

Effective Use of Performance-based Assessments to Identify English Knowledge and Skills of EFL Students in Ecuador

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Abstract—This paper seeks to understand how EFL teachers can effectively use performance-based assessments to determine the English knowledge and skills that EFL students have developed during the teaching-learning process. It also presents the advantages of this type of assessment as well as its challenges and the way these challenges can be overcome. Through this investigation, EFL teachers in Ecuador and around the world will be able to get valuable information that will guide their assessment practices in EFL classrooms.

Index Terms—performance-based assessments, authentic assessments, evaluation strategies, EFL education, education in Ecuador

I. INTRODUCTION

English is considered the predominant language of international commerce today. That is why Education Departments all around the world are working hard to improve English language learning in their schools (Glisan, Uribe & Adair-Hauck, 2007). However, since teaching and assessment go hand in hand, teaching cannot be truly effective if it is not directly connected to effective assessment as well. Actually, wrongly selected assessment tasks can severely damage teachers' hard work in creating efficient and supportive classrooms (Colley, 2008; Pinter, 2009; Rixon, 2000). Therefore, schools are looking for innovative assessment tools that connect assessment with teaching, strengthen instruction, provide feedback to learners, and improve students' knowledge and skills.

For many years, teachers have relied on standardized tests to evaluate students. However, research shows that these types of assessments do not always demonstrate what students really know (Colley, 2008; Speers, 2008). As several authors explain, traditional assessments like pencil-and-paper tests are usually reductionist and do not measure the extent to which students have acquired deeper understanding of a topic or if they have mastered complex skills like critical thinking or problem solving (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Herrera, Morales & Murry, 2013; Volante, 2004). These kinds of evaluations do not always reveal what the students really know. Besides, they do not provide any information about the changes that teachers have to make in their classes in order to improve instruction or help unsuccessful students. In fact, several studies reveal that these tests cause high levels of anxiety and lead to losing interest in language learning (Bejarano & Gordon, 2009; Hasselgreen, 2005; Taylor, 2006). That is why it is necessary to implement a new assessment strategy that takes into consideration students' cognitive development, emphasizes what learners can do instead of what they cannot do, serves as a tool to diagnose learning and teaching problems, and has as its primary focus the continuous improvement of learning for all students (Bejarano & Gordon, 2009). Thus, advanced educators are trying to find effective assessment tools that go beyond paper-and-pencil formats to evaluate students appropriately.

Based on the requirements mentioned above, it is possible to conclude that performance-based assessments (PBA) are one of the most appropriate and effective evaluation strategies that can be used with EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. According to Stiggins (2001), performance-based assessments represent a set of strategies that asks students to use their knowledge and skills to create a product or perform a task that is authentic and meaningful to them based on certain predetermined criteria. For instance, the tasks may include giving oral reports, writing essays, participating in interviews, among others. That is why government policies all around the world are increasingly requiring performance-based assessment in all areas of education, including language education (Glisan et al., 2007) since they are practical tools that can be used to improve education and positively impact learners and instructors.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The world has become a large global society. Thus, people live now in an interconnected civilization where communication between individuals from different countries is a constant need. Accordingly, English has become the predominant language of international communication and commerce. That is why many schools around the world have been trying to implement effective teaching and assessment practices to build upon students' abilities to use English in the fullest meaning of the term and in real contexts (McKay, 2006). Advanced educators recognize that it is necessary to

integrate assessment with curriculum and instruction. Also, they realize that effective assessment practices must promote “a practical rather than a theoretical command of the language” (McNamara, 2001, p. 334). That is why many of them have decided to start using authentic assessments.

A. *Authentic Assessments*

Evaluating students’ language products and processes without the use of tests has come to be known as alternative assessment (Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2013). According to Wiggins (1998), assessments are authentic if they test the learner’s knowledge and skills in real-world situations, promote doing a task rather than reciting memorized content, and give students the opportunity to rehearse, obtain feedback on, and strengthen performances and products. Therefore, authentic assessments provide an alternative for traditional evaluations, and include tasks that are relevant for both the teacher and the student. Actually, the students are actively involved in the evaluation process and may even contribute to the creation of the criteria used to assess their tasks.

When instructors implement authentic assessment in classrooms where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), they give students the opportunity to demonstrate their active use of English to complete tasks or solve problems (Glisan et al., 2007; McKay, 2006). Therefore, they can motivate students to see English as a real means of communication. Besides, authentic assessments help teachers to monitor student learning and progress, identify learners’ strengths and weaknesses, collect evidence about what students really know and can do, monitor teaching effectiveness, and plan and modify instruction according to the students’ needs (Herrera et al., 2013; Stiggings, Arter, Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007). Evidently, instructors will choose an appropriate evaluation tool according to what they want to learn from the assessment. Thus, teachers can use different types of authentic assessments like portfolios, interview-based assessments, play-based assessments, cooperative group assessments, experiments, projects, student narratives, among others. However, this project is based on a specific type of authentic assessment, which is performance-based assessment.

B. *Performance-based Assessments*

Assessment based on performance is not a new concept in education. In fact, it is one of the oldest methods used to evaluate how well a student has mastered the material that has been presented in class (Colley, 2008; Speers, 2008). Nowadays, teachers who use this kind of assessment believe that students demonstrate their real learning and understanding by performing tasks or creating products. This is because performance-based assessments 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 (Tzagari, 2004; VanTassel-Baska, 2013). Many educators also prefer to use performance-based assessments (PBAs) since they include meaningful, challenging, and engaging tasks that simulate real-world contexts, and combine language abilities with knowledge and skills of different content-areas. Besides, PBAs 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 to determine how well they can apply what they know (Glisan et al., 2007; Herrera et al., 2013). Therefore, these evaluation instruments provide information in depth about students’ knowledge and skills.

The philosophy behind performance-based assessment is that knowledge is constructed during learning, and that students discover knowledge for themselves rather than receive knowledge from the teacher (Glisan et al., 2007; Herrera et al., 2013). Also, unlike old traditional assessment practices, in which feedback meant returning test scores to students, in performance-based assessment practices, feedback is considered an important tool to improve student learning and teacher instruction. Actually, as William and Thompson (2007) mention, “performance-based assessments give teachers and students an implicit and explicit recipe to improve future action” (p. 12). Therefore, effective teachers commonly use PBA as a formative assessment tool to monitor and examine student progress from various perspectives and under different conditions during instruction.

There are several linguistic and cognitive theories that offer foundation for performance-based assessment. All of them emphasize the importance of evaluating EFL learners in communicative contexts, through authentic, contextualized, and challenging materials (Kasper et al., 2000). It is impossible to mention all the theories behind performance-based assessment. That is why I will only mention the most relevant philosophies related to this evaluation methodology.

C. *Foundation for Performance-based Assessment*

The literature related to performance-based assessment mentions several authors that support this evaluation strategy. According to all these scholars, effective assessment practices result on student motivation and enhanced learning. One of the most important intellectuals in this area is Stephen Krashen. Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis explains that language can be easily acquired if it is taught through comprehensible input that is just beyond the learner’s current proficiency level (Krashen, 1981). That is exactly what PBA promotes. Teachers who evaluate students using performance-based assessments offer learners contextualized and meaningful contexts where students can demonstrate their authentic communicative skills.

Another relevant author is Vygotsky. According to Vygotsky, social interaction plays an important role in the learning process because learners construct the new language through socially mediated communication (as cited in

Wang, 2009). This idea is supported by Lightbrown & Spada (2006) who suggest that it is important to engage students in socially interactive activities that encourage them to communicate and express their intentions, thoughts, and opinions actively. Hence, this is another theoretical foundation for PBA since it evaluates students' communicative skills in real-world socially interactive contexts.

Finally, according to the environmentalist approach of second language acquisition defended by McLaughlin (1987) and Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991), learner's external environment serves as a stimulus for the process of learning. Thus, they suggest that the amount of contact that learners have with the target language and the degree to which they are exposed to it, influence their level of language development. Therefore, the closer a person is to the target language group, the more he will learn the language. This approach also supports the idea of using performance-based assessments in the classroom. When teachers use PBA, students are exposed as long as possible to the target language inside and outside the classroom because learners have to demonstrate the extent to which they can actually use the language in real contexts.

Based on the theories mentioned before, it is possible to conclude that performance-based assessments offer many benefits for teachers and students. Actually, several studies report the benefits obtained by implementing Performance-Based Assessments in EFL classrooms. In the following section, I will explain those benefits.

III. ADVANTAGES OF PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENTS

In recent years, there are abundant researches and articles that explore the benefits of performance-based assessments (Adair-Hauck, et al., 2006; Bekiroglu, 2008; Chan, 2008; Henning and Robinson, 2004; Liao, 2007; Miller & Linn, 2012; Pccheone et al., 2005). All those investigations conclude that PBAs help to measure complex learning outcomes that cannot be measured by other means, and provide tools for assessing the process or procedure as well as the product or result of the performing task.

According to Stiggins (2001), PBA involves students directly and deeply in their own learning process, and increases their confidence and motivation to learn since it emphasizes progress and achievement rather than failure and defeat. Furthermore, in performance-based assessments, students' work is compared to a set of criteria, not to other students' performance (Davies, 2000; William & Thompson, 2007). As a result, this kind of assessment promotes learning rather than assigning grades; that is why PBAs look more like teaching and less like testing. Therefore, performance-based assessments can be a learning experience in themselves; in fact, they can motivate EFL students to learn more about the target language.

Performance-based assessment also allows students to construct their own responses instead of choosing them from a list of options as it usually happens in multiple-choice and standardized tests. According to Gardner (2006), cognitive research indicates that most learning occurs in active rather than passive contexts, and that children construct knowledge from their interactions in the classroom. Consequently, this is a suitable and useful assessment tool to evaluate learners effectively.

Moreover, performance assessments offer teachers the opportunity to discover their own strengths and weaknesses. By using PBAs, teachers can reflect on their own teaching practices in order to identify their own deficiencies or determine if further emphasis is needed in certain areas of instruction (Speers, 2008; Stiggins, 2001). Actually, educators are better able to see all their deficiencies at the time they are assessing their students' performances.

Finally, performance-based assessments can be used to enhance instruction, determine what curriculum needs to be taught and at what level, identify appropriate strategies for grouping students, and recognize which core concepts should be emphasized or even retaught (VanTassel-Baska, 2013). Therefore, this kind of evaluation brings many benefits for EFL learners, especially those who are *culturally and linguistically diverse* (CLD).

A. Performance-based Assessment and Student Biography

Performance-based assessments are useful to evaluate culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners whose prior experience, language, and knowledge differ from those students from the dominant culture (Herrera et al., 2013). When dealing with CLD learners, teachers need to consider the unique characteristics of these students and try to understand how their language, culture, and background affect their learning processes. That is why, before assessing, educators should take into account several characteristics of these students like exposure to the language outside the school, previous educational experiences, and proficiency in the second language and in the native language (Gottlieb, 2006).

It is important to incorporate multicultural perspectives and culturally diverse resources in the assessment tasks used to evaluate CLD learners (Herrera et al., 2013; Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou, 2003; Stiggings et al., 2007). That is why, in these cases, performance-based assessments can be extremely useful since they scaffold student learning naturally and sequentially, allow learners to demonstrate their competency in different ways according to their own needs and preferences, make instructions comprehensible for students by using visuals, pictures, and diagrams, give learners the needed time to complete their tasks, and engage students in their own learning process. Consequently, as Colley (2008) says, "all those elements can motivate students to perform well and may account for cultural differences in a more equitable manner than it occurs in standard testing settings" (p. 69).

B. Benefits Reported in Several Studies

Several studies have reported the benefits of using performance-based assessments in class. For example, Adair, Glisan, Koda, Swender & Sandrok (2006) created a PBA prototype to identify the effects of implementing this tool on EFL classrooms. The results showed that performance-based assessments let students demonstrate their knowledge and skills in real-world situations, helped learners to develop their ability to communicate in another language, provided appropriate and timely feedback to students and other stakeholders like parents, authorities, program coordinators and administrators, and helped teachers to improve their instruction. The authors also reported that implementing PBAs encouraged teachers to create rich instructional contexts, and connect English with other disciplines.

These conclusions are supported by another research project conducted at the US Air Force Academy during the 2004-2005 academic year. The primary purpose of this study was to determine if using performance-based assessments had any effect on students' language learning process (Glisan et al., 2007). As a result, the article reported that PBAs improved students' oral skills and encouraged teachers to connect teaching, learning, and evaluation effectively. Evidence from this research project also supports previous studies on second language acquisition (Ellis, 2005; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; William and Thompson, 2007; Wong & VanPatten, 2003). According to these studies, when learners have the opportunity to use the language in real-world situations, they easily achieve higher levels of language performance.

Moreover, according to research conducted by Yildirim & Orsdemir (2013), performance-based assessments contribute to improve writing skills, increase vocabulary, reinforce grammar, develop motivation, and promote self-confidence in the use of language. These results support the idea that performance assessments offer many advantages since they improve learners' self-esteem, enhance motivation and learner involvement, and promote the improvement of teaching practices. However, implementing PBA in EFL classrooms also presents several challenges that will be explained in the next section.

IV. CHALLENGES OF PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENTS

Most assessment practices in the United States and many other countries are still traditional not only because instructors think it is challenging to make the change to more performance-based, open-ended formats, but also because they feel that these new evaluation tools require too much time to be designed, administered, and scored (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006; Colley, 2008; Stiggings et al., 2007). The development of this type of assessment involves creating the performance task, gathering materials and resources, and finally, implementing the evaluation. All of these activities take time. Linn & Miller (2005) also recognize that PBAs are time-consuming since students need a substantial amount of time to perform the tasks.

Designing complex assessments that are truly informative can also be difficult. According to Colley (2008), a major challenge in developing or using performance-based assessment is the standardization of scoring procedures. In performance tasks, there is a huge variety of possible solutions, answers, and procedures to obtain those answers. Due to this variability, it can be very difficult to evaluate student performance. Besides, for large-scale performance-based assessment at a district or state level, the costs of administering and scoring these evaluations are very high (Linn & Miller, 2005). Furthermore, for several authors, the most important limitation of performance-based assessment is that it is not possible to prove the validity and reliability of these kinds of evaluation tools. Actually, some say that scores and grades will probably change across teachers and across time (Stiggings et al., 2007; Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2013).

Teachers also need to be tutored to use performance-based assessments efficiently.

When educators have no instruction about the nature and application of PBAs, they are not well-equipped to employ these alternative assessment methods correctly (Clark & Gipps, 2000; Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2013). Therefore, they are not prepared to train their students in the use of this type of assessment. As a result, learners usually don't complete their tasks appropriately and the expected results are not obtained.

Finally, many teachers express indecision about using authentic assessments because they think these evaluation tools rarely provide information in numerical format. Therefore, many believe these strategies are good, but they don't know how to determine a grade for the content of the lesson (Herrera et al., 2011). To some extent, this point of view is reasonable because teachers are responsible for reporting grades and proving that a student has met a goal set by the curriculum or standards. Besides, the education system and policies usually restrict teachers' views of grading. Therefore, many educators are constantly worried since performance-based assessment focuses more on learning development than grading (Colley, 2008; Herrera et al., 2011). However, although all the challenges mentioned before are logical, most of them can be overcome if the assessments are designed appropriately.

V. FACING CHALLENGES

Most of the disadvantages mentioned above can be solved. For example, by using rubrics and check lists, teachers can equitably and accurately score students' performance. According to Herrera et al. (2011), before creating a rubric, teachers need to have a clear desired outcome in their minds. Also, they need to establish what knowledge and skills will be assessed, determine what a good or high-quality performance on this task might look like, and finally, create the rubric by describing the requirements that must be met in each level of performance. On the other hand, when using checklists, teachers have to identify the skills, knowledge, and competencies needed to perform the tasks, include them

in the checklist, and then use it to check the steps of the task that the student actually completed (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2012). Additionally, instructors need to check the assessments and rubrics regularly in order to determine if they are consistently measuring what they are supposed to measure. In this way, it will be possible to ensure the validity and reliability of the assessment tool.

Training teachers can also be helpful to use performance-based assessments efficiently. Training gives teachers the opportunity to enhance their knowledge about preparing alternative assessment tasks. Therefore, they will learn to value both effort and achievement of students during the language-learning process (McKay, 2006). Also, they will acquire the necessary skills to design rubrics and checklists with specific criteria linked to the intended learning objectives to enhance and evaluate student learning appropriately (Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2013).

Finally, even though designing performance-based assessments requires a substantial amount of time, it is possible to solve this problem if teachers work cooperatively. For example, teachers could exchange materials that exemplify various tasks and evaluation criteria. Consequently, if cooperation among teachers is encouraged in schools, it will be easier to design tasks and develop criteria for the design and evaluation of those tasks, and it will take less time to do it (Yildirim & Orsdemir, 2013).

In general, there are several steps teachers can follow to develop effective performance assessments. First, before developing a performance task, it is important to determine what knowledge and skills need to be assessed. Then, teachers have to decide what tasks will be used to identify if the objectives have been met, and describe how the ideal response will look like (Stiggins et al., 2007). Next, instructors need to create a set of evaluation criteria that is clearly understood by the students, and provide them a model response. Evidently, the rubric and scoring guide should be discussed with students before administering the assessment. Students can even participate in developing the rubric and the scoring guide (Herrera et al., 2007). After the assessment has been administered, educators must analyze the kind of responses the students produced. Finally, it is important to provide feedback. This feedback needs to be more than just a number (Linn & Miller, 2005). It needs to provide descriptive and constructive information that can help students and teachers to do better the next time.

A. *But What about the Grade?*

Scoring procedures vary depending on the focus and intended outcomes of the performance task. However, if teachers want to assign a grade for certain task developed in class, it is important to establish a clear rubric. As Arter & McTighe (2001) mention, rubrics are the best format to demonstrate learners' degrees of mastery. Actually, rubrics can measure accomplishment of the tasks in the four areas of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. That is why students' performance is often scored by raters using a rubric that details the characteristics that must be present in a well-developed task (Moskal, 2003; VanTassel-Baska, 2013; Wang, 2009). Students are usually given the scoring rubrics to guide their own work and performance. Then, the teacher uses them to assess student performance at the completion of the task.

B. *Evaluation beyond a Letter/Number Grade*

First, it is important to understand that the appropriate assessment approach should always be based on the purpose of the assessment. Generally, if content mastery is being assessed, a paper-and-pencil test with close-ended items may be a good option. However, if higher-order thinking and problem solving are being assessed, a performance-based assessment would be more appropriate (Stiggins et al., 2007; VanTassel-Baska, 2013).

Performance assessments do not have a clear right or wrong answer, and do not determine which the best student in the class is. Instead, this kind of assessment tries to help all learners to do their best to improve their performance. That is why feedback is an important component of performance-based assessments (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002; Wang, 2009). Also, the main focus of these evaluations is to determine what the students have achieved, identify progress in student motivation and linguistic development, and inform teachers about appropriate accommodations for the students. Therefore, reflective teachers realize that "the most desirable goal of assessment is to move beyond a grade toward useful information about what knowledge has been gained, what capacities have been maximized, and what skills have been developed" (Herrera et al., 2007).

VI. PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENT IN EFL CLASSROOMS IN ECUADOR

In Ecuador, MinEduc (Ministry of Education) recognizes the importance of developing students' communicative language skills since the primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication. MinEduc also believes that EFL classrooms should engage learners in authentic and meaningful activities that support the functional use of language (Ministry of Education, 2012). Actually, the English Curriculum in Ecuador states that "students should use the language productively (through speaking and writing) and receptively (through listening and reading) inside and outside the classroom" (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 8). That is why it promotes classroom activities that equip students with the necessary skills to communicate in real contexts. In consequence, from this point of view, performance-based assessment is a suitable evaluation method that schools should implement to achieve the objectives established in the National English Curriculum Guidelines and to change and improve the traditional high school

language programs which are focused mainly on memorization of grammatical structures and vocabulary, and that are still widely used in many EFL classrooms in Ecuador.

In addition, performance-based assessments could be a practical tool to be used with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners in Ecuador since this type of assessment gives students the opportunity to connect their interests and backgrounds with the class content. With this type of assessment, students are able to listen, read, write, and speak in English about topics that are connected to their real lives. Therefore, they will be motivated to learn English as it is something meaningful for them. Many people believe that Ecuador does not have a very diverse population as United States because there are not many immigrants or people coming from foreign countries. However, Ecuador is considered a multicultural and multiethnic country because of its diverse population. Even though most people are Mestizos, we can also find Afro-Ecuadorians, Quichuas, Awas, Tsatchilas, Chachis, Huancavilcas, Mantas, Epera, Cofan, Secoyas, Sionas, Huaorani, Zaparo, Achuar, and Shuar (Granda, 2003). Nevertheless, the culture background is not the only source of diversity in Ecuador. Cognitive abilities and learning styles are also important factors that contribute to the diversity of our classrooms. Consequently, it is important to be prepared to deal with all these types of diversities during instruction and assessment. That is why teachers in Ecuador need to provide students with personalized and authentic assessments like performance-based assessments that will scaffold their learning naturally and sequentially, and that will increase their confidence and motivation to learn.

VII. CONCLUSION

To be reflective and effective teachers, it is necessary to look at what we do from time to time in order to correct our mistakes and improve the teaching and assessment strategies we use in class. That is why the main objective of this paper was to guide teachers' professional practice in order to help them grow as educators. As teachers, we need to realize that it is important to constantly verify if the way we are teaching and assessing our students is appropriate, or if it is necessary to modify our instruction in a certain way. Besides, we all need to be aware that it is important keep up-to-date with current research on best practices for assessment of EFL students in order to provide them the support they need to succeed.

Lamentably, many secondary school language classrooms around the world, including Ecuador, continue to focus only on grammar and form instead of on meaning and communication (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006). That needs to be changed. It is time to use authentic assessments such as performance-based assessments more, since they are practical tools that can be used to improve education and positively impact learners and instructors. We need to start giving students the opportunity to show their knowledge and abilities through practical tools like essays, compositions, dialogues, interviews, role-plays, and others. In that way, it will be possible to take into consideration students' cognitive development, emphasize what learners can do instead of what they cannot do, diagnose learning and teaching problems, and focus on the continuous improvement of each learner which will lead, at the end, to the students' success.

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