The 'Mini-Viva' as a Tool to Enhance Assessment for Learning

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ABSTRACT   *This paper reports on an action research project which aimed to promote assessment for learning within a summative assignment. In an attempt to provide enhanced feedback to students, the process of their group assignment involved lecturer feedback at various stages. A particular focus was on a 'mini-viva', whereby students explained and justified to the lecturer selected aspects of their assignment after it was submitted but before a mark was awarded. Oral and written evaluation data were collected from students, two peer observers and from colleagues taking part in an action research team. Some implications for 'good assessment practices' are discussed.*

Introduction

This paper reports on a small-scale individual action research project which aimed to promote assessment for learning within a summative assignment. The study forms part of a larger collaborative project focusing on teaching, learning and assessment involving nine lecturers from different departments of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd), the main provider of teacher education in Hong Kong. The teacher education context provides a particular incentive to model assessment for learning, in view of the hope that in future, trainee teachers can themselves implement good practices in assessment.

Boud *et al*. (1999) argue that "Assessment is the single most powerful influence on learning in formal courses" (p. 413). Given its importance to students how can student learning be facilitated through assessment? Brown *et al*. (1995) argue as follows:

> The key to the use of assessment as an engine for learning is to allow the formative function to be pre-eminent. This is achieved by ensuring that each assignment contains plenty of opportunities for learners to receive detailed, positive and timely feedback with lots of advice on how to improve. (p. 81)

Furthermore, the literature on classroom formative assessment as summarised in the landmark article by Black & Wiliam (1998a) outlines the strong potential for learning

gains through well-focused formative assessment. Indeed, Black & Wiliam (1998b) argue that they know of no other method of raising standards for which such a strong prima facie case can be made.

Following from this, the action research aimed to place particular emphasis on assessment for learning or the formative aspects of assessment. For the purposes of the paper, the terms are used synonymously and drawing on definitions by Black & Wiliam (1998a) and Sadler (1989), they are defined as encompassing, "actions undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify or improve the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged". Assessment *for* learning was particularly emphasised in contrast to assessment *of* learning, the summative judgement on performance. As Boud (1995) points out, the dominance of summative assessment in the minds of students (and in the practices of staff) has tended to swamp the efforts of formative types of assessment.

Within this broad umbrella of formative assessment, 'good assessment practices' were to be promoted through:

- Providing prompt oral and written feedback during the preparation of the students' assignments and after its completion.
- Encouraging student self-evaluation of their work, with particular reference to the stated criteria.
- Fostering peer collaboration and feedback during the process of the assignment.

Context

The action research was carried out on the HKIEd Bachelor of Education (BEd) two-year primary full-time 'add-on' programme. 'Add-on' denotes that the course is designed for graduates of a two-year teaching certificate wishing to upgrade to degree level. The student cohort were already familiar because I had already taught them on year 1 of the programme and/or during their certificate programme.

Specifically, I was teaching a compulsory module for English major students entitled, Monitoring, Assessing and Testing in the ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom. This is a 2-credit point module of 30 hours duration, meeting once per week over a period of around 4 months. The class size was rather large with 50 students attending, all native-speakers of Cantonese training to become English teachers. The objectives of the module are for students to be able to:

(1) Illustrate their understanding of approaches to formal and informal, formative and summative assessment so as to promote pupil learning;
(2) Construct specific types of formal and informal assessment tools for use in the second language classroom and express cogently and accurately the associated rationale.

I am the sole lecturer for the module, which permits me a certain degree of autonomy. This was the first time that I had taught the module but I will also teach it again on two sister programmes: BEd (Mixed Mode) involving in-service teachers studying in evenings, weekends and holiday periods; and a 4-year full-time BEd programme. Any insights gained from action research into the module can thus be used to inform my future teaching of the same module to other cohorts of students.

The Action Research Process

Action research typically goes through cyclical stages of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and then re-planning again. More specifically, this research went through the stages of problem identification; designing a proposed solution, implementing the proposed solution, evaluating its effectiveness and considering implications. The remainder of the paper is roughly structured along these lines.

Problem

The problem revolved around two aspects of the learning processes of summative assignments. First, it was perceived that students put more emphasis on producing an acceptable product to obtain a grade rather than focusing more on the processes of achieving learning gains. Initial reflections were that students only seem to work on their assignments in earnest when the deadline is looming and this scenario tends to emphasise a product approach, with a possible repercussion being rushed, superficial or under-achieving work. Students are quite naturally, mainly preoccupied with obtaining a high mark rather than achieving understanding of the material (Greer, 2001). Once a mark is awarded, there does not seem to be much reflection on what they have learnt or how they might improve in the future.

The second issue related to the nature and usefulness of lecturer feedback to students. It was perceived that although lecturers usually mark assignments diligently and provide detailed written feedback to students, there are a number of limitations inherent in this process. First, there is often a fairly lengthy time gap between the submission of the assignment and receiving the marked version. Second, feedback is usually exclusively in writing with verbal discussion being generally either brief or non-existent. Third, amongst my colleagues, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that a minority of students do not even collect the marked assignments (this seems particularly a problem for part-time evening courses or for final year students). One student told me revealingly, that it was not his practice to collect the assignment if the mark awarded was low!

James (2000) in a study of mature students' experiences of assessment at a university in the UK reveals similar dissatisfactions: the lengthy time for the assignment to be returned; feedback containing a lack of concrete advice on how to improve; and in the case of good assignments, little indication of why the work was deemed to be good. A repercussion of these kinds of scenarios is that the potential learning benefits of feedback on summative assignments are not being fully exploited. Knight (1995) outlines a further limitation in that feedback is often restricted to the specifics of a task so that it fails to offer much general feedback for doing better on the next task. As Stefani (1998) summarises:

> It is still the case that too many academics believe that a grade, and a short series of comments, usually of simple praise or blame nature constitute feedback, when what students actually want, is user friendly information, relating to how they are doing and how specifically, they might be able to improve upon what they are doing. (p. 348)

Proposed Solution

In the present study, the research evidence on assessment for learning, as summarised in Black & Wiliam (1998a) influenced the development of a proposed solution. For

example, Butler (1988) in a study of 11-year old Israeli students compared three types of written feedback, 'comments only', 'comments with grade' and 'grade only'. In a controlled experiment, the 'comments only' group achieved significant learning gains, whilst the other two groups made no progress over a series of assessed tasks. The explanation for this seems to lie in the phenomenon that marks or grades engage the ego, so students focus more on the mark and its impact on their self-esteem than they do on the suggestions for improvement. As James (1998) observes, "Feedback is most effective if it encourages students to think about the task rather than to think about themselves" (p. 98). Similarly Sadler (1989), in his seminal paper on formative assessment, observes that "A grade may actually be counterproductive for formative purposes" (p. 121).

Stimulated by reading of the above literature, as preparation for teaching the module, the proposed solution here was to arrange the summative assignment in such a way that there would be more emphasis on a continual process of learning and that the feedback would emphasise improvement rather than solely the grading function. As a core element of the proposed solution, the concept of a 'mini-viva' was devised, i.e. a shorter and simplified version of the viva voce examination undertaken by doctoral candidates. The objective of the mini-viva was to provide prompt verbal feedback on the assignment, after its completion but before a mark was awarded. The idea for a mini-viva was prompted by the desire to provide an opportunity for timely feedback for the purpose of enhanced learning before a mark was awarded (cf. Butler, 1988 discussed above). The concept of a mini-viva was perhaps stimulated by my own doctoral viva voce examination that had taken place a few months prior to the commencement of the action research project. The implementation of the mini-viva is described in the next sub-section.

The assignment (see Appendix 1) was for students in groups of three to collect a portfolio of assessment tools, write a rationale and relate their tools to pupil learning in line with the main theme of the module, assessment for learning. A group assignment was chosen so as to maximise opportunities for sharing and collaboration amongst students and enhance possibilities of peer-assessment and self-assessment. Although somewhat tangential to the main discussion a few observations about the award of grades for group assignments should be made. One of the main challenges for group assignments is in judging the contribution of individual members so as to ensure that individuals as well as the group are reliably assessed on their performance. In particular, there is a danger that less hard-working or less able students may be rewarded for work they have not done (Conway *et al.*, 1993). It was decided to award two grades, one for the individual contribution and one for the group as a whole based on suggestions outlined by Kuisma (1998). Each group was required to indicate clearly the specific individual contributions of students. The assessment weighting for the group element was slightly higher than the individual part on the basis that 'the whole is greater than the sum of the parts'. A more detailed discussion of the rating of group assignments is beyond the focus of this paper, but overall it was felt that the above procedure facilitated a reliable assessment of student performance.

Implementation of a Solution

In view of the above, the implementation plan for the summative assignment was as follows. First, to encourage an early start to the assignment, students were given some initial time in class in week 6 (6 weeks before the hand-in date) to reflect on the requirements of the assignment and begin planning. Second, in week 8, students

submitted via e-mail an outline of the assignment and received brief written feedback for further development and were encouraged to draft as much of their work as possible before the next stage. Third, in weeks 9 and 10, students (in their groups of three) had a short pre-submission tutorial of about 15–20 minutes to receive further feedback on the ongoing progress of the assignment. Fourth, students handed in the assignment in week 12, three weeks before the end of the module.

After the provisional marking of the assignment, students attended their 'mini-viva' in weeks 13 and 14. The mini-viva was a post-submission tutorial lasting 15–20 minutes in which the groups of three students answered queries about the content of their completed assignments, had an opportunity to clarify or justify their approach and received feedback. Questions that were posed included specific questions, e.g. 'What did you mean by statement X on page Y?' or 'On page A, you said B, can you justify that statement?'; general questions, e.g. 'Can you summarise how your assessments items might promote student learning?'; and questions related to grammatical accuracy and understanding, e.g. 'Can you identify a grammatical problem in sentence Z?'. The latter aspect is particularly emphasised in contemporary Hong Kong in view of concerns about the language standards of teachers and the associated policy of a benchmark level of language proficiency for teachers (Falvey & Coniam, 1997; Hong Kong Government, 2000). Student performance in the mini-viva was not assessed as its purposes were solely for discussion and feedback.

As a final stage to the assignment process, after the mini-viva tutorial the assignment scripts were re-examined and provisional grades for the assignment were finalised. For a small number of borderline scripts, convincing or unconvincing responses during the mini-viva were an additional source of information available, although as far as possible the award of marks was based solely on the merits of the written script. A sample of three scripts were then moderated with a colleague, as per standard HKIEd quality assurance procedures.

Data Collection Methods

A number of data collection methods were used, three involving the collection of student feedback and two involving input from colleagues.

First, *classroom assessment techniques* (Angelo & Cross, 1993) were used, principally in terms of 'five-minute papers' whereby the whole class responded in writing to some focus questions related to the teaching, learning and assessment for the module. Three of these 'five-minute papers' were distributed respectively at the beginning, mid-point and end of module to collect feedback on assessment for learning. Second, a *focus group* of three students was formed. Two taped discussions of about 30–40 minutes were carried out and transcribed to provide additional oral data to supplement the whole-class written feedback. The first focus group discussion was at the mid-point of the module to review progress to date and outline suggestions for improvement. The second focus group discussion was at the end of the module and sought to evaluate the teaching of the module, with particular emphasis on the process of the assignment. Third, *formal module evaluation and teaching evaluation* data were also collected at the end of the module using standardised Institute forms.

In addition to the feedback sought from students as outlined above, two other methods of collecting data about teaching, learning and assessment on the module were employed. First, *peer observations* of my teaching were carried out by one external visitor and one HKIEd action research team member. The purpose of the peer observations was

to collect informed professional opinion on the teaching of the module and the student response, with particular emphasis on formative assessment. A short tailor-made feedback form was completed by the peer observers. Second, at the regular *action research team meetings*, the collaborative discussions triggered further insights into the teaching, learning and assessment process. Through presenting and discussing individual experiences, team members were often able to clarify or stimulate their thinking and collect opinions from other team members. In particular, during the team meeting where I presented an earlier version of this paper, a lively discussion ensued which was particularly useful in refining my ideas.

Findings from Evaluation Data

For the purposes of this paper, the subsequent discussion will focus principally on those findings which pertained most directly to the mini-viva and the process of the assignment. Other data, such as student comments on other aspects of the module or the feedback from peer observers will not be discussed.

Overall, student feedback was generally positive about the process of doing their assignment with the pre- and post-assignment tutorials being highlighted as particularly positive aspects. A selection of comments from the summative 'five minute papers' and module evaluation data are quoted below to provide a flavour of the main responses from students:

> In the tutorials, we can ask you the questions that puzzled us. So we have a clearer picture on how to do the assignment. Concerning the feedback, it is fair because we have the chance to explain what we are thinking.

> The individual tutorials before and after doing the assignment are very useful. We could really get useful feedback.

> The tutor can satisfy different groups' own problems.

> We have individual tutorials before and after doing the assignment, so that we can get useful feedback to improve our work.

> I like the feedback sessions as we could learn from it for how we did the assignment and it's a chance for us to clarify any unclear issues in the feedback session. Tutorial is also good, but it is better for us to prepare something before we have the tutorials. Also it would be good to clarify what we should, can and can't do in the tutorials.

Negative aspects of the process of doing the assignment focused principally on requests for the assignment description to be more explicit. In particular, there was some confusion of the term 'portfolio' as the students had already previously collected very detailed field experience portfolios for another module and this influenced their interpretation of the term. There seemed to be a general feeling that the assignment task description could have made more clear, perhaps by the addition of some focus questions after the part on relating assessment to pupil learning, which was perceived as the most challenging part of the assignment. Some student opinions included:

> I personally think it confused us as 'portfolio' gave us the sense that it should be a collection of a lot of items in it. We had worked for a long period of time to clarify what we should do.

> The instruction [for the assignment] is not very concrete and sometimes makes us feel confused.

> The guideline [for the assignment] can be more detailed and clear.

With respect to the mini-viva, there were few negative sentiments but in the focus group discussions one student commented that she would like to have known her mark immediately at the end of the tutorial and another stated that she would have preferred to have a longer time for the discussion.

A further issue is the manageability of the assignment in terms of student workload. There were relatively few complaints about workload generated by the assignment, which was somewhat surprising because in my experience students invariably complain about assignment workload! In the focus group discussion, the students indicated that a group assignment usually generates a higher workload than an individual assignment because of the meetings and discussions which are needed. In terms of learning, the focus group felt that they generally learn more from a group assignment than an individual assignment: reasons suggested were that the process of discussion (and argument) with group members forces them to clarify their thinking (although it can sometimes be frustrating); and that peer learning takes place.

The assignments themselves also form part of the dataset in that they provide an indication of student learning on the module. Overall, I was pleased with the quality of work produced by the students and tentatively I had the impression that as a whole, the body of work was superior to that produced by other groups when such a systematic feedback process had not been carried out. As brief evidence of student work two extracts are attached in the Appendices. The first, Appendix 2, is a student self-evaluation form adapted from the stated module assessment criteria. During the entire process of the assignment, students were encouraged to evaluate their performance with reference to the stated criteria (Appendix 1). Five of the 17 groups included some kind of self-assessment checklist and I appreciated this one (Appendix 2) because the students acknowledged that they were only partially able to meet two aspects of the criteria, rather than other groups which tended to claim mastery of all aspects of their checklist. Stefani (1998) emphasises the link between clearly understood assessment criteria and the capacity for student self-assessment. An issue for further development relates to clarifying student interpretations of the assessment criteria. This might include students developing their own criteria for assessment of their work. Or, an alternative way of raising awareness of the criteria could be a classroom activity whereby students are presented with a sample script from a previous cohort and are asked to evaluate it against the criteria. This would encourage them to interpret and apply the criteria and would also provide experience of peer evaluation.

A second brief extract of one student's work is included as Appendix 3. Four of the 17 groups included some kind of overall reflection on the processes of the assignment and for this sample chosen, all three group members wrote their own individual reflection. This reflection, submitted as part of the conclusion to the assignment, provides evidence of some of the learning processes involved in the preparation of the assignment. Such reflections integrate well with the overall ethos of their BEd programme on teachers as reflective practitioners.

Conclusions and Implications

This action research report has focused on the conduct of an assignment involving a slightly early submission followed by a mini-viva to facilitate discussion and feedback between students and the lecturer. The process of the assignment and mini-viva was evaluated positively by the students. However, discussion with the other action research team members and my own subsequent reflections revealed some limitations

to the tool of a mini-viva. First, it might not be feasible on a module involving more than one lecturer, unless other staff were willing to try it out. Second, it seems most feasible with either a small cohort of students doing individual assignments or a larger group of students doing group assignments, as otherwise carrying out the tutorials and mini-vivas would tend to become too time-consuming. Third, as pointed out by the action research team members, it requires the agreement of students to cooperate in an innovative assessment method. In this case it was not problematic, as the concepts underlying the assessment method were inculcated throughout the module and in addition mutual trust had been developed between the students and myself over a period of time. The latter might not necessarily be the case for a group of students who were not familiar with a lecturer and so there may be some resistance to an earlier assignment deadline or novel assessment procedures. Fourth, a mini-viva seems particularly suited to a module on assessment so that the lecturer can provide loop input (Woodward, 1991), i.e. a congruence between content and process. In this case, introducing concepts in assessment (the content) and using those same concepts to inform assessment strategies (the process).

Finally, the practicality in terms of workload needs to be considered. The work reported in this paper generated some additional workload for me, which may discourage other lecturers from adopting similar methods. There were, however, some strategies which kept the workload manageable. First, the group assignment, although justified on pedagogic grounds in terms of collaboration, sharing and cooperative learning, was also relatively workload efficient in terms of marking and small group tutorials. Second, tutorials were instead of, not in addition to, a regular taught class. For this class of 50, the 17 small group tutorials lasted about 4–5 hours and this was 'compensated' by not having to teach and prepare materials for a two-hour class. Although the additional workload was not excessive, the arrangement and timing of the mini-viva requires careful planning and organisation, and the provisional marking of the assignments needed to be carried out promptly. A spur to mark student work swiftly is probably a useful stimulus! Overall, I would argue that the mini-viva is a useful tool to add or adapt to one's repertoire of techniques in assessment for learning. In particular, the positive response from students in terms of attitudes and learning were especially encouraging.

To conclude, some wider questions are posed which may form the basis of a summary of points for further reflection on formative assessment practices. As lecturers and teachers to what extent are we:

- using assessment for the purpose of improving student learning (rather than merely for purposes of grading or certification)?
- providing an appropriate balance between formative and summative aspects of assessment?
- providing timely feedback for student improvement, both orally and in writing as appropriate?

Additionally, to what extent are our learners:

- engaged in peer- and self-assessment practices which promote learning and facilitate learner independence?
- making improvements in learning in accordance with the feedback which they have received?

A possible implication is that teachers, at various levels of education, would benefit from further professional development in the area of formative assessment. One step in this

direction is for the sharing of practices in formative assessment and it is hoped that this paper provides a modest contribution in this vein. Perhaps the most significant message of the paper is the need for a variety of techniques, experimentation and reflection related to assessment for learning.

Notes on Contributor

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Appendix 1. Summative Assignment

Summative Assignment

Task. Design a portfolio of informal and formal assessment tools for the primary ESL classroom. Explain the rationale for the assessment tools/items. Indicate the relationship between the assessments and pupil learning.

Organisation and procedures. Work in a group of three. Indicate clearly on the assignment, the responsibilities of each member of the group, as you will receive one individual mark (40% weighting) and one group mark (60% weighting). The assignment should be handed in by 5 pm on 2nd May 2001. I will then mark the portfolio and award a provisional grade. I will invite the group for a tutorial and will ask questions to clarify any queries about the assignment and the respective individual student contributions. Final grades will be awarded after these tutorials.

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

A	*DISTINCTION*	The portfolio is very well-designed, coherent and reflects good assessment practices. The rationale is clear, well-written and there is evidence of a reasonably wide knowledge of relevant literature, very well-referenced. The relationship between assessment and pupil learning is clearly and perceptively indicated. Some originality and creativity is shown. There is a very high degree of English accuracy. No major errors occur in assessment items; for prose parts, a wide range of simple and complex structures are used successfully and grammatical structures are invariably accurate with communication never impeded.
B	*CREDIT*	The portfolio is quite well-designed, has some coherence and shows an understanding of good assessment practices. The rationale is reasonably clear and quite well-written and there is evidence of a knowledge of relevant literature, well-referenced. The relationship between assessment and pupil learning is indicated quite well. There is a high degree of language accuracy in the assessment tasks. For prose parts, a wide range of simple and complex structures are used reasonably successfully and grammatical structures are usually accurate with communication seldom impeded.
C	*PASS*	The portfolio is adequately designed, although there are some limitations in balance or in understanding of good assessment practices. The rationale is satisfactory and there is evidence of a knowledge of some relevant literature, adequately referenced. The relationship between assessment and pupil learning is discussed but with limitations. There are some inaccuracies in language accuracy in the assessment tasks. For prose parts, an adequate range of simple and complex structures are used reasonably successfully and grammatical structures are generally accurate with communication generally discernible.
D	*MARGINAL PASS*	The portfolio has weaknesses in design and demonstrates only partial understanding of good assessment practices. The rationale does not justify the choice of portfolio items satisfactorily and does not show adequate evidence of a knowledge of relevant literature and/or inadequate referencing. The relationship between assessment and pupil learning is not covered adequately. Assessment tasks do not show a high degree of accuracy. For prose parts, grammatical structures are generally accurate but errors tend to occur when complex structures are attempted; communication is sometimes impeded.
E	*FAIL*	Not yet able to reach the requirements for a D grade. In particular, assignments which contain major errors in assessment tasks and widespread errors in prose parts will be awarded failure grades.

Note to students.

If you have any suggestions for minor adjustments to the assignment or criteria, please let me know verbally or via e-mail by 19th February, 2001. I am willing to revise the assignment or criteria if specific, convincing suggestions are made. Whenever possible, teachers and students should be partners in assessment.

Appendix 2. Sample self-assessment criteria developed by students

(Reproduced using the exact language as written by the students)

	Able to	Partially able to	Not yet able to
The portfolio is very well-organised, with a cover page, content page, formative and summative tasks, rationale as well as references.	✓		
There is a very high degree of English accuracy.	✓		
No major errors occur in assessment items.	✓		
The relationship between assessment and pupil learning is clearly and perceptively indicated.		✓	
Some originality and creativity is shown.		✓	
The rationale is clear, well-written and there is evidence of a reasonably wide knowledge of relevant literature, very well-referenced.	✓		
For prose parts, a wide range of simple and complex structures are used successfully and grammatical structures are invariably accurate with communication never impeded.	✓		

Appendix 3. Sample student reflection submitted as a concluding section to the assignment

(Reproduced using the exact language as written by the student)

Reflection on the Assignment

After doing this assignment, I have learned more in the aspects of assessment and have a valuable experience in my learning.

Through the different stages of discussing and evaluating our assignment, difficulties have been solved and insights were gained. The assignment was supplemented and modified after every discussion. Besides, the concepts of assessment are gradually built up and questions about assessment are always asked during our learning process. For example, "What kinds of assessment task should we design?", "Why do we use those tools?" and "What are we going to assess the students?" are the questions we also remind ourselves to think about.

I enjoyed working with my friends, and the peer evaluation played a remarkable part in my experience. The suggestion and the opinions of my friends strengthened the organization and structure of my work. They brought me into another side to think about my idea. This is really important as it provides an opportunity for me to consolidate and evaluate my learning.