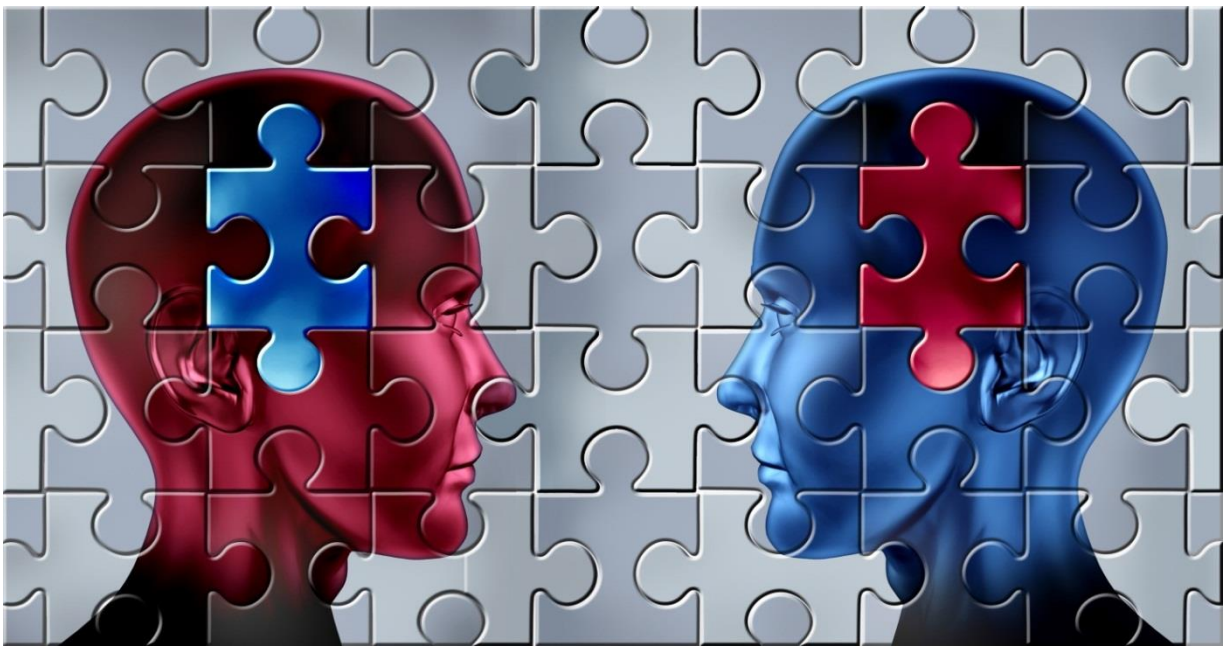

Exchanges: the Warwick Research Journal

Volume 1, Issue 1, October 2013

http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk

Teachers' approaches to language classroom assessment in Cameroon primary schools

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Abstract

Assessment has a huge impact on ESL primary pupils, in part, because on the curriculum English is both a subject and also a language of learning all the other subjects. For children still acquiring L1 it is daunting sometimes to be expected to understand concepts in L2. It may be difficult then to gather information to make an impartial judgement with regards to a pupil's language level. This study is a preliminary inquiry that attempts to find out teachers' approaches to classroom assessment in Cameroon primary schools. Using a qualitative open-ended question the researcher finds out three main categories of assessment approaches used by teachers. From the categories extrapolations on possible assumptions that guide teachers' choices of assessment procedures are described and suggested for future study.

Keywords

Classroom assessment approach, Cameroon, scheme of work, ESL/EFL, Young Learners

Language learning in a bilingual context

Cameroon has maintained a bilingual policy since re-unification between West Cameroon (English-speaking) and East Cameroon (French-speaking), in 1961. In spite of attempts to harmonise both systems of education and develop a "Cameroonised" version, it has never reached a satisfactory conclusion because it is a delicate political issue. Therefore, English-speaking Cameroon followed its own system of education until the 1998 when Law No. 98/004 of 14th April was passed organising the Cameroon educational system into two subsystems, English-speaking and French-speaking.

Furthermore, Article 15 (2) of the law states that "the two educational systems shall co-exist with either maintaining its specificity in methods of assessment and certification." At the primary level Article 15 (2) seems to have been implemented for end of course examinations. However, at the level of classroom assessment this does not appear to be the case as observation and official texts from the Ministry of Basic Education indicate a

convergence in both sub-systems. One reason for this state of affairs could be due to the centralised educational policies.

The majority of children beginning formal primary education are bilingual or multilingual in Home Language (HL), Pidgin English (lingua franca), and some basic English language. Unlike many African countries Cameroon has no formal education in any HL; it is English and French for Anglophones, or French and English for Francophones from pre-school to university (Kouega, 2002, Bobda, 2004).To English-speaking primary school pupils, then, English is taught as a second language (ESL) unlike French-speaking pupils who learn English as a foreign language (EFL).

Broadly, ESL would try to access the transactional and practical side of English as in EFL plus the whole range of skills, abilities, cognitive processes and the cultural nuances of the language through space and time. The primary school pupil has to learn the language as subject and as language for accessing the other subjects on the curriculum.

English language syllabus

The primary school syllabus for English language informs the framework in the process of teaching, learning and assessment. The objectives in the Preamble to the English language syllabi state that after six years of study:

> [T]he primary pupil must acquire good command of the language at four levels: listening, speaking, reading and writing. All four language skills should be developed to avoid training pupils who could master reading and writing well but not be able to express themselves orally with efficiency. This English syllabus tries to cater for the three domains of learning i.e. the cognitive, the psychomotor and the affective and also stresses the importance of participatory methods. (Ministry of National Education 2000:1)

Here the general curriculum policy clearly states the skills and competences which are expected for the primary school graduate to show mastery and awareness of. A key participant in the learning-teaching process is the teacher. There are other important

stakeholders but the role of the teacher is primordial especially in classroom assessment approaches.

Researching classroom assessment: gaining a teacher's perspective

Studies have been carried out on primary classroom assessment (Rea-Dickins 2001, Pryor and Lubisi 2002, O'Sullivan 2004, Jane, 2012) but the present study seeks specifically to find out teachers' approaches to language classroom assessment in the primary school in Cameroon. One way to check on the language learning progress of children is by examining the approaches to classroom assessment. The assumption is that the syllabus objectives should determine assessment approaches.

Much has been written about the various approaches to English language assessment at the primary level but not many on ESL primary learners. Struck by the low level of language development of pupils who had successful completed the primary cycle I wondered if the approaches in assessing pupils during English language lessons were appropriate to encourage the skills and competences stated in the syllabus objectives. The research intends to find out if there is convergence or divergence between the syllabus objectives and assessment approach.

The 27 teachers reported in this study were part of a larger sample involved in a wider investigation. Teaching experiences spanned from 3 to more than 11 years, with the majority of the sample having taught between 6 and 10 years. Furthermore, the teachers represented all the 6 primary school levels, to find out if there were any differences in approaches to assessment practice.

Convenience non-random sampling was chosen for the sample selection because teachers wanted payment from the researcher before taking part in the research. To avoid this unethical research conduct, only respondents who did not ask for payment were included in the sample. Again it was difficult convincing the teachers about the benefit of this research for teaching and learning. Cohen et al (2011) and Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue that this method of sampling is sufficient for a small scale research where there is no desire to generalise beyond the sample in question. Moreover, Pryor and Lubisi (2002) and O'Sullivan (2004) in their empirical studies on South Africa and

Namibia applied a similar sampling technique. In the absence of generalisability of the research results I wanted the research to be representative of the school levels.

The instrument for the research problem was an open ended question that sought from participants what assessment procedures (approaches) were used during English language lessons considering the syllabus objectives. The data for this study was analysed using broad classifications to which, depending on a participant's feedback, a descriptor was assigned.

Classifying teacher approaches

The feedback from the 27 participants was classified into three clusters.

The first cluster I call the **syllabus-bound teachers**. This cluster of 8 teachers is bound religiously to the syllabus not taking into consideration the fact that the syllabus may be difficult or too easy for the children:

- The programme designed for the class is strictly followed (Class 4 teacher).
- Classroom instructions, examples, and samples are most of the time extended but assessment is always based on the syllabus (Class 5 teacher)
- The pupils at the end of the 'séquence' [continuous assessment] should be able to attain the set goals for the programme (Class 3 teacher).

The next cluster I call the **middle-of-the-road teachers**. Like the name implies, these are teachers (15 of them) who take from both sides. They look around and use what is good for a certain topic:

- I follow the scheme with the lessons. I do formative assessment. After 2 weeks of teaching a topic or unit I give a summative test. End of term exam covers the programme for the year (Class 6 teacher).
- I assess following what I have taught (Class 1 teacher)
- Pupil skill and performances are assessed (Class 3 teacher)
- You cannot assess what you have not taught (Class 1 teacher).
- It is what the children have learnt that is being assessed (Class 4 teacher).
- Assessment is given based on what has been done for the academic year (Class 5 teacher).

- So the assessment is directly based on the various topics taught and found in the work scheme for the week, term and year (Class 2 teacher).

The third cluster I call **syllabus-unbound teachers**. These are 4 teachers who are aware of the syllabus but are not bound to it. The syllabus is just a reference document but what is done is for the well-being of the child. The syllabus or programme can have its content added, reduced or drawn aside depending whether it matches with the learners:

- At times the syllabus does not reflect the school programme because children should not be tied down only to syllabus while the social skills are left out (Class 3 teacher).

Middle-of-the-road respondents form the biggest cluster of teachers and these are likely teachers who follow closely ministerial guidelines and at the same time carry out informal assessment. This cluster also has teachers representing all school levels.

From the analysis and presentation of the data some answers to the research problem began to emerge concerning approaches to classroom assessment used by teachers in English lessons.

Areas for consideration

Teachers' beliefs and rational choice

Significant research in education would seem to suggest that teachers' belief influences their classroom practice (Gonzales and Fuggan, 2012). Stoynoff (2012) also makes suggestions along similar lines that teachers need to reflect on their assessment practices and beliefs for the process helps them determine how they may use assessment results to improve learning. Even where there exists assessment framework, reflection can serve as a guide in the classroom. Teachers need to make a variety of options for assessment but selection of assessment procedure should be based on the curricular aims, purpose of assessment and learners. Similarly, the syllabus objectives which stress developing a complete learner who can master reading and writing efficiently, as well as listening and speaking need be considered in classroom assessment approaches.

Bearing this in mind then it may be better to understand assessment approach from the teachers' perspectives so as to be able to comprehend the beliefs with which they define their work (Jane, 2012).

Evidence gleaned from this preliminary study indicates that teachers consider assessment approaches which are appropriate for children still developing not only cognitively, but emotionally. Jane (2012) notes that no matter the level of experience and competence, teachers appear to make decisions which to them reflect rational choices that attempt to promote pupils' learning. This could influence approaches to assessment selected.

Teacher training

There is the need for teachers to receive training, often on assessment. They need to understand the different approaches to assessment depending on the purpose, including basic concepts whether dealing with implicit or explicit approaches to assessment (Davidson and Leung, 2009). Some teachers seem to construct only 'séquence'/'testing', 'assessment of learning' (Lambert and Lines, 2001), unaware that language development is the key, rather than language testing. An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used by teachers, and by their students to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged (Black et al., 2003).

Pre-service training in assessment has to be encouraged in teacher training colleges, while the new teachers are given induction on assessment, and monitored by experienced teachers. All teachers, Stoynoff (2012) suggests, need to sustain continuous experience in assessment so that they may be able to fulfil their professional responsibilities. They can gather a wealth of experiences from training, workshops and seminars. This may take the form of in-service and professional development training on assessment.

Policy and practice

A national policy on assessment would probably begin to create awareness of assessment especially as the English language syllabus adopts a cross-curricular/topic-

based approach and a communicative language teaching method. Experience shows that curriculum designers may have the aim of meeting up with the various trends of globalisation but at the level of implementation very little progress is made. One reason for this is the educational budget which can hardly suffice for an elaborate national programme targeting teachers. Another difficulty is bureaucracy in the ministry which makes it hard for upward communication between the teachers who are the implementers of teaching-learning programmes and those doing the planning. Maybe teachers' behaviour is affected by multiple pressures such as working condition, lack of basic didactic equipment by both pupils and teaching staff and overcrowded classrooms (Harris and Brown, 2008).

Summary

The study has indicated that teachers use formative and summative approaches under three categories: teachers who are always testing; those whose procedure entails testing and informal assessment; and those who mainly make informal assessment. Some light can be shed on teacher condition in the context of Cameroon to draw attention to variables that may have a significant influence on teachers' work. This study needs to be extended with a larger sample, in-depth interviews and observation as instruments to collect data, and investigate in more depth the relation between teacher beliefs and assessment approach. A further stage would be to juxtapose this with the placing of the young learners themselves at the centre of assessment, bringing to light their perspectives regarding the nature of assessment approaches.

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