


<p>Integrating Formative Feedback in the Process of Summative Assessment as a Means to Ensure Acquisition of English as a Foreign Language <i>A Case Study Using Formative Feedback in a Sandwich-like Summative Assessment Process</i></p>		<p>Linguistics</p> <p>Keywords: formative assessment, summative assessment, formative feedback, learning, teaching.</p>
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<p>Abstract</p>		
<p>This paper presents the reader with the results of a case study carried out at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana, in order to highlight the role and impact formative assessment has on learning in the process of summative assessment and the role it plays in the improvement of student performance in exams in the subject of Text Analysis. The hypothesis raised is that even summative feedback can effectively be used for formative purposes in English classes. The arguments and data in support of this hypothesis are based on the results collected from a mid-term exam whose aim is to assess the degree to which the scheduled grammatical structures have been mastered during the first three weeks into the 1st year. After students take the 1st variant of the exam they are provided with feedback and are granted the right to decide whether to sit another variant of the exam. If they decide to try again, they can choose from the two variants the one they would prefer to be assessed with a grade. The study enables us to see the degree to which the feedback provided to individuals, groups and the whole class after the 1st variant can lead to an improvement of the results in the 2nd variant of the exam.</p>		

Introduction

One of the most important goals of higher education in Albania is the training of independent, self-sufficient and self-regulated people supplied with the necessary skills and abilities that help them to effectively continue learning foreign languages even after graduating from university. Learning English, be it at Elementary or High school level, is recognized as a complex and dynamic process determined and supported by a series of other processes such as assessment. It is obvious that assessment is closely connected with learning but how does it impact learning? Thanks to feedback, assessment serves as the main source of information students are provided with in relation to what is expected of them, the amount of knowledge they have acquired and the quality of their performance. On the other hand the results of the assessment help teachers evaluate and if necessary modify their teaching strategies in terms of quality and efficacy (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006:7), but above all discover more about students` understanding and learning. The article argues that despite the progress made in the field of teaching in terms of perfecting teaching methods and strategies, the process of assessment especially summative assessment needs serious revision since the feedback it produces is not used properly therefore can barely promote the learning of languages in general and that of English in particular. Unfortunately, nowadays university students seem to take more interest in passing exams rather than benefiting from the feedback they may derive from summative assessment.

This undesired reality which has also been confirmed by several studies such as that carried out by Ding (1998) who is of the opinion that university students care more about grades rather than the feedback they are provided with, and the one in which Brookhart (2001) emphasizes the fact that successful students are the ones who know how to use the feedback produced by both summative and formative assessment. Being incited by these important findings and the claim of Black and William (1998) that the results of assessment can help all students succeed, we came up with the idea of combining both formative and summative assessment in one process, which consists of three main phases: 1st variant of the exam, teacher feedback and 2nd variant of the same exam. With the teacher feedback stuck between the two variants, this assessment process can metaphorically be compared to a sandwich.

Despite its importance and indispensability summative assessment cannot lead to acquisition unless it is used as a source of feedback. This idea has been confirmed by Dweck (1999) who maintains that without feedback summative assessment leads to superficial learning making students concentrate more on grades and scores rather than on the process of learning and learning strategies. On the other hand Butler (1988) argues that in general summative feedback in the form of grades only benefits students little even when grades are accompanied with feedback comments. Obviously, students pay little attention to feedback when this is given together with a grade, which in fact does nothing but discourages students by causing them to begin comparing themselves against each other instead of helping them pay more attention to the assignment and the way they learn in general. Hence the main challenge is to modify and shape the process of summative assessment so that it could produce formative feedback which in Rowntree's view is "the life blood of learning" Rowntree (1987, p. 24) and really fulfill its mission "to improve and accelerate learning" (Sadler, 1998:77).

Aim of study

Highlight the relationship between formative feedback and the process of summative assessment as well as its impact on the students' learning and their final results in a higher education system where students pay more attention to summative assessment.

The study was based on the hypothesis that the more students are involved in the process of assessment the more capable of identifying their strengths and weaknesses they will be while learning English, the more confident they will feel about themselves and the more motivated and persevering to complete a task.

Object of study

The object of investigation was the course in Text Analysis for the 1st Year English major students of the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana. Text analysis is an integrated language course which alongside developing writing, speaking and listening skills aims at consolidating the students' grammatical knowledge. The data for this study were gathered from the 1st mid-term assessment, which consisted of three main phases: the 1st Variant of the exam, teacher feedback and the 2nd variant of the same exam. The 1st and the 2nd variants of the exam were the same in terms of the grammatical material it covered but they differed in the way the questions were worded. Another source of data was the interviews (Appendix 1 and 2) conducted with the students in Albanian after the 2nd variant of the exam. The aim of the interviews was to discover students' attitudes and opinions of the impact the sandwich-like assessment had on the quality of their performance in the 2nd variant and on their learning strategies in general.

Method

The method adopted in this study is the constructivist method which sees the process of assessment not only as a way of evaluating the amount and quality of the language knowledge and skills acquired but above all as a process in which under the guidance of the teacher the students themselves reconstruct their own knowledge based on their previous knowledge, experience and backgrounds. In view of this approach the success and effectiveness of the assessment is not conceived of without the active involvement of students. This can be explained with Sadler's suggestion that for students to be able to compare actual performance with a standard and take action to close the gap, they should have some of the same evaluative skills as their teacher (Sadler, 1989). This conclusion has caused many teachers including the writer to focus their attention not only on improving the quality of feedback messages, but also on strengthening the students' assessment skills and ability to act on the received feedback.

Participants

Fifty-two first year students whose ages ranged from 18 to 19 years old in a 3-year BA English Language Program were selected for the study. Their first language was Albanian with English as a foreign language. Their level of English was expected to be B1 according to CEFRL (The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

The process went through these phases:

1. All the students took the 1st variant of the exam
2. The teacher identified the problems.
3. The teacher provided the students with feedback as to the problems and offered solutions.
4. The teacher asked the students to reflect on the feedback provided (we use “provided” since we cannot be sure if they received it) and informed them of their right to take the exam again if they liked and choose the variant they would like the teacher to evaluate with a grade.
5. The students took the 2nd variant of the exam.
6. The students decided on the variant they would like to be assessed with a grade.
7. The teacher marked the 2nd variant and allocated grades.

After they took the 1st variant, the students were informed of the real aim of this kind of assessment: to provide them with a new opportunity to act upon the teacher’s feedback and improve their performance in a 2nd variant. The teacher went over the grammatical issues providing plenty of examples alongside discussing with the students the best way for them to prepare for the 2nd variant (of course if they were convinced they should take that).

Findings

1. Forty-six students utilized the right to take the 2nd variant of the exam whereas 6 decided to not sit it.
2. All of the students liked the process and thought it should be applied in other subjects, too.
3. 46% of the students thought that the teacher’s feedback helped them perform better on the 2nd variant.
4. Only twenty-eight of the students were sure they were making the right decision concerning the variant they thought was appropriate for grading.
5. Despite their hesitation and lack of confidence in choosing the variant for grading thirty-eight students namely 80% of those who sat the exam for the 2nd time, did better on the 2nd variant of the exam.

Final Average Grade: 5.3

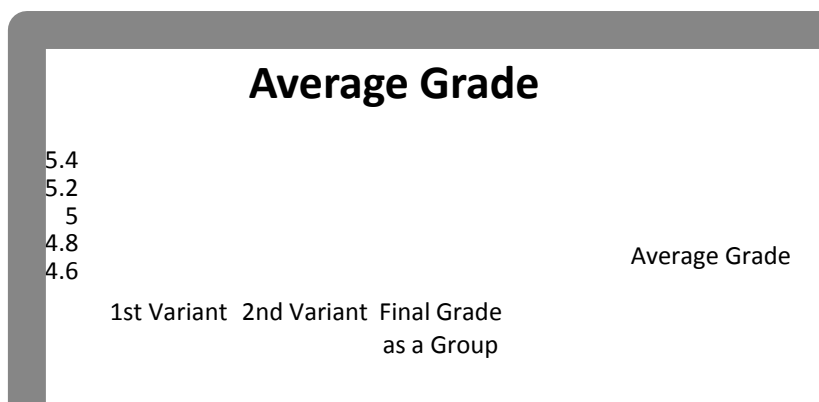


Figure 1: Final Average Grade

1st variant results

Thirty-seven out of fifty-two students got a 4 i.e. they failed the exam (only two refused to take the 2nd variant):

fifteen students passed the exam:

one student got a 10 (this student did not take the 2nd variant)

four students got a 9 (only one of them didn't take the 2nd variant)

two students got an 8

three students got a 7

five students got a 5 (two students didn't take the 2nd variant)

1st variant average grade: 4.9

2nd variant results

Thirty students who passed the exam had the following results:

three students took a 9 (only two of them had taken the 2nd variant and got the same grade as in the 1st variant)

two students got an 8

eighteen students got a 5

three students got a 7

four students got a 6

sixteen students failed the exam.

The 2nd variant average grade: 5.2

Passing Average

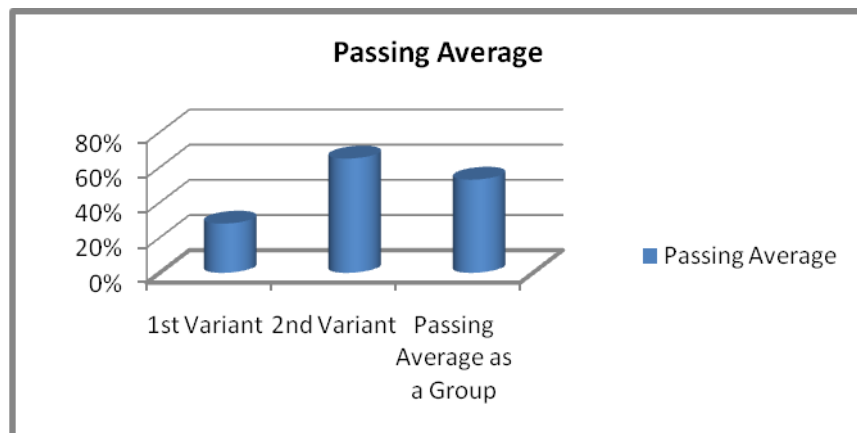


Figure 1: Passing Average

Only fifteen out of fifty-two students passed the 1st variant, i.e., 28% of the group.

Since thirty out of forty-six students passed the 2nd variant, it means that the passing average was 65%.

Taking into consideration the results of the two variants (the number of the students who passed the 1st variant but did not take the 2nd one) the group final passing average measures 53%.

Students` attitudes to this kind of assessment

Only three out of the six students who did not take the 2nd variant were convinced they had done well in the 1st variant so there was no need to sit the 2nd, whereas the other three thought they just did not want to go through it again. Despite these different attitudes 100% of the students thought that the assessment process was beneficial as well as motivating namely encouraging students to do better on the 2nd variant. In other words they appreciated the fact they were given the right to do better on the next variant and some wanted to have the same assessment system in other subjects, too. Thirty-one students i.e., 88% of them, stated that it was the teacher`s feedback that helped them decide to take the 2nd variant whereas only five of them admitted that the possibility they had had to see what the questions in the exam were like encouraged them to venture again. Ten students admitted that they had not done enough revision before the 1st variant so they decided to do more preparation work before the 2nd variant.

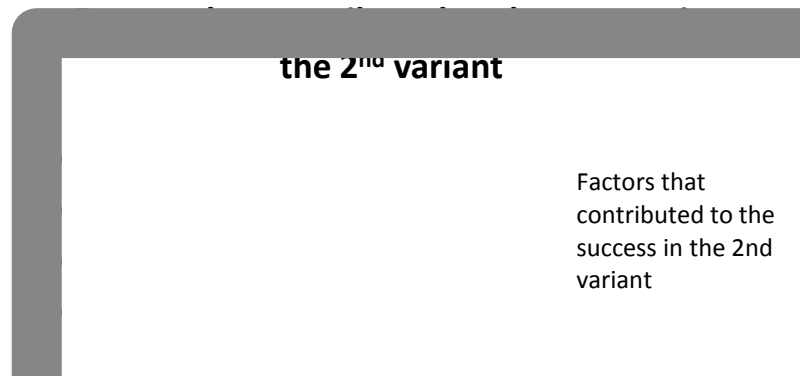


Figure 2: Factors contributing to the success in the 2nd variant

The advantages of the sandwich-like summative assessment method

- a. The teacher feedback encourages students to self-assess their performance and through this process further develop their self-assessment skills which are likely to come in handy to them in their lives.
- b. Feedback guides the students and helps them identify the aspects where they need to focus more. It helps them see for themselves what they need to improve.
- c. Feedback helps students reflect more on the way they study and if they see that they are not successful they turn to themselves and reconsider the strategies they used while preparing for the 1st variant and try to find and apply new strategies while preparing for the 2nd variant.
- d. By being made to choose the exam variant they would have liked to be judged with a grade or points students develop a skill which they need throughout their lives.
- e. Through this kind of assessment student perception of the whole process changes: they see for themselves that the ultimate aim of summative assessment is not simply to assess their level but to help them close the gap between where they are and where they are expected to be.
- f. Thanks to this kind of assessment they realize the impact feedback has on their performance and therefore they feel the urge to get involved in asking for more information as to their current and desired levels.
- g. This kind of assessment enhances the students` level of responsibility and motivation on the one hand and self confidence on the other.

Drawbacks of the process

- a. Since the 2nd variant is almost the same as the 1st, we cannot say for sure that the increase in grades is a result of the teacher's feedback only.
- b. Since the students are exposed to the same material twice this can lead to memorization rather than a better understanding of the questions.
- c. Since students have the right to sit the same exam twice they do not try hard enough to be successful on the 1st variant.

To sum up, despite its disadvantages one cannot help noticing the positive impact this kind of summative assessment has on student performance. The fact that in this kind of assessment students feel free from the pressure generated by grades, empowered by the teacher feedback as well as encouraged to act upon it, makes the sandwich – like assessment method worth applying and disseminating.

(Appendix 1)

Intervista I (Interview I)

Pyetjet për studentët që u futën në variantin e dytë të provimit. (Questions addressed to the students who did the 2nd variant of the exam.)

1. Përse vendosët të bënit variantin e dytë të provimit? (What made you decide to do the 2nd variant of the exam?)
2. A e kishit të vështirë të përzgjidhnit variantin që dëshironit të vlerësohej me notë? Përse? (Did you experience any difficulty choosing the variant that could be assessed with a grade? Why?)
3. A ju ndihmoi feedback-u i pedagogut për të dalë më mirë në variantin e dytë? Mund të jepni një shembull se në ç`drejtim ju ndihmoi? (Did the teacher's feedback help you with your performance on the 2nd variant? Can you give an example?)
4. Si ndikoi kjo metodë vlerësimi në mënyrën se si mësoni? (How did this kind of assessment affect the way you learn in general?)

(Appendix 2)

Intervista II (Interview II)

Pyetjet për studentët që nuk u futën në variantin e dytë të provimit. (Questions addressed to the students who did not do the 2nd variant of the exam)

1. Çfarë ju shtyu që të mos e bënit variantin e dytë të provimit? (What made you decide to not take the 2nd variant of the exam?)
2. Cili është mendimi juaj në lidhje me këtë mënyrë vlerësimi? Përse? (What do you think of this kind of assessment? Why?)
3. A do të dëshironit ta kishit bërë variantin e dytë? Përse? (Do you wish you had taken the 2nd variant? Why?)

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