

**Conferencing: Using Summative Assessment Results
for Formative Purposes in the English Class**

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Abstract

In educational contexts, in which summative assessment predominates, there is a need to incorporate strategies that point to students' self-reflection in terms of their weaknesses and strengths. That is why this study used the conferencing as a formative strategy to use summative assessment results for formative purposes in the English class at a public school in Itagui (Colombia). Through a questionnaire, an interview and the researcher's journal this study established students' perspectives about the use of conferencing and its impact on their language learning process. Results revealed that conferencing worked as a formative strategy well received by students; however, it was also found that it requires a lot of preparation, time management and creativity from the teacher.

Keywords: conferencing, summative assessment, formative assessment, language assessment.

Resumen

En contextos educativos en los cuales predomina la evaluación sumativa se hace presente la necesidad de incorporar estrategias que apunten a la auto reflexión de los estudiantes, en cuanto a sus debilidades y fortalezas. Es por esto que en este estudio se implementó la conferencia como estrategia de evaluación formativa convirtiendo así los resultados de la evaluación sumativa en formativos en la clase de inglés en una escuela pública del municipio de Itagüí (Colombia). Mediante diferentes técnicas de recolección de datos como el cuestionario, la entrevista y el diario del investigador, este estudio pudo establecer las diferentes perspectivas de los estudiantes acerca del uso de la conferencia y el impacto que este tuvo en el proceso de aprendizaje de esta lengua. Además, este estudio dio a conocer que la conferencia a pesar de ser una estrategia formativa muy bien recibida por los estudiantes, requiere de mucha preparación, tiempo y creatividad por parte del maestro que la desarrolla.

Palabras Clave: conferencia, evaluación sumativa, evaluación formativa, evaluación de lenguas.

Introduction

Assessment refers to a related series of measures used to determine a complex attribute of an individual or groups of individuals (Brown, 1990). This process represents the gathering and interpretation of the individual's level of attainment of learning goals. Assessments are also used to identify individuals' weaknesses and strengths, so that educators can provide specialized academic support, educational programming, or social services (Yambi, 2018). Furthermore, a good assessment can help students become more effective self-directed learners (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Assessment has different approaches which focus on identifying the procedures and the results of the students' learning processes. "Classroom assessment includes both formative assessments, used to adapt instruction and help students to improve, and summative assessment, used to assign grades" (Sherpard, 2019). According to Regier, (2012), summative assessment is a strategy to show what students have learned during the lessons, this is commonly applied at the end of the unit of study to corroborate what the students achieve in the process.

According to Brown (1990), Pla-Campas et al. (2016), Hansen (2020), Yambi (2018) and Ozan and Kınca (2018), formative assessment is related to the instruction that the teacher gives in the classroom for encouraging the best comprehension in the student's learning process; it is an integrated teaching and learning process, and involves continuously gathering information to generate feedback for the student. There are strategies that teachers can use to verify the students' understanding and learning; this information helps to make decisions about the current and future instructions (Regier, 2012). Moreover, different strategies can be applied with the intention to get a big clear picture of students' skills and understanding, such as the journal, the concept-map, the discussion, among others. Consequently, the strategies need to be selected carefully regarding the learning students' preferences and needs.

The specific context of each institution or academic environment is a determining factor for an effective formative assessment (Ketabi & Ketabi, 2014). We have observed an institution with the purpose of recognize the procedures about assessment and their effectiveness; in this institution they establish the summative assessment at the end of each semester, teachers use this type of assessment with an instructional purpose to monitor the class process using a multiple-choice test, quizzes, fill the gap exercise, and creation of sentences. Nevertheless, this does not allow teachers to develop the communicative and holistic skills in the English assessment moment and learning acquisition process. Based on the results, at the end of each semester teachers participate in a meeting where they analyze the results and study the context. With this information they define new strategies to improve the assessment, but the tool is always the same. We found that the technique used is not effective enough to properly cover the students' necessities. For the presented reason, we have investigated formative assessment strategies that can allow the opportunities for the students' self-reflections on their performances.

A known strategy but less used by teachers in classroom assessment is conferencing. Inbar-Lourie (2008) defines it as a method that includes both self-assessment and the teacher's assessment. A conference can be used to review pieces of work in portfolio assessment, but it can also be used to discuss any other language-learning tasks at school. This is an instructional strategy that allows the teacher to know the students better, and it provides the opportunity for an immediate correction of errors or reteaching of materials if the students need it as well as allowing the teacher to respond to a problem immediately, rather than at the end of a unit, and concentrate in one particular point at a time thus making feedback specific rather than general. Also, it allows the students to be conscious in their difficulties regarding the lessons instead of focusing on the grades and to be able to comprehend the feedback given by the teacher.

Such as formative assessment is an important part of the students' learning and performance process, and one of the strategies that improve this exercise is conferencing, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of conferencing on learners' ability to understand and use the results from summative assessments for formative purposes in the English class.

Literature Review

To achieve a better understanding of the impact of conferencing as a formative assessment strategy, it is important to take into account the existing research on this matter. For that reason, the following studies are identified according to the context in which they were carried out, and all of them have highlighted the reason why this assessment is very important in learning processes and in our case in EFL teaching.

This study developed in a university from Iran shows that implementing formative assessment strategies help students to improve writing abilities and generate positive attitudes about this skill (Naghdi-pour, 2017). In the same vein Huan Liu and Cindy Brantmeier (2019) demonstrated that formative assessment is highly correlated with the development of receptive skills. The information helps to make decisions that will improve the quality of the classes, the teacher will be able to observe the students' learning, recognize the students' lacks and strengths and then he or she can adapt its teaching to students' needs (Herrera & Macías, 2015).

The use of process-oriented assessment procedures like conferencing can provide ample opportunities for both teachers and students with each other in an EFL context (Gan & Leung, 2020). In the study of Chun -Chun (2017) he underlined the importance of sharing time with students and gave value to the connection created between student and teacher through the use of conferencing. "Besides, some students enjoy the personal connection with the teacher and other students find it intimidating" (Cho et al., 2020). The study was focused

on paired conferencing and the findings in general said that for students is a positive strategy. The data collection was made using questionnaires, interviews, and the transcriptions of the conferences. Conferencing is a strategy that uses the benefit of self-reflections with different purposes such as reconstructing concepts, clarifying doubts, or sharing the conflicting thoughts of students in aspects regarding their performances. Consequently, self-assessment constitutes an essential aspect to take into account.

Some researchers show that student's perceptions or ideologies on their own language proficiency level can be a determining factor on how they self-reflect upon it. While students are not given specific questions on what to reflect, they base their answers through how bad or good their second language is comparing it with their mother language, and how much they know about social aspects in a spontaneous way (Forsberg et al., 2020). Also, other studies from a Chinese educational context reveal the student's perceptions of assessment are directly related with motivations and have an impact in their outcomes (Cho et al., 2020). This leads to belief that reflecting is something that is inherent to the human being but the level of importance or meaning held in this process will depend on the orientation it is given by a second person.

Regarding the teachers' role, they play an important part in the student's reflecting process since the students need a guideline in which they can question their performances with different elements. Consequently, self-assessment can be used as a starting point for collecting language attitudes and information on standard language ideologies present in the students, but it is required to be combined with follow-up questions triggering reflection on the assessments (Forsberg et al., 2020).

Other studies found that the teacher must understand the essential concepts that constitute an effective assessment for learning. The purpose has to always be in line with the assessment and assignments proposed, the students' must understand the purpose in order to

increase their metacognitions, (Woodard et al., 2013). In addition, it is important for both, teachers and students, to have a clear conception of what implies formative assessment and its importance, because students tend to see the assessment through what the teacher has told them about it and as high grade they must accomplish in order to pass the class.

The studies conclude on the significant change that a good formative assessment practice has on the teaching and learning processes for a better understanding and comprehension of the content, goals, and even context. Along with the recognizing of formative assessment benefits, it is important to highlight the role of self-assessment as an essential part of the students' learning constructions, which guided by the teacher can lead to the improvement of their performances and understandings; it has been found that the use of formative assessment strategies contribute positively to formative assessment's refinement. Therefore, strategies such as conferencing prove to be beneficial to intended reflective purposes. It is a good complement to the current popular summative assessment that is carried out in most contexts around the world and ours is not different.

Formative assessment

According to López-Pastor (2009), formative assessment is integrated into the teaching/learning process and involves continuously gathering information to generate feedback for the student. Feedback helps students to modify, make decisions about, and improve their learning process. However, the formative assessment does not just have a direct effect on students. It also provides information for lecturers on the suitability of their strategies. Teaching strategies should be designed to encourage independent learning, that is, to ensure that students assume a degree of control over their learning, which fosters learner autonomy (Rué, 2009) and the development of skills such as learning-to-learn (Pla-Campas et al., 2016). Another definition is the continuous process of gathering information on the learning link, as well as on the strengths and weaknesses, that the teacher can introduce in his

planning of course and the effective feedback given to the students. This must be accompanied by a teacher helping the student with the process of learning for achievements and progress or setbacks that he has during it (Maturana, 2015).

Summative assessment

According to Yambi (2018), summative assessment is used primarily to make decisions for grading or determine readiness for progression. Typically, summative assessment occurs at the end of an educational activity and is designed to judge the learner's overall performance.

Conferencing

For Inbar-Lourie (2008), conferencing is a method that includes both self-assessment and teacher assessment. A conference can be used to review pieces of work in portfolio assessment, but it can also be used to discuss any other language-learning tasks at school.

Feedback

It is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter that is used to alter the gap in some way (Ramaprasad, 1983). The term 'feedback' means all dialogue to support learning in both formal and informal situations. Hattie JA et al., defined feedback as "information provided by an agent (e.g. teacher, peer, books, parents, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding, thus being a consequence of performance" (Bajaj et al., 2018).

Methodology

This research adopted the Action Research to facilitate the collection of data to achieve the information needed to accomplish the goals of this study. Action Research is a systematic method oriented to analyze the collected information, taking into account that this method involves the researcher and the members of the community that would be the study scope, in this way the researcher needs to be directly immersed with the context. Action

Research is focused to bring a social perspective in which is defined a problem to find the solutions to improve the situation (Macdonald, 2012).

The first step was to determine the proper moment to apply the strategy, and it was decided that the proper moment would be after the summative assessment activities occurred, with the purpose of guiding students in self-reflection and providing advice and feedback according to their needs, then do the pertinent adjustments needed. The researcher implemented the conferencing in two different sessions, each session lasting around 30 minutes; each conference included a set of questionnaires that used a variety of specific questions to promote thinking; teachers learn about, prompt, and make their students aware of various thinking processes through selective questioning (Gall & Rhody, 1987).

To execute the first conferencing session, the researchers implemented a feelings wall strategy. In this activity the researcher made a question: “based on your experience, write the most common feelings you had during the exam”. For this activity, the researcher brought students two papers of different colors. The students should write positive feelings in one paper and negative feelings in the other paper, subsequently sticking them on the board in their respective places. After that, all together could analyze and compare the feelings, next they realized the common feelings they had. Finally, the researcher gave strategies about how to manage those feelings for the next summative assessment moments.

About the second conferencing session, the researchers implemented a round table. This strategy was implemented based on the result of a previous summative assessment activity related to writing opinions about a controversial topic. The students should share their opinions against or in favor with all the classmates in order to create a debate. Afterwards, the researcher started the conferencing moment making the following questions: Taking into account your experience, do you think the learning has been meaningful with the activity? How do you feel were your results on the debate? How do you think you can get a

better performance in order to have better results? And, what kind of feedback would you like to receive to improve your performance?

The researcher collected information through a journal that was made for each conferencing session. In those journals the researchers documented every moment and the students' responses during the strategies' development.

Data Collection Techniques

The following data collection instruments will be used in this study: questionnaire, interview and research's journal. The questionnaire was used to determine the extent to which conferencing helps learners reflect on summative assessment results for formative purposes in the English class. The interview allowed to establish learners' perspectives on the usefulness of conferencing to improve further performance based on summative assessment results in the English class. Finally, the researcher's journal was used to examine benefits and hindrances in the implementation of conferencing as a tool to use summative assessment results for formative purposes in the English class.

Findings and Discussion

The objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of conferencing on learners' ability to understand and use the results from summative assessments for formative purposes in the English class. The results disclose that: a) There was a significant participation of the students in the different conferencing sessions, they felt free to express their feelings and even give or purpose changes for their future English classes. b) The conferencing provided a space to openly share those feelings that students have about summative assessment results. c) Conferencing is a well-received strategy by students but for the teacher it implies a high creativity and time. d) The students indicated that conferencing helped them improve their weaknesses and identify their strengths, making it an effective strategy for formative purposes in the English class.

Student's active involvement, intervention and reflection in conferencing sessions

After analyzing the evidence provided by the data collection instrument, the researchers could identify that the student's active performance during the conferencing session could be more effective than the teacher's performance. Students' feelings and thoughts are determining factors, such as how active they are at reflecting on and proposing changes. Also, teacher's guided reflections can generate students' involvement through suggesting changes or contributing to the improvement of the processes. As suggested by Cho et al, 2020, although reflecting is an inherent element in the human being, motivation is an important factor for a good self-reflection, therefore the students need certain guidance or they might be a meaningless process for them, as expressed by some participants:

“They've motivated and helped me to be better prepared to face the English summative assessment moments” (Questionnaire - student 4). “When we all talk, there is more participation and the class become proactive” (Interview - student 8). “When the activity is individual, I get blocked. But when we are participating together, we lose the fear” (Interview - student 3). “I want the classes still being as the current ones” (Questionnaire - student 7)

Students' perspectives about summative results

The results showed the students feelings about summative assessment results and how the teacher management can help to have a positive attitude while they are facing these types of activities. Moreover, the students are able to share their ideas and points of view, in a certain way this is an easy manner to recognize their weaknesses and strengths. “Feelings like anxiety are common in all the group, there is so much pressure and not enough knowledge, they aren't useful for our lives” (Researcher's journal - student 8). “In this way the ideas flow up, I could express what I feel and what I think” (Journal - student 10). “Students said they

could make a major effort to express more of their ideas, but they felt they didn't have the enough vocabulary, English skills, and knowledge" (Journal).

Teacher's creativity and awareness in the implementation of Conferencing

This study had demonstrated through the data recollected that the teachers' creativity has a direct and important influence on the conferencing effectiveness. During the different moments, students expressed how the different and dynamic classes motivated them to participate in the sessions and has an impact on the learning process. The use of activities like a feeling wall, round tables and debates were well received by the majority of students, while a few thoughts it was just like another English class. "It is a creative activity that involves all of us and in this way, we become more motivated, it helps to reduce the fear of participating and improves our confidence" (Interview - student 12). "I learn more through dynamic and creative classes, in this way I understand more" (Interview - student 5). "If the activity is different and creative, we learn more" (interview - student 8). "The class is motivated, interactive, and effective" (questionnaire - student 7).

The usefulness of conferencing as a tool to promote formative assessment

Conferencing as a strategy in the classroom provides a different space where students can freely participate and express their ideas and foster self-reflection. Taking into account the previous aspects, students feel the conferencing helps them to have an active involvement in their continuous improvement regarding their learning process, preparation and summative assessment results. "It helped me to see where I'm failing and helped me to improve, so I'm more encouraged to learn" (Participant 4). "It helped me to improve myself to have better results in English summative assessment moments" (12 of 14 students in the questionnaire". "It helped me to be better prepared for English summative assessment because it had contributed strategies to study and manage my weaknesses in a better way" (7 of 14 students in the questionnaire). "It helped me to identify my strengths and weaknesses, in this way I

can work in that to be more relaxed at summative assessment comments” (6 to 14 students in the questionnaire).

Conclusions

The purpose of the research was to see if conferencing could give a formative assessment direction to the context that is heavily oriented on summative assessment purposes, therefore lacking formative assessment moments that could support students' learning processes. In fact, conferencing demonstrated to be a useful tool for the teacher and the students; especially regarding immediate adjustments to the lessons. Students were able to expose their ideas, and propose changes regarding the lessons and even the methodology of certain tasks they were asked to do, the students' posture adopted through the conferencing performances depended on their feelings or the humor they had at the moment, thus it was found that although the majority of the students demonstrated a positive posture, some of the students do not have enough interest to frequently propose changes or to actively improve their performances even if they knew in what were they failing. Furthermore, it is necessary that the teacher must have a certain level of creativity in order to perform the conferences in different ways with the intention of maintaining students' interests or else, students are not going to give a use of the conferencing as an advantage for improvement.

All of these findings mean that although conferencing is a useful tool, it might be too tasking for the teacher since it needs a lot of planning and constant innovation or it might have no impact on the students. In conclusion, conferencing provides a sense of formative assessment moments that allows students to reflect on their own performances at the English classes, but it requires a lot of elements for it to work in a long-term scenario, making it a difficult formative assessment technique to use regularly. The conference provided us the opportunity to know students on a more personal level as they increased their trust in themselves and feel more comfortable to talk about their weaknesses if it is the case. The

focus of the conferences and its questions lead to a better understanding of students' learning process and their self-reflection.

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