Original Paper

The Pivotal Role of Performance-Based Assessment in EFL/ESL Classrooms: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

Assessment plays a central and important role in teaching and learning as it measures and estimates whether learners achieved the desired goals and met the expectations; and therefore, instructors can make decisions regarding instruction, curricula, and learners' proficiency and placement. Nevertheless, there is no single assessment tool which is fully adequate to provide both instructors and students with all the information needed to make judgments about learners' actual abilities; however, performance-based assessment (PBA) is considered as one of the effective alternative and authentic assessments for evaluating students' English competence. This paper is an appraisal of the washback effect of PBAs in EFL/ESL classrooms and the potential challenges faced by instructors when implementing PBAs. It provides a comprehensive review of literature relating to L2 assessment; compares between different modes of assessment; discusses the benefits and drawbacks of PBAs; and provides general guidelines for an optimal design and implementation of PBAs in language classrooms.

Keywords

alternative assessment, authentic assessment, L2 assessments, performance-based assessment, traditional assessment

1. Introduction

Black and William (1998) define assessment as "… activities that teachers and students undertake to get information that can be used diagnostically to alter teaching and learning" (as cited in Cheng, Roger, & Wang, 2008, p. 9). It is an ongoing process to observe learners' individual performances and during pair/group work (Brown, 2004). Instructors can use a set of *informal assessments*, which include

classroom tasks that are designed to assess learners' performance "… without taking fixed judgements about a student's competence" (Brown, 2004, p. 5). However, *formal assessments* are systematic and planned specifically to "… give teachers and students an appraisal of students' achievement" (Brown, 2004, p. 6). Almost all kinds of informal assessments are *formative*. They focus on the ongoing development and growth of learners' language. Thus, instructors' comments, suggestions, and feedback are meant to call attention to learners' errors and improve their language abilities. On the other hand, *summative assessment* usually occurs at the end of a unit and/or course "… to measure or summarize, what a student has grasped" (Brown, 2004, p. 6), and its goal is to conclude and determine whether learners achieved the objectives.

In language classrooms, L2 learners are asked to demonstrate their language skills and their abilities to search, process, analyze, synthesize, complete tasks, and solve problems in target language (Purpura, 2016). However, the type of assessment used in language classes is mostly a *traditional assessment* (e.g., standardized tests and multiple-choice questions) which may not fully reflect students' abilities and knowledge and what they are capable to do (Espisona, 2015). Thus, this paper emphasizes the notion that assessment is a process that instructors should *do* with their students rather than to *them* through using alternative and authentic modes of assessment. In the following sections, the researcher provides a comprehensive review of literature relating to L2 assessment; compares between different modes of assessment; examines the washback effect of PBA in EFL/ESL classrooms; and provides guidelines to ensure an effective and appropriate design and implementation of PBAs.

2. What Entails L2 Assessment

Purpura (2016) attempts to describe what language assessment entails. It is a systematic and planned procedure for "… eliciting test and non-test data for the purpose of making inferences or claims about certain language-related characteristics of an individual" (Purpura, 2016, p. 191). According to Alderson, Brunfaut, and Harding (2017), L2 assessment considers a unique form of assessment as it is practiced both within and outside the classroom. It is designed to obtain information grounded in meaningful context to measure learners' abilities to demonstrate set of skills required to meet the goals of the unit, syllabus, and standards (Purpura, 2016). The goals of L2 assessment are to elicit evidence of learners' performance under certain situations; to identify learners' strengths and weaknesses; to monitor and adjust instruction; to determine what L2 learners know, and what skills they have acquires/learned; and to provide feedback to students.

Consequently, a considerable amount of literature has criticized traditional assessments (TAs), in the form of multiple choice, matching items, true/false, and pencil-and-paper tests, as being inadequate, invalid, and insufficient to measure language learners' competencies and meet their unique needs and expectations. Instead, TAs usually measure students' ability to memorize and recall information, but they fail to measure their holistic ability. TAs do not give a comprehensive picture of what the students know and are able to do, and they do not thoroughly measure the extent to which students have

115

mastered complex skills (e.g., critical thinking). In addition, they do not fully allow instructors to provide constructive feedback to guide students' future performance, which initiated a movement toward implementing alternative and authentic assessments to meet the unique needs of language learners (Brooks, 1999; Chinda, 2014; Espinosa, 2015; Imsa-ard, 2021; Lynch, 2003; Solorzano, 2008; Sragen, 2017).

3. Alternative vs. Authentic Assessments

Brooks (1999) distinguishes between alternative and authentic assessments. *Authentic assessment* is defined as "A special kind of performance assessment conducted in an authentic context as part of a regular classroom learning rather than as contrived, intrusive assessment tasks" (as cited in Brooks, 1999, p. 14). On the other hand, *alternative assessment*, "… requires problem solving and higher-level thinking, involves tasks that are worthwhile as instructional activities, uses real-world contexts or stimulations, focuses on processes as well as products, and encourages disclosure of standards and criteria" (as cited in Brooks, 1999, p. 14). Research has shown that PBA is a powerful method of assessment as it includes several aspects and characteristics of both authentic and alternative assessments (Brook, 1999; Espinosa, 2015). It gives learners ample opportunities to demonstrate their active use of L2; and therefore, they motivate students to use their L2 as a real mean of communication (Espinosa, 2015).

4. Performance-Based Assessments (PBAs)

In order for learning to take place, learners should have the opportunities and freedom to "… experiment, to tryout" (Brown, 2004, p. 4) and to "… play with language" (Brown, 2004, p. 4) without feeling that they are being formally evaluated and their errors are being counted. Language instructors are, thus, urged to use "…. meaningful, challenging, and engaging tasks that simulate real-world contexts and combine language abilities with knowledge and skills of different content-areas" (Espisona, 2015, p. 2442). Unlike traditional assessments, "PBAs look more like teaching and less like testing" (Espinosa, 2015, p. 2443).

The broadest definition of PBA is by Frechtling (1991) that is "Anything that is not a multiple-choice paper and pencil test" (as cited in Brooks, 1999, p.15). It includes activities, such as projects, exhibitions, experiments, oral interview, story retelling, writing samples, and more. These tasks are both *response-centered* and *simulation-centered* (Plam, 2008). They are response-centered because PBA tasks require students to *produce* a response rather than simply completing multiple-choice questions. They are also simulation-centered because the tasks emulate and reflect real-life situations and experiences, so learners take active participation in the assessment. Therefore, PBAs increase the authenticity of the assessment (Chinda, 2014; Imsa-ard, 2021; Koné, 2021; Plam, 2008; Salma and Prastikawati, 2021; Sragen, 2017). Espinosa (2015) asserts that PBAs play an integral role in L2 classrooms because they:

Evaluate not only the final outcome but also the procedures and strategies used to obtain that outcome. Through performance-based assessments, students' understanding and reasoning are tested and determine how well they can apply what they know… Therefore, these evaluation instruments provide information in depth about students' knowledge and skills (p. 2442).

5. Advantages of Performance- Based Assessments

Due to the limitations of traditional assessments, a growing body of literature has examined the trend of using performance-based assessment in ESL/EFL classrooms (Brooks, 1999; Chinda, 2014; Espinosa, 2015; Imsa-ard, 2021; Koné, 2021; Prastikawati, 2018; Salma and Prastikawati, 2021; Sandrocks, 2015; Sragen, 2017; Suastra and Menggo, 2020), and they have revealed the following benefits (see Figure 1).

1. PBAs integrate language skills and utilize the three modes of communication (i.e., interpersonal, interpretive, and personal).
2. They emphasize progress rather than failure which increases students' motivation to learn.
3. PBAs assign authentic and meaningful tasks that learners may encounter in real life situations.
4. They allow learners to demonstrate their abilities to think critically, solve problems, draw inferences, and more, which standardized tests may fail to measure.
5. PBAs provide in-depth information about students' growth, strengths, weaknesses, needs, learning, and mastery of new skills.
6. PBAs measure the targeted competence or performance while students are performing the task, which allow them to exhibit their language skills and uncover their abilities to demonstrate their knowledge.
7. They promote cooperative learning and activate learners higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills.
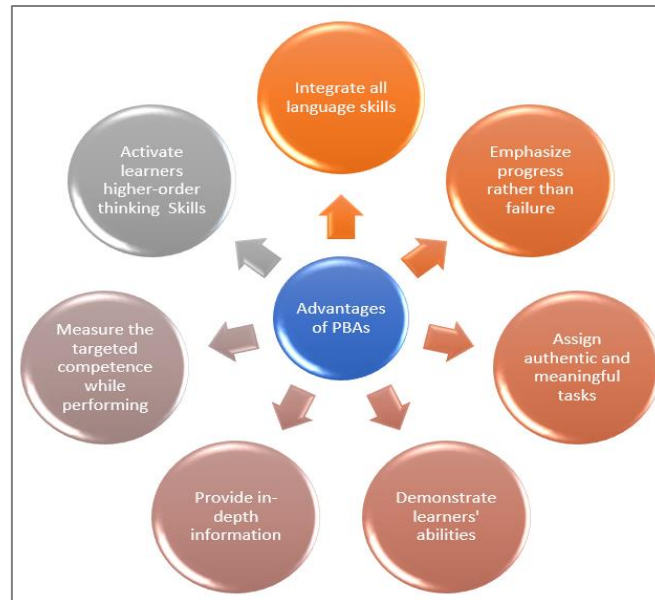
Figure 1. Advantages of PBAs

6. Challenges of Using Performance- Based Assessments

Nevertheless, researchers have found that PBAs can be time consuming for instructors to design, administer, and score as they require students to "… use higher-order thinking skills like analysis, synthesis, problem solving, and critical thinking in order to create the responses or perform the tasks" (Espinosa, 2015, p. 2442). In addition, it can be challenging to assess students' performance under the PBAs due to the variability – because "There is a huge variety of possible solutions, answers, and procedures to obtain those answers" (Espinosa, 2015, p. 2444). Another drawback of PBAs is the difficulty to prove the validity and reliability of the evaluation tools. In fact, "Some say that scores and grades will probably change across teachers and across time" (Espinosa, 2015, p. 2444) (see Figure 2).
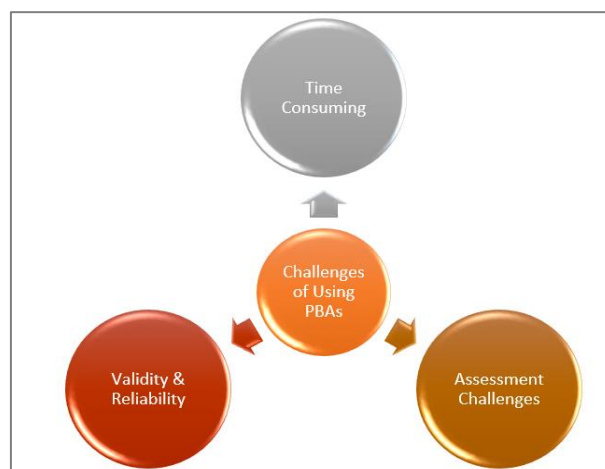

Figure 2. Challenges of using PBA

7. Guidelines to Implement Performance- Based Assessments

In order to alleviate the drawbacks of PBAs, instructors should be trained to design and administer PBAs as well as to assess learners' performance under this method. They are also advised to follow the following steps that are adapted from Espisona (2015) and Sandrock (2015).

Step 1: Determine what skills and knowledge to be assessed prior to developing the performance task.

Step 2: Select the appropriate task(s) and provide a model response.

Step 3: Design a set of assessment criteria that is clearly understood by the students, with clear criteria, expectation, and descriptions.

Step 4: Discuss the rubric/ scoring guide with the students prior to administering the assessment to help them know what is expected from them to perform the tasks.

Step 4: Provide a descriptive and constructive feedback.

Step 5: Use the final results to modify the assessment tasks if needs.

Furthermore, the National Capital Language Resource Center (2011) asserts that authentic assessments must meet the following criteria (as cited in Griffith & Lim, 2011),

1.   be relevant to students' interests

2.   mimic real-world situations

3.   require creative use of the target language rather than repetition

4.   motivate students to produce a quality performance

5.   familiarize students with the evaluation criteria and standards

6.   allow interactions between the instructor and the student

7.   provide students with an opportunity to self-evaluate

8. Conclusion

As has been noted, traditional assessment has several limitations. It may fail instructors to examine what the students can do and may fail students to address their unique needs. It does not consider an integral part of instruction since it is typically administered at the end of a course/ semester. It causes high-level of stress and anxiety, which may negatively affect learners' performance. Traditional assessment practices usually measure students' ability to memorize and recall information, but they fail to measure students' holistic ability. Multiple-choice and Yes/No questions cannot reflect what students can do with the target language in real-life conditions. On the other hand, alternative and authentic assessment methods, such as PBAs, are powerful and effective diagnostic tools that are carried out continuously during instruction. Students actively perform tasks which replicates real-world situations outside the classroom. PBAs integrate all language skills and modes of communication. Thus, it measures the holistic ability of students. They allow students to be involved and engaged in the assessment process, designing rubrics, selecting topics of personal interest, and monitoring their own learning progress, which gives them a sense of control of their own learning (Espisona, 2015; Sandrock, 2015).

Espisona (2015) asserts that PBA is an effective method of assessment in EFL/ESL settings as it engages learners in activities and tasks that link learners' interests, culture, and linguistic backgrounds with the content. Students can use all their language skills to engage in topics in their L2 that are relevant to their lives and interests. In short, a well-constructed design of performance-based assessment offers opportunities for EFL/ESL learners to present a more comprehensive picture of what they know and can do. They allow students to demonstrate their growth, activate their higher-level thinking skills, perform authentic and meaningful tasks, and actively engage and participate in worthwhile activities (Espisona, 2015; Prastikawati, 2018).

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