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An Action Research on the Effectiveness of Bookworm Project as Formative Assessment Task to Enhance Extensive Reading

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Abstract

Under the pressure from society in internationalization and globalization in education, under the constraint of professional development among teachers and lecturers in higher education level, and under the social requirements of the job markets and competition of the industry, Action Research is seen as an effective way to improve teachers' future self and organizational learning. The study addresses the issue by investigating the use of the current project named Bookworm as a formative assessment to improve students' extensive reading. The research applied an action research method to investigate how well teachers and students perceive and conduct the project as a formative assessment in class. Specifically speaking, the study places the importance on the evaluations of both teachers and students as to the effectiveness of the project and how they would improve it for the better. Moreover, from students' perspectives, they assess the effectiveness of the project based on the improvement in extensive reading. Therefore, the study offers a scald-folding way to back up newly-inexperienced teachers in weighing learners and insightful prospects for skilled lecturers in the formative assessment practices in General English (GE) classroom.

Keywords: Formative assessment, project-based learning, GE class

Statement of Problem

As a lecturer, it is important to find out the appropriate teaching method that works best in a certain context so that the stakeholders can maximize their benefits. Action Research (AR) is seen as an approach of seeking for the best ways to improve students' learning and teacher's teaching. There are a number of papers related to teaching, but they vary based on different contexts of teaching and learning.

Johnson (2012) has introduced several ways of improving teaching including personal reflection that works well in the community of University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS). The reflection can help teachers to look back their teaching, lesson plan, objectives, procedures and provide instant adjustment and adaption to be more suited to their students' need and learning. Bell (2010) views reflective activities as systematic practices where AR is regarded as fundamental to support effectiveness and outcome of teaching and learning accomplishments.

AR is an intriguing factor for educational researchers, teachers and staff in the education context (Mills, 2011). Not only does it provide knowledge and information to enhance teaching and learning practice but it also offers multiple benefits for professional development or fills the gap between theory and practice (Mills, 2011). In the words of Hensen (1996), AR (a) provides teachers with new information and knowledge of their class, (b) enhance reflection in teaching, (c) improves teaching pedagogy, (d) requires teachers to be more responsible for their work, (e) promote practice and achievement of students,

(f) opens up new horizon of knowledge and learning, and (g) offers ownership to teachers in their efficient teaching.

In ULIS's context, under the pressure from society in internationalization and globalization in education, under the constraint of professional development among teachers and lecturers in higher education level, and under the social requirements of the job markets and competition of the industry, conducting AR is seen as an effective way to improve teachers' future self and organizational learning.

Rationale and Methodology

The underpinning aim of applying AR in the project-based learning is the feasibility and practicality of it. One of the challenges facing teachers in ULIS is the financial burden in doing research. There is no fund provided to teachers. AR is considered cheap and applicable in many contexts (Mills, 2011). In comparison to other methods, the outcome of AR can be straightforward and directive to teaching and learning activities (Mills, 2011). Additionally, in Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE), doing action research helps to involve stakeholders to reflect their teaching and learning to provide instant feedbacks and comments to adjust and adapt project-related activities. This is acted as essential since renovation and reformation in education in Vietnam, especially in language teaching is put to the top priority. Among which, the change in assessment from summative and traditional method to formative and alternative approaches is shown by case-based studies, project-based learning and problem-solving activities. AR in such a case is of great necessity and importance to ULIS's situation.

Overview of Action Research

Choi (1999) claims among the important targets and goals of language learning is to develop student's competency of communication. That is considered significant in second language acquisition. However, it is unfortunate that foreign language learners like those in Vietnam have limited opportunities to use English as Foreign Language as a means of communication outside classroom. This issue is proven by Lightbown and Spada (1999: 92) who stated that towards individuals, their goals in a language course is just to overcome tests and exams instead of using language for communication and interaction purposes. This proposes a question of adapting new method of assessing learners' abilities that may motivate learners to apply language that they have learnt in communication purposes in daily life interaction. Traditionally, the emphasis on accuracy should be replaced by fluency and communicative approaches.. Project-based learning (PBL) is there to stay, to meet the demand for English teaching and learning, especially the benefits of learning by practicing. In PBL, students are supposed to do a research on a certain discipline and collect sufficient information to propose a solution or to make a specific product (Ckarke, 2005). Throughout the PBL, students will form their understanding, knowledge of literature, methodologies and findings, discussions via making plans for investigations, collecting evidence, criticizing previous studies, making suggestions and providing explanations or testing hypotheses and coming to the conclusions or recommendations from the findings.

In PBL, the intended outcomes and learning methods are seen as equally important as the assessment of students' performance. Popularly, the evaluation of PBL tutorials pays attention to the procedure where students experience and gain knowledge and different skills. However, according to Lewin (1951) among the significant philosophies of assessment, it is necessary to balance the assessment methodology to the studying style, progressive level, subject matters and programme results. Consequently, evaluation of classes may consider the understanding gradually achieved. Students' achievements of the aims are pursued by the

course and the assessment of PBL. The evaluation should be regarded as an integral portion of the learning and teaching developmental process, which is endless. Therefore, FA is one of the crucial elements of PBL and the education profession as a whole. It is defined as “an on-going assessment” (Clarke, 2005), which is built on how well learners fulfill learning, and involves them in cultivating their education. The main value behind FA is to supply students with learning method over the delivery of intelligence about the presentation (Yorke, 2003).

In ULIS in general, and in FELTE in particular, there have been subjects that employ both project-based learning and formative assessment for learners to improve students’ learning performances. However, it is unfortunate that little research into student’s perceptions about the implementation of PBL and formative assessment has been made. The researcher believes that only when students’ understandings about the new teaching and assessing strategies, as well as the effects of the application are determined and analyzed will the teaching methods be exploited to the fullest.

Context of the Study

One of the challenges facing our teachers in the division is the lack of innovation and reformation in assessing students’ capacity. The textbooks, rubrics, assessment criteria and testing’s are out-of-date. The feeling of resistance to change seems to outweigh the motivation to plug a change in assessment. Therefore, as a teacher with ten-year-experience, I find it the right time to explore further to this issue with a view to investigating a Bookworm project as a formative assessment task, proposing several recommendations to improve the current situation.

Context of The Project

In this course, English for Social Purposes, the proficiency goal is for students to develop from level B1 toward B1+ /B2- Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Group and pair work activities are viewed as central to enhance content learning and students’ language skills. Students will learn by engaging in scaffolded and theme-based activities in this course. All students will learn to organize and take responsibility for their own progress through assessment forms and in- and out-of-class activities. The size of each class ranges from 10 to 12 students while the course runs in 8 weeks each semester.

Description

The materials selected are famous masterpieces (classic and modern) that have motivated various readers in the world. Most of the texts have been adapted to suit students’ level of proficiency. Each story creates a rich context for language activities, and provides a valuable resource for language work (discussion, role play, creative writing, etc.) Students are supposed to do the intensive reading and make oral presentations and complete by a written reflection. There are five literature masterpieces namely *The Secret Garden*, *When Summer Comes*, *Ghost stories*, *Cold Comfort Farm*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, adapted for graded reader (50-80 pages each, CEFR level specified. Students will read, take notes of plot, main ideas, and important details.

Procedure

- Students read assigned literary works at home and are recommended to take notes of main ideas.
- In order to assure students reading assigned chapters, teachers can ask one or two random students to summarize orally (This activity can be done weekly or spontaneously).
- In week 2, 4, 6 teachers provide activities to check students’ understanding.

- After that, it is required for students to conduct the project in a group of four and make oral presentations and write reflections on the assigned readings. Each group is responsible for TWO oral presentations and THREE written reflections.

There are some notes for the project.

- ONE week before Revision Weeks, students are assigned the reading stories/novels to make oral presentations and write reflections.
- The written reflection on “*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*” is OBLIGATORY for all groups.
- The other TWO written reflections are selected out of the four following materials (*The Secret Garden*, *When Summer Comes*, *Ghost Stories*, *Cold Comfort Farm*)

Requirements

Content of Oral Presentations and Written Reflection includes

- Short summary of literary works
- What they like or dislike
- Favourite character + Explanation
- Change / Adaptation of plot or details + Explanation
- Change of the ending + Explanation
- Comparison between written work and film version (if any)
- Students’ own ideas

Length

- Oral Presentations: 10-15 minutes
- Written Reflection: About 400 words

Literature Review

Ardi (2015) conducted a study to examine the attitudes of both teachers and students towards formative assessment via feedbacks in English teaching and learning. The study reveals that students’ attitude towards the alignment between both type of assessment is negative (only 21% learners advocated the notion). More than half of the students prefer formative assessment (52.6%) while only 26.3% found that summative assessment is well regarded.

After careful examining almost 700 research publications on formative assessment from seven significant nations and focused on the 250 most related results, Black and William (1998:61) concluded that formative assessment plays a central role in improving student’s learning and helps generate a productive classroom environment. As Black and William alluded, formative assessment and feedback (formative feedback) are closely interrelated and contribute to each other’s successfulness.

In another research carried out by Dinkelman (1997) about student’s perceptions about formative assessment examinations, student’s responses were positive about the usefulness of formative examination. 95.46% students agreed that some drive as formative assessment is needed to compel them to study. The students strongly agreed that formative assessment is of help to them (47.7%) and that formative assessment improves the student’s knowledge and skill (48%). However, few students were neutral and mentioned that they can study even in the absence of any drive. The study also revealed the importance of formative examinations to the students. The casual approach of some of the students towards formative assessment suggests the requirement of increasing awareness towards these interim assessments for the validity and successful academic progression. The formative examinations should be comprehensive in

terms of assessment mechanisms and the feedback practices so as to benefit every learner. The assessment should include testing of application of the knowledge and problem solving abilities.

On the other hand, as analyzed by Hine (2013) roughly 35% of the studies show discouraged outcomes of formative assessments (FA). The researchers studied these negative findings by investigating the potential elements, which can balance the relationship between feedbacks as alternative evaluation and enhanced performance. The study discovered that the meaningfulness of FA is reduced when the focus of the assessment is more placed on students' presentation rather than on acquiring how to complete the assignment. This occurrence, according to Zaff (2003:5), is linked to "extrinsic versus intrinsic motivations for success". The latter refers to carrying out a duty for a sense of preference, even just for the interest of accomplishment. The former, however, means carrying out a duty to achieve an external return, such as high marks (Zaff, 2003). For example, placing more focus on marks (extrinsic) causes more adverse effects than attaching the importance on study skills that lead to mastering a provided task. Erickson (1986) carried out a comprehensive project called the help for the professional practice in FA, which included four groups of eight schools and lasted for more than two years in Scotland. The project reveals that FA is effective in enlightening pupils' knowledge and enthusiasm (89%), the value of learners' effort (88%), accomplishment (78%), studying skills (94%), attention (83%) and performance (55%). It is notable that applying summative assessment in teaching policy may discourage students in their learning effort and motivation toward progress, so teachers should present formative assessments that inform students about the continuous development in their achievement.

Findings and Discussions

Again, the study addresses the issue by investigating the use of the current project named Bookworm as a formative assessment to improve students' extensive reading. The research applied an action research method to investigate how well teachers and students perceive and conduct the project as a formative assessment in class. Specifically speaking, the study places the importance on the evaluations of both teachers and students as to the effectiveness of the project and how they would improve it for the better. Moreover, from students' perspectives, they assess the effectiveness of the project based on the improvement in extensive reading. Therefore, the study offers a scald-folding way to back up newly-inexperienced teachers in weighing learners and insightful prospects for skilled lecturers in the FA practices in GE classroom. The research pursues to answering the subsequent issues:

1. What are teachers' self-evaluations of the project?
2. What are students' self-evaluations of the project?
3. What are teachers' recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the project?
4. What are students' recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the project?

Research question 1 and 2

When being asked to give a self-evaluation of the project in the first half of the semester, 8/10 students mark it as Excellent while both teachers in the study think it Excellent.

In terms of the structure of the project, all agreed that the project follows a harmonious combination of integrated skills and language items. Therefore, teachers and students can self-study and exchange ideas with partners, improving their presentation skills and critical thinking in giving opinions and challenging arguments. Added to this, students all hold the belief that they can enhance their vocabulary from the proses, thus boosting their extensive reading. Not only is their pleasure for reading reinforced but their writing from reflective activities is fostered as well.

When it comes to the language used in the project, all put Very good as sometimes technical words, idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs hinder the students' understanding. This should be noted that in the next semester, the selection of the stories should be carefully considered, especially the simplified language. The videos to support the written language can be provided beforehand.

Regarding the skills learnt from the project, all agreed that they can develop all four skills and other soft skills such as presentation, critical reading and critical thinking. Thanks to the questions and discussions in class, students are more well-prepared to challenge other's arguments and ideas to thoroughly understand the stories. This is of great importance as students in ULIS are seen as passive in learning due to their background and gender.

Research question 3 and 4

However, when it comes to the recommendations to make it a better project, two teachers share the following ideas:

1. "...The project has been done pretty well recently. Then I think what needs to do for the second half of the project is to integrate more listening activities or videos for students to watch such as movie show or other youtube videos to vividly illustrate the content, images, values and lessons drawn from the stories. Moreover, thanks to that, students have more opportunities to practice their listening skill..."
2. "...I don't think I have many recommendations for it coz I think it is Excellent. However, it would be better if the project can be done in both semesters 1 and 2..."

Regarding students' recommendations, five participants share several common comments as follows:

1. "...I love the project as it helps me improve my vocabulary. It would be a lot of fun if we can do some activities such as role-play or movie theatre where students can together see the movie. It will of course motivate us to learn and to read..."
2. "...What I think needs improving is the language of the story, sometimes I find it very difficult and then I have to look up in the dictionary. Another thing is I think teachers should provide more information such as plot summary or discussion in class like story sharing at the beginning of the class..."
3. "...I don't know how er..er.. I feel after the project ends, but I love it very much. I love Vietnamese literature, and now I love English literature. To be honest, I just hope we can have more time to discuss and share with each other, and we can bring more joy into class thanks to the discussion..."
4. "... I find it difficult to understand the hidden meaning of the story. That's why I need Google. Sometimes I ask my peers or teacher for help. I think the story is too long. If you can cut it, then I think it would be more suitable..."
5. "...Do you think of the idea of poster presentation when students can mind map the stories, the lessons, and any interesting ideas from the stories? I love that. And for reading skill, do you think students should make a glossary for students to study the vocabulary and share with each other. And for writing skill, I love the idea of writing a diary. And it will, you know, improve reading and writing skill. For the speaking skill, I think it is enough now as I have to discuss in class with teacher and mates..."

Needless to say, a number of pros from the project should be taken into consideration. Firstly, the projects can get involved students in extensive reading, motivating them to have passion for reading, especially masterpieces, and literary stories. Another merit of this project is the integration of language skills, which can be named as Reading – Speaking – Writing.

Bookworm can, moreover, enhance critical reading, critical thinking and knowledge since students are supposed to read extensively and share the ideas among group members. The project is conducted in multiple performances, thus giving opportunities for students to make progress is a noticeable highlight of the project. Furthermore, sharpening students' communication, collaboration skills and learner autonomy is one of the benefits gained from the project as students are asked to work in groups. The project also fosters students' multiple intelligences when it comes to visual smart, natural smart, linguistic smart, logical smart, interpersonal and intrapersonal smart.

However, it should be noted there are several points that are in need of editing and revising. Firstly, the objectives are written from teacher's expectations, not from the students' perspective. Action verbs (in Bloom's taxonomy), therefore, should be consistently used to clarify the learning outcomes. Secondly, much as the integration of language skills can be noticed, listening skills is not a focus in the absence of Audio books. Thirdly, there finds a rubric for written work, but lack of rubric to assess oral presentations is stressed. What is more, self and peer assessment is not emphasized though the teacher's assessment with detailed guidelines. Due to the fact that it is the group work activities, undoubtedly the workload is not equally shared. Last but not least, students have to work under pressure on account of the length of stories; regardless of how much motivation and inspiration they have, they keep complaining about the density of words in each literary prose.

Bookworm Project, conducted in 8 weeks of the Semester 1 for the first year English-majored students in University of Languages and International Studies, has shown its effectiveness in student's language skill learning. The benefits are not limited to simply dealing with reading skill, but instead generalize to other skills and intelligences as well. The project, therefore, can be considered an effective formative assessment. Despite the numerous benefits to be derived from the project, the aforementioned reflections and limitations drawn should be paid more attention to take the full advantage of such tool of assessment for learning.

Conclusion and Reflection

During the study on AR, the understanding of different kinds of research has been enhanced. Among which, AR plays a central role in my teaching context in higher education. The outcomes of AR well reflect the teaching and learning, assessment activities and professional development (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). In ULIS, a number of professional development as the social requirements to meet the demand for high qualified teachers have been conducted including INSET trainings, pre-service and in-service trainings, research workshops, national and international conferences, to name but a few. In the current situation of financial constraints, doing AR is among the most feasible ways to bring about instant and immediate outcomes to reflect, adjust, adopt and adapt teaching and learning strategies. Thanks to the AR on bookworm project as stated above, my understanding of critical AR has been improved as in the words of Maurer and Githens (2009) about its role in creating an effective and productive research. The stakeholders of the project come to the agreement as to the effectiveness in enhancing language skills, extensive readings, vocabulary and soft skills such as problem-solving, presenting and critical thinking.

As an educational leader, policy-maker, the values of AR should be taken into consideration and spread out to the community.

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