

LTJ_29.3_Classroom_Based_Assessment

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Interviewer: From the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom, this is Glenn Fulcher with another issue of Language Testing Bites. In issue 29.3 of the journal we publish a paper on classroom based assessment by Catherine Hill and Tim McNamara. The research described in the paper is based on Catherine Hill's PHD research, and so we invited Catherine to join us for issue 10 of the podcast to talk about this important area of research. Catherine is currently lecturer in clinical communication and learning development in the medical education unit at the Melbourne Medical School.

Welcome to Language Testing Bites to talk about classroom based assessment, and your article in issue 29.3 of the journal.

Respondent: Thank you for inviting me.

Interviewer; Classroom based assessment hasn't received a great deal of attention in the language testing literature until relatively recently. And in fact most of the work appears to have been done in general education and science education in particular. Most articles including yours refer back to a paper by [unintelligible 00:01:10] published in 1998, entitled Inside the Black Box. And perhaps we could start off by asking you to tell us why this paper is now viewed as so important, and what trends in research and language assessment it kick-started?

Respondent: Sure, well basically what they said in that article was that government policy and initiatives up until that point had been really focused on inputs and outputs in the classroom, without really looking at what teachers were actually doing to try and achieve those outcomes. So what they argued for more attention to that, and in particular they argued for a greater focus and use of formative assessment, and in another paper which they drew on in the article Inside the Black Box, they conducted an extensive literature review, like a meta review. What that demonstrated is that formative assessment could really improve learning outcomes. So they were arguing that is what policy and initiatives and research really needed to start focusing on more. So in terms of the trends, there has since that time been a much greater emphasis on looking at classroom based assessment and how teachers actually do assessment, in particular formative assessment. There has been all sorts of things like people have been looking for instance at the relationship between formative and summative assessment, looking at the criteria that teachers actually use which are not necessarily consistent with the official criteria. And also looking at things like the influence of external assessment and reporting regimes on what teachers do in the classroom in terms of assessment.

Interviewer: In your explanation there you refer to the development of formative assessment practises in addition to summative forms of assessment. Can you briefly explain each of these and comment on their role in classroom based assessment?

Respondent: Yeah sure, well basically summative assessment is what we traditionally think of as assessment in the form of tests for example, and their main purpose is really to report on student progress say to parents or to an outside authority which has an accountability function, or to certify learners as having accomplished satisfactorily finished a course of study or a unit of study or something like that. Whereas formative assessment it may take the form of tests but it is often much broader than that, much more varied than that. It is characterised as assessment for learning, whereas summative assessment characterises assessment of learning. What is meant by that is that information from assessment, however that is gained, is then used either to modify the teaching to re-teach something that hasn't been specially understood for example, and or to provide feedback to learners about how they can improve from what the assessment has shown in order to come closer to the standard that is desired. And the other thing about formative assessment is whilst it is often still conducted by the teacher, in contrast to summative assessment, there is more opportunity for learners to be involved in that process as well, either in

self or peer assessment. But also in negotiating the sort of criteria, or the tasks that they will be doing to demonstrate their learning. What that is all based on is the idea that all students can improve and it is really important they are actively involved in their own learning.

Interviewer: Thanks. Perhaps we can now turn to your paper and talk more directly about that. In your approach you have three parameters, evidence, interpretation and use. Taking each one in turn, can you tell us what each perimeter is and what significance it has for describing and studying a classroom based assessment?

Respondent: Well what I found when I started looking at the literature is that evidence and interpretation and use of the three criteria parameters or dimensions of assessment, so assessment involves a collection of evidence, interpretation of that evidence, and use of it. But what I found is that how each dimension is understood, there is a lot of diversity there. So, for example, when we look at evidence, you look at what is assessed, but also you look at how evidence is collected. Some researchers see it as something that is planned, whereas others say it could be planned or incidental. Or it might be something that is overt and highly visible, the learners know they are being assessed. Or it could just be embedded in every day teaching, so that goes to how it is collected. Then another important factor that came out in the literature is exactly who is being assessed, who is the target of assessment. [Unintelligible 00:06:33] and Prior, for example, concluded that in classroom based assessment it is more often assessment happening at the group level, rather than individual students, so it is important to be looking at that as well. And finally there is the question that I mentioned before about who is involved in the assessment, is it just the teachers, or are students actually involved in collecting evidence as well? Then the next dimensional parameter is interpretation. There is two things here, there is differences in views about what level of attention the assessor, teacher, or learner needs, let's say teacher. For example in Tim McNamara's definition in 2001, he says that it needs to be sustained attention. Whereas other researchers would say it may actually be fleeting, and sort of on the run. Then again to do with interpretation in terms of applying criteria to interpret the evidence. This criteria might be explicit, or they might actually be unconscious in terms of what criteria are being applied to interpret performance or whatever it is that is being assessed. And finally in terms of the use, there is quite a range of purposes in the literature for assessment. As we have mentioned before, it could be reporting or certification, it could be used to plan on modified teaching, as in the sort of more formative purposes. But other researchers have talked about the management role of assessment. And then there is who is using the information, so the information might be for the benefit of the teacher, or an outside agency, or it might be for the learner.

Interviewer: As I understand it, the study you describe in the paper is unusual in that you developed an empirical approach that led to the development of a framework for describing classroom based assessment. Now of course our readers can download the study for themselves, and we hope they will. But perhaps here you can briefly summarise the study and its main outcomes for us?

Respondent: Okay, well at the outset I need to say that what is presented in the article is actually part of a larger study which is actually my PHD dissertation. So I might need to distinguish as I go along here. But basically what that was is a detailed ethnographic study of two Australian school classrooms, and the students were aged 11-13, and they were studying Indonesian as a foreign language, which is quite commonly taught in Australia. It might sound odd to people overseas. So what I did is I looked at two successive levels of schooling, year six which is the last year of primary school in Victoria where I live, and then year seven which is the first year of high school. And I did this because one of the things I was interested in the larger study was the issue of continuity and transitions, so I looked at those consecutive year levels. So it was an ethnographic study so I used participant observation and field notes, and I also collected audio recordings, so there was about eighty ours all up of audio recordings. These were of classroom interactions, so between students or groups of students, and between the teacher and the class or individual students. And also interviews with teachers and students, focus groups of students. Then I also did a document analysis so I looked at things like progress reports, the sorts of things

that are sent to parents, worksheets and those sorts of things. One of the things, first of all I need to say is that something that came up very early in the piece was how to capture, or how to record or think about the more intuitive forms of assessment that are taking place in the classroom. This was a particular issue in the year six classroom because the teacher there didn't really do... all the assessment was embedded and it was very hard to see when assessment was happening. I talked to the teacher about this and she said well it is like you have got antennae sticking out of your ears and it all comes in and you are constantly processing it, so I sort of then thought well how am I going to record this. What I did was come up with the idea of the assessment opportunity, and the way I described this is I looked at the evidence that was available in the classroom that might be used for assessment in the recognition of the possibility that incidental assessment, or intuitive forms of assessment are constantly taking place.

A simple example is an activity where the teacher asks students to read aloud in turn, and although it might not be a planned assessment opportunity, it affords the teacher an opportunity to either consciously, or unconsciously assess that individuals reading and pronunciation skills. What that also allowed me to do was to think about the classroom interactions in general, and think well what quality of evidence is generated by the sorts of activities that the teacher is doing in that classroom? The outcome of the study was framework for analysing classroom based assessment. This framework was based on a grounded analysis of the data, but it was also informed by existing research. The framework is organised around four main questions. That is first of all, what do teachers do, and then secondly what do they look for, and then thirdly what theories or standards they use when they think about assessment, and finally looking at what the learner understanding of assessment was. Then of course in the larger study that framework was actually then used to analyse the data from the respective classrooms in order to compare the classrooms and draw more general conclusions about the meaning of assessment practises in those contexts.

Interviewer: And in the paper you discovered that there were four key processes in classroom based assessment, that there was planning, framing, conducting and using assessment. In studies of classroom based assessment today, including those of Black and William, the assessment reform group, the notion of feedback to learners has taken a centre stage. So can you say what role feedback plays in your framework?

Respondent: Sure, I suppose in those four processes, planning, framing, conducting and using, they are all part of the first part of the framework, which is what teachers do. So what teachers do is they plan assessment, frame assessment, conduct and use. In terms of using feedback that relates to, I talk about the type of feedback that is provided to learners, so I distinguish a number of different types. The first type, and this is documented in the literature as well, but the first type I call person reference, and that sort of feedback is really focused on the ego, on a fixed rate of the student. So for example, it is like you are very smart, that was very good. But it doesn't really tell them anything about the performance. And there is research to suggest that actually has a negative impact on student motivation, it makes them more likely to compare, to be motivated by doing better than other people, rather than improving their own learning. That was the first type, person reference. The other type of feedback I've characterised is task reference, and in this type of feedback there is much greater focus on the performance or on what the learner has done. Again, this can be broken down into a number of different categories. I've called them confirmatory, which is just yes that is right, or a tick, explanatory which is where the teacher might actually tell the student what they did well, and then corrective goes a bit further and actually tells the student the difference between what they did and what was expected in terms of what level they are supposed to get to, and basically how they might get to that level. Corrective feedback itself varies in terms of degrees of explicitness, and I considered this by using [unintelligible 00:16:05] regulatory scale, but I won't go into that right now.

Feedback actually comes up in other parts of the framework. In the second part, what do teachers look for, I looked at the content of feedback to look for criteria for example. And in the last part,

the fourth part, it looks at learner understandings of feedback, so feedback comes up quite a bit in the framework.

Interviewer: Are there any other components of your framework that are novel, and from which you think teachers can directly benefit when thinking about their own assessment practises?

Respondent: As I mentioned before, the framework does build on earlier models, but I think it extends them in a number of ways and addresses a number of gaps, different frameworks have looked at different things, and I guess this is a comprehensive framework. The sorts of things that might not necessarily be in other frameworks are things like looking at the values and beliefs, informing observed assessment practises, and a specific focus on learners and their understanding of assessment. The other aspect of the paper that might be novel is the definition of classroom based assessment that was adopted, which I didn't really explain before, but what I did was adopted the broadest possible definition of a classroom based assessment, which took in all the diversity that was represented in the literature, and this was because I wanted to include the most diverse range of data possible, given that it was an ethnographic approach that I used. And also the notion of the assessment opportunity, which as I tried to explain before, looks at all the affordances offered in the classroom, and therefore the sort of things that might provide evidence for the more intuitive forms of assessment. And finally I guess, as you said at the beginning, most of the work to date has been done in general education and science education. There has also more recently been quite a bit of work done on English as an additional language, but I'm not aware of any other work that is done at this level of detailed study in the context of school based foreign language. So I guess that is quite novel as well. The second part of your question was to think about how teachers might benefit from this article. I need to emphasize that the aim of the empirical study was to understand, rather than evaluate, classroom based assessment practises, so I really wasn't there to judge the teachers. And the focus of the article itself was presenting the framework, rather than describing the outcomes of the main study, which has a lot more to say to classroom teachers I think. However, the framework presented in the article may certainly be useful for teachers to help them think about their own assessment practises, and there is certainly plenty of literature out there, plenty of evidence, on how different assessment practises impact on learning. And the sort of things I'm thinking about here are the types of feedback they provide, and also to be more reflective about how their values and beliefs may impact on their assessment practises. Also a great focus on the learner role in the assessment process, and in the main study there were some quite amusing and interesting data on students misunderstandings of what was important in the classroom. I think there is something for teachers there.

Interviewer: I think the research in classroom based language assessment is set to grow in the coming years. The publication of your framework as a resource in framing that research is very timely. We would like to thank you for choosing Language Testing in which to publish your research, and for joining us on Language Testing Bites to help elucidate the issues for our readers.

Respondent: I hope that is what it has done, thanks Glenn.

Interviewer: Thank you for listening to this issue of Language Testing Bites. Language Testing Bites is a production of the journal Language Testing from Sage publications. You can subscribe to Language Testing Bites through iTunes, or you can download future issues from ltj.sagepub.com, or from languagetesting.info. So until next time we hope you enjoy the current issue of Language Testing.

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