Utilizing Proficiency Test as an English Language Learning Instrument

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ABSTRACT

A number of scholars have viewed that assessment for learning as informal assessment, and assessment of learning as formal assessment. In the field of English learning, proficiency tests are mainly defined as learning objectives or learning assessment tools in most studies, that is by focusing at the results of how much can English learners score in the tests. The purpose of this study is to collect necessary data on English learners’ attitudes toward formatively use of summative language assessment tool. In addition, this study analyzes the proficiency test as a task oriented tool for English learners in the learning process. 92 senior students of a technical college, who were enrolled in English proficiency test remedial classes, participated in the study. Quantitative research method was applied to the study. Survey instruments were administered at the end of a semester to collect the data of learners’ attitudes toward using English proficiency test (TOEIC) as an English learning instrument. Statistics analyses were performed to analyze collected data.

INTRODUCTION

Hiller (2002) defines the summative assessment occurs at the end of learning, where formative assessment occurs during the course of learning to assist teachers and learners to know the progress of learning. Moreover, formal assessment methods may be used in the informal assessment throughout the course of learning. That is, formal assessment contributes to the identification of achieved outcomes as specified by the learning program, where informal assessment does not necessary have to be (Hillier, 2002).

Brown (1994) and Kruidenier (2002) view that assessment for learning as informal assessment, and assessment of learning as formal assessment. Ecclestone (2004) argues that formative assessment is synonymous with continuous assessment or courses without end examinations. Fordham et al. (1995) also argue that summative and formative assessment should be equally important and useful. Derrick and Ecclestone (2008) further suggest that summative assessment should be used formatively. This study intends to adopt Derrick and Ecclestone’s (2008) theory and put it into practice. TOEIC test assess English learners at the end of their learning, that is, it is more of a summative assessment, where this study implemented the test formatively. This study intends to collect data on English learners’ attitudes toward formatively use of summative language assessment tool. Furthermore, the study focuses the English proficiency test (TOEIC) as a task oriented tool for English learners in the learning process.

Learning Assessment Process

Assessment can support learning or just simply record it Ecclestone (2004). Black et al. (2002) argued that the first priority for assessment for learning is to promote students learning. That is, an
assessment can assist learning if it provides feedback and it becomes a formative assessment which can bring teaching to meet learning needs. Improvement of students’ understanding of the assessment process should be viewed as part of learning (Lindsay and Gawn, 2005).

Claxton (1995) and Boud (2000) indicated that when learners are involved in the assessment process the assessment of learning can be effective. Most commentators agree that students’ involvement in the assessment process is necessary for authentic learning (Derrick and Ecclestone, 2008). Furthermore, for students with less achievement in the previous education, the effect of authentic involving in the process of assessment is even greater (Fordham et al., 1995; Lindsay and Gawn, 2005; McGivney, 1996; and Merton, 2001). The nature and quality of learners’ involvement should be considered important and understanding of the language and the process of assessment need to be taught to the learners (Derrick and Ecclestone, 2008).

Assessment and Motivation

Brown (1994) suggests that assessment should develop and maintain learners’ intrinsic motivation throughout the learning. He further argues that because of the importance of the intrinsic motivation, it is necessary for teachers to distinguish between teaching (formative) and formal testing (summative assessment). Kruidenier (2002) further argues that most widely-used summative assessment tools none of them aims to assess motivation. And with the focus of intrinsic motivation, assessment should be fully integrated into instruction. Focusing on assessment and assessment of learning as key elements of the process can help develop motivation, confidence and autonomy, which may produce further benefits in terms of citizenship (Derrick and Ecclestone, 2008).

Task Oriented Learning

J. Willis (1996) defines a task as an activity ‘where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome’. Language in a communicative task is seen as bringing about an outcome through the exchange of meanings. One obvious outcome is the exchange of information in spoken or written form. But there are other possible outcomes to which the exchange of information may be contributory but subsidiary. Learners may also ask to exchange and carry out instructions, or to solve a problem, or to entertain one another with anecdotes, spoken or written. All of these activities have a goal which is independent of the language used to achieve goal.

RESEARCH METHOD

A task (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004) can be interpreted as a meaning-focused and goal-oriented activity that aims to promote using language as a vehicle of communication to achieve specific ends within authentic and meaningful context. Therefore, the Task-based Approach is referred to as an approach to language learning and teaching that implements a series of tasks to provoke communication and interaction between learners via using the target language purposefully.

Willis (2001) mentioned Task-based Learning sees language use as the driving force in language learning. The study of language itself may enhance effective learning, but it is subsidiary to language use. In performing the task, students can experience an achievement of producing, manipulating in authentic language while attention is principally paid to meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989).

More than ninety college students enrolled in English proficiency test remedial classes in a technical university located in Northern Taiwan were selected as the subjects of the study. The remedial
class was a prerequisite for senior students to graduate who did not pass required English proficiency test scores. The required textbook for the class was a preparation guide for taking TOEIC test. A survey questionnaire was developed and pilot tested. The questionnaire has 5-point Likert scale responses; from 1-strongly agree to 5-strongly disagree. After 18 weeks of class instruction, the survey was administered at the end of the course.

RESULTS

There were 75 female and 17 male participants in the study and all of them were senior college students. There were 30% of the participants majored in Applied English, 22% in Applied Japanese, 25% in International Trade, and about 14% in Business Management. That is, there were about half of the participants in applied language related majors and half in the business related majors. Results showed that more than 65% of the participants considered TOEIC guidebook as a preferable English listening learning material. 63% of the participants indicated TOEIC guidebook as a preferable English grammar learning material. More than 67% of the participants considered TOEIC guidebook as a preferable English vocabulary learning material. Noticeably, 75% of the participants indicated that TOEIC guidebook is a preferable English reading learning material.

Furthermore, more than 58% of the participants indicated that they would like to use the TOEIC guidebook as the textbook for their freshman English class. More than 54% of the participants indicated that they have gained knowledge in English business writing by using the material. More than 66% of the students indicated that they have gained knowledge in English business conversation by using the material.

More than 76% of the students indicated that they have realized the importance of English because of using the TOEIC guidebook as an English learning material. More than 62% of the students indicated that they would like to learn more of English because of the material. There were 64% of the participants indicated that they were interested in learning English, in addition, more than 49% of the students indicated that they have gained interests in learning English because of the material. Furthermore, about 72% of the participants would recommend TOEIC guidebook as an English learning material for future students.

Pearson correlation analyses were utilized to exam if there were significant correlation existed between students who have gained interests in learning English because of the material and their attitudes toward using the guidebook as English listening, grammar, reading, vocabulary, and business writing learning materials. As seen in Table 1, the results indicated that there were significant positive correlations existed between the interests gained and using the TOEIC guidebook as English listening material \((r = .486, p < .01)\), grammar material \((r = .385, p < .01)\), reading material \((r = .241, p < .05)\), vocabulary material \((r = .231, p < .05)\), and business writing \((r = .235, p < .05)\). Students who indicated that they have gained interests in learning English tend to consider the guidebook as a preferable English listening, grammar, reading, vocabulary, and business writing material.

Additional Pearson Correlation analyses were performed to exam if there were significant correlation existed between students who have gained interests in learning English because of the material and other variables. As seen in Table 2, results showed that there were significant positive correlations existed between the interests gained and using the TOEIC guidebook as Freshmen English class material \((r = .265, p < .05)\), gained knowledge in American culture because of the material \((r = .397, p < .01)\), interested in learning English in the future \((r = .750, p < .01)\), would like to take TOEIC test to see how
they learned via using the guidebook as an English learning material ($r = .658, p < .01$), and would recommend future students to use the guidebook as English learning material ($r = .329, p < .01$).

Students who indicated that they have gained interests in learning English tend to consider taking the TOEIC test in the future to exam what they have learned and would recommend the material for future students. In addition, they also tend to consider the guidebook as a preferable Freshmen English class learning material, a tool for them to gain knowledge about American culture, and motivating them to learn English in the future. listening, grammar, reading, vocabulary, and business writing materials.

### Table 1

Pearson Correlation: Correlation between students who have gained interests in learning English because of the material and their attitudes toward using the guidebook as English listening, grammar, reading, vocabulary, and business writing learning materials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gained Interests in Learning English</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening Material</td>
<td>.486**</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar Material</td>
<td>.385**</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Material</td>
<td>.241*</td>
<td>.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Material</td>
<td>.231*</td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Writing</td>
<td>.235*</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

### Table 2

Pearson Correlation: Correlation between students who have gained interests in learning English because of the material and their attitudes toward using the guidebook as Freshmen English Class material, gained more knowledge in American culture, interest in learning English in the future, taking the TOEIC test in the future, and recommend for future students to use it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gained Interests in Learning English</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshmen English Class Material</td>
<td>.265*</td>
<td>.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gained Knowledge in American Culture</td>
<td>.397**</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future English Learning</td>
<td>.750**</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take TOEIC Test</td>
<td>.658**</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommend for Future Students</td>
<td>.329**</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

### CONCLUSION

This study intended to exam learners’ attitudes toward using the guidebook to the TOEIC test as an English learning material. Results showed that after 18 weeks of implementing the learning material and class instruction, majority of the participants in the study indicated that the guidebook could be served as a preferable material for learning English listening, grammar, vocabulary, reading, business writing, and business conversation. Moreover, results also indicated that using the material tends to motivate learners’ interests in learning English. Furthermore, based on the results of the study, indicted there were positive
correlations between interests in learning English gained and other variables. Results of the study may only be applied to the college students with applied language related and business related majors and using guidebook specifically for preparing TOEIC test. Future studies should exam students with different majors or interests. In addition, future studies should also investigate into other language assessment tools.

REFERENCES


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