

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASSESSMENT AND STUDENTS' LEARNING

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Abstract

Assessment is a critical aspect of teaching and learning process which aim at collecting, interpreting and analyzing the regarding students' performance. The quality of learning is determined by the quality of assessment practices in the classroom. There are many purposes of assessment that focus on the different dimensions of educational development, however, the most dominant purposes of assessment are improving students' learning and develop accountability measures for learning at classroom and school levels. For effective assessment, using appropriate assessment strategies is significant. There are number of that can be employed to enhance students' learning outcome but teacher rely on only a few strategies which alone cannot promote meaningful learning. Therefore, a clear understanding and skills of using a variety of assessment strategies for learning is pivotal in classroom. It is fundamental teachers to understand the relationship between assessment and learning. Moreover, students need be engaged in their own learning in a challenging but enabling environment. The assessment practices and strategies must encourage developing linkage of theory and real life. Assessment is meant to contribute in students learning and thus need to be integrated in daily teaching and learning process in the classroom.

Keywords: *Assessment, Learning, Students*

Introduction

Education is a process of exploring learners' potential to grow, conceptual learning effectively and make a positive difference at individual and societal level by virtue of their learning. The main purpose of educational institutions, particularly schools is to create and provide an environment conducive for students' learning. For creating such a stimulating learning environment students need to be involved actively in the learning process to exhibit their maximum potential. For this purpose, teachers are responsible for highlighting students' strengths and need improvement areas, as these supports or hinder students' learning. Thus, assessment has a central and paramount role in extending support to students' learning outcomes. Teachers' relevant assistance and guidance based the assessment data become very significance in enhancing students' learning. So teachers must have a clear understanding of relevant and effective assessment strategies and have a grasp to implement these strategies in classroom.

The concept of teachers training has a long history in Pakistan in the form of pre and in- service teacher development course being offered to teachers. These courses are offered to teachers mainly in the public sector through government teacher education colleges. These courses cover different themes regarding teaching and learning processes

but have little emphasis on the practical aspect of assessment and the session are limited to what and why aspects of assessment rather 'how' dimensions.

The aim the study was to explore assessment practices and its relationship with students learning in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. The main research question was, how and to what extend assessment is used to enhance students' learning in English and Social Studies in Gilgit, Pakistan, there were subsidiary questions emerged from the main question which are;

- What is the purpose of assessment?
- What are the current practices of assessment in the schools in Gilgit?
- How do teachers understanding the relationship between assessment and students; learning in schools in Gilgit?
- What are the challenges for teachers in using assessment as learning enhancement tool in classroom in Gilgit?

Background of Gilgit-Baltistan

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) is a region spreading on approximately 72, 496 square kilometers, bordering China, Central Asia, Afghanistan and India. As a result of its politically sensitive location, Gilgit-Baltistan has recently accorded special territorial status.

GB is dominated by most mountainous landscapes on the earth, with an arm of Hindukush, to the West, Himalaya to the South, the Karakoram to the East and Pamir to the North. More than half of GB is located above 4,500 meter. The collision of Karakoram, Kimalaya and Kindukush range gave birth to these most congested mountainous regions in the world. The villages are located in narrow mountain ridges and separated by difficult mountainous terrain, therefore, to access different village is hard which lead to poor communication within and across the region but the mobile technology facilitated the communication issues.

Climatic conditions vary widely in GB, ranging from monsoon-influenced moist temperature zone, the western Himalaya, to the arid and semi-arid cold desserts in the Northern Karakoram and Hindukush.

In term of population, the total number of population is 870, 347, including 453, 221 males and 417,126 female according to 1998 census. The overall population density is low and intra-regional densities vary considerably. Despite the growth of urban areas in GB, the population remains overwhelmingly rural.

In term of education, there are 1, 764 primary and secondary school in GB. In addition to these schools there are numerous religious schools which operate in even the remotest communities. There are 18 government, community and private colleges in GB and ten of these are located in Gilgit district. The regions first university, Karakoram International University is established in 2003 at Gilgit (IUCN).

The National Assessment Policy and the National Curriculum of Pakistan

The National Education Policy of Pakistan developed in 2009 is committed towards improving the quality of education in the country, which mentions, “improving quality requires action in the areas of teacher quality, curriculum and pedagogy, textbooks, assessment approaches, and in learning environment and facilities” (p.33). National curriculum (2006) for English class I-XII mentioned the purpose of assessment, which says, “the focus of the curriculum is to prepare students for an assessment of their acquisition and the use of language skills rather than memorization of the text book contents” (p.153). To achieve the purpose of assessment, curriculum recommends two forms of assessment; formative and summative (National Curriculum 2006, p.153). Formative assessment will be conducted on periodic basis and it will be an ongoing process throughout the academic session. Teachers can assess students’ performance “through homework, quizzes, class tests, and group discussion” (National curriculum 2006, p.153). The summative assessment will be conducted at the end of academic year. The national curriculum (2006) suggests three important things to consider in designing assessment items, which are: 1) Validity that test item must be relevant to curriculum objectives; 2) Reliability that a student get a similar grade if given in different occasion; and 3) Practicality that testing conditions are the same across the context.

There is a strong need of fine-tuning the different aspects of quality education in Pakistan, and one of them is improving quality practices of students’ assessment. Assessment needs to be directly linked with students’ learning at the classroom level. The importance of assessment is highlighted in the policy in the following words, “assessment systems are quality measures that cater to a number of requirements of the education system. These can be used to measure overall system efficiency as well as individual student performance for movement in the education system” (National Education Policy 2009, p. 47). It is realized and mentioned that assessment is a fundamental instrument to gauge the quality of system and individual which needs to be improved. It is because there are issues of assessment in the educational institutions of Pakistan, which is mentioned in the policy, “Assessment system currently suffers from several deficiencies in promoting quality education” (The National Education Policy, 2009, p.47).

Methodology

The study was conducted in the qualitative paradigm through using a case study approach. The reason for using the qualitative paradigm was that it enabled me to investigate participants’ experience and practices of assessment and its relationship with students’ learning in a natural setting, where the data collection process was carried out in an uncontrolled environment. (Marshall and Rossman 1995; Gall, Borg and Gall 1996). The multiple dimensions of data enable a researcher to interpret the experience of the participant and make meaning of the data, which he/she has collected, and on the basis of their meaning, recommendations can be made. (Allan, 1991; Krathwohl 1991).

The research question demanded discovering new ways and strategies in order to link assessment practices with students' learning. The qualitative method enables the researcher to explore the complexities that are beyond the scope of the more 'controlled' approaches and also provide a chance to look at the case from the inside and study the research as a process rather than as a significance of the result (Gillham, 2000). The reason for selecting the case study method was that it provided researcher an opportunity to explore the real situation in classroom regarding assessment practices (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000). According to Bell (1999), "case study approach is particularly appropriate for individual researcher because it gives an opportunity for one aspect of phenomena to be studied in some depth within a limited time scale" (p.10). Moreover, Yin (1994) has said, "case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena.... the case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (p. 3). The study was conducted in in secondary schools focusing two subject English and Social Studies till elementary level. In the process of data collection, ten teachers, two head teacher, two teacher educators and two assessment professionals, were interviewed, two focused group discussions were conducted and twentyclassroom observations were carried out through running notes.

Literature Review

Students come to school for learning and developing an understanding of new concepts; therefore, it is the responsibility of schools and teachers to develop such a system which identify students' learning needs and facilitate their learning, "In order to learn, children must first become engaged with situations or tasks that are sufficiently challenging to demand the construction of new knowledge or new ways of looking at the world" (Jonse& Tanner. 2006, p.6). This kind of engagement can take place in the school or classroom when assessment is linked with students' learning. Assessment should be integral part of teachers' daily teaching and they must be able to explore and identify whether students are learning from their teaching or not, as it is mentioned in relevant literature that "the identification of each pupil's curriculum needs can only be made by relating an individual's achievement to what is generally accepted as a purpose of education" (Roby, 1990, p.137). If there is some gaps, teachers should work on new strategies and ways of making their teaching effective and according students' level, which is endorsed by Packard, Packard and Brown (1997),

The ideal situation in the organization of your teaching is that you should teach what the children need to know, find out if they have understood if or not and then continue to the next area. This link between planning and assessment can be tricky to establish, so you need to adopt systematic and structure to ensure that such connection are established. (p. 84)

Establishing this connection is very important in the classroom and school by teachers because "learning and academic performance depends on social and emotional factors as well as purely cognitive" (Jones & Tanner, 2006, p. 6). Without understanding the scope and importance of assessment and its relationship with learning, it becomes very difficult to expect students to perform well and meet the expectations of school and society. Teachers have to conceptualise their teaching and learning activities and how they are assessing their own teaching and students' learning as a result of the interaction that is

taking place in the classroom. It is mentioned that “effective teachers make continual approximate assessment as teaching proceeds to keep the class in the learning zone” (Jones & Tanner 2006, p.7). In the context of Pakistan in general and Gilgit in particular, teachers consider teaching/learning and assessment two isolated things. They never try to develop the relationship of teaching/learning and assessment within the class and school. For example, the teaching and learning process is going on throughout the years and teachers conduct different tests in the classroom after certain intervals. They never analyze the data collected from these different tests in order to track students’ learning. Teachers think that it is the duty of schooling and a formality that they have to conduct tests for administrative purposes, but in the true sense, “the processes involved in the construction of knowledge suggest that student should have opportunities to articulate their tentative ideas” (Jones & Tanner, 2006, p.11) and teachers analyze these ideas and draw conclusion for future teaching and make changes in teaching strategies after each assessment because;

The process of knowledge construction is necessarily tentative. Learners are not sure at first, to what extent their version of the concept or ideas being taught is valid. They need feedback. They need to find ways to test their tentative constructions against knowledge that has been officially approved” (Jones & Tanner, 2006,p.10).

Thus, developing a strong relationship between assessment and learning is very critical. Through assessment, teachers can collect strong evidences of students’ performance and progress. Teachers can provide qualitative and quantitative feedback to students on areas needing improvement, “children require regular, immediate feedback while they are striving to understand new ideas and construct new knowledge system” (Jones & Tanner, 2006).

Providing continuous support and facilitation by the teachers based on the assessment data is very important for students, education system, and society on the whole. Through this process, teachers can rectify the minor mistakes of students at an early stage and enable them to prove to themselves and others that they are capable of what they have scored in the test. McKenna and Stahl (2003) said, “how much confidence can we have that a student’s score accurately reflects what the student knows or can do? In the best of worlds, test scores would provide perfect indicators of student learning” (p.27). Roby (1990) further said, "Education may be described as a dynamic process of changing pupils’ behaviour by developing within them increased knowledge, understanding and skills. In more specific term, the aims expressed in better schools are generally regarded as worthwhile"(p.137).

Any assessment system should focus upon the following particular key questions: Will the assessment benefit the pupils? Will the information on attainment be useful? Do the performance criteria identify positive achievement? Are there important aspects of the course not covered by the assessment? Are the assessment techniques appropriate or valid for the learning experience? (Roby 1990, p.50).

Whenever there is a strong assessment system integrated with teaching and learning, and best use of evaluation system on continuous basis, the effectiveness of classroom is visible and there are substantial learning gains (Black & William 1998;

Songster & Overall, 2003; Spandel, 2001). Leicestershire Education Authority (as cited in Roby, 1997, p.151) identifies five assessment objectives which are: recognition of problems, location of information, application, communication and evaluation.

In the school context, it is decisive for teachers to understand these five dimensions of assessment. However, these aspects of assessment are not really understood by teachers in the Gilgit, Pakistan. The teachers are using assessment as a mechanical process that it has been in practice and they have to continue it without contemplating on what it actually means. Developing relationship of assessment and learning is unavoidable in school because without a clear relationship of assessment and learning, education becomes meaningless. I consider education as a process of exploring and identifying students' potential of learning and growth. This potential can be explored through effective assessment by taking into account the above mentioned five dimensions.

Discussion on Findings

The study has focused on the relationship of assessment with students learning and the finding reveal that there are different dimensions of the relationship of assessment with students' learning such as identifying learning needs, providing feedback on need improvement areas, it is also important for teachers to understanding the focus of assessment and marking process of students responses. The ultimate objective of assessment isto improve learning.

Identification of Learning Needs

The study recognises that identification of learning needs is critical in linking assessment with students learning. Once the teacher knows gaps in students' learning, then she/he can plan teaching and learning activities to address identified needs. Therefore, it is pivotal for teachers to links learning needs with assessment practices in the classroom and schools. Most of the participants have the opinion that assessment is significant for identifying students' learning needs but in practice it is not linked with each other. Assessment practices can help the teachers to identify fast, sharp or genius and weak or slow learners in the classroom(Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, and Cornu, 1998). A research participant mentioned;

Some of the students are sharp at speaking but not good at writing and some students are good at writing but they have weakness in speaking, therefore, sometimes I asked them orally, and sometimes, I assess them through written tasks. In this way, I can identity which students are good at speaking and which students are good at writing, and I pay attention according to their needs and dictate some words or sentences to help them improve their writing. (Interview on May 03, 2010)

Other participants also supported the above idea there are students having different learning abilities and assessment can help the teachers in know that to what extent students have learnt the concept and what the teachers need to do more in the next lesson to

broaden students understanding. Reinforcing the above mentioned idea the a research participant said,

For example, there are students who are very fast, some are weak. We give them turn as per their ability. For example, there are weak student, with them we use such methods, we encourage them, there are students with hearing problem, we place them in front rows. (Interview on May 04, 2010).

It reveals from the data that conducting assessment is not important but it very important to analyse the assessment data. The assessment gives the teachers a clear picture of students' learning over a period of time and enables them to track students' progress. To identify students' learning there are variety of tools that teacher apply as mentioned by a research participant;

When conduct test, we get to know that where a student is weak, what have students not understood, when we ask questions if the students do not answer, then we know that this is the areas where the students are weak. We discuss with them. I meet frequently with parent even when I meet parents in the street, I discuss with them their children's problems. When I meet with parent, i ask them to look at their children's notebooks and the test I have given them. (interviewed on May 05, 2010)

Once the assessment data were analysed, then it must be shared with students and their parents so they could see where they lack. Parents and teachers need to focus those areas which were identified weak area in assessment. Hence assessment has a strong links in the identification of learning needs.

Providing Feedback

The study found another significant dimension of assessment for learning that is providing feedback on students' performance and learning(Wragg, 1997).Assessment data provide the strengths and weakness of students which can be rectified in future times. It is paramount element of assessment that teachers share the stronger and weaken areas of students and guide them to continue with strong aspect and remove the weaken areas to perform higher in the next examination or test. (Harlen, 2006). It is evident that the participants consider feedback as a process of identifying students' spelling or grammatical mistakes, and then they correct these mistakes on students' notebooks collectively or on the blackboard. But the conceptual areas are ignored in providing feedback as mentioned by a research participant;

We I conduct assessment in my classroom, we have overcrowded classes and it becomes very difficult for me to check their tests. I take one or two days and check the papers and identify the mistakes done by students and sometimes we sit with students individually and sometimes I write the correct responses on the black and address the overall mistakes of students (Interview May 03, 2010).

it reveals from the data that teachers just identify students mistakes but they do not help students how to avoid these mistakes in future and what steps are required to reduce weakness. It is very important for teachers to suggest alternative in feedback and make students understand the process of doing thing correctly, as one of the participants maintained;

Yes we provide feedback, when they perform well, we say well done, we use such words to appreciate them. We also tell in the class that this student has performed well in the test, we encourage them. For those who do not perform well, we write on their papers or notebooks words like need improvement, or similar things. We meet with parents, we try to explain the concept or problem their children face again to them. (Interviewed on May 05, 2010).

The study shows that participants acknowledge the importance of feedback for students learning but they use it only in classroom teaching and home assignments. They do not provide feedback on the semester and annual assessment. In the annual assessment practices they only promote or retain students. It is significant to link assessment data and feedback to improve students' learning. There is a need to develop a mechanism in schools to share students previous semester or year performance before teaching new concepts. They must know about their overall performance and teachers must guide them through constructive feedback.

The data collected from research participants shows that feedback is a very important component of assessment. But the response of participants illustrates that their understanding of feedback is very superficial. Participants consider feedback as a way of commenting on students' participation in classroom activities, encouraging them for higher participation and appreciating their responses when they perform well. Some of the participants are of the view that feedback is correcting students' mistakes in written or oral tests. Feedback is a process of going beyond correction and encouraging students but is it identifying the gaps between the desired learning and the actual learning. Feedback enables students to understand this gap and suggest alternatives to acquire the desired learning outcomes.

Focus of Assessment

Another dimension found through this study was the focus of assessment. The focus of assessment must be improving students' learning rather just collecting the information; hence it must be part of teaching and learning process (Cotton, 2004). This sub theme came up from the data collected from participants where they mentioned two focuses of assess: Firstly, what is taught by the teachers in the classroom, and secondly, teachers are trying to find out how well students have memorised what they have taught. The research participants mentioned,

I try to assess both. I try to pay attention on what students learnt and also pay attention to what I have taught. I look at that whether students learn what I taught in the classroom or they try on their own by reading/studying additional material. Sometimes, the student take interest and make charts, and other material from

home, or bring additional information, if there is a topic of history, so. (interview on May 03, 2010)

Supporting the same idea, another participant said;

We assess students and ourselves, we assess ourselves by looking at what I taught; we evaluate that. How much my teaching was effective? Did my teaching benefits students? What was the impact on them, what they were expecting to learn? Did they learn that to some extent or not? We also assess student. There are some weak students, there are also genius students. We assess them to identify whether they have learned effectively or not. (Interviewed on May 04, 2010)

The study illustrates that the focus of assessment is more dominantly what is taught rather what is learned. There are few cases where participants mentioned that their focus of assessment is exploring the extent the students have learned the concept presented in the classroom. The dominance of focus on what is taught was confirmed in the classroom observation conducted by the researcher. The teachers asked questions related to the content they have presented rather than asking question regarding what students have understood about the concept and linking it to their real life situation. The questions asked by the teachers were more factual, rather providing an opportunity to students to reflect on the content and generation of their own ideas.

Marking Students' Work

Assessment provides valuable information about students' performance and learning. This information is raw until it is thoroughly analysed. In order to draw conclusion from the assessment data, developing clear criteria is obligatory. The data highlighted that there are no criteria for marking students' responses in classroom, term or annual tests in both schools. Teachers look at the nature of the question and the students answers them likewise. They allocate marks based on how long or short the answer is. It is teachers' discretion to allocate marks according to their own perception for each answer given by the students. I found different responses from research participants regarding this. The research participant said:

I marked the paper or response keeping the nature of question in mind. I allocate five or ten marks for each question. We give two types of question: one low order questions and other higher order questions, for those questions which have short answer, I just allocate one mark, If there are five question and they have responded to all five, I give them five marks. And for those questions which have longer answer. (Interviewed on May 03, 2010)

Validating the idea, other participants explained:

While marking, first of all, we look at the question that whether we have given question relevant to the topic or not. Then we look at how well we have taught them in the classroom. Considering all these, we mark the paper and display their work in the classroom. (interviewed on May 03, 2010)

Other participants also support the above ideas there is not certain criterion for marking students response and they mark as per their own understanding and experiences. Thus, as evident from the data, the variance in the assessment practice raises question about the reliability of the marking process. Marking the students' responses in test or examination is very critical for identifying the areas of improvement in the next session, semester or level. Therefore, the process of marking students' work needs to be taken very seriously, which determines the kind of support, students should be given to overcome the problematic areas. From the data collected for this study explain that teachers' marking scheme is not clear in both the schools. Most of the research participants focus on their marking looking at the nature of question and not the nature of the responses the students have presented. Furthermore, the teachers do not have criteria for assessing students' work; they mark students' work as per their own understanding, which creates problem in identifying issues of learning.

Improvement in Learning

The ultimate target of assessment is improving students' learning. Assessment provides information about students' learning that to what extent students have learned the concept and where they need more support (Alkharusi 2008; Townsend, 1998). Therefore, it is imperative to link assessment with learning; thus, the data draw attention to the important aspects which contribute in improving students' learning. Assessment gears up students' zeal and motivates them to perform at optimum when they are able to see their better performance in different tests. The RP, Shams, pointed out during the interview:

If we pay more attention through assessment, then they become motivated towards learning, because we keep assessment record with us, and sometimes, we share it with parent, so in this way, it becomes a compulsion for students to work hard; therefore, I pay more attention to assessment. (interviewed on May 03, 2010)

Furthermore, sharing assessment results with parents has also an impact on learning, because the process creates awareness amongst parents to know about their children's progress in school. It also makes the students accountable and responsible for their own learning.

Using continuous assessment approach in the classroom enables students to raise questions in the classroom and respond to teachers' questions. Questioning has a greater role in stimulating students to think harder, because quality question generate quality answers. Thus, quality questions in the assessment boost learning through serious thinking. The RP, Gul, said:

Yes there is an impact on student. Student learned. Students are learning now. Now when PDCN programme started, before that we were not using real objects, now when we are taking all these things to classroom to help students learn better. Before this programme, the students were not asking questions but now they are asking questions in the classroom. Students are becoming better prepared for annual examination. (interviewed on May 03, 2010)

A critical aspect of assessment which has the greatest role in improving learning is knowing about students' level that is where are they at the moment and where they should be. This determines the quality of input teachers should extend to students. Another RP, Rud, said, "Yes, for example, if we teach or ask the student to read or we read by ourselves, and during teaching they make mistakes, then for their correction, we read it again. In this way, they improve their learning" (interviewed on May 04, 2010). The RP, Gul, further mentioned:

Obviously, there is an impact on learning, one after-test, I know where students are very weak. Most of the times, the students are weak in spelling, so I emphasise on spelling. After doing that I move to another area. When I conduct the second test, I see improvement. I compare both the tests, and I see greater improvement. Therefore, the test is very important, without test, student don't learn. (interviewed on May 04, 2010)

The ultimate purpose of assessment is improvement in students' learning therefore, assessment must be linked with learning and find out the need improvement areas. Teachers need to use variety of assessment and teaching strategies that enable students to learning from their experiences within class and outside class.

Conclusion

Effective and well-planned assessment strategies have a great impact on students' learning because assessment provides opportunity for teachers to place students in a situation where they exhibit their true potential. This way students and teachers can know about their performance and progress and they can be in a better position to decide where they are and where need to go.

Analysis of the data gives a clear picture of the impact of assessment on learning, that the practice of recording students' performance and sharing it with their parents can raise the motivation level of students. Students feel the compulsion that their performance will be shared with parents; therefore, they feel that they have to perform better. It was also mentioned that when teachers link assessment with real life situation by putting some question from practical life, then these questions prompt students' thinking and reflective abilities and enable them to provide their personal views and experiences. Based on the theoretical and practical aspects of learning, teachers and students can identify their needing improvement areas for future reference.

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