The Impact of the Formative Assessment in Speaking Test on Saudi Students' Performance

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Abstract
The current research takes place at the English language department at Taibah University, Saudi Arabia, where all students are enrolled in undergraduate studies and must study English language course as a core module in their first year. One of the most challenging tests faced by Saudi students in their studies, is the summative speaking test. The test is consisting of three tasks in which students required to go through them all. Accordingly, there is a need to seek approaches to enhance students' performance in the speaking test. In other words, formative assessment has not been used to overcome the challenges faced by the Saudi students at Taibah University in the speaking test. This research aims to investigate whether a formative speaking assessment has a significant impact on students' performance in the summative test. Also, it aims to monitor student learning and to provide constructive feedback that can be used by teachers to improve students' learning and help the students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in speaking skills. This study concludes that formative assessment helps Saudi students to overcome the challenges they face in speaking test. It is also recommend constructive feedback to improve their speaking performance.
Keywords: Constructive Feedback, Formative Assessment, Speaking Performance, Speaking skill, Summative Assessment

1.Introduction

The field of education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has been developed noticeably, as teaching English has taken a new positive shape. It is quite satisfactory that teachers and students are aware of the importance of the English Language, and tremendous efforts have been made at every level of education to impart proficiency among students. Halliday's (2004) indicates that language has developed "to talk about what is happening, what will happen, and what has happened (the ideational meta-function); to interact and/or express a point of view (the interpersonal meta-function) and to turn the output of (these) into a coherent whole (the textual meta-function), (p.30). Much emphasis is given to improve students' English communication skills. Speaking is one of the four skills that students should master in order to communicate properly and effectively. Ur (1996) in her study of language teaching, indicates that speaking is one of the most important skill intuitively, and people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowledge; and many if not most foreign languages learners are interested in learning to speak, Harmer (2001) clarifies that if a person is able to speak a language, it means that he\she possesses the knowledge of the target language's features and has the ability to process information when required. On the other hand, there should be a way to assess students' speaking skill in order to evaluate their performance. Black and William (2006) assert that "assessment in education must serve the purpose of supporting learning" (p. 9). Many studies have shown that assessments serve teaching learning process in different ways. Hanna & Dettmer, (2004) also, define assessment as a process of gathering information about teaching and learning process that enables instructors to evaluate students' performance.

The current research emphasizes the evaluation of Saudi students' performance who study English language course as a core modules at their first year in their undergraduates study. The course is a pre-requisite for medical and science programs at Taibah University. The course aims to take students from the A1Level of CEFR (The common European Framework of Reference for Language) entrance ability and exit them at the B1 language level based on the CEFR language levels scale. As a part of English language assessment procedures for measuring students' English proficiency in the four language skills, Saudi students are required to take four English-speaking tests over two semesters. Speaking tests are initially summative which is considered to be one of the most challenging tasks for students. This research aims to answer the following questions: What is the impact of the formative assessment in speaking tests on students' performance? Does formative speaking assessment help the students to identify their weaknesses and strengths?

2. Background

2.1 Assessments and Feedback

Assessment is a process of gathering information systematically. It is an essential element in the teaching-learning process that enables teachers to evaluate their methods of teaching and provides them with the required information regarding the learners' progress. Huhta (as cited in Spolsky&Hult, 2008) refers to assessment as "all kinds of procedures used to assess individuals (e.g., informal observations, self-assessments, quizzes, interviews, tests)" (p. 469). Teachers should assess their students frequently in order to monitor their improvement and measure their ability to master the essential skills. When teachers consider an assessment task, they usually have some questions in their mind such as: "*When* and *how often* shall we assess the students?", or "*How*

should we conduct an assessment procedure?" The question of "*What"* and "*Why"* rarely comes to teachers' mind (Bachman & Palmer, 2010).

Teachers have many reasons for being interested in using feedback in their teaching practices. They are likely to be interested to know generally, what they are doing and how teaching should be done. Feedback refers to specific information that teachers provide to their students related to the task or learning process. The purpose is to fill in the gap between what the student understands and what is aimed to be finally understood (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It provides teachers with a whole picture of their good practice and improvements they may achieve in teaching. Others teachers need feedback to be able to document the quality of their teaching skills. Research has shown that either type of feedback is better than none, and that, the more information is provided in the feedback, the greater is the impact on the resulting performance measured (Olina & Sullivan, 2002; Whyte, Karolick, Nielsen, Elder, & Hawley, 1995). Learners also need feedback to gain a better achievement in their summative assessment and also to help improve attendance and retention of learning. Akter, (2010) proves that giving feedback to learners on their performance is an essential aspect of effective teaching. Feedback can either be positive or negative and may serve not only to show learners how well they have performed but also to motivate them and build a supportive classroom climate.

2.2 Differences Between Formative and Summative Assessment

Assessment is vital to the education process. Schools, universities and Ministries or departments of education may use summative assessments and evaluations. In addition, assessment may also serve a formative function. In classrooms, formative assessment refers to frequent, interactive assessments of student's progress and understanding to identify learners' needs and adjust teaching appropriately. "Teachers using formative assessment approaches and techniques are better prepared to meet diverse students' needs". (Burner, 1996, p2)

Formative assessment methods are necessary to raise overall levels of student's achievement. Quantitative and qualitative research on formative assessment are proved as one of the most important interventions for promoting high-performance ever studied. Black and Wiliam(1998) concluded that:

> formative assessment does improve learning. The gains in achievement appear to be quite considerable, and as noted earlier, among the largest ever reported for educational interventions. As an illustration of just how big these gains are, an effect size of 0.7, if it could be achieved on a nation-wide scale, would be equivalent to raising the mathematics attainment score of an 'average' country like England, New Zealand or the United States into the 'top five' after the Pacific Rim countries of Singapore, Korea, Japan and Hong Kong. (p. 61)

These findings provide a strong foundation for further research on effective teaching, learning and assessment strategies. On the other hand, the aim of the summative assessment is usually focus on evaluating students' learning at the end of instructional units, lessons, or course specifications and syllables. It is frequently comparing it against some particular test specifications or standard checklists. Consequently, Summative assessments are often considered to be a high stakes form

of assessment, which means it been recognized as a "high point value assessment". Some examples of summative assessments include; final or midterm exams, graduation projects, scientific papers or writing compositions. Generally, gathered information from summative assessments has a profound influence on students' development or faculty members to reflect on their own teaching in the future.

2.2.1 Formative Assessment

Formative assessment has been interpreted in many ways. Black and Wiliam (1998) define it as the whole activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information that can be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Formative assessment can be used to facilitate the learning process in the classroom, and it might help the students in their learning. Tahir, Tariq, Mubashira and Rabbia (2012) state that formative assessment is a diagnostic use of assessment that provides feedback to teachers and students throughout instructions. Marsh (2007) claims that formative testing is a kind of strategies, which is designed to identify learner's learning difficulties in order to provide remediation procedures to enhance the performance of the majority of students. The information provided to the students must be used in order for the assessment to be described as a formative one. The Assessment Reform Group (ARG) describes formative assessment as the process of looking for and interpreting evidence for teachers and their learners to decide where the learners fit in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there (Assessment Reform Group, 2007). Kathy (2013) also claims that formative testing aims for an analysis of learners' learning difficulties to improve their academic achievement.

2.2.2 Summative Assessment

According to Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, Wiliam (2003), summative assessment is given periodically to determine at a particular point in time what students know and do not know. Summative assessment comes after the learning has been completed and provides information and feedback that sums up the teaching and learning process. Typically, no more formal learning is taking place at this stage, other than incidental learning which might take place through the completion of projects and assignments. For Scriven (1967), summative evaluation provided information to judge the general value of an educational program (as compared with some alternative), whereas the results of formative evaluation were targeted to facilitate the educational program. According to Shepard (2006), a summative assessment should fulfill its main purpose of documenting what students know and can do but, if carefully crafted, should also successfully meet a secondary purpose of support for learning. Yorke (2003) defines summative assessment as evaluation of the extent to which students meet the course's objectives through a midterm or final examination. Summative assessment has been contrasted with the formative one, which has its roots in the field of program evaluation. According to Atkin, Black, & Coffey (2005), summative assessment is an assessment given at the end of a learning period to conclude if learning occurred, and often to place some value (score) on how much learning had occurred or to quantify how much a learner knows about the subject matter.

2.3 Applying Formative and Summative Assessments in Education

Recent research suggests that taking tests can enhance learning by strengthening the representation of information retrieved during the test, and it also slows the rate of forgetting (Rohrer and Pashler,

2010). Many studies and research have been conducted to show the effect of assessments on teaching. Dhindsa, Omar, and Waldrip (2007) claim that examining students' perceptions of assessment stimulate them to develop an authentic assessment approach that "rewards genuine effort and in-depth learning rather than measuring luck" (p. 1262). Assessment in education is an essential tool of the 20th century. Scriven (1967) proposes the use of "Formative and Summative" assessment to distinguish between the roles of evaluation. Hence, an assessment is perceived to serve two different purposes: 1) informative, to improve teaching and learning process, and, 2) summative to measure students' achievement. (p. 4). In order to investigate the effect of formative assessment on students' achievement in secondary school Mathematics, Moysore (2015) conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of the formative assessment; the experimental research design was employed in that study. One hundred and twenty (120) Mathematics students in secondary II Art classes in two public schools in Iseyin Local Government of Oyo State, Nigeria were selected through purposive technique made up the study sample. Findings from analysis revealed that formative assessment has a strong significant difference in the mean achievement score of Mathematics students that are exposed to it ($t = 36.54$, $p = 000$) while there is no significant difference in the mean achievement scores of student who are not exposed to formative assessment ($t = 2.053$, $p = 0.045$). Feedback used as part of formative assessment helps learners become aware of any gaps that exist between their anticipated goal and their existing knowledge, understanding, or skill and guides them through actions necessary to obtain the goal (Sadler, 2005). Ross (2005) used a mixed methods approach, which included self-assessment as a form of formative assessment, to study Japanese undergraduates who were enrolled in a two-year, sixteen course English for academic purposes program. Analyses showed that formative assessments produced higher language proficiency growth than those who were assessed by summative assessments only. Also, it revealed that even though formative assessment can produce substantive increases in achievement and proficiency growth, this impact might be domain-dependent, e.g., language listening comprehension improvement. However, this research is an attempt to focus on the impact of formative assessment in the speaking test on Students' performance.

However, the course of the current study is a skill-based course that focuses on developing the general and academic language skills of the first-year English language students at the English language department, Taibah University. The major aim of this specific course is to develop students' language skills and competencies by exposing them to a variety of general and academic contexts at the beginner, elementary and advanced elementary language levels. In addition, the course builds the students' abilities in the language area through equipping them with a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical structures. Moreover the course develops the learners' cognitive skills such as analyzing, criticizing, synthesizing, and evaluate what students need at the university stage.

As a part of the English department assessment procedures for measuring students' English proficiency in the four language skills, the students are required to take multiple summative speaking tests during the academic year. English Speaking tests in this case study is considered to be one of the most thought-provoking tasks for Saudi students. To overcome the challenge of the speaking test faced by students, the English Language Department (ELD) administration provides teachers with three materials as a part of test preparation: test specification with examples, practices with model answers and exercises for teachers. All teachers are encouraged to share these materials with their students. Therefore, this research been conducted to evaluate the formative

assessment based on the materials provided by the English language department in order to facilitate students' learning and help them in the speaking test.

3. Research Methodology

A class of 30 first-year female students at the English Language department was divided randomly into two groups; controlled group and uncontrolled group. Each group has 15 students. Controlled group refers to the students who do not receive formative assessment while the uncontrolled group refers to the students who receive both formative and summative speaking tests. All students are homogeneous in terms of their education, ethnicity and age.

3.1 Description of Assessments Tasks

Both formative and summative speaking assessments are of three tasks; two teachers assess each student. The assessment begins with a one minute ungraded introductory chat between the assessor and the student. In this part of the test, the assessor greets the student and confirms the student's name and ID number. The assessor then explains the format of the assessment to the student. This speaking assessment consists of three tasks: a dialogue, a description of a picture, and a reaction to a situation.

3.1.1 Task 1: A dialogue

In this part of the test, students have two-way discussion with the two assessors about the themes and topics covered in the book as part of the English language curriculum. The assessors explain to the student the format of this part by saying, in this first part, I am going to ask you some questions, and I would like you answer them in full sentences. Do you understand?.

3.1.2 Task 2: A description of A Picture

In this part of the test, the assessor starts saying to the students, I will give you a picture, and I want you to describe what you see in the picture. I would like you to speak about what you see for about one minute. Students are required to describe a picture, based on the themes and topics covered in the book.

3.1.3 Task 3: A reaction to A Situation

In this part of the test, the assessor tells the student, I will describe a situation to you, and I want you to respond with one or two sentences to the situation. Are you ready? Students are required to respond to a particular situation, based on the themes and topics covered in the course book. The assessor randomly selects a different question for each task. Students are not given the chance to change any question.

The test takes six minutes and weights 10 scores. Two assessors assess students' performances in the three tasks. Based on a unified rubric designed and accredited by the ELD administration. Students are assessed on the range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence. It is worth noting that the uncontrolled group was given feedback about taking the formative assessment and their weakness and strength areas were pointed out.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

For analytical purposes, the students' scores were computed in continuous numerical variables range from one to ten values in which one refers to fail, and ten refers to excellence. The data of the formative assessment has been collected one week before administering the summative speaking test. All data have been processed by the statistical package for the social science (SPSS). Some analytical procedures have been used to investigate whether a formative assessment has a positive impact on the summative assessment such as frequency, means, standard deviation and One-Way ANOVA.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics:

Table (1) shows that the uncontrolled group's scores in the summative speaking test are very high. The majority of the students get A+. On the other hand, Table (2) indicates that the students' scores are distributed across all grades from A+ to F.

Table (1)*: Students' scores in speaking summative test (Uncontrolled group)*

Students' Grades	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
C+	1	6.7	6.7	6.7
B+	1	6.7	6.7	13.3
A	1	6.7	6.7	20.0
A+	12	80.0	80.0	100.0
Total	15	100.0	100.0	

Table (2): *Students' scores in speaking summative test (Controlled group)*

Students' Grades	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
F+	1	6.7	6.7	6.7
D	2	13.3	13.3	20.0
C+	3	20.0	20.0	40.0
B+	2	13.3	13.3	53.3
A	2	13.3	13.3	66.7
A+	5	33.3	33.3	100.0
Total	15	100.0	100.0	

These results are supported with focused group discussion. The majority of the students of the uncontrolled group demonstrated that formative assessment and the feedback that they received helped them to overcome three main issues related to the speaking test, which are (accuracy, fluency and coherence)

4.2 Comparing Means Statistics

One-way ANOVA analysis was conducted to investigate whether the means of controlled group's scores differ significantly from the scores of uncontrolled group. Table (3) and (4) shows

that there was a significant effect of formative assessment on students' scores in the summative speaking test at the p<. 05 level [F (1, 7.76) = 4.68, p = 0.01].

Table (3): Scores of students in the summative speaking test as a function of controlled and uncontrolled groups

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Summative speaking test	Between Groups	36.300	1	36.300	7.76	.01
	Within Groups	131.067	28	4.681		
	Total	167.367	29			

Table (4): Means of the scores of students in the summative speaking test as a function of controlled and uncontrolled groups

		N	Mean	Std. D	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Controlled group		15	7.33	2.845	.735	5.76	8.91
Uncontrolled group		15	9.53	1.125	.291	8.91	10.16
Total		30	8.43	2.402	.439	7.54	9.33
Model	Fixed Effects			2.164	.395	7.62	9.24
	Random Effects				1.100	-5.54-	22.41

Note: Formative assessment of uncontrolled group (mean= 7.40 and standard deviation=1.68

These results are supported with focused group discussion. The majority of the students of the uncontrolled group demonstrated that formative assessment and the feedback that they have received help them to overcome the same issues mentioned above related to the speaking test.

5.Discussion
The figures mentioned above indicate the value of the formative assessment. The results clearly show an improvement in the overall performance of the speaking test, which resulted in gaining higher marks for students in the "uncontrolled group". Interestingly, students who were given feedback in their formative assessment were able to perform better than the "controlled group" in terms of accuracy and coherence. On the other hand, the study' results indicate a significant difference in student's performance in the speaking test for the controlled group, as the students in this group had taken only the summative assessment without any feedback. Recent contributions to the literature show that there is a transition from the conventional summative assessment

approach of language learning outcomes to gradually integrating formative assessments, but this is only a continuing process (Davison, 2004).

Therefore, the process of the formative assessment, which included in this study, indicates that when students are aware of their strengths and weaknesses they were able to perform better in their speaking test. It is a process through which they find out about their learning. The process involves them in recognizing, evaluating, and reacting to their own learning outcome. Students did reflect on their own performance, as well as they have received constructive feedback from their teacher such as pointing out their language errors, e.g. (grammatical and phonological errors). Formative assessment outcome in this study is also an indication of the importance of proper feedback to students in which teachers find out about the effectiveness of the learning process. Accordingly, Chickering and Gamson (1991) claim that frequent feedback as a result of formative assessments can keep students on task by helping to identify areas in which the student is not performing well. It can be viewed as the process by which teachers gather assessment information about the students' learning and then respond to promote further learning and better performance. For example, assessment should contribute to instructions and learning. However, assessment after the instructions are over, does not allow the assessment to contribute to any instructional decisions. This can conclude to what extent can students master some amount of content. Thus, assessment must be a continuous process that facilitates "on-line" instructional decision-making in the classroom. (Gitomer & Duschl, 1995, p. 307).

6.Limitations

The size of the sample was small. The results of the study cannot be assumed to be generalizable to other populations beyond this group of subjects. Rather, this study should be considered as an exploratory investigation that has the goal of identifying possible issues and trends for further research.

7.Conclusion

The discussion raised in this study shows the value of the formative assessment. The results clearly indicate an improvement in the overall performance of the speaking test which resulted in gaining higher marks for students in the "uncontrolled group".

Referring to the findings of this study, it could be concluded that when the formative assessment is implied, it improves the students' performance in the speaking skills and also enables them to understand the contents of the subject properly, which is better than the use of summative test only. In addition, formative assessment tested in this case study plays a crucial role in enhancing students' learning process by giving continues structured feedback.

Moreover, formative assessment places an emphasis on the process of teaching and learning, and actively involving students in that process through stressing the importance and the impact of formative assessment, which is identified in this research. The purpose of this research is to highlight whether students' performance will be affected or not when undertakes this type of assessment and when students provided with constructive feedback, in comparison to students who undertake the summative assessment only. Assessment in general, accounts for "supporting learning (formative), certifying the achievement or potential of individuals (summative), and

evaluating the quality of educational institutions or programs (evaluative)" (Wiliam,& Thompson 2008).

However, both formative and summative assessment influences learning. In other words, to improve learning outcomes, we need to consider not only the teaching and learning activities, but also the assessment tasks (Gipps & James, 1998). Additionally, the extent to which formative assessment improves learning outcomes is now being recognized. For example, Black and Wiliam (1998), in their review of classroom assessment, boldly state: that formative assessment does improve learning. The gains in achievement appear to be quite considerable, and as noted earlier, amongst the largest ever reported for educational interventions. (p. 61)

To sum up, the value of formative assessment in this research was briefly introduced in order to highlight its importance to the teachers' existing practice, as well as to raise students' awareness of their English speaking competence. Moreover, formative assessment is a practical method that enables students to learn English effectively as well as to adjust and reflect on their own learning by the constructive feedback received. It also expands and deepens their knowledge of the language as they are supposed to be assessed regularly and thoroughly.

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