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An Investigation into the Effectiveness of Learning Assessment for Non-English Major Students at the Tertiary Level

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Abstract

English is now considered as a global language. In non-English speaking contexts, English language education has been the major concern of different stakeholders, including managers, teachers, students, parents and employers. That is why there is a growing need for investigating how EFL curricula are implemented. This study reports part of a larger study that aims to investigate the effectiveness of the EFL curriculum in a non-public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This part only focuses on learning assessment in terms of both formative and summative assessments. For gathering data, the study employed such research methods as documents analysis, class observation and open-ended questionnaire. The results of the study revealed that many problems still existed in the implementation of learning assessment in relation to the teachers' use of techniques for measuring students' language knowledge and skills and to the achievement test construction and implementation at the end of the courses. The study also made some recommendations to improve the quality of the implementation of English learning assessment at the university in particular and at the tertiary level in Vietnam in general.

Key words: *EFL curriculum, learning assessment, effectiveness, tertiary level, Vietnam*

INTRODUCTION

Learning assessment is of vital importance in English language education. It not only enables teachers to obtain information about their instruction and students' progress, but provides feedback for students about their learning as well. It is always considered as a hot issue and has been widely discussed and investigated all over the world, especially in non-English speaking countries. However, it is not the case of Vietnam where little research has been conducted to investigate how formative classroom assessment is performed and how achievement tests (end-of-term tests) are constructed, administered, and used in the context. It is expected that this paper will partly reflect the current status of English learning assessment at the tertiary level in Vietnam and will make a small contribution to the discussion through the investigation of the implementation of learning assessment.

LANGUAGE LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Assessment is of vital importance in the process of teaching and learning. It helps teachers know what students already know, what they have learned in the course of instruction and where their strengths and weaknesses are (Alderson, 2005). It is the teacher's responsibility to clearly understand about different types of learning assessment employed in the process of language teaching and learning; which types are appropriate to their students, and what techniques and criteria should be used in learning assessment.

Learning Assessment: Definitions

The term "learning assessment" refers to a variety of ways of collecting information on a student's language ability or achievement (Brindley, 2001). Or, it is a systematic approach to making inferences about the quality or success of a teaching course on the basis of various sources of evidence (Richards and Schmidt, 2010). It can be inferred from the above definitions that assessment is carried out both during the process of teaching and learning in the classroom and at the end of a unit, a week, a course or a term, and that assessment is a method or an approach which employs a set of procedures or techniques to gather information about students'

performances or achievements of knowledge and skills. Through the collection of information, teachers know what problems students are facing, and thus they can make adjustments or decisions in the process of teaching and learning.

Learning Assessment: Purposes

In education, there are gaps, sometimes considerable ones, between what has been taught and what has been learned (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Administrators, teachers and students expect to know what is taking place in the classroom. They need better ways to monitor learning throughout a lesson, a unit, a course or even a term. Particularly, teachers need a continuous flow of accurate information on their students' learning. The best way to identify and fill in the gaps is to carry out assessment. Language learning assessment is carried out in language learning curricula for a variety of purposes, including a) for diagnosis: to identify students' strengths and weaknesses; to help teachers to discover what problems individual students cope with in their learning; and to help teachers to identify and analyse the errors students makes in handling the target language; b) for decision-making: to help teachers to select appropriate materials and to enhance their teaching effectiveness by making modifications in their teaching; c) for motivation: to encourage students to study harder, and to enable certain groups of students or individuals in the class to benefit more; and for other purposes such as selection, certification and accountibility (Heaton, 1990; Brindley, 2001; Danielson, 2002; Oosterhof, 2003; McKay, 2008).

Formative and Summative Assessment

Assessment is an integral part of effective classroom teaching because assessment enables teachers to obtain accurate information about their students' progress (Westwood, 2008). Such information also provides essential feedback to teachers themselves on the quality of their instruction. There are two major categories relating to assessment in teaching and learning; a) assessment for learning provides information about student achievement which allows teaching and learning activities to be changed in response to the needs of students. This type of assessment is called formative assessment; and b) assessment of learning involves making judgements about students' summative achievement for purposes of selection and grading, and it also acts as a focus for institutional accountability and quality. It is considered as summative assessment (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007; Marshall, 2011).

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment (informal assessment) is ongoing assessment (Fisher & Frey, 2007). It takes place as the course is in progress (Torrance & Pryor, 1998; & Graves, 2000) and is carried out by teachers during the learning process with the aim of using the results to improve instruction (Brindley, 1989, 2001). It can be used to inform teachers of the effectiveness of their teaching and of the effectiveness of student learning as a result of their instructional practices (Shermis & Di Vesta, 2011). Teachers use it to improve instructional methods and provide feedback for students throughout the teaching and learning process. What is more, formative assessment can occur many times in every language lesson. It can involve different techniques for encouraging students to express what they are thinking. It can give teachers information about what students know, how they learn and what their attitudes towards learning are (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2005; Browne, 2007). In addition, Brookard (2009) indicates that successful formative assessment focuses student work clearly on learning targets; allows students and teachers to measure progress against the goal; and offers information useful for improvement. Therefore, teachers have to take great care in the design of learning activities. Irons (2008) indicates that key to adding value is to design activities in such a way that students understand how they contribute to learning and that they are integral part of learning and teaching. Activities should a) empower students to learn; b) motivate students to engage and

participate; and c) be valued by students as part of their learning and education. Activities should cover one or more among such techniques or instruments as: teachers' observation of students' performance; questions and answers; students' discussions about topics; learning logs/ porfolios; self-assessment; peer-assessment; students' presentations about topics; practice exercises; after-class assignments or projects (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Cunningham, 2005; Irons, 2008). These techniques provide teachers with information about: whether their students understand the materials presented; b) what should be taught next; c) whether there is a need for further review; d) the effectiveness of the teaching methods being employed; and whether it is necessary to alter instructional methods.

Recently, the term "alternative assessments" is commonly-used in language learning assessment. When alternative assessments are used, students are required to expose their abilities through the performance of tasks in the real-world contexts or simulations. Alternative assessments are also considered to support students' intrinsic motivation (Brown, 2003). Researchers like Brown (2003), Hamm & Adam (2009) and Shermis & Di Vesta (2011) have identified some forms of alternative assessments that are useful in language learning assessment, including a) teacher observation helps teachers understand the way students do their assignments or how they solve their problems and thus teachers can observe their achievement and feeling in the performance of tasks or activities; b) performance assessment requires students to do something related to the real-world context ; c) the use of portfolios can help students to develop abilities, and reflect students' attainment of learning goals or objectives; d) student self-assessment and peer-assessment require students to assess their work to find ways to improve their performance. Self-assessment is considered as one of the best ways for teachers to get feedback about student understanding and performance of tasks or activities. In general, information collected from alternative assessments are essential to teachers and students. It reflects the interactions between teachers and students and thus can be used to enhance teaching and learning effectiveness. It not only helps teachers learn about students' motivation and abilities, but also provides students with information about their progress in learning.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment, or "formal assessment" (Cunningham, 2005), or "testing" (Ur, 1996), helps teachers to evaluate an overall aspect of the students' knowledge, to judge student achievement, and to provide information on curriculum outcomes. It is used to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional curriculum and services at the end of a course, a term or an academic year (Torrance, & Pryor, 1998; Brindley, 2001; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Wrench, Richmond & Gorham, 2009). Information from summative assessment can be used to make adjustments to long-term plans, to emphasise areas of weakness in teaching, and to set curricular targets for the setting (Browne, 2007). Additionally, Cunningham (2005) states that summative or formal assessments include conventional testing methods and are characterised by precision and accuracy. It is required that EFL teachers clearly understand about the different types of tests and their qualities.

Testing and Types of Tests

Testing is a part of language teaching and learning. There should be a harmonious relationship between curriculum goals, course objectives, testing and all other curriculum elements (Brown, 1995). Testing must serve teaching and learning. The feedback teachers obtain from tests must be of value to teachers and students. Testing is the use of tests (Richards & Schmidt, 2010) and a test is a method of measuring students' ability or knowledge in a given area; and a set of techniques or procedures and test items are used and require some performances from the testees and testers (Brown, 1994, 2000).

Researchers like Alderson, Clapham & Wall (1995), Brown (1994, 2000), Brown (1996), Harmer (2001), Hughes (2003), Popham (2003) and Hadfield and Hadfield (2008) give discussions about the four types of tests as follows: a) Placement tests are used for placing new students in the right class or in a particular level of a language curriculum or school; b) Diagnostic tests are used to expose student difficulties, gaps in their knowledge and skills during the course; c) Proficiency tests are intended to measure the skills and knowledge that a student currently possesses in a particular subject area. These tests are not intended to be limited to any one single skill, a course, or a curriculum; and d) Achievement tests are designed to measure students' language and skill progress in relation to classroom lessons, units or even a total curriculum they have followed with the aim of assessing how well students have fitted into course material and whether they have achieved the learning outcomes of the course as Klapper (2005) states. They are limited to particular material covered in a curriculum within a particular time frame. Henning (2001) indicates that achievement tests support both teachers and students in monitoring learning progress, anticipating learning obstacles, and assessing learning outcomes. They are the most commonly-used tests applied in university language curricula. They are usually used at the end of a unit, a module, a course or a year of study and aim to assess how well students have studied with the provided course books and whether they have achieved the learning outcomes of the course or curriculum.

Qualities of Tests

When teachers construct or evaluate achievement tests, they should take test qualities and principles into consideration. Researchers (Brown, 1994; Alderson et al., 1995; McNamara, 1996; Brown, 2000; Harmer, 2001; Hughes, 2003; Cheng & Curtis, 2008; Davis, 2009; and Richards & Schmidt, 2010) have indicated five major qualities of tests, including practicality, authenticity, validity, reliability and backwash: a) practicality refers to the way an achievement test is constructed, administered and marked. An achievement test is considered to be practical if it is easy to design, to administer, to mark, and to interpret the results and it is appropriate to students' level; b) authenticity refers to various types of assessment procedures for evaluating test takers' achievement or performance using real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills; c) validity refers to the content of a test. A test must measures what is supposed to test; d) reliability refers to how accurate a test score is. Its instructions and tasks should be absolutely clear; and e) backwash refers to the effect of testing on teaching and learning. There are positive and negative backwash. Teachers must ensure that what they test is not only relevant to what they have taught and what students have learnt, but also that the assessment process serves to promote learning.

Principles of Achievement Test Construction

Test constructors and teachers need to have clear statements about who the test is aimed at; what its purpose is; what content is to be covered; what methods are to be used; and how long the test takes (Alderson et al., 1995, p.10). Achievement tests must not only measure the objectives of a course, but they must also help teachers to learn about students' abilities, needs, and learning of the course objectives. The specifications should at least cover such elements as a description of the test content, number and type of tasks or items, time allotment for each task (Brown, 2000), and students must know what they have to do in the test (Hughes, 2003). In addition, achievement tests must assess all language areas (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation), language skills and language functions which are covered in a course and must be constructed based on students' learning outcomes.

Testing Language Knowledge and Language Skills

Vocabulary tests are designed to measure students' understanding of word meanings as well

as the patterns and collocation; grammar tests are constructed to measure their ability to recognise appropriate grammatical forms and to manipulate structures; and pronunciation tests are constructed to evaluate students' production and identification of the sounds, stress patterns, and intonation of English (Heaton,1990). According to Read (2000), assessing students' language knowledge is both necessary and reasonably straightforward. Language knowledge can be seen as a priority area in language teaching, requiring tests to monitor students' progress in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation learning and to assess how adequate their language knowledge is to meet their communication needs.

Language knowledge tests should measure the comprehension and production of words, grammar points or structures and pronunciation items through speaking and writing even in reading and listening tasks. In testing language knowledge, teachers need to avoid presenting language knowledge components in isolation or giving them too much prominence (Madsen,1983; Heaton, 1990; Hughes, 2003; Purpura, 2004). That is because the development of skills normally constitute the primary objectives of language courses. All the four enabling skills of English: listening, speaking, reading and writing must be assessed in achievement tests. It is required that these skills be carefully integrated in test items (Heaton, 1990). Harmer (2001) states that in achievement tests, in order to understand an overall picture of students' language knowledge and skills, test constructors usually combine direct, indirect, discrete-point, and integrative items in a test. In general, English achievement tests are used to measure student achievement after instruction and are usually given at the end of a course or a term in order to determine whether learning goals and objectives have been met. Through achievement tests, both teachers and students will know clearly about what students have obtained and what they have not, so achievement tests should be constructed and conducted appropriately to the curriculum objectives and students' needs and English proficieny level.

In conclusion, learning assessment plays an important role in the process of gathering information about students' abilities, progress and overall development in any foreign language curriculum (Gardner, 2010). By designing and conducting a variety of forms of formative and summative assessment during the course, teachers will certainly have a good grasp of where their students are in the learning process, what they have achieved and what they need to do to fill the gap in their knowledge and skills. Also, managers and teachers need to know what types of assessment are appropriate to their students, and what techniques and criteria should be employed in assessment, how different types of tests are constructed and how feedback is given to their students so that they can accurately assess their students and thus contribute to the success of the implementation of a foreign language curriculum.

THE STUDY

This paper is a part of a larger study entitled "An evaluation of the English as a foreign language curriculum at the tertiary level-A case study of a non-public university". The study was conducted at a non-public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam with the participation of managers, teachers, and students. The study employed various data collection techniques, including documents analysis, interviews, class observations and questionnaires to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data.

This part only focused on learning assessment in terms of formative classroom assessment and achievement tests implemented at the end of the five courses of the EFL curriculum. The study attempted to answer the two questions below:

a) How do the teachers implement formative classroom assessment?

b) How are achievement tests constructed and implemented?

Data Collection

The data for this study were gathered from a) the analysis of five achievement tests conducted at the end of the five General English (GE) courses; b) the open-ended questionnaires administered to ten EFL teachers; and c) classroom observations. Eleven classes from different disciplines were selected for non-participant observations, and each observation lasted 90 minutes. A framework was used for the class observation. Through learning activities performed in the class, dimensions related to formative classroom assessment were investigated such as how the teachers checked the students' understanding of language input; what types of questions the teachers used; and what techniques the teachers used to assess the students' language knowledge and skills.

Data Analysis

The methods used to analyse the data collected for this study were based on "Content analysis". Categories and sub-categories were figured out based on the review of literature about formative classroom assessment and criteria of achievement test evaluation. The data were coded according to the categories and the content of the categories was described through subcategories. The participants of open-ended questionnaires were coded as T1, T2 and so on. All the five achievement tests conducted at the end of the five courses were coded in identification numbers as "AT1" for achievement test 1; AT2 for achievement test 2; and so on. The class observations were coded in identification numbers as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Coding for Class Observations

Classes observed	Identification numbers	Observation dates
Class 1	CL1	3rd October, 2014
Class 2	CL2	10th October, 2014
Class 3	CL3	15th October, 2014
Class 4	CL4	17th October, 2014
Class 5	CL5	31st October, 2014
Class 6	CL6	10th November, 2014
Class 7	CL7	15th Novemebr, 2014
Class 8	CL8	20th Novemebr, 2014
Class 9	CL9	21st November, 2014
Class 10	CL10	Morning, 5th December, 2014
Class 11	CL11	Afternoon 5th December, 2014

Based on the literature related to achievement test qualities and the course learning outcomes, to gather data from the achievement tests, the researcher read through all the five tests, analysed all the parts and items constructed in the tests and categorised data according to the variables under investigation to the research question. To identify the main ideas from classroom observations, the researcher read the field notes from the class observation sheets. Sub-categories were grouped together and labeled to indicate the content. The findings from the analysis of the achievement tests, classroom observations and questionnaire responses were interpreted in narrative passages. Responses from the teachers'open-ended questionnaires and some parts of the field notes from classroom observations were extracted and quoted in this paper to support the analysis of the findings. For example, the extract coded as "Observation excerpt CL2.10.10.2014.02" means that the excerpt was extracted from page 2 of the observation sheet from Class 2 observed on 10th October, 2014, or "AT1.32" means test item 32 in achievement test 1.

Findings and Discussion

Teachers' Implementation of Formative Classroom Aassessment

Traditional Assessment Methods

There was evidence that traditional methods were still commonly used in formative classroom

assessment. As observed, most of the teachers employed traditional assessment methods such as multiple-choice, true-false and yes-no questions, gap-filling for checking grammatical structures (Observation excerpt CL9.21.11.2014.02), vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension. Formative classroom assessment was implemented through already-designed activities in the course book. Rarely were any adapted activities used by the teachers. It was evident that the teachers relied too much on traditional methods. This problem arose because of some reasons. This might be because the teachers thought that the students were familiar with the activities designed in the course book, so designing other activities was not necessary. There was no evidence of the use of alternative assessments such as self-assessment, peer-assessment, project work or performance-based activities. This was tantamount to the lack of students' involvement in learning assessment. The teachers should have created opportunities for the students to assess their own understanding and progress. It might be because the teachers did not realise the value of students' involvement in learning assessment, or they were not familiar with alternative assessments. Meanwhile, many studies (Nezakatgoo, 2011; Iseni, 2011; Azarnoosh, 2013) have proved that alternative assessments such as portfolios and peer-assessment can bring a lot benefits to English language students. They make students become more active in the process of learning and acquiring the language.

Ineffective Language Knowledge Assessment

Grammar Assessment

The data gathered from class observations revealed that the teachers'methods of assessing grammar were ineffective. For example, in one class, the students were asked to do a grammar exercise entitled "Complete the sentences" on page 35, American Headway Book 2. The exercise required the students to put the verb "Go" in the blanks in the correct form. Instead of calling on the students to give answers, the teacher showed the answers on the screen; she then read the answers to the students (Observation excerpt CL10.05.12.2014.03). Doing so, the teacher might not see whether the students understood the grammar point or not. In addition, it was evident that the students' language knowledge was assessed isolatedly. For example, in one class, the students were asked to write some verbs used with "Verb-ing and To-infinitive". Nine students were called on to write the verbs on the board. Instead of asking the students to give examples using the verbs, the teacher wrote some sentences on the board and explained the grammatical rules (Observation excerpt CL8.20.11.2014. 02). This activity could have been conducted more effectively if the teacher had asked the students to make sentences using the verbs they had written on the board. At that time the teacher could have assessed the students' language knowledge through a writing activity. Or, this activity could also have been designed as a speaking activity, using pair work. According to Purpura (2004) grammar knowledge assessment must be performed through activities that help teachers determine whether the students have internalised the grammar points and that their students can use the grammar points to communicate spontaneously in real-life situations.

Vocabulary Assessment

In terms of vocabulary assessment, it was evident that most teachers placed less importance on it; even in some classes, it was neglected, or the teacher only asked the students to do vocabulary exercises at home (Observation excerpt CL4.17.10.2014. 03). In other classes, the teachers assessed their students' understanding of word meanings superficially. They asked the students to give word meanings in L1. In case the students could not, the teachers themselves provided the meanings for the students (Observation excerpt CL2.10.10.2014. 03). It might be because the teachers thought that the students could look up word meanings in the dictionary. However, students should be able to exploit knowledge of vocabulary effectively for various

communicative purposes (Read, 2000). Therefore, vocabulary should be assessed through communicative activities that require the students to use vocabulary in real-life communication rather than isolatedly. If there were not enough vocabulary practice exercises designed in the course book, the teachers should modify more different activities for assessing the students' vocabulary. Neglecting vocabulary assessment might lead to a problem that the students only understood the meanings, but they could not use vocabulary in communication.

Pronunciation Assessment

There was evidence that no pronunciation assessment was implemented in the class. The question raised for discussion is "Why did the teachers not assess the students' pronunciation? That was because according to the teachers, no achievement tests assessed pronunciation. For example:

> T10 answered, "*Because the students' speaking ability is not assessed,*
>
> *they do not need to learn pronunciation*"

Or, it might be because of the teachers' beliefs that pronunciation was not as important in supporting students in developing their ability to use English as grammar points and vocabulary. Also, in the five achievement tests, no items measuring pronunciation were constructed. However, the sounds of English and Vietnamese have a variety of differences, and Vietnamese students usually face a lot of difficulties in English pronunciation. Also, English sounds, stress and intonation vary. According to Kenworthy (1987), the more differences there are, the more difficulties the students will have in pronouncing English. That is why aspects of English pronunciation such as sounds, stress or intonation should be assessed in the class. Another reason is that not all units in American Headway mention English sounds, word stress or sentence intonation, for example unit 2 or unit 4-American Headway Book 3, so the teachers did not concern about how to find ways to assess pronunciation in the class. No matter what teaching methods the teachers applied in their classes, they should have integrated pronunciation into vocabulary work, listening or speaking activities. As a matter of fact, only when the students produce English sounds correctly, can they understand what other people say to them.

Ineffective Language Skills Assessment

The data gathered from classroom observations revealed that the teachers were not very successful in the implementation of language skills assessment. There was only limited evidence of the teachers' assessment of the students' ability to understand reading and listening texts and to use the target language in both speaking and writing.

Speaking Assessment

It was found that the teachers did not employ many techniques for assessing the students' speaking ability. The very few techniques used in the class were "Question and Answer" in which the teachers asked and the students answered (Observation excerpt CL9.21.11.2014. 02); and presentation of some ideas in front of the class. For example, the students talked about people's jobs on p.12, Unit 2, American Headway Book 3 (Observation excerpt CL1.03.10.2014.03). Meanwhile, according to Harris and McCann (1994), there are many types of activities that teachers may organise for students to perform and then speaking ability assessment can be implemented. Such activities are pair work interviews, group survey, roleplays, information gap, presentation, etc. What is more, there was no evidence that the teachers used criteria for assessing the students' speaking ability. Harris and McCann (1994) indicate that teachers should focus on a particular aspect of speaking such as fluency, intonation, pronunciation, self-correction where necessary. However, in some classes, it was found that no teachers paid

attention to the above aspects. Even the teacher did not correct the students' pronunciation or praise the students when they did a good job. Another problem is the selection of activities for assessing the students's speaking skill. It seemed that the teachers did not determine which speaking activity in each unit of the course book could be used for assessing speaking. Many speaking activities designed for assessing the students' speaking ability in different units of the course book were neglected, such activities as "Project" on page 12, " Free time activities" on page 16-unit 2, or "Talk about you" on page 36 and "What do you think" on page 37-unit 5 in American Headway Book 3. Those activities required pair work and group work. Through the use of those activities for assessing the students' speaking ability, the teachers might help the students realise that speaking English and participating in class was rewarded (Harris & McCann,1994), which would make them more motivated in learning.

Writing Assessment

The assessment of writing skills almost did not take place during the class. In all classes observed, the researcher did not find any writing activities. What the teachers asked the students to write on the board or in their notebooks was only some words, phrases, grammatical structures, or simple sentences to check grammar mistakes. For example, in Class 6, when the students finished doing grammar exercise 7 on page 19-unit 3-American Headway Book 2, the teachers called on some students to write some sentences on the board (Observation excerpt CL6.10.11.2014. 02). It is very traditional in Vietnamese English classes. Teachers have a tendency to ask students to write something on the board, even it is only a letter, a word or a phrase. In spite of not having sufficient time for many writing activities, in each unit the teachers should have assessed the students' writing skills (Harris & McCann, 1994). As a matter of fact, it is not easy for the teachers to assess all students' writing skill, so pair work or group work can be motivating and engage the students in cross-checking for each other. In mixed ability English classes like in Vietnam, group writing activities are not only good for developing writing skill, they can also enable teachers to give more feedback to more students (Harris & McCann, 1994).

Listening Assessment

Among activities used for assessing the students' macro skills in the class, listening activities were the most frequently organised. Listening activities with different purposes were already designed in the course book. It was apparent that assessment of listening skills was done better than that of the other skills although it was performed ineffectively and traditional techniques were mostly used. For example, in Class 4, after the students completing the questions about " Vincent Van Gogh" on p.18, American Headway Book 3, instead of asking the students to listen and check, the teacher asked them to read some questions and then she showed the answers on the screen (Observation excerpt CL4.17.10.2014. 01). Several teachers were used to answering questions for the students if after some times of listening to the text, the students could not answer the questions (Observation excerpt CL7.15.11.2014. 0-02). In fact, the teachers could have asked different students to answer and then gave feedback later because according to Harris and McCann (1994), some students could understand but they did not answer. In order to assess listening abilities of the students of different proficiency levels, the teachers should have used different techniques (Buck, 2001), which entailed the teachers' redesigning activities, for example, asking the students to recycle what they had heard, or to work in groups or pairs to report to their partners the important points of a text (Harris & McCann (1994). The teachers should have classified different types of listening performance used for developing students' listening ability. Such types as intensive, responsive, selective and extensive listening should be employed at different stages of the courses (Brown , 2003) and if the course book did not cover those types, it was the teachers' responsibility to design the activities for assessment.

Reading Assessment

Reading skill was also the main focus of the course book and of the five achievement tests. However, most of the teachers were not successful in assessing the students' reading ability. The teachers tended to ask the students to read comprehension questions aloud and then all the questions were translated into L1. Some individual students were called on to answer. No pair work or group work was used for cross-checking. Or, when group work was organised, each group was asked to prepare and answer only one question (Observation excerpt CL2.10.10.2014. 04). Another problem was that the teachers were not patient enough to wait for the students' answers, or to ask them to express opinions. Instead of asking the students to give answers and explain the reasons, the teacher did all (Observation excerpt CL7.15.11.2014.03). Doing so, it was obvious that the students'reading ability was not assessed.

The above situations showed that only answering one or two questions or listening to the teacher's explanation and answering questions again did not provide reliable information about overall understanding of the text (Harris & McCann, 1994). The most "dangerous" thing might be that the teachers tried to answer most of the questions because they might think that no students could answer or it took too long to wait for the students' answers. However, it is necessary, although it takes time and practice, that teachers focus on strategies for eliciting responses (Murray & Christison, 2011). If the teachers only asked the students to read the text and do some exercises such as "True or False", or "Question and Answer", it might be like forcing them to do a reading test. Texts designed in the course book were not for testing reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000). In order to develop reading ability, it is necessary that the teachers assess the students' ability to complete reading activities step by step (Harris & McCann, 1994). For example, if the students do the "True or False" activity, they should be encouraged to point out how many answers are correct and how to correct the wrong ones, and the students could do this job through self-correction or peer-correction.

Teachers' "Action Zone" in Formative Classroom Assessment

There was evidence that when assessing the students' language knowledge and skills, some teachers only called on those students who were sitting in the front rows or those who volunteered; they accidentally neglected those who were sitting in the back of the class or in the far side of the room. That is to say, the teachers not only created "action zone" (Richards, & Lockhart, 1996), but also made many students demotivate in their learning because the students might think that they were left behind. This situation was observed in several classes. The teacher asked the students to work in pairs and complete sentences and then he called on some students sitting in the first row to write their sentences on the board (Observation excerptCL6.10.11.2014.02). It was apparent that many students were neglected in assessment. Consequently, the teacher did not know whether those students understood the language input or could later use the target language in communication. That teachers usually created "action zone" in assessment might lead to wrong assumptions about teaching and learning (Murray & Christison, 2011). When some students answered the teacher's questions correctly, the teacher might think that all the students understood what they had learned. To be equal, all students should have a chance to receive feedback from their teachers through assessment.

Teachers' Poor Questioning Technique

Asking questions is considered as one necessary technique in formative classroom assessment. This technique was used by all teachers of the classes observed. The strongest point was that the teachers used questions to check the students'comprehension of a reading or listening text. However, the results of the observations showed that the ability of some teachers in employing the questioning technique was limited. The question type they usually used was "yes-no" questions,

which was considered not to be effective in motivating the students in expressing their opinions. For example, in one class, the teachers asked their students such questions as " Do you like going to party?", "Are you a party animal"?, "Is your friend a party animal"? (Observation excerpt CL5. 31.10.2014.01). Those display questions only required short answers. However, according to Lightbown and Spada (2006), in Communicative Language Teaching, teachers should ask more referential questions that require more cognitive processing. In addition, most teachers asked questions which were already designed in the course book, which was, as observed, not easy for many students to understand. The teachers should have used simple questions so that the students could answer and the teachers could keep them involved in the process of learning. Teachers should also know how and when to ask questions. Questions must be used to assess students in different stages of a lesson. They should be asked to encourage students to self-assess their progress. Another problem was that the teachers did not pay much attention to the purpose of the questions they made. They seemed only to focus on factual questions which required the students to recall some ideas from the text they read or listened to. Many questions which placed the highest demand on cognition requiring the students' analysis and judgment of the text were not employed. Murray and Christison (2011) suggest that in order to interpret demands on cognition, teachers use the six levels in Bloom's Taxonomy (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) for making questions to assess students' learning.

Achievement Test Construction and Implementation

The results of the teachers' open-ended questionnaires and of the analysis of the syllabus content and the five achievement tests constructed for the academic year 2013-2014 revealed that the achievement tests conducted at the end of the five courses used multiple-choice tests and had the same number of items, i.e. one hundred multiple choice items. AT1 and AT2 consisted of three main parts: Grammar and Vocabulary, Listening, and Reading; AT3, AT4 and AT5 consisted of four main parts: Grammar and Vocabulary, Listening, Reading and Writing (Sentence Building and Transformation). The students did all the tests on computers within sixty minutes for each. Through the analysis of the data collected, several problems have emerged for discussion.

Inappropriate Testing Method

The purpose of an achievement test is to assess what the students have learned. The GE courses being implemented at the university were integrated courses, which entailed assessing the students' language knowledge and skills at the end of each course. That was why most of the teachers did not think multiple-choice tests were relevant to the courses. For example:

> T4 answered, *"To me, multiple choice tests are irrelevant to the courses. The content of the tests do not assess what the students have learned in the class. The tests should assess the students' speaking and writing abilities."*

Furthermore, multiple-choice items do not require students' performance. The ability to answer multiple- choice items is a separate ability. Students do not have to think, or analyse much, but they can still choose the correct answer (Alderson, 2000). In addition, language knowledge components in multiple-choice tests might be assessed isolatedly and not contextualised, and the naturalness of the language might be neglected. It was evident that those above problems existed in the five achievement tests. The item below is an example.

> *I do it_____I like it.* (AT1.14)
> *a. because b. so c. for d. while*

Using multiple-choice tests for assessing the students' achievement might prevent teachers from

making valid inferences about students' language competence based on the results of such tests and from identifying whether their instruction was effective. Obviously, there was evidence that such tests did have some negative effects on teaching and learning. The teachers would try to "teach to the test" and the students would try to "study to the test", which means passing a multiple-choice test was the target of both teachers and students. There was no need to develop productive skills for the students.

Mismatch between Test Content and Learning Objectives

As required by the five GE courses, the students had to develop not only language knowledge but language skills as well, which means the teachers had to encourage the students' written and oral abilities (Hughes, 2003). However, none of the five achievement tests was designed to assess the students' written and oral abilities, which means no real-world tasks were constructed to require the students to apply essential knowledge and skills which they had learned during classroom instruction. Regarding writing assessment, multiple-choice items were also used. That assessing writing ability is requiring the students to recognise which sentence was right or wrong is not enough. The students must perform a writing task. They must write about something related to real life, depending on different levels. For example,

> T10 answered, "*Assessing writing skill does not mean that asking the students to choose one answer from four options. This task is not considered as a productive skill.*"

It was evident that using multiple-choice items could only meet some of the course objectives. That is to say, only language knowledge components were assessed. Meanwhile, according to (Brown, 2003), the specifications for an achievement test should be determined by the objectives of the course being assessed and the relative importance assigned to each objective. In addition, some teachers said that the content of the tests was not based on the content of the course book. Instead, many test items were extracted from other tests taken from the Internet or from other exercise books. It is impossible to say that the achievement tests measured what the students had learned, especially grammar and vocabulary components. For example:

> T3 answered, " *The content of the tests is based on a variety of materials. Most of the items are extracted from other existing multiple-choice tests.*"

> T5 answered, " *I participate in constructing AT3. I extract sentences from "American Files", "Toeic Starter" and from other materials.*"

The above situation leads to a serious problem related to the content of the tests. Based on the analysis of the course syllabus as well as the requirements of the curriculum, when the students reached Course 5, the last course of the curriculum, they studied with American Headway Book 4 (Upper intermediate). However, in AT5, the following multiple-choice item was constructed to assess grammar knowledge.

> *Item 30. _____you____to the zoo?* (AT5. 30)

> *a. Are   b. Were   c. Have / been   d. Will / be*

The above item was only suitable to AT1, which was also tantamount to the fact that there were gaps between testing and teaching. Achievement tests did not match what the students had learned. The tests might neither determine the amount of language knowledge the students had learned nor assess the students' learning outcomes.

What is more, some reading passages in some tests were not long enough to assess the students' reading ability. The test constructors had to design multiple-choice items with direct answers.

For example:

> *"In the 1500s, platform shoes became popular in Italy. At first women wore these to protect their feet and skirts from wet, muddy roads. Later very high platform shoes became stylish. Some of these shoes were more than 30cm high. Women needed help to walk in them. Platform shoes became popualr again in the 20th century. In the 1970s, people wore them to look tall and because it was the fashion."* (AT1)

> *When did platform shoes become popular in Italy?* (AT1.85)
>
> *a. in the 1800s b. in the 1700s c. in the 1600s d. in the 1500s*

It was evident that the passage did not challenge the students at all. They did not have to think much about how to choose the correct answer. A multiple-choice item or a reading passage may be taken from other sources, but the test constructor must think about what the main purpose of the item is, what level of student it is suitable for, and whether it is equivalent to what the students have learned in the course book (Alderson et al., 1995).

Imbalanced Distribution of Multiple-Choice Items

The results of the analysis of the achievement tests also raised some discussions about the imbalanced distribution of the multiple-choice items for assessing grammar and vocabulary knowledge. For example, in AT1 there were sixty multiple-choice items constructed to test grammatical structures and vocabulary, but there were fifty-five grammar items, or in AT2, there were seventy-five multiple-choice items, but there were sixty grammar items. It was evident that the content of the test was not based on the content of instruction. It could not reflect what the students had learned and therefore it was inappropriate to the assessment of the students'learning objectives. The test constructors should have tried to achieve a balance of test questions or items so that one or two skills or language components were not over tested at the expense of the others (Alderson et al., 1995).

Poorly-Constructed Multiple-Choice Items

Another problem was that multiple-choice items were not thoroughly or exactly constructed. For example, the test constructors designed the following item to assess vocabulary knowledge.

> *The CEO suggested_____to the trade fair in London.* (AT3.32)
>
> *a. Mary that she should go   b. to Mary that she should go*
>
> *c. for Mary that she go   d. to Mary to go*

As seen in the example, this item was not used for assessing any vocabulary component. Also, there were four choices, but there was no correct answer for the students to choose. Grammatically, this item was not correct.

Missing or Ineffective Instructions for Test Tasks

The instruction for each test task shows students how to performce the task. However, it was evident that the instructions for some test tasks were missing or not easy for the students to understand. For example:

In Part 3 of AT3, the following instruction was written.

> *"Choose the sentence that has the most suitable structure to the sample one, starting with the word or phrase provided at the beginning of each sentence. Keep the sentence stay the same meaning after transformation."* (AT3-Sentence transformation)

The above instruction was not clear enough for most of the students. If the students could do the task, that was because they were familiar with the test format. According to Harmer (2001), the instruction of a test task must be absolutely clear and simple, and thoroughly written so that every student can do the task in the right way.

Lack of Diversity of Techniques used in Multiple-Choice Tests

Different techniques permit the measurement of different aspects of the construct being assessed. Therefore, it is important to consider what techniques are capable of assessing and what they might typically assess (Alderson, 2000). However, the data gathered from the analysis of the test samples revealed that the techniques used for the tests were poorly selected. To assess the students' listening and reading ability, only two techniques, i.e. "True or False" and "Comprehension questions" were used for listening texts, and "Comprehension questions" and "Gap-filling" were used for reading texts. Meanwhile, there were many other techniques with which the students were familiar were not used. For example, in the course book, multiple matching technique was used for assessing students' reading ability (Unit 3, 4, 5-American Headway Book 3). However, this technique was not employed for assessing the students' reading ability in the achievement tests. Reading assessment techniques must be selected based on the objectives of the achievement test at different stages of instruction. Such techniques as receptive reading: written response and multiple choice; selective reading: multiple choice, matching, editing, picture-cued, gap-filling; interactive reading tasks: cloze, comprehension questions, short answers, editing, scanning, ordering, information transfer; extensive reading tasks: skimming, summarising, note-taking or outlining (Brown, 2003).

Teachers' Exclusion from Test Construction

The data gathered from the teachers' questionnaires revealed that many of the teachers did not participate in the test construction. The tests were constructed by the Expertise Council of the Foreign Language Centre (FLC). For example:

> T1 answered , "*The Expertise Council of the FLC design the achievment tests. The teachers are permitted to know the format of the test, the number of items and assessment methods.*"

It means that the teachers could not have information about the content of the tests. They also did not know what materials were used for the test content. For example:

> T2, T7 and T8 answered , "*The teachers do not participate in the test construction, so we do not know how the tests are constructed, what materials are used for the tests and what the content of the tests look like.*"

Achievement tests not only reflect what students have learned, but also inform teachers of how they have taught and whether the instruction has met the curriculum goals. Teachers are the people who know clearly about the students'English proficiency levels rather than the managers. Therefore, their participation in the test construction should be encouraged.

Recommendations

With the aim of enhancing English language education at the tertiary level in Vietnam, the current study has employed different research methods to productively address the proposed research questions and made some practical recommendations in relation to learning assessment for stakeholders, as specifically stated below:

For Testing Policy Makers

Multiple-choice tests were developed many years ago. They have been mostly used to assess students' content knowledge rather than skills. Specifically, in the field of language education, it is necessary that students be able to use the target language in communication, which means their abilities to use the target language must be assessed. The results of the study have revealed that the use of multiple-choice tests for testing students'achievement at the end of each course is inconsistent with the curriculum goals and students' needs. Achievement tests should focus on what students can do with the language, and on the tasks they can carry out (Ingram, 1985). An integrated-skills course requires integrated-skills assessment, which means, for students' sake, testing policy makers should not employ traditional testing methods, i.e, multiple-choice items for assessing both language knowledge and skills at the end of the courses any more. Instead, to prevent teachers from "teaching to the multiple-choice test", to encourage students to be more active in their learning through the participation in communicative activities using real-life situations in the class, as well as to meet the curriculum goals and the students' needs, it is recommended that, besides language knowledge assessment, achievement tests be constructed to measure EFL students' abilities to use the target language in real-life communication at the end of each course.

For Test Constructors

The results of the study also revealed that problems existed in the content and in the construction process of the achievement test. The test content was not consistent with the content of the course book or the curriculum goals and the teachers were not invited to participate in constructing the tests. A well-designed achievement test will help both teachers and students evaluate their respective achievements. It provides them with information whether the course objectives have been met. Therefore, teachers' voice about the achievement tests are really necessary. It is advised that English teachers should be given more opportunities to take part in the construction of achievement tests. They should play a part in deciding what should be tested and how it is tested in an EFL curriculum for the sake of their students' achievement.

In the researcher's opinion, it is time for the test constructors and teachers to sit down together in the test construction process to ensure the consistency and the continuity of the achievement tests across the courses. Besides, it seemed that the teachers were not familiar with different types of learning assessment. Therefore, it is suggested that workshops or seminars on learning assessment should be sometimes organised for the teachers so that they will be able to apply in their instruction. The different forms of alternative assessment need to become an integral part of teaching; and teachers and students themselves need to be made aware of the different forms of assessment and should definitely be involved in the process (Wach, 2012). Achievement tests are related to EFL curricula. Feedback about the tests should be gathered. Teachers and students can provide test constructors with very valuable insights (Alderson et al., 1995). The results of the study recommend that the test constructors conduct a survey to get information about what the teachers and students think about the test content, test items, test methods, test task instructions, the timing and many other factors so that improvements in the test construction will be made.

For EFL Teachers

The results of the study revealed that the teachers were not successfully in the implementation of learning assessment in their classes. Problems existed in some aspects such as in the teachers' perception of the importance of learning assessement. Their perception might not be entirely positive. Many of them did not pay much attention to preparing formative classroom assessment; and in the use of questions to check the students' understanding, and in the use of techniques for assessing the students'language knowledge and skills. The study suggests that

teachers use the proper techniques for assessing student language progess, especially alternative assessment techniques. Students should be assessed in a variety of ways; and all aspects of skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking must be considered (Téllez & Waxman, 2006; Vásques, Hansen & Smith, 2010). Without selecting and conducting the right techniques for assessing students, teachers will not know whether their instruction is effective or not, which leads to no modification and improvement, and therefore, they cannot address difficulties students have in learning and acquiring new knowledge and skills (Murray & Christison, 2011). In addition, teachers should pay much attention to different types of questions, and their purposes. Questions must be simple and suitable to students'various proficiency levels. Also, during the class, all students must be assessed. If the class is large, students should work in pairs or groups so that assessment can take place more easily and effectively. Teachers' "action zone" must be avoided, which leads to students' positive attitudes towards teachers and learning. Only doing so, will teachers be able to implement effective learning assessment, making a valuable contribution to creating an active student-centred class and to meeting the demand of the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted in a non-public university which is a part of the tertiary level in Vietnam.

The results of the study are consistent with previous studies (Le, 2013; Van, 2013; Le, 2014) that have found that problems in English learning assessment at the tertiary level still exist and there are gaps between teaching and learning assessment; and that there is lack of assessment practices (Öz, 2014). The study has provided an insight of how the teachers implemented the EFL curriculum in relation to the use of learning assessment. Besides efforts that the test constructors and the teachers have made to enhance the quality of learning assessment, ineffective implementation of formative classroom assessment and poorly-constructed achievement tests still exist. It is undoubted that many necessary things related to English learning assessment at the university in specific and at the tertiary level in Vietnam in general need to be dealt with in the years to come. Also, it is expected that this study will partly make a contribution to the pool of knowledge about learning assessment in relation to both formative and summative assessments.

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