provisions in the school curriculum. So for a better evaluation system, it is necessary to practice different varieties of assessments such as project work, field visits, classroom observation, attendance, participation in the learning task, etc. while evaluating the learners. Concern authorities such as School Management Committee (SMC) members, School Supervisors, and headmasters must monitor the schools' assessment practices to provide feedback for better implementation of the government's provisions.

Teachers also should be accountable and responsible for their duties to implement the best provision of the government. Regarding assessment practices, we should develop several assessment strategies to address the different abilities of the learners and maintain contextual trends in the process of evaluation. It is not the debate of effectiveness regarding formative and summative assessment but the main thing is that we should utilize the forms/tools of any assessment system according to the contextual demand and heterogeneous nature of the learners.

The findings from this study will be beneficial to the language teachers, educators, test administrators and curriculum designers to set the evaluative tools effectively. Furthermore, the language teachers can update their assessment strategies as per the conclusion presented in the study.

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