

Effects Of Formative Assessment On Listening Comprehension Performance Of EFL Learners At Dong Nai Technology University

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Abstract – Assessment plays an important role in language students' learning development. While summative assessment aims to measure what students have gained at the end of a course, formative assessment focuses on evaluating the process of acquiring knowledge and practicing skills. This paper aimed to review the benefits of using formative assessment in teaching English and develop particular activities in order to teach listening skills. Some activities were used to teach listening skills to a class of EFL learners at Dong Nai Technology University then the effectiveness was evaluated by the researcher. The results revealed that each type had its own strengths and weaknesses so teachers had to follow the cycle of formative assessment to utilize the benefits of each activity.

Keywords – Formative Assessment, Listening Skills, Listening Comprehension, EFL Learners.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the project

Assessment plays an important role in language students' learning development. For many years, theory of assessment includes two common types of assessment which are summative assessment and formative assessment. This categorization is function-based. Summative assessment aims to "measure, or summarize, what a student has grasped, and typically occurs at the end of a course or unit of instruction" ([4], p. 6), whereas formative assessment focus on "evaluating students in the process of forming their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them to continue that growth process" (p.6).

It can be easy to notice that in traditional classroom, summative assessment is commonly used. Mid-term tests and final tests belong to this kind of assessment. Tests are considered as a tool to measure students' achievement after a period time of learning. However, achievement should not be viewed that way. While achievement means moving from a lower level to a higher level and is gained differently by different students, progress is definitely being made [7]. Moreover, if teachers wait until the end of the course to see the students' results, it might be too late for the teachers themselves to adjust teaching methodology and for the students to make changes to students improve skills and knowledge. From the above reasons, it is essential to use formative assessment in a language classroom.

1.2 Aims of the project

This paper aims to review the benefits of using formative assessment in teaching English and develop particular activities in order to teach listening skills. Two activities will be implemented in an actual classroom then its effectiveness will be evaluated by the researcher. Besides, educational implications are going to be provided to language learners, teachers and administrators.

1.3 Research question

In order to reach the research aim, the researcher will try to find the answers to one research question which is formulated as follows:

Does formative assessment have effects on listening comprehension performance of EFL learners at Dong Nai Technology University?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition and characteristics of formative assessment

2.1.1 Definition of formative assessment

Over the years, different researchers have developed different definitions of formative assessment. Formative assessment is defined as follows: “any task that creates feedback (information which helps a student learn from formative activities) or feed-forward (information which will help a student amend or enhance activities in the future) to students about their learning achievements can be called formative assessment” ([8], p. 7). This definition is based on one that was proposed by [1] who suggest that formative assessment refers to “all those activities undertaken by teachers, and or by their students [in assessing themselves], which provide information to be used as [formative] feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they [both teachers and students] are engaged” (pp. 7-8). Similarly, this kind of assessment is ongoing evaluation [5]. On the whole, formative assessment is any kind of task that teachers and learners take part in and receive feedback to adjust the instruction during the process of teaching and learning.

2.1.2 Characteristics of formative assessment

According to [7], there are three principles of formative assessment, including:

- (1) Formative assessment is student focused,
- (2) Formative assessment is instructionally informative, and
- (3) Formative assessment is outcomes based. (p. 15)

To be more specific, regarding the first principle, formative assessment emphasizes on how students receive the information being transferred by their teachers, how well they understand the information and how they can use it. Formative assessment helps teachers to consider students’ learning needs and make instructional improvement. Additionally, formative assessment provides learners with opportunities to make self-assessment and receive feedback from their teachers. Concerning the second principle, formative assessment creates the situation that teachers assess students’ understanding, then review and reflect on assessment outcomes to adjust instruction. The final principle implies that formative assessment “focuses on achieving goals rather than determining if a goal was or was not met” (p. 18). During the process of achieving goals, frequent and substantive feedback is delivered to the students in order to “[close] the gap between what students know and desired outcomes” (p. 19).

Besides, the theory of formative assessment was developed in [2] by conceptualizing it as consisting of five key strategies that are:

1. Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success;
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding;
3. Providing feedback that moves learners forward;
4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another; and
5. Activating students as the owners of their own learning.

In general, formative assessment possesses the following features. First, it is a systematic, continuous process. Second, it evaluates student learning during the process in order to provide feedback to adjust ongoing instruction and close the gap in learning. Finally, formative assessment involves both self-assessment and peer-assessment.

2.2 Why to use formative assessment

As mentioned above, at the end of a course, teachers typically use the evidence from tests to deliver a grade to students and then move on to the next one. However, at this time, it might be too late. On the contrary, formative assessment gives teachers information that can be used to inform their instruction and improve students' learning while it is in progress [7]. The author also identifies advantages of formative assessment including helping teachers focus instruction, allowing for customized learning, encouraging collaboration between teachers and learners, enhancing students' motivation and building up coherence between curriculum, instruction and assessment.

The importance of using formative assessment is stated by [5] that it will allow teachers to use the information gained in the process of teaching to improve instructional methods and suggest appropriate learning strategies for their students. Moreover, he points out that formative assessment can "transform students' failure to master skills or concepts into a second chance to learn" (p. 26). Thanks to the benefits for teaching and learning, formative assessment suggests to be used in language teaching context.

2.3 How to use formative assessment

There are many suggestions by researchers on how to apply formative assessment in the classroom. Five main types of activity for applying formative assessment, which are sharing success criteria with learners, classroom questioning, comment-only marking, peer- and self-assessment and formative use of summative tests are proposed by [2]. Each type has its own strengths and weaknesses and is directly linked with the strategies mentioned above in section 2.1.2.

In the review of [5], some methods which can be considered as formative assessments include asking questions and setting assignments and learning activities which consists of collaborative learning, quick writing, weekly summaries, graphic organizers and journaling activities. He claims that teachers can use any tools that they use daily as formative assessment tools. It is important to review the cycle of formative assessment proposed by [7] (2010, p. 7) (see Figure 1).

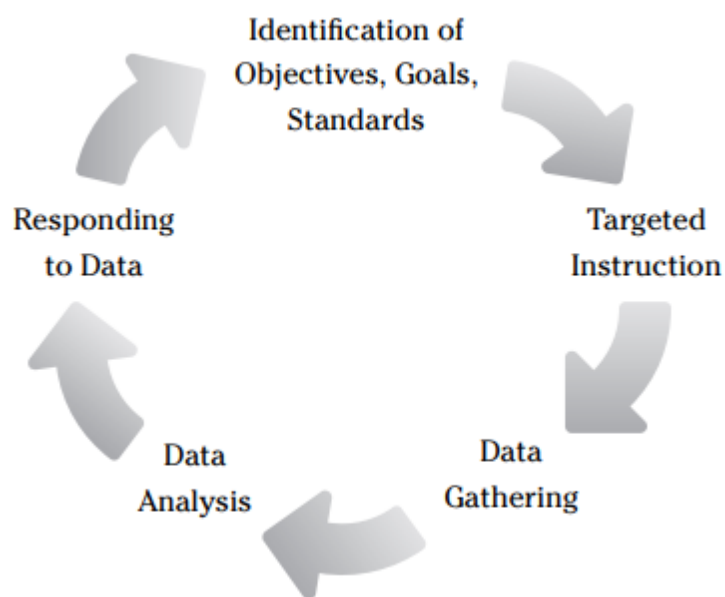


Figure 1. The cycle of formative assessment

According to [7], one of the primary functions of formative assessment is to inform students of objectives, goals and standards of the course to which the students relate their learning process. In addition, the information of objectives, goals and standards helps teachers to adjust their instructions for greater effectiveness. In this context, teaching and assessing are "intertwined" (p. 6). It is because that both students and teachers find it beneficial to regularly receive feedback. This makes teaching and learning "a cyclical

process for continuous improvement” (p. 6). Furthermore, this cycle of formative assessment relates to the strategies introduced by [2] in that the strategies illustrate the cycle and strengthen the spiral relationship between teaching and learning as well as emphasizing the significance of supportive feedback.

2.4 Previous discussion about effects of formative assessment on listening comprehension performance

In reality, formative tests can be beneficial in the second language classroom, just as they can in many other subjects. As stated by [3], self-assessed scores and instructor assessments of the same learners had a strong correlation. According to [10], it was claimed that the epistemic and functional problems and difficulties of formative tests in the L2 classroom, claiming that the lack of standardization in this field makes progressing the study difficult.

The advantages of self-assessment when it comes to the consistency of the language-learning system, and how it can be used as a tool were also discussed in [6]. Learners engage with teachers in order to develop skills to test their own processes, which is an essential mechanism.

According to [9], he used a mixed methods approach to analyze the formative evaluation effects in his research in order to include novel methods. As stated his study, since formative processes are so complex, traditional experimental methods will be unable to detect results in achievement and proficiency, and novel methods will be required to measure formative evaluation effects.

III. METHODS

3.1 Context of teaching and participants

The study was conducted at Dong Nai Technology University. The researcher used convenient sampling with the participation of 60 first-year students who were not majored in English. Those 60 students shared the first language which is Vietnamese and were from two intact classes of the course *English 1* (i.e. *Tiếng Anh 1*) whose length is approximately 30 hours (2 hours x 15 sessions). However, due to the fact that the last day of the course was used to conduct mid-term tests, there was approximately 28 hours of actual teaching in class (2 hours x 14 sessions). Besides, since the course *English 1* aimed to teach general English and develop all four skills (Reading, Speaking, Listening and Writing, among which Speaking and Listening were focused), the number of treatment was approximately 10 hours (45 minutes x 14 sessions).

The participants were divided into experimental and control groups. Both groups had equal class time as presented in the previous paragraph and were provided with the same materials including the course book *Speakout – Elementary, 2nd edition*, workbook and other supplementary materials. The participants’ proficiency level was elementary, and their ages varied from 18 to 20 years old. The names of all participants were kept anonymous from this part to the end of the paper.

3.2 Data Collection Tools

The design of the study was a quasi-experimental study in which the experimental group experienced treatment during eight weeks while the control group received normal teaching. The research tools were listening comprehension tests for both groups and treatment for the experimental group.

3.2.1 Pre-test and Post-test

Both pre-test and post-test have 15 question items which were divided into two parts. The pre-test had two parts which were Part 1: Multiple choice (Items 1 to 5) and Part 2: True-False (Items 6 to 15), whilst the post-test consisted of Part 1: Matching (Items 1 to 7) and Part 2: Gap-filling (Items 8 to 15).

3.2.2 Intervention

Based on the theoretical framework being reviewed in sub-sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3, five formative assessment activities are chosen and adapted by the researcher and briefly described as follows.

Table 1. Suggested Formative Assessment Activities

Activity 1: Using comprehension questions	
Listening sub-skills	Listening for details; Listening for gist
Level of students	All levels
Procedure	+ Students listen to a passage in English, and answer questions about it. + Questions and answers can be in English or students' home language (i.e. Vietnamese).
Activity 2: Writing summaries	
Listening sub-skills	Listening for details; Listening for gist
Level of students	≥ Pre-intermediate
Procedure	+ Students listen to a passage in English and write a summary about what they have understood. + Students may be asked to work in pairs or individually then share their writing with peers. + The teacher will set a time limit for this activity or consider it as homework.
Activity 3: Retellings	
Listening sub-skills	Listening for details; Listening for gist
Level of students	≥ Pre-intermediate
Procedure	+ Students listen to a listening passage or watch a short video clip. + Students are asked to retell what they have heard. + A retelling rubric can be used by the teacher or peers to provide feedback.

Activity 4: Using projects and performances (Drawing pictures)

Listening sub-skills	Listening for details
Level of students	Beginners
Requirement	After learners have been taught words about parts of body and some adjectives such as “long”, “big”, “small”, etc.
Procedure	+ One student comes to the board and gets ready to draw a monster. + The teacher describes the monster for the student to write. + After finishing drawing, the student will choose the next one to draw whereas the teacher will choose another student to describe. + The activity should continue until each student has been in both roles.

Activity 5: Using projects and performances (Directions)

Listening sub-skills	Listening for details
Level of students	≥ Pre-intermediate
Requirement	After learners have been taught basic directions
Procedure	+ The teacher delivers handouts as a map with some places and blank spaces on it. + Students are asked to work in pairs or groups to choose a place as their house then practice telling directions to the house. + Each group chooses a representative to stand in front of the class and show how to get to their house. + The others have to listen to their friend and find out where the house is. + The activity should continue until every group has a chance to present.

These five activities share some same features of formative assessment. Firstly, they involve teachers and students and allow the opportunities for feedback from teachers and from peers. In that manner, self-assessment and peer-assessment can be facilitated.

Secondly, they all occur during the time of lesson, not at the end of a semester or a course. Finally, since they are conducted during a course, they are systematic and continuous.

In this study, the activities in the list were used in various lessons during the course to investigate the effects of formative assessment on learners' listening comprehension performance.

3.4 Data Analyses

The data collected from the listening test scores was analyzed quantitatively by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 20 for Windows. Independent and Paired Samples t-tests were conducted on the data collected through the final post-tests to see if there are any significant differences between the performance of the experimental group and the control group.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the research questions, the t-test scores were calculated and it showed that the two groups were homogeneous. According to the data in table 2 in pretest, for control group, the mean and the standard deviation were respectively 5.527 and 1.9986, and they were respectively 6.000 and 1.9986 for the experimental group.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Pre-test Scores

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental Group	30	6.000	1.9986	.3649
Control Group	30	5.527	2.0819	.3801

The total score = 10

Table 3 shows the results of the independent sample t-test to compare the pre-test scores between the experimental and control groups. It is clear that the difference between the groups is not significant at $p = .373 > 0.05$. Therefore, both groups are homogeneous before intervention.

Table 3. Independent Samples T-Test of Pre-test Scores

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	.056	.814	.898	58	.373	.4733	.5269
Equal variances not assumed			.898	57.904	.373	.4733	.5269

Regarding the post-test result, according to the data in table 4, for control group, the mean and the standard deviation were respectively 5.873 and 1.9647, and they were respectively 7.423 and 1.4727 for the experimental group.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Post-test Scores

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental Group	30	7.423	1.4727	.2689
Control Group	30	5.873	1.9647	.3587

The total score = 10

The independent sample t-test to compare the post-test scores between the experimental and control groups was also conducted. As table 5 shows, the difference between the groups is significant at $p = .001$ (two tailed) < 0.05 .

Table 5. Independent Samples T-test of Post-test Scores

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	2.190	.144	3.458	58	.001	1.5500	.4483
Equal variances not assumed			3.458	53.769	.001	1.5500	.4483

Besides, Table 6 presents that there was a greater increase in the test scores of the experimental group than the control group. The mean score of the experimental group rose from 6.000 to 7.42 while that of the control group only increased from 5.527 to 5.873.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Test Scores of Experimental Group and Control Group

Group	N	Pre-test		Post-test	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Experimental Group	30	6.000	1.9986	7.42	1.4727
Control Group	30	5.527	2.0819	5.873	1.9647

The total score = 10

To further investigate the impact of formative assessment on listening performance of the experimental group, a paired-sample t-test was also conducted. Table 7 shows that there was a statistically significant increase in the experimental group students' scores from the pre-test to the post-test, at $t(50) = -9.060$, $p < .05$ (two-tailed).

Table 7. Paired Samples T-test for Experimental Group

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Pretest - Posttest	-1.4233	.8605	.1571	-9.060	29	.001

Overall, the t-test for post-test (Table 5) and paired-samples t-test (Table 7) indicate that the difference between the two groups is significant at the level ($p < 0.05$). In other words, formative assessment had positive impacts on developing participants' listening comprehension performance. Thus, it indicates that the learners' listening enhancement in experimental group improved significantly.

V. CONCLUSION

Through data analysis, the researchers found that results indicated that the instruction of using formative assessment affect the learners' listening comprehension performance.

However, the activities which were used in the course both had strengths and weaknesses. Regarding the strengths, the students were expected to receive feedback continuously during the lesson and make adjustment on their answers. They knew how to provide and deal with feedback from the teacher and their friends. The teacher also reflected herself on students' work. When the students could not understand the question, the teacher adjusted it immediately.

Concerning the weaknesses, since the activities repeated many times in a period, some students felt bored then the teacher had to use her back-up plan such as games. Despite that fact, the students felt more confident when working in pairs to prepare the answers and more motivated when delivering feedback to their friends. Besides, their test scores increased significantly.

Formative assessment is recommended by the researcher to be used in the classroom. However, it is necessary for the teacher to get students familiar with the activity and change the activity after using it many times. Moreover, students should be instructed of how to give feedback and deal with it to improve their listening skills. Last but not least, students need to be aware of their learning process and keep moving to the end of the course.

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