

EXPLORING TEACHERS' PRACTICE OF CLASSROOM-BASED ASSESSMENT

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Abstract. This study explores teachers' practice of classroom-based assessment (CBA) and how the institutional guidelines affect their practice, using the grounded theory approach. Data were collected from interviews with four EFL teachers from a Vietnamese university and the syllabus documents they used for their classes. Results demonstrate that the participants actively planned assessment opportunities, provided necessary information of assessment to their students, and carried out the planned or unplanned assessments. All teachers reported using the assessment information to improve their teaching activities. Lastly, syllabus documents had a strong impact on the teacher's CBA practice. Based on these findings, a conceptual model is proposed to represent the relationship between teachers' practice and contexts and teacher assessment identity.

Keywords: classroom-based assessment, assessment for learning, teacher assessment identity, teacher identity.

1. Introduction

English language education has seen significant growth in Vietnam, driven by the country's efforts to integrate into regional and global cooperation [1,2,3]. As a result, English assessment has attracted increasing attention from multiple stakeholders, including teachers, educational administrators, researchers, policymakers, students, and parents. In higher education, English assessment activities are implemented by two groups: (1) classroom teachers and (2) institutions (e.g. schools, colleges, universities). Assessments conducted by classroom teachers can be formal or informal. For the informal assessment part, the activities administered by classroom teachers are not reported, such as observation, feedback, student-teacher questioning, self assessment and peer assessment.

There are three significant tensions in the English assessment system in Vietnam [1]. The first tension is that whereas Vietnam's English assessment system seems strictly controlled by the central government through the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), enforcement of these regulations remains limited. The second tension was that even though Vietnamese education authorities have encouraged more use of formative assessments, summative assessments still dominate English assessment practices. The third tension was the conflict between Vietnamese government-supported standardized English tests (e.g. VSTEP) and international exams such as IELTS [2].

Formative assessment has been termed in many ways, such as assessment for learning, teacher-based assessment, alternative assessment, informal assessment [4,5,6]. Recently, it was called classroom-based assessment [7]. In this article, I will adopt the term classroom-based

assessment (CBA) to refer to formative assessment in the EFL classroom. More specifically, I define CBA as all activities enacted by teachers and/or their students to collect information on students' performance or language use, for the sake of improvement in learning and teaching.

The idea of CBA first emerged in general education and has a strong link to formative assessment. In the late 1980s, a British group of research on testing and assessment produced a report, which was incorporated into a seminal publication on formative assessment [11]. Subsequent EFL research has focused on teachers-student interaction, the role of feedback, and student involvement in assessment processes [7]. There has also been a growing trend to require classroom teachers to be more responsible for assessment [10]. Consequently, English language teachers need to be knowledgeable and skilled in CBA and take more roles in the classroom [8,9]. Language assessment is no longer just about standardized tests [12].

Existing CBA literature documented teachers' practices of assessment tasks and evaluated their efficiency, such as portfolio assessment, peer assessment and self-assessment. [13] Researchers investigated the performance of two groups: portfolio-based students and test-based students. The study finding showed no significant difference in the pass rate between these two groups, which suggests a promising application of portfolio assessment. However, 66 reviewed studies on second language portfolio assessment and identified both positive and negative aspects of this CBA activity [14]. While portfolio assessment can boost students' confidence, it raises concerns over fairness and students' self-regulation abilities.

The effectiveness of CBA depends on the training for both students and teachers. For example, an investigation looked at how training impacts the peer assessment and peer comments [15]. In terms of score ratings, there was no significant difference between those who received training and those who did not. In terms of comments, the trained participants provided more and better comments and the untrained participants.

CBA literature points to the possibility of empowering teachers in the assessment process, whereas the practicality of CBA indicates the persistent pattern of preference for quantifiable assessment, the doubt over test unfairness, and teacher agency [14]. Even training may have little impact on the real practice, since overloaded teachers might harbour hostility against CBA [16]. If the teachers are not supported with a good network, they will face numerous challenges from institutional constraints [8].

A useful framework for studying CBA processes was provided [10]. CBA, in this framework, is defined as "any actions, interactions, or artifacts" which may "provide information on the qualities of a learner's performance". By this definition, the unplanned or incidental forms of assessment can be considered in data analysis. Teachers' practices of CBA in Vietnam can be investigated by looking at four dimensions: planning assessment, framing assessment (or making assessment known to the students), conducting assessment, and using assessment information. This framework was used in this study.

EFL teachers in Vietnam encounter numerous difficulties in assessing students in the classroom. It may be attributed to inadequate assessment literacy, unclear assessment identity and inadequate professional training and discussions [8]. It may be due to the contextual factors which impact the CBA practice, including the interplay of macro (e.g. national policy) and micro context (e.g. individual teacher) [9]. However, there is a lack of in-depth research on the actual practice of CBA in EFL classroom in the Vietnamese context, such as what decisions they make on a daily basis, and what creative ways they find to pursue their personal values and beliefs.

Therefore, this study is intended to explore the EFL teachers' practice of English-language CBA, using the framework [10]. The research questions are:

RQ1: How do EFL teachers carry out classroom-based assessment?

RQ2: How do institutional guidelines influence teachers' practice of CBA?

2. Content

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

This study recruited four EFL teachers from a university in Hanoi, North of Vietnam. Each participant's highest qualification was Master's degree in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and had more than five years of teaching experience at the tertiary level. To protect their identities, they are referred to by pseudonyms: Teacher 1, 2, 3, and 4. Teacher 1, 2, 3, and 4 were teaching speaking, listening, writing, and ESP (English for Specific Purposes), respectively. The study context was an intensive English program designed to prepare students for English-medium instruction. The students who successfully complete the program must satisfy all assessment requirements, including formative and summative assessments.

2.1.2. Data collection

First, ten EFL teachers from the program were contacted and agreed to participate in the study. Preliminary interviews were conducted to establish rapport and provide further information about the research where necessary. As the researcher was geographically distant the participants, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. After the first interviews, background information and syllabus documents were collected. Based on participants' willingness and availability, four teachers agreed to take part in the follow-up interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for each participant, audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis [10].

2.1.3. Data analysis

Data analysis followed a grounded and iterative coding process conducted concurrently with data collection and transcription [17]. Initially, labels or codes were assigned to every single line of the interview transcripts and the syllabus documents. Next, these initial codes were refined, by association with themes of planning, framing, conducting, and using assessment information [10]. Finally, themes from previous stages were integrated into one central theme. To ensure the validity of these themes, a colleague with EFL research expertise independently compared their codes and themes with the researcher's interpretations.

2. Results

Interview data were used to answer the research question, "How do EFL teachers carry out classroom-based assessment?" Syllabus documents were analysed to examine the question "How do the institutional guidelines influence teachers' practice of CBA?" Five key themes emerged from the data analysis:

1. Planning assessment: This process involves the type and nature of planned assessment tasks and the intended relationship of assessment to instruction as well as to the intended learnings.
2. Framing assessment for students: This process relates to how (or whether) learners in the respective classrooms came to know that a given activity was 'for assessment'.
3. Conducting assessment: This process concerns what assessment activities were conducted (both planned and incidental, explicit and embedded forms of assessment), how they were conducted, and who were involved in the assessment.
4. Using assessment data: This process looks at the purposes for which assessment data was used, such as for teaching and learning, grading and reporting, managing behaviour and preparing students for high stakes exams (for example by modelling daily assessment on the types of high-stakes assessments students will need to take at the end of the term).
5. Impacts of syllabus documents: Syllabus documents' impact on the teachers' CBA practice.

2.2.1. Planning assessment

The results indicate that the teachers were active in planning assessment opportunities to meet their goals, beliefs and values. However, there were variations in the range and types of planned assessment activities employed by different teachers. In general, their planning was based on their own beliefs, either in the nature of language development, or in the authenticity of language tasks. For example, Teacher 1 had a strong belief in the importance of grammar and vocabulary as a foundation for language development. She explained:

For example, students in classes 2D and 3D are quite slow, so they need to focus more on accuracy. They require more intensive coaching from me on vocabulary and pronunciation; they really need to feel confident in these areas before they'll dare to speak. So, I always dedicate more time to that section in class. On the other hand, students in 1C and 2C pick up things very quickly, and their performance is quite good. When it comes to vocabulary, they're not afraid to use new or difficult words, so I'll emphasize fluency more with them.

In this case, the teacher's strong belief on the sequence of language development seems to influence her choice of bypassing an institutional guideline on teaching methodology. The teacher seemed to be firm in her belief and confident of her ability to design activities that suit the students' needs. Similarly, Teacher 3 provided vocabulary relevant to the topic and the questions from the textbook, before expanding on those questions and helping students broaden their vocabulary. Regarding grammar, instead of explaining a grammatical feature, the teacher chose to focus on how to apply it in writing. This was because the teacher believed that the student could easily check out information about grammatical features from the textbook. The teacher provided opportunities for the students to ask questions and paced his teaching according to their understanding.

The participants' planning assessment is influenced by their belief in the authenticity of language tasks. An example was Teacher 2's lesson, in which the students learned to handle passages about processes. For this lesson, the teacher gave the students a "small task," which was to interview a friend or family member about a process which they personally undertook, such as finding their first friend in the university, or dating someone. The teacher believed that "real tasks" like this helped the student to develop "skills" as well as to acquire "content" related to the lesson.

2.2.2. Framing assessment for students

All teachers reported informing students about requirements they need to complete throughout the semester and how their works will be assessed. For instance, in the ESP class, a design assignment was graded on the basis of aesthetics and their use of language to describe their products. The students have ongoing assessments, including vocabulary and grammar exercises, and small projects. In the listening class, Teacher 2 explicitly framed classroom exercises as essentially practice for the final exam or summative test. The teacher also often reminded students of the format of summative assessments and clearly informed them of the penalty for wrong answers, such as losing 0.5 marks for every mistake.

The teachers, however, have different attitudes towards framing for students. Teacher 3 believed that the students were already familiar with the assessment criteria and should be responsible for meeting them. This belief was grounded in the fact that the assessment rubrics were included in the textbook. The teacher consistently referred to these specific criteria when providing feedback on students' works. Teacher 1, on the other hand, was uncertain about students' cognitive ability to understand every aspect of assessment criteria. Even though the students may know about the criteria, the teacher felt that many did not understand what was required to achieve them. The teacher attributed this situation to the complexity of rubric

descriptors. So, she had to explain it in simple language that is very easy for students to understand.

2.2.3. Conducting assessment

Since the teachers did not have authority to make decisions on summative assessment design, they undertook assessments according to plan or made some modifications to the assessment plan. Teacher 3 exemplified strict adherence to the planned assessment. In his writing lesson, there are three stages of assessment: homework feedback, in-class activities, and end-of-class activities. First, for homework feedback, he asked a few students to present their work directly and share their computer screens. He then corrected their writings based on the four assessment criteria (i.e. vocabulary, grammar, coherence, and completion). In the second stage, the feedback focused on correction of common errors of sentence writing. For each activity, he invited about 10 students, covering around 20 sentences in about 20 minutes. At the end of the class, he assigned an essay as homework.

Teacher 1, however, conducted assessment in a more flexible way. The teacher kept an observation note for each student in the class to record various aspects of the student's performance. Besides evaluating academic performance, the teacher also included other valued behaviours, such as efforts and attitude, in the assessment. Students were informed that their overall assessment was not determined solely by summative test scores, but also on their progress, effort, and attitude throughout the semester. So, she kept records of their vocabulary checks and their attitude in class—whether they are supportive, and how they answer spontaneous questions without preparation.

2.2.4. Using assessment data

All teachers use the assessment information to inform their pedagogical activities. For example, Teacher 1 used assessment data to re-design classroom activities to improve areas of weaknesses and meet the students' needs. The teacher believed that the students need to focus more on accuracy, and to be 'trained' more on vocabulary and pronunciation. For such a class, the teacher would spend more time on accuracy. The teacher believed that "The students need to have confidence (in accuracy) before they can speak up." For a class in which the students are faster and perform better in accuracy, the teacher would focus more on fluency.

Teacher 2 did not rely on formal assessment data. He promoted a valued behaviour, such as speaking up in class. In this instance, the teacher's belief about the importance of the students having fun led him to design an activity (game quiz) to serve that purpose. Besides delivering fun, the activity was also instructional as the content was related to the topic of the lesson (tourism). It also provided opportunities for the teacher to assess the student's cultural knowledge, language skills, as well as their level of participation in classroom activities. This observation helped the teacher to identify students who might need more opportunities and encouragement to participate with the lesson. Teacher 2 explained:

Overall, through these activities, what I measure most is student participation. I can immediately tell which students speak up often and actively join in. There are always those familiar faces in class. This helps me identify students who participate less, so I can give them opportunities—or rather, require them—to show effort at various times and in other opportunities.

The teachers also relied on the informal CBA (classroom activities), rather than formal CBA (mid-term test) to monitor and support students on an on-going basis. Teacher 3's belief on the efficiency of formal and informal CBA in assessing student's performance seems to be similar to Teacher 1's. He commented:

Actually, I regularly assess and monitor the students in class, so I don't wait for midterm exam scores to take action. Through classroom activities, I can immediately identify students who are struggling or have issues, as these become clear in their writing. I

typically provide immediate support in such cases. Sometimes there's a noticeable discrepancy in their midterm exam scores, but these results are often something I've already anticipated during the teaching process and from the assignments they complete in class.

2.2.5. Impacts of syllabus documents

There are three types of assessment activities which were mentioned in the syllabus: end-of-term assessment, mid-term assessment and homework. Analysis results suggested that: (1) the assessment activities mentioned in the syllabus were formal by definition, (2) they had a strong impact on the teacher's CBA practice, and (3) the extent to which they were used for formative purposes varied among the different teachers and across the different courses.

The end-of-term assessment carried the highest weightage among the components (60%). Taking the form of a test or exam, this component was largely summative as it assessed the student's performance at one point in time and its results were used mainly for grading, recording, and accountability purposes. As the assessment was scheduled at the very end of the term, the teacher was unlikely to meet the students again after the test. This means no opportunity for the results to inform teaching and learning in any direct way. As the Teacher 1 commented, the summative assessment is useless. As its results were not used for any formative purposes, the end-of-term assessment could be considered as solely summative. However, the fact that the end-of-term test was accorded the highest weightage of all the components made it a strong influence on CBA practice. Classroom tasks were designed to mimic the end-of-term tests, as illustrated by Teacher 2:

Typically, most listening exercises in my course are similar to the final test format: they're listening passages with a provided outline. It's not a full script, just an outline. That outline usually has about 20 blanks. The midterm version is shorter, with only 10 blanks.

The mid-term assessment was accorded the second highest weightage (30%). There was no instruction from the syllabus on how the teacher should use the information from this assessment, other than for its grading purpose (summative). Consequently, decisions regarding its formative use were left to individual teachers. Analysis of the interview scripts showed variations in the teachers' usage of mid-term assessment information for formative purposes. Teacher 1 treated and provided feedback on the mid-term assignment similarly to homework assignment, providing feedback on the student's overall progress over the course of half a term. However, Teachers 2 and 3 did not use mid-term test results for any formative purposes. In these cases, the mid-term assessment took the form of a test administered and graded by external teachers from other classes. Since the classroom teachers did not have direct access to the test and hence did not follow up with its results. Consequently, for Teachers 2 and 3, the mid-term assessment was summative in both design and usage.

Homework was not accorded any weighting in the official grading scheme. Nevertheless, the syllabus mandated that homework should be assigned to the students and checked by the teacher for every class session. In Teachers 1 and 4's classes, homework tasks were pre-determined and stated in the syllabus. According to Teachers 2 and 3, the syllabus instructed them to select relevant tasks from corresponding units in the student workbook. Both emphasised that "completion of homework is compulsory." The data showed that the teachers largely abided by this mandate, to the extent that homework correction was a regular feature of each lesson. During homework review, teachers often invited a student or groups to present their homework to the whole class. Teachers would then provide feedback on this work so that everyone in the class could learn from it. They might also give a grade to this work, so that the students knew what level of proficiency this work is evaluated at, but that would not be counted towards the official grading. Teacher 3 systematically archived the homework and the feedback provided. At the end of each term, the teacher would look back at them and reflect on what mistakes the students

commonly made. This information helped the teacher to adjust learning materials and modify teaching approaches to make them more effective in future courses.

2.3. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the EFL teachers' classroom-based assessment (CBA) practices and the influence of institutional guidelines on those practice. The results showed that the participants were active in planning assessment opportunities, and their planning was based on their own beliefs. All teachers provided necessary information of assessment to their students, but the teachers might have different attitudes towards this provision. They generally undertook assessments as planned or made unplanned assessments. All teachers used assessment information to improve their teaching activities in response to students' needs. Lastly, syllabus documents had a strong impact on the teacher's CBA practice.

The results suggest that teacher beliefs influence their CBA practices. Recent studies share similar findings, recognising the role of belief in teachers' decision making [18,19,20]. In addition, teachers' practice is heavily influenced by contextual constraints. In this study, syllabus documents functioned as institutional guidelines exert strong effects on how they plan, frame and conduct assessment. Evidently, although the teachers may be aware of the value of formative assessment, their institutions prioritize summative assessment [18]. As a result, this affects their attitudes towards CBA. Nevertheless, the teachers still find space to adapt themselves to the institutional constraints. The flexibility, exemplified by Teacher 1 keeping an observation notebook, helps the teachers monitor the students' progress and performance, despite the syllabus documents' heavy weighting of summative assessments.

It can be argued that a model which serves as an abstract representation of teachers' practice of CBA should consider the contextual factors and teacher identity. This is supported by the idea of teacher assessment identity (Figure 1) which is composed of five components: Knowledge, Skills, Beliefs, Feelings, and Perception of role [21]. These components can interact in intricate ways, influencing how a teacher carries out assessments. For instance, a teacher might understand CBA but lack the practical ability to execute it well. Even if teachers have sufficient knowledge and skills for a specific CBA method, they might not believe in its benefit or like it enough to use it frequently, or they do not perceive their role in the CBA processes.



Figure 1. Looney's model of TAI [21]

The contextual factors include national policy, school guidelines, class syllabus, and other socio-cultural variables. This is in line with Quynh's model of language assessment literacy (Figure 2), in which the macro-sociocultural and micro-institutional variables constitute the contextual factors. This reflects the social constructivist approach whereby the language assessment practices shape and are shaped by the context [22], [23].

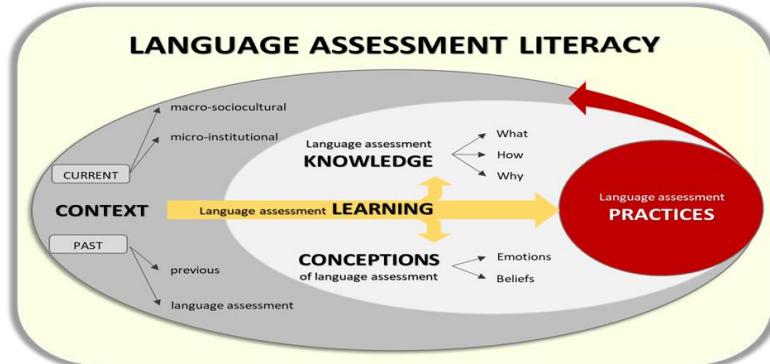


Figure 2. Nguyen's model of Language Assessment Literacy

As illustrated in Figure 3, Teacher Assessment Identity functions as a mediator between the contextual factors and the teachers' practice. This link is not static; rather it is dynamic because teachers' identities develop and change throughout their careers. An individual's identity should be understood as something that is interpretable in many ways, shifting based on time, experience, and context. The present study was conducted during the COVID pandemic, posing numerous challenges to the teachers. The role of teachers, as such, should be resilient to the changing context by acquiring new competencies, such as digital competence [24].

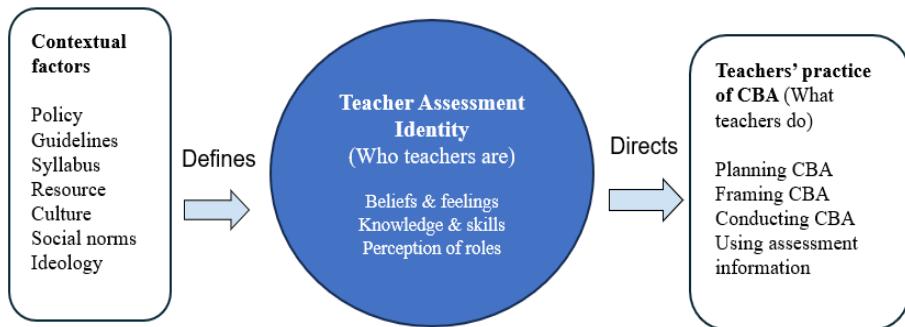


Figure 3. A proposed model of Teachers' Practice of CBA

3. Conclusion

This study aims to explore teachers' practice of classroom-based assessment (CBA) and how the institutional guidelines affect their practice. Data were collected from interviews with four EFL teachers from a Vietnamese university and the syllabus documents they used for their classes. Results demonstrate that the participants were active in planning assessment opportunities, and their planning was based on their own beliefs. All teachers provided necessary information of assessment to their students, but the teachers might have different attitudes towards this provision. They generally undertook assessments as planned or made unplanned assessments. All the teachers use the assessment information to improve their teaching activities in response to students' needs. Lastly, syllabus documents had a strong impact on the teacher's CBA practice. I proposed a model to represent the relationship between teachers' practice and contexts and teacher assessment identity. This study, though small in scale, demonstrates insights and perspectives of current trends in language assessment policies. Future research needs to investigate further dimensions of CBA, especially the unplanned and incidental assessments. The policy makers, as the study indicates, need to recognise the role of teacher identity as a significant contributing factor to the understanding of CBA processes as well as the success of assessment reforms in every country.

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