Original Paper

The Need for a Change in Assessing Non-English Major Students at the Tertiary Level from Teachers' Perspectives

Tuyen Van Le[1*]

[1] Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (Hutech), Vietnam

[*] Tuyen Van Le, E-mail: lv.tuyen@hutech.edu.vn

Abstract

Assessment is one of the six main components of an English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum. It plays an important role in language education. Having the right techniques to assess students certainly supports learning. However, whether an institution or a department has an appropriate policy of assessing students, and a teacher has effective assessment techniques or not needs to be investigated through teachers' opinions as well as real classroom observation. This paper aimed to explore how non-English major students were assessed regarding classroom assessment and achievement tests and whether the applied assessment techniques were effective or not. This study was conducted at the tertiary level through the use of two instruments: "open-response questionnaire" with six experienced EFL teachers and observations of six classes at three universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The findings revealed that very few classroom assessment techniques were used during the class and achievement tests did not meet their qualities such as validity and authenticity. The findings of the study provide administrators and EFL teachers with both theoretical and practical implications in student learning assessments at the tertiary level in Vietnam.

Keywords

classroom assessment, assessment techniques, achievement tests, effective, tertiary level

1. Introduction

In educational systems, what administrators, teachers, and students always consider is learning outcomes, i.e., what knowledge students have mastered, what abilities and skills they can demonstrate and how they will apply their knowledge and skills in the world of work.

Assessment must be integral to teaching and learning activities. In addition, not only language knowledge, but also how to apply knowledge in real life and in the workplace must be assessed. Researchers have introduced and applied different instruments that connect assessment with current constructivist theories of learning and teaching such as performance assessment, portfolios, authentic assessment and student self and peer assessment together with feedback and comments (Miller, Linn, &

Gronlund, 2009). Assessing students in these ways is considered as one of the factors that teachers can best prepare students to succeed in the 21st century as Finger and Jamieson-Proctor (2009) state, and that there will be no 'profound gap' between the knowledge and skills most students acquire in school and those required in today's 21st Century communities and technology-infused workplaces. Regarding the teaching and learning of English at the Vietnamese tertiary level, it is also necessary for administrators and teachers to be more effective in assessment policy and formative and summative assessment to meet the demand of the new century. However, so far not many studies have investigated how EFL teachers conduct classroom assessments, and whether achievement tests are appropriate for teaching methods, coursebooks and learning objectives or not. Thus, this study aimed to explore how non-English major students were assessed regarding classroom assessment and achievement tests and whether the applied assessment techniques were effective or not in supporting students' learning and teachers' teaching.

2. The Study Context

This study was conducted in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. It focused on investigating the effectiveness of techniques of assessing non-English major students at the tertiary level. The EFL curriculum for those students covers the four enabling skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing and is also called "integrated skills courses". This type of curriculum exists in all universities in Vietnam. The coursebooks used for those courses also cover integrated skills, so every teacher has to focus on the four language skills of each course content. Also, all EFL teachers not only have to participate in the implementation of the EFL curriculum, but they also need to employ appropriate techniques for assessing their students. Assessment is one of the most important components of an EFL curriculum, so all EFL teachers at the tertiary level are trained to assess their students in their English classes in order to meet the goal of the curriculum "Students of different disciplines will be able to achieve the Intermediate Level of English proficiency after graduation. They will be able to use English for daily-life communication, for study and in workplaces". The current study was conducted with the participation of the teachers within the context of teaching General English (GE) to non-English major students.

3. Statement of the Problem

In Vietnam, whenever an academic term or year comes to an end, teachers usually receive the following question from their students.

"Dear teacher, what materials do we have to revise for the end-of-term test?"

Why do students always ask this question? Is it good or not good? Are they worried about their knowledge or grades? Actually, there are several answers to this question in the Vietnamese education context. One answer is that, according to Nguyen (2011), exams are the first concern for all students. They always want to know what materials they need to read in order to get good marks. Another answer may be the way the students are tested. According to Van (2013), for years Vietnamese schools and

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universities have focused on English grammar and reading comprehension, so exams have had to be set this way. That means the majority of the English tests in the system have still been designed to recheck the grammar and structures students learnt in the programme (Hoang, 2008). Such rigidity of the exam design and the desire to pass as many students as possible tie the teacher to the coursebook provided (Tran, 2013). Also, Le (2013) indicates that at the Vietnamese tertiary level testing and assessment do not implement their role of directing learning and teaching of language skills. As testing focuses only on checking language knowledge rather than language skills, the teaching and learning of English heavily emphasises on grammar, vocabulary and reading. That is why, Hoang (2008) argues that there is a mismatch between testing and teaching the English language in Vietnam. While communicative language teaching is employed and teachers are striving to follow it, testing seems to focus on students' lexicogrammatical knowledge.

From EFL teachers' points of view about the issues of assessing English students in Vietnam, the researcher assumes that there is a need for a change in how to assess non-English major students as suggested by Nguyen (2011) that more extensive research should be conducted on assessment methods and standards since both teachers and students have expressed their concerns over the pressure of tests and exams in the current curriculum.

4. Research Questions

The aim of assessments should be to educate and improve student performance, not merely to audit it (Pelligrino, Chudowski, & Glaser, 2001). Their effectiveness must be judged by the extent to which they promote student learning and teacher teaching. That is why the current study tried to answer the two questions as follows:

a) To what extent are classroom assessment techniques employed in tertiary English classes effective in supporting students' learning ?

b) What are EFL teachers' perceptions about the achievement tests employed to assess non-English major students' achievement?

5. Literature Review

5.1 Student Assessment

Teachers need to know what students already know, what they have learned in the course of instruction over a longer or shorter period and where their strengths and weaknesses are, so that they can plan their instruction appropriately, guide students on where they need to improve and give feedback to students about their learning (Alderson, 2005, p. 4). Actually, assessment is of vital importance in the process of teaching and learning. Administrators, teachers, and students need to know what assessment is, why it is necessary to assess students, what types of assessment are appropriate to their students, and what techniques and criteria should be employed in assessment. These elements are discussed in this section.

5.1.1 Student Assessment: Definitions

Scholars like Angelo and Cross (1993), Harris and McCann (1994), Cizek (1997), Lambert and Lines (2000), Brindley (2001), Brown (2003), Bachman (2004), Wrench, Richmond, and Gorham (2009), Richards and Schmidt (2010), and Shermis and Di Vesta (2011) have defined assessment in education in different ways. For example, Angelo and Cross (1993) define assessment as an approach designed to help teachers find out what students are learning in the classroom and how well they are learning it; Harris and McCann (1994) define assessment as a method to measure the performance of students and the progress they make and to diagnose the problems they have and provide our students with useful feedback. Also, according to Brindley (2001), the term assessment refers to a variety of ways of collecting information on a student's language ability or achievement; and according to Wrench, Richmond and Gorham (2009), assessment refers to the entire process of collecting information and making judgments about instructional outcomes. Although different terms related to the above-mentioned definitions are preferred by different researchers, they all refer to major facets of the same phenomenon. All the definitions cover such terms as approach, process, information, performance, achievement, and outcomes. So, it can be inferred from the above definitions that assessment is a method or an approach which employs a set of procedures or techniques to gather information about students' performance or achievement of knowledge and skills. Through the collection of information, teachers know what problems students are facing, and thus they can make adjustments or decisions in the process of teaching and learning. Assessment is carried out both during the process of teaching and learning in the classroom and at the end of a unit, a week, a term, or a course.

5.1.2 Student assessment: Purposes

Assessment in education serves different stakeholders with various purposes. In the case of language teaching and learning, assessment is carried out to collect information on students' language proficiency and achievement that can be used by the stakeholders in language learning programmes for various purposes. Heaton (1990), Brindley (2001), Danielson (2002), Oosterhof (2003), and McKay (2008) indicate several different purposes of learning assessment including a) to determine whether students have sufficient language proficiency to be able to undertake the study; b) to help teachers to select appropriate materials; c) to enable teachers to increase their own effectiveness by adjustments in their teaching; d) to identify students' strengths and weaknesses; e) to help teachers to locate the precise areas of difficulty encountered by the class or by the individual student; f) to help teacher to identify and analyse the errors a student makes in handling the target language; g) to encourage students to study harder; h) to enable certain groups of students or individuals in the class to benefit more; i) to provide people with a statement of their language ability for employment purposes; and j) to provide educational funding authorities with evidence that intended learning outcomes have been achieved and to justify expenditure. These purposes show that the central point of assessment, as Angelo and Cross (1993) state, is to empower both teachers and their students to improve the quality of learning in the classroom and provide information for improvement when learning is less than satisfactory. Also,

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Westwood (2008) identifies assessment as an integral part of effective classroom teaching because assessment provides essential feedback to the teachers themselves on the quality of their instruction, and to students on their own progress. What is more, according to Stronge (2007), assessment is a central element of the teaching process. It is used to determine the effectiveness of a lesson in terms of student learning and engagement, to evaluate student progress, and as a basis for continuing instruction so that teachers must use a variety of assessment practices to monitor student learning, including formative and summative assessments. Both types of assessment serve various purposes in general education as well as in language education.

5.2 Types of Assessment

5.2.1 Formative Assessment

Formative assessment or classroom assessment is ongoing assessment (Fisher & Frey, 2007). It takes place as the course is in progress (Graves, 2000; & Torrance & Pryor, 1998) and is carried out by teachers during the learning process with the aim of using the results to improve instruction (Brindley, 2001). Formative achievement can be used to inform teachers of the effectiveness of their teaching and student learning as a result of their instructional practices (Shermis & Di Vesta, 2011). Teachers use formative assessment to improve instructional methods and provide student feedback throughout the teaching and learning process. According to Haynes (2010), formative assessment, through providing feedback, helps students to improve their learning and teachers to improve their teaching. It can give teachers information about what students know, how they learn and their attitudes towards learning (Black et al., 2005; & Browne, 2007). That is why teachers have to take great care in the design of the activities which cover several or more among such techniques or instruments as a) observation of performance; b) questions and answers; c) discussion; d) learning logs: e) self assessment; f) peer assessment; g) presentation; h) ideas sharing; i) journals; j) practical exercises; and k) assignments (Angelo & Cross,1993; & Irons, 2008).

5.2.2 Summative Assessment

Summative assessment is typically used to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programmes and services at the end of a course, a term or an academic year. The goal of summative assessments is to judge student achievement or provide aggregated information on programme outcomes after an instructional phase is complete (Torrance, & Pryor, 1998; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Brindley, 2001; Wrench et al., 2009; & Haynes, 2010). In addition, Cunningham (2005) states that summative or formal assessments include conventional testing methods and are characterised by precision and accuracy. Testing is as much a part of language teaching as are materials, syllabus and approach (Cross, 1995). There should be an evident and harmonious relationship between curriculum goals, course objectives, testing and all other curriculum elements (Brown, 1995). What is more, testing must serve teaching and learning. The feedback teachers obtain from tests must be of value to teachers and students. According to Cross (1995) and Haynes (2010), educators can use the result of tests to pinpoint students' strengths and weaknesses to plan curricula and adopt teaching practices tailored to their needs, both as

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individuals and groups. Besides, when both teachers and students can identify weaknesses, they know how to make efforts to overcome them. Teachers can pinpoint deficiencies in the programme and include needed remedial work in the ongoing instruction.

5.2.3 Types of Tests

Researchers such as Brown (1994, 2000), Brown (1996), Harmer (2001), Hughes (2003) and Alderson, Clapham and Wall (1995) give discussions about the four types of tests including a) *placement tests* which are used for placing new students in the right class; b) *diagnostic tests* which are used to expose learner difficulties, gaps in their knowledge and skills; c) *proficiency tests* which give a general picture of a student's knowledge and ability; and d) *achievement tests* which are designed to measure students' language and skill progress in relation to classroom lessons, units or even a total curriculum they have followed with the aim of assessing how well students have assimilated course material and whether they have achieved the learning outcomes of the course as Klapper (2005) states. Also, Henning (2001) indicates that achievement tests can support and reinforce other aspects of the instructional process. For example, achievement tests support both the teacher and the student in monitoring learning progress and anticipating learning obstacles. In addition, achievement tests are the most commonly-used tests applied in university language programmes. They are usually used at the end of a unit, a module, a course or a year of study to assess student learning (Brown, 1996; Harmer, 2001). That is why it is necessary that achievement tests be designed in accordance with their qualities.

5.2.4 Achievement Test Qualities

When test designers or teachers construct achievement tests, they should take test *qualities* into consideration. Qualities of tests are practicality, authenticity, validity, reliability and backwash (Brown, 1994; Davis, 2009; & Richards & Schmidt, 2010). a) *practicality:* A test which is practical should be easy to design, to administer, to mark, and to interpret the results (Brown, 1994); *b) authenticity:* Authenticity refers to various types of assessment procedures for evaluating test takers' achievement or performance using test tasks that resemble real-life language use as closely as possible (Richards & Schmidt, 2010); *c) validity:* Validity refers to, as Davis (2009) states, whether the content of a test adequately samples the content of the course so that an instructor can draw valid inferences about a student's competence based on a test score; *d) reliability***:** Reliability is the extent to which test scores are dependable and consistent (Davis, 2009). A test is reliable when its instructions are absolutely clear; it restricts the scope for variety in the answers; and the test conditions remain constant (Harmer, 2001); and *e) backwash:* Backwash is the effect of testing on teaching and learning (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). There are positive and negative backwash. Teachers must ensure what they test is not only relevant to what they have taught and what students have learnt, but also that the assessment process serves to promote learning (Clapper, 2005).

5.3 Testing Language Knowledge

Language assessment is largely fruitful provided that it is able to provide evidence relating to the specific purposes for which the testing is undertaken (Madsen, 1983).Tests of language knowledge

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should cover vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation (Madsen, 1983). They are the major language components which a language programme must include. Testing language knowledge refers to a) testing vocabulary, as Heaton (1990) states, to measure students' knowledge of the meaning of certain words as well as the patterns and collocation in which they occur. According to Read (2000), assessing the vocabulary knowledge of second or foreign language students is both necessary and reasonably straightforward; b) testing grammar to measure students' ability to recognise appropriate grammatical forms and to manipulate structures; and c) testing pronunciation to measure the ability to recognise and pronounce the significant sound contrast of a language, ability to recognise and use the stress patterns of a language, and ability to hear and produce the melody or patterns of the tunes of a language (Heaton, 1990). In addition, test items of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation should be contextualised or integrated into testing skills (Rhodes, Rosenbusch & Thompson, 1997).

5.4 Testing Language Skills

The four macroskills in communicating through language are defined as listening, reading, speaking and writing. These skills should be carefully integrated and used to perform genuinely communicative tasks. According to Heaton (1990), it is important for test writers to concentrate on those types of test items which appear directly relevant to the ability to use English for real-life communication. A test item or task should link directly to the test specifications, standards, the content and skill that the item is supposed to measure. That is why, according to Fulcher and Davidson (2007), the process of defining test purpose, test items or tasks and test techniques is one that needs careful thought and lengthy collaborative processes. Carefully-identified items, tasks and techniques will help teachers or test designers make inferences about the ability of the student to use language in the domains and range of situations defined in the test specifications (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). In addition to test items, tasks and techniques, instructions or directions are also play an important part in deciding on whether the test is a success or failure. Madsen (1983) emphasises that the instructions for tests should be brief and clear so that students will not have to spend a lot of time reading them, and they can avoid anxiety from poorly worded questions and misunderstood directions (Buck, 2001; Weigle, 2002; Hughes, 2003; Long & Doughty, 2009; & Luoma, 2009).

In conclusion, assessment is of vital importance in the process of language teaching and learning, and assessment of any kind should ultimately improve learning (Gardner, 2010, p.2). Administrators and teachers need to know what types of assessment are appropriate to their students, and what techniques and criteria should be employed in assessment, how different types of tests are constructed, how feedback is given to their students, and how assessment match with learning outcomes so that they can accurately assess their students and thus contribute to the success of the implementation of a language programme.

6. Methodology

6.1 Participants

Employing purposive sampling, the researcher chose six EFL teachers who taught GE to non-English major students. All of these participants were from three universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. They are all experienced teachers and have a Master's degree in TESOL. Also, they are really familiar with the ways how students are assessed regarding both classroom assessment techniques and achievement tests at the tertiary level.

6.2 Instruments

The current study aimed to investigate how non-English major students were assessed regarding classroom assessment and achievement tests and whether the applied assessment techniques were effective or not. To collect data, two types of instruments were employed. First, the researcher employed a "*questionnaire'* with eleven open-response items that required the participants to give short answers in their own words by writing in a space about what they thought about classroom assessment and achievement tests at their university. According to Brown (2009), since open-response questionnaire items are primarily exploratory, they are commonly associated with qualitative research, particularly observation, interviews, and diary studies. That is why after gathering data from the questionnaire, the researcher investigated how EFL teachers implemented classroom assessment by conducting *observations* of six classes with a checklist consisting of thirteen items regarding classroom assessment techniques. That is because Rea-Dickins and Germaine (1992), Wragg (1999), Kyriacou (2009), and Nation and Macalister (2010) emphasise that from the class observations, how closely teachers may be adhering to the set objectives of the course, how teachers are applying the textbook guidelines, what teaching methods they are employing in their teaching, and what learning experiences and interactions are taking place in the classroom will be examined by employing structured observation with a checklist.

7. Data Collection and Analysis

Open-response items can take many forms in language studies because such items are often used for a variety of purposes such as course development and evaluation; applied at various levels such as classroom or institution; and administered to various groups of people such as students, teachers, and administrators (Brown, 2009). By far the most common types of open-response items are fill-in and short-answer items. That is why for the purpose of this study, first, a short questionnaire with 11 items was designed and piloted with two teachers in order to check the clarity of the questionnaire items, instructions and layout, and to gain feedback on the validity of the questionnaire items, the operationalization of the constructs and the purposes of the research. After that the questionnaire was distributed to six EFL teachers from three universities. All the questions in the questionnaire focused on the elements relating to classroom assessment techniques, types of achievement tests and the effects of achievement tests on students' learning and teachers' instruction. Hesse-Biber (2010) argues that one

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method alone cannot provide adequate support for the validity and reliability of the information or the research findings. That is why the researcher conducted observations of six classes. Each class lasted two hours. The observation instrument was a checklist which focused on what the teacher did to assess the students. The checklist consisted of two sections. The first section contained nine variables regarding classroom assessment techniques that should be used quite often during the class (Mislevey & Knowles, 2002). During the observation, the researcher tried to count the times each technique of assessment was used. The second section contained four variables regarding classroom assessment techniques that should be used at least once in every lesson. What the researcher wanted to know was whether these techniques were employed or not at the beginning or at the end of the lesson. After that all the participants reviewed and approved the collected data.

According to Brown (2009), in qualitative research, open-response items are used to collect data that will be analysed for its content, i.e.'content analysis'. For analysing the data collected from the open-response questionnaire, the researcher used "content analysis" to identify themes in the data based on the questionnaire. First, the data were arranged by questions, and then they were separated into small categories. Each category was considered as a subtheme arranged in order, i.e. departmental guidelines, techniques and homework for research *question 1*, and types of achievement tests, test content and tasks, feedback and effects of achievement tests for research *question 2*. The teachers were coded as T1, T2, T3…..T6 and their perceptions were put under each theme or topic.

For analysing the data collected from classroom observations (items 1-9), first, the times each assessment technique was used were counted, and the following criteria were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the employment of the classroom assessment techniques.

Table 1. Criteria for Evaluating the Effectiveness of Classroom Assessment Techniques

Counted times	Extent of effectiveness
Not used at all: not observed in any times during the two-hour class	Ineffective (IN)
Rarely used: observed one to two times during the two-hour class	Needs improvements (NI)
Occasionally used: Observed three or four times	Average (A)
Frequently used: observed five to seven times during the two-hour class	Effective (E)
Extensively used: observed more than seven times during the two-hour class	Highly effective (HE)

And then the percentage of the participants who used the techniques was calculated. The data were displayed in a table and a graph. The data collected from items 10-13 were also calculated by percentage and displayed in a table and a graph. However, the focus was whether the teacher employed the technique at least once or not.

8. Results of the Study

8.1 Results of Research Question One: Classroom Assessment

8.1.1 Results of the Questionnaire

Departmental Guidelines

The findings of the questionnaire revealed that the English departments did not give the EFL teachers any guidelines on how to assess their students so they had to decide on the classroom assessment techniques by themselves.

T2 & T5: The departments did not give any guidelines. They just gave us the syllabus.

T3: They did not give any directions, but they warned us to avoid inadequate instruction because poor results were due to poor or insufficient teaching.

T4 & T6: They asked teachers to give students a mid-term test for the course, not during the class.

Classroom assessment techniques

Most of the teachers said that they asked their students to answer questions, to read the answers or to write the answers on the board.

T1: My students do exercises such as "sentence transformation" and then I ask them to read their sentence. Or, after listening to a passage, I ask my students to check the correct answers.

T2: My students are asked to answer questions, write their ideas on the board, or present their ideas in front of the class.

T4 & T6: We ask our students to answer some questions or do some exercises related to the lessons they have learnt.

T5: I check whether they did their homework or not by looking at their notebook. Sometimes I call them to go to the board to do exercises.

Homework

Most of the teachers said that they had assignments for their students to do at home. The students had to focus on preparing a reading text for the next class or doing grammatical exercises.

T1 & T6: Our students are often required to read at home for their reading comprehension as well as for their grammar.

T2: My students do Toeic exercises required for mid-term tests.

T3: My students practise additional exercises in their workbook, prepare vocabuary for next classes. All are assigned as homework.

T4: My students spend more time doing grammatical exercises or read some reference books.

T5: The students are always asked to prepare reading texts since there is not enough time in the class for this.

8.1.2 Results of Classroom Observation

After the researcher collected the data through the questionnaire, in order to investigate what took place in the real classroom regarding classroom assessment techniques, the researcher decided to observe six classes. The table and graph below show the results.

Table 2a. Teachers' Performance of Classroom Assessment Techniques

Statements (N=6)	IN	NI	A	E	HE
1. The teacher asked the students questions to check comprehension.	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
2. The teacher gave individual quizzes to students or have groups of students complete a quiz.	66.7%	33.3%	0%	0%	0%
3. The teacher encouraged the students to ask questions during the lesson.	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
4. The teacher organised pair work or group work for the students to cross-check.	66.7%	0%	33.3%	0%	0%
5. The teacher asked the students to give short presentations or talks about the topics.	33.3%	0%	33.3%	33.3%	0%
6. The teacher asked the students to practise exercises during the class.	0%	33.3%	66.7%	0%	0%
7. The teacher asked the students to record what they were learning.	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
8. The teacher corrected the students' spoken and written mistakes.	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
9. The teacher organised discussions about the topics or subject during the lesson.	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Ineffective   (IN)
Needs improvements (NI)
Average   (A)
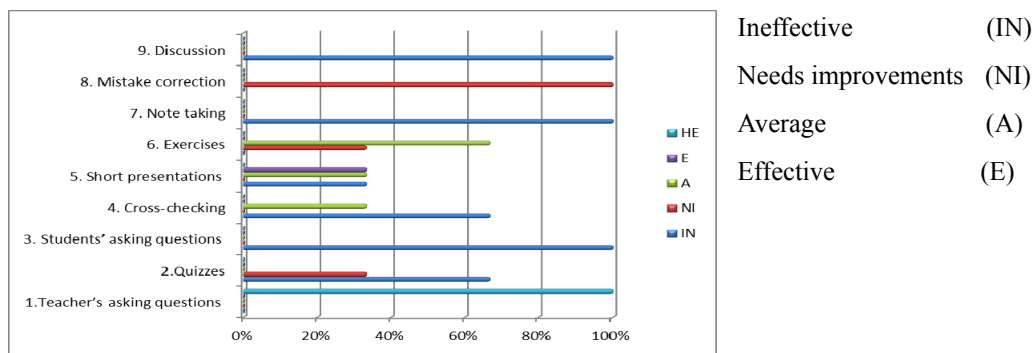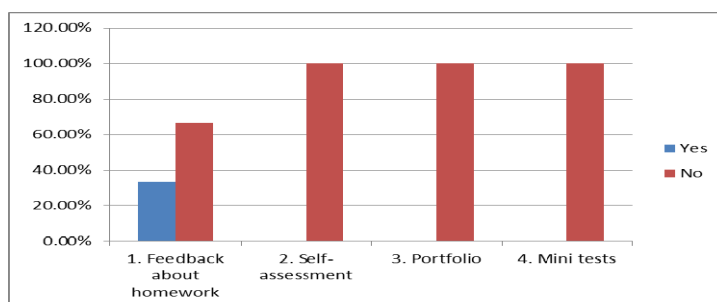Effective   (E)

Figure 1a. Teachers' performance of classroom assessment techniques

Table 2b. Teachers' Performance of Classroom Assessment Techniques

Statements (N= 6)	Yes	No
1. The teacher gave feedback about the students' assignments or homework.	33.3%	66.7%
2. The teacher asked the students to assess themselves by using "Can do" statements at the end of the class.	0%	100%
3. The teacher asked the students to reflect their class work in the portfolio.	0%	100%
4. The teacher gave the students a test to assess comprehension and mastery of information of the subject at the end of the class.	0%	100%

Figure 1b. Teachers' performance of classroom assessment techniques

8.2 Results of Question Two: Achievement Tests

Types of achievement tests

All the teachers said that at their university there were two types of test. They were mid-term tests which were designed by the teacher and the end-of-term tests which were designed by the dean of the English language department or the head of the language centre.

T1 & T2: Non-English major students at our university have to do one mid-term test and one end-of-term test after a course of 45 periods (a period = 45 minutes). The mid-term test is designed by the teacher. The teacher in charge of the programme or the head of the English language department designs the end-of-term test.

T3: At my university the end-of-term tests are retrieved from the test bank. The students do the test on computers.

T4, T5 & T6: At our university, teachers in charge of English classes design the mid-term test and the department or the authority in the English center designs the final test.

Test content and tasks

Regarding knowledge, skills, tasks and items in the test, the teachers revealed that the test mainly covered grammar, vocabulary two or three skills, i.e. reading, writing and/or listening ; all are in the

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form of multiple choice or true or false items.

T1: At my university, grammar, vocabulary, writing and reading skills are tested. The tasks and items designed in the test are multiple choice, true or false and questions and answers.

T2: At my university a multiple choice test is designed for testing grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading and writing skills. The mid-term tests are often based on the content they have learned so that students find it rather easy to do the test if they go to school regularly.

T3: At my university, integrative test items cover a wide range of activities and may be presented in a variety of formats such as multiple choice items, true/false items, questions and answers, gap filling items, and cloze exercises.

T4: The end-of-term tests at my university only include multiple choice items to test vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing skills.

T5: At my university the final paper consists of vocabulary, grammar, reading and listening tasks. They only include multiple choice items. What I am worried about is that the students are tested with written form whereas the textbook applied is for communication.

T6: Multiple choice items are designed for listening comprehension, reading comprehension and writing skills.

Feedback

Most of the teachers said that they could only give feedback about the mid-term tests to their students. However, one or two said that they did not have time for correcting the students' written mistakes in the test papers in class.

T1: I did give the test back to my students especially the mid-term test with feedback written on the test paper.

T2: My students get feedback about their mid-term tests. I often return the papers and give them some comments, and the whole class are often asked to correct some difficult errors by themselves under the teacher's guide.

T3: I can correct the students'mid-term tests. I try to balance the amount of class time to conduct peer-correction or self-correction.

T4: If I have enough time, I'll give the test paper back to the students and correct mistakes for the students by asking them to write the answers on the board and correct the mistakes and explain why their answer is wrong.

T5 & T6: We often explain why the students make mistakes and answer their questions related to the mid-term tests.

Effects of Achievement Tests

All teachers thought that their students were strongly affected by these tests. They made changes in their learning after they knew the results of the tests. Most of them changed their learning methods in accordance with the test format and content. Also, most of the teachers had to teach according the way the tests required. Generally speaking, they had to satisfy the students'desire, i.e. passing the tests with

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high scores.

T1: All of the students at my university are bored with learning English because it is not their major. Tests can act as learning motivation.

T2: Almost all non-English major students are not interested in the English subject, so tests work just as a tool to force them to study to get satisfactory scores. About 70% of them seem reluctant to change and cling to the way the test requires so that they can get better scores.

T3: Testing tells students how well they are progressing and what they need to do to improve learning. This may contribute to their growth as independent learners and stimulate them to take learning more seriously.

T4: It's a time for students to go over their lessons and they can know their ability or their understanding about the lessons so that students will try hard for the next course. Also, the way we design tests makes the students change their learning styles in order to meet the requirements of the test.

T5: In some ways, tests do have negative and positive effects on students' learning a foreign language. Passive learning is obviously seen in the way the students are tested.

T6: I think testing is a good way not only for the teacher to check if the purposes of the course are achieved but also for the students to make suitable adjustments in their learning.

Regarding the effects of achievement tests on teachers' instruction, all teachers thought that their instruction was strongly affected by these tests. Most of them taught their students according to the way the end-of-term test required.

T1: Frankly, I have to combine many ways in teaching . I have changed teaching style all the time and different tasks and games are often added. However, I follow the way the end-of test requires as well.

T2: I have to combine the teaching methods I like, i.e. communicative language teaching with the final test-oriented teaching method.

T3: It is obvious that I would like to teach my students according to the way I like provided that it meets the requirements of the end-of-term test.

T4: I have to teach as the end-of-term test requires because it is the goal of the course that teachers have to follow.

T5: Sometimes I teach the students according to the way I like, but most of the time of the course, I have to focus on what the students are going to be tested in the final paper.

T6. I usually teach my students according to the way the end-of-term test requires.

9. Discussion

The findings of the research revealed that there were gaps in the implementation of learner assessment at the investigated universities.

Regarding classroom assessment techniques, the findings of the questionnaire and classroom observations revealed that most of the assessment techniques were not employed at all during the class

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and only one or two techniques were used effectively.

First, the participants said that they had no guidelines on techniques of assessing the students during the class, except for the syllabus, so they had to decide on the assessment techniques by themselves. If the teachers were inexperienced, they might not know what methods or techniques of assessment could be useful for assessing learning. Consequently, the findings of the questionnaire and classroom observations (Table 2a and Figure 1a) revealed that "questions and answers" technique was used with the highest frequency during the class. That means only interaction between the teacher and the students took place. *Table 2a and Figure 1a* also show that four teachers (66.7%) asked the students to practise exercises individually; and two teachers (33.3%) asked several students to have presentations to the class, mostly relating to picture description at the pre-stage of an activity. However, almost no interaction between students and students took place during the class for cross-checking. In addition, several techniques were used, but with a low frequency. For example, sometimes one or two students were asked to write their answers on the board, read the answers to the class, or check whether the answers were correct or not. Especially, many useful assessment techniques were not used at all during the class. For example, six teachers (100%) did not ask the students to raise questions. Meanwhile, asking questions helps students engage in learning. Doing so proves that they try to discover the language and cannot avoid difficulties; six teachers (100%) did not organise discussions about the topics or subject for the students to work in groups or in pairs; six teachers (100%) did not ask the students to take notes of useful words or expressions. The main reason is that no teachers wrote any words on the board. During the observations, the researcher discovered that the teachers tried to teach, but paid little attention to what the students were doing; four teachers (66,7%) did not ask the students to have cross-check or quizzes. Meanwhile, cross-checking helps the students see each other as resources for understanding and checking work quality. One more issue is correcting mistakes for the students. The teachers only corrected spoken mistakes for one or two cases; especially no written correction took place because during the two-hour class, almost no writing activities were carried out.

Second, assignments and homework given at the end of the lesson or unit are considered as formative assessment after instruction. According to Greenstein (2010), student reflection can be part of the post-instruction formative assessment of writing, presentations, products, problem-solving techniques and portfolios. It leads to numerous positive outcomes, including increased engagement and the development of critical-thinking skills, such as analysis and evaluation (Greenstein, 2010). The findings of the study revealed that what the teachers asked their students to do at home was to focus on preparing a reading text for the next class or doing grammatical exercises. In addition, during the classroom observations, the findings displayed *in Table 2b and Figure 1b* show that four teachers (66,7%) did not give feedback about the students' homework. It may also be inferred that the teachers did not give homework to students. Especially, no teachers (100%) applied such techniques as "self-assessment" by using "Can do" statements, "reflecting work in the portfolio" or " using mini tests" to assess students' comprehension of the subject at the end of a lesson or a unit.

Regarding achievement tests, all the teachers said that at their university there were two types of test including mid-term tests which were designed by the teacher and the end-of-term tests which were designed by the dean of the English language department or the head of the language centre. The mid-term tests were designed by the teachers, but they had no guidelines from the department, so there is no evidence that the teachers designed authentic, reliable and valid tests.

In regard to the content, tasks and items of the achievement tests, according to all the teachers, achievement tests were designed in the form of multiple choice or true-false items to assess not only receptive skills but also productive skills, i.e. writing skill in the investigated cases. A multiple choice test is an indirect test; the test does not resemble outside-class performance (Nunan, 2004). Also, writing skill is a productive skill. Students of language should be tested by using the target language to produce a piece of writing such as a letter, memo, story or an essay. What is more, according to the teachers, no university had tests of speaking skill. That means the students' ability to speak English was not assessed. Meanwhile, learning a language is learning how to communicate by using the language. The objectives of learning a language are to obtain both language knowledge and language skills. Also, achievement tests aim to assess how well students have studied with the provided coursebooks and whether they have achieved the learning outcomes of the course or programme (Henning, 2001). Consequently, in this case, the achievement tests lacked authenticity and validity. The tests did not assess students' achievement or performance using test tasks that resemble real-life language use. The students were not required to be involved in performance of communicative tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of knowledge and skills. In addition, the tests did not sample the content of the current integrated skills. One more issue is that all the teachers said that the achievement tests at their university were designed by the dean of the English language department. The teachers did not involve in designing the tests. Meanwhile, they were the people who directly implemented the course. They knew clearly about their students' English proficiency level.

In regard to giving feedback to the students about the results of the tests, all the teachers indicated that they could only give feedback in case of the mid-term tests, not the end-of-term tests. Sometimes, they did not have time for mistake correction. Meanwhile, end-of-term tests can cover what students have learned during the course in terms of both skills and knowledge. Another issue is that according to some of the teachers, the end-of-term tests were done on computers, or taken from the bank of test items, so the teachers could not get the test papers. That is why they could not correct the papers for the students.

Regarding the effects of achievement tests on learning and teaching, all the teachers answered that their students were strongly affected by the achievement tests. They made changes in their learning methods after they knew the results of the tests. When they knew how they were tested, they seemed reluctant to change and cling to the way the test required so that they could get better scores. This is also the reason why the teachers had to teach their students according to the way the achievement tests required, not according to the way they liked or the course books required. They had to focus on what the students

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were going to be tested in the final paper. Doing so, obviously, the teachers "taught to the test" as scholars term it. "Teaching to the test" is not bad in case tests are designed for assessing of learning objectives and for improving learning (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; & Marshall, 2011), and tests can meet the requirements of the course and students' language needs relating to performance and proficiency.

10. Implications and Conclusion

The findings of the current study provides administrators and EFL teachers at the Vietnamese tertiary level with practical implications in language learning assessment in terms of both classroom assessments and achievement tests. The need for a change in assessing non-English major students at the tertiary level is inevitable.

First of all, the findings of the study suggest that institutions should have guidelines for teachers on how to carry our classroom assessments and what to assess in mid-term tests. Teachers should know that the results of classroom assessment can provide feedback to individual students to help them focus on their learning activities (Mislevey & Knowles, 2002, p. 37). In addition, through classroom assessments, teachers can get knowledge about what their students have learned, and what content should be retaught and covered next; and classroom assessment of learning should be treated as continuous assessment during a lesson, a unit or a course.

Second, assessments are used to monitor learning progress, detect misconceptions, encourage students to study, and provide feedback to students and teachers (Miller, Linn & Gronlund, 2009). Also, there are a variety of classroom assessment techniques, not just "questions and answers", and thus EFL teachers should apply different assessment techniques during the class, especially, self-assessment is really necessary. It helps students to assess their own work according to the established criteria given by the teacher. Doing so, teachers can make their lessons more interesting to students and help them create motivation and automomy in their learning.

Third, assignments for students at the end of a lesson or a unit play an important role in learning a foreign language. Teachers should not just ask their students to read texts or prepare some new vocabulary items as homework for the next lesson. Alternative assessments are now commonly-used in education such as "*Oral Performances*" including interviews, oral reports, role plays, describing, explaining, summarizing, retelling, paraphrasing stories and so on; "*Written Products*" including learning logs, reading response logs, writing assignments, and dialogue journals; and

"*Portfolio*" which requires students to collect samples of their work over time to track their progress (Johnson, Penny & Gordon, 2009). These methods also call for more student involvement in planning assessment, interpreting the results of assessment, and in self-assessment (Rhodes, Rosenbusch & Thompson, 1997). That is why the findings of the study suggest that teachers should use alternative assessments in their English classes.

Fourth, the findings suggest that a change in designing achievement tests is a must. It is easy to see that exams with multiple-choice items could assess language knowledge or understanding of conceptual

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knowledge. Also, according to Rhodes, Rosenbusch and Thompson (1997), most traditional assessments of language skills tend to be discrete-point tests, with emphasis on linguistic accuracy, such as grammatical structure and vocabulary. Performance requires students to demonstrate not just that they can remember or understand something, but that they can use it (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). If achievement tests only contain multiple choice or true-false items, they will not be authentic and valid. Deans of English departments should design test tasks that resemble real-life language use to assess students' achievement or performance so that students are required to be involved in performance of communicative tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of knowledge and skills.

Fifth, teachers should be involved in designing the end-of-term tests together with the dean of the English department or the people who are in charge of testing. Testing must match with instruction and learning objectives. Teachers are the implementers of an EFL curriculum, so they themselves, not others, know what their students need, what they have learned and what should be tested.

Sixth, according to researchers doing language multiple choice tests on computers is often applied for a large number of students and for proficiency language tests, but not for achievement tests, so the findings of the study suggest that the policy of testing should be changed. Doing so will bring several benefits to both teachers and students. "Teach to the test" will have positive backwash if testing students' performance by using the target language instead of only memorising language knowledge. At that time teachers also have to change their instruction to meet students' needs and learning objectives.

Finally, at the Vietnamese tertiary level, students are required to have ability to use English for successfully performing a job after graduation, so establishing standards and introducing a system of standards-based assessment can be exceptionally useful (Fulcher, 2010). It is necessary that individuals be tested to see if they have reached the required standards.

In conclusion, assessment is of vital importance in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. Although institutional administrators and teachers of English in the Vietnamese context have tried their best and partly succeeded in the implementation of assessment, they should know that gaps in both classroom assessments and achievement tests still exist. In order to improve the teaching and learning of English, a change in classroom assessments; language testing policy; and test design and implementation should be gradually carried out, especially for non-English major students.

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Appendixes

QUESTIONNAIRE ON ASSESSMENT

1. What classroom assessment techniques do you often apply during classes?

2. What do you often ask your students to do at home for their English subject?

3. Does your department provide you guidelines on how to assess your students during classes? Please clarify your answer.

4. What type of test do non-English major students at your university have to take: end-of-unit, mid-term, end-of-term, or others?

5. Who designs these tests for non-English major students at your university?

6. What types of tasks or items are designed in these tests? E.g. Multiple choice items,

7. What do you think about these tests regarding the content, tasks and items?

8. Do you give the test paper back to your students and have time to correct mistakes of these tests for your students? Please clarify your answer.

9. What effects do these tests have on your students' learning and your teaching?

10. Do you think your students make changes in their learning after doing these tests? Please clarify your answer.

11. Do you teach your students according to the way you like or the end-of-term test requires? Please clarify your answer.

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION CHECKLIST 1

Frequency of Using Assessment Techniques

Definitions of Criteria:

Not at all: not observed in any times   = Ineffective (IN)

Rarely: one to two times   = Needs improvement (NI)

Occasionally used: Observed three or four times   = Average (A)

Frequently: five to seven times   = Effective (E)

Extensively: more than seven times   = Highly effective (HE)

No	Items	Teacher	Counted times	Notes	IN	NI	A	E	HE
1	How often does the teacher ask the students questions to check comprehension?								
2	How often does the teacher give quizzes to the students?								
3	How often does the teacher encourage the students to ask questions during the lesson?								
4	How often does the teacher organise pair work or group work for the students to cross-check?								
5	How often does the teacher ask the students to give short presentations or talks about the topics?								
6	How often does the teacher ask the students to practise exercises during the class?								
7	How often does the teacher ask the students to record what they are learning?								
8	How often does the teacher correct the students' spoken and written mistakes?								
9	How often does the teacher organise discussions about the topics or subject during the class?								

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION CHECKLIST 2

Assessment Techniques

No	Items	Teacher	Notes	Yes	No
1	The teacher gives feedback about the students' assigments or homework.				
2	The teacher asks the students to assess themselves by using "Can do" statements at the end of the class.				
3	The teacher asks the students to reflect their class work in the portfolio.				
4	The teacher gives the students a test to assess comprehension and mastery of information of the subject at the end of the class.				