

Designing authentic assessment tasks for EFL courses

Jingbo Hu^{1,2,*}, Phaik Gaik Lee¹, and Madhubala A/P Bava Harji¹

¹Faculty of Education, Language, Psychology, and Music, SEGi University, 47810 Petaling Jaya Selangor, Malaysia

²Foreign Language Department, Chengde Medical University, 067000 Chengde Hebei, China

Abstract. Authentic assessment has been widely proven to have practicability value. Since EFL courses focus on the practicability value of the English language to the learners, it is urgent to implement authentic assessment in EFL courses. Authentic assessment, as an assessment for learning, is integrated into the teaching and learning process. Thus, for teachers, the task of authentic assessment needs to be designed and practiced in a targeted manner. The basic concept of authentic assessment coincides with constructivist learning theory, and thus constructivist theory can provide theoretical support for authentic assessment. In this paper, we define the characteristics of authentic assessment tasks and propose a checklist for teachers' reference when designing them.

1. Introduction

Authentic assessment is an assessment method that measures students' ability to apply knowledge and skills to solve problems in real-life settings and contexts [1]. Authentic assessment usually requires instructional activities that are carefully designed to fit real-life scenarios. Students are expected to use a variety of learner skills in authentic assessment activities, including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and more. These learner abilities and skills will be essential for employability and life-long learning.

Unlike conventional forms of assessment, authentic assessment is an alternative assessment [2], which focuses on the process of learning, rather than just the outcome of information memorization. Thus, authentic assessment is usually implemented during the teaching and learning process. Teachers provide students with opportunities to construct new knowledge and meaning with authentic assessment instruments and authentic assessment tasks.

Authentic assessment is increasingly used in Chinese educational practice, which not only examines the degree of students' knowledge mastery but also focuses on students' practical application ability, thus providing students with a more comprehensive and in-depth learning experience [3]. Authentic assessment emphasizes a learning task or project as the core for the comprehensive assessment of students learning process and learning outcome. By carrying out course tasks with practical meaning and realistic background, students are assessed according to their actual performance, and the assessment content includes multiple aspects such as knowledge and skills enhancement, attitude and values, learning outcome, finished product, diverse solutions, etc. This can truly reflect the whole picture of students and

avoid the bias caused by a single and unvaried testing format.

2. Background

EFL refers to English as a Foreign Language, which means learning English in a non-English speaking country. In China, English courses are required from the compulsory education level to the graduate study level. For students and working professionals, mastering English has become one of the necessary skills. English education in China has been undergoing continuous reform and progress, and English has become an important part of the school curriculum from elementary school to university. In addition, there are many English training institutions and schools in China that offer English courses and test preparation programs to help students improve their English. Although English education in China has come a long way, there is still much room for improvement, such as teaching methods and testing. In Chinese English education, there is a relative lack of training in practical English, and the most common teaching method in classroom instruction is teacher-centered.

The predominant test in EFL courses is the paper-and-pencil exam or summative assessment. Summative assessment as the sole form of assessment has long been questioned by educational researchers because it does not test the learning process, does not promote the development of learner skills and self-directed learning, and does not provide comprehensive feedback to the student beyond the periodical learning outcomes. Since the 1990s, educational administrators and researchers have been recommending formative assessment and attempting to reform the form of assessment into a combination of

* Corresponding author: *Jingbo Hu*, Email: academichu@126.com

summative and formative assessment in the educational process. However, in educational practice, teachers do not seem to have built up enough knowledge and beliefs about formative assessment, thus making it difficult for formative assessment to occupy a mainstream position in educational practice. The reasons for this include inadequate relevant training, limitations in teachers' assessment literacy, larger workloads, and so on.

From the educational research and related literature in the last decade, it is evident that authentic assessment is gradually gaining recognition in Chinese educational practice [3-4]. This may stem from the impetus of educational policies, attempts at pedagogical exploration, and the need for reform of assessment instruments. Authentic assessment, as an emerging assessment method, has received attention from Chinese education authorities. The Ministry of Education has promulgated policy documents such as "Opinions on Curriculum Reform in General High Schools", which propose to implement quality education and comprehensive quality assessment. The introduction of these policies has given a positive impetus to the promotion of authentic assessment. More schools have started to try to apply authentic assessment to their teaching practice. Project-based and task-based teaching help students gain knowledge and demonstrate their abilities and achievements in practice by conducting practical research and social practice activities. At the same time, a diversified evaluation system is gradually being established, including oral expression, written expression, presentation, reflection, and other forms, to meet the needs and characteristics of different students.

3. Underpinning theory

Constructivist learning theory asserts that learning is an active, personal process in which learners acquire new knowledge and skills by interacting with their environment and constructing knowledge [5]. In this process, factors such as learners' personal experiences, backgrounds, and cultural contexts influence their understanding and construction of knowledge. Therefore, in constructivist learning theory, authentic assessment should be based on learners' personal experiences and contexts. Authentic assessment should focus on learners' personal experiences and contexts, as well as their processes of understanding and constructing knowledge. Assessment should focus on learners' thinking and understanding processes, not just whether their answers are correct. Assessment should promote learners' critical thinking and reflection, and encourage them to explore and discover new knowledge and ideas. Evaluators need to understand how learners think and reason and how they relate new knowledge to what they already know, and they should encourage learners to express their views and opinions to gain a good understanding of their thinking processes.

In addition, constructivist learning theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction. Constructivist learning theory suggests that social interactions also have an important impact on learning. Evaluators should

consider learners' performance and ability to cooperate in social settings, as well as their ability and effectiveness in interacting with others. Evaluators should focus on how well learners perform in group learning, cooperation, and communication, and how they gain new knowledge and ideas from the experiences and perspectives of others.

Constructivist learning theory emphasizes the importance of learners' critical thinking and reflection. Evaluators should encourage learners to think critically and reflect on what they have learned to better understand and apply what they have learned, and evaluators should provide feedback and guidance to help learners better understand and apply what they have learned and to encourage them to explore and discover new knowledge and ideas.

Constructivist learning theory emphasizes the importance of the learner's initiative and personal experience, and authentic assessment should focus on the learner's thinking and understanding process and consider the impact of social interaction. Constructivist learning theory guides authentic assessment in that evaluators should focus on learners' personal experiences and contexts, as well as their thinking and understanding processes; evaluators should focus on learners' performance in social communication and their ability to cooperate, as well as the effects of their interactions with others; and evaluators should encourage learners to think critically and reflect, and provide feedback and guidance to help them better understand and apply what they have learned. And evaluators should use the above statements as theoretical starting points when designing authentic assessment tasks [5-6].

4. Assessment type

To design authentic assessment tasks, it is most important to understand the nature of authentic assessment. Authentic assessment should be a comprehensive assessment that combines two or more assessment types. This must be a combination concerning the assessment of learning, assessment for learning, and assessment as learning.

Assessment of learning (AoL) provides grades in form of a number or a letter to be evidence of the learning outcome at the end of teaching [7]. It is usually summative, in the form of a pen-and-paper test. It is used to measure a student's learning at the end of a unit, semester, or academic year. It could measure the overall learning, provide feedback for improvement, encourage accountability by motivating students to study and work harder, evaluate the effectiveness of educational programs or initiatives, and so on. While it has its benefits, there are some drawbacks associated with this type of assessment. It provides limited feedback, causes stress, does not promote continuous learning, may not accurately reflect student learning, and encourages test-oriented education. Constructive learning theory and assessment of learning are two interconnected concepts in education. Constructive learning theory focuses on the process of learning, while assessment of learning is

concerned with measuring the outcomes of that process. The goal of assessment in constructive learning theory is to provide feedback that facilitates continued growth and development rather than merely assigning a grade.

Assessment for learning (AfL) is administered during the process of teacher's instruction and student's learning, whose aim is to evaluate the students' understanding of teaching material and content and provide the teachers with the necessary information to judge the students' learning outcomes. Since AfL provides timely feedback to teachers, the teachers could supervise the growth of students and make necessary amendments to the instruction. AfL and constructive learning theory are related in that both emphasize the importance of active engagement and feedback in the learning process. In AfL, formative assessments are used to provide ongoing feedback to students, which helps them construct their understanding and meaning of the material. Similarly, in constructive learning theory, learners construct their understanding through active engagement with the material.

Aside from AoL and AfL, assessment as learning (AaL) is one more type presented by researchers but is considered to be part of or from AfL [6-7]. AaL emphasizes that the relationship between assessment and learning is an interrelated and mutually influential one. This aligns with constructivist learning theory which emphasizes the ability of learners to actively build their understanding of knowledge and then to actively construct and continuously enrich the body of knowledge. Knowledge is not transferred to the learner in a completely passive manner. Knowledge is constructed by the learner reflecting on his or her own learning experiences, creating mental representations, and incorporating new knowledge into his or her own body of knowledge. Such a process of knowledge construction makes it possible to develop higher-order thinking and to improve the learner's cognitive level [8].

Since AoL, AfL, and AaL are all necessary and have theoretical support, authentic assessment task, which is supported by the same theory, is considered to be a combination of different assessment types.

5. Assessment tasks designing

The purpose of the authentic assessment is aligned with the learning objectives to develop students' learner skills and employability by simulating real-life situations and challenges. Authentic assessment requires students to use critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills to complete tasks similar to those they would encounter in their professional lives. Based on these perceptions, when teachers design an authentic assessment task, they should first ensure that the objectives of the assessment task are aligned with the instructional goals and that students are adequately guided to apply and develop their skills through the assessment tasks.

In the context of an EFL program, the assessment focuses on the basic language skills that students are expected to develop, including the skills of listening,

speaking, reading, writing, and translation. When designing an authentic assessment task, teachers need to integrate one or more language skills into the task. Students must demonstrate their proficiency in these language skills as they complete the tasks. At the same time, learners' skills are tested and enhanced by completing these authentic assessment tasks designed by the teacher that incorporate language skills.

When designing authentic assessment tasks for EFL courses, teachers should prepare draft assessments that focus on developing students' competencies and examining English language learning outcomes. Language skills should be integrated directly or indirectly into the assessment tasks. Assessment criteria should be specifically designed to fit the assessment task.

The following forms of assessment can be proposed experimentally for different proficiency development and assessment goals.

Assessment of oral communication skills. Oral communication tasks, such as mock interviews, group discussions, and presentations, can be conducted in authentic contexts to assess students' oral communication skills. The assessment criteria take into account students' language fluency, accuracy, and pragmatic adaptability.

Reading comprehension assessment: Authentic reading materials and authentic reading tasks, such as news reports, advertisements, and manuals, can be used during instruction to assess students' reading comprehension. The assessment criteria take into account students' depth of comprehension, accuracy, and information acquisition ability.

Writing skills assessment: Authentic writing tasks, such as letter writing, report writing, and essay writing, are used to assess students' writing skills. The assessment takes into account the student's language skills, logical thinking skills, grammar, and spelling.

General competence assessment: Students' general competence is assessed by integrating language skills and completing authentic language tasks, such as completing a project, participating in a simulated business meeting, etc. The assessment takes into account the student's ability to work in a team, problem-solving skills, and language skills.

When designing an authentic assessment task for classroom teaching, the following steps can be referred to by teachers. Proper amendments can be made according to differences of subjects, contents, methods, and participants.

First, determine the goals of the assessment: Teachers clarify what the goals of the assessment and the expected learning outcomes are, including assessing students' oral communication skills, writing skills, or general skills.

Second, design the assessment tasks: Depending on the assessment objectives, authentic assessment tasks can include oral communication tasks, writing tasks, synthesis tasks, etc. Students work in groups, actively communicate, and use critical thinking and creativity to find problems and propose solutions to them.

Third, provide authentic materials: To make the assessment tasks more authentic, some authentic materials, such as news reports, survey data, and expert

interviews, must be provided for students' reference.

Fourth, assessment criteria and methods: Teachers clarify the assessment criteria and assessment methods for the assessment tasks. For example, the assessment criteria for oral communication tasks include language fluency, grammatical accuracy, and pragmatic adaptability. Assessment methods can be peer rating, self-assessment, and teacher assessment.

Fifth, feedback and improvement: Teachers provide timely feedback on assessment results, point out students' strengths and weaknesses, and make suggestions for improvement to help students improve their English proficiency and basic learning skills.

The authenticity checklist in Table 1 provides the teachers with assistance to ensure that the tasks they design are authentic.

Table 1. Authenticity checklist for assessment tasks

Checking point	Content of Checklist
high-level complex thinking	The assessment tasks are not overly simple and require students to complete them through high-level complex thinking as described in Bloom's Taxonomy, such as investigation, research, analysis, and summarization over a sustained period.
various resources	The assessment task allows students to use a variety of resources to examine the task from different perspectives.
authentic outcome	The learning outcome of the task is authentic.
real-life context	The assessment tasks are relevant to the real-life context and can be integrated into real life, rather than just catering to artificial scenarios.
finished product	The outcome of the assessment task is a finished product, not a preparation for something else.
diverse solutions	The assessment tasks allow for diverse solutions and outcomes.
collaboration	The assessment tasks require students to work collaboratively.
reflection and feedback	The assessment tasks provide the opportunity to reflect and feedback between teachers and students.

6. Discussion

The role and value of authentic assessment as a method of teaching and evaluation has not been relatively well validated across disciplines for a variety of reasons, among which teacher assessment literacy is a root cause and one that needs to be addressed urgently. Compared with a high level of acceptance of authentic assessment in educationally developed countries, integrating authentic assessment in disciplines should be promoted. The introduction of authentic assessment tasks in EFL courses in China can enhance the practical application value of EFL courses, improve the teaching effectiveness and assessment literacy of EFL teachers, and develop the

learning skills of students. Although well supported by theory, the design of authentic assessment tasks is relatively complex. Depending on the content and material, teachers need to design targeted, specific, and comprehensive authentic assessment tasks based on the instructional objectives.

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