An Exploration Of Learners' Perspectives About Assessment Practices In Pakistani Language Classrooms

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Abstract

This study is a descriptive research, which explores the assessment strategies which have been used primarily for teaching of English to graduate students at college level in Pakistan and how these assessment strategies have been perceived by learners. Assessment and evaluation are two significant components of teaching. Teachers are required to evaluate learning through various activities to provide their feedback in terms of marks, remarks or grades. Language teachers' roles of 'evaluator and corrector' are predominant. Due to large number of students classrooms become authoritarian and autocratic. Learning assessment is through class tests, quizzes and exams. Learners are not aware of how to utilize their teachers' feedback for improving their performance. Black & Williams (2009) have presented concept of formative assessment as a way to get information about students' learning, which enables teachers to adapt their teaching methodologies and modify their instructions for meeting learners' learning needs. Students are trained to be critical of their performance, and are encouraged to be the managers of their own learning. Teachers reflect on the impact of their teaching on learners' performance. Plethora of empirical research proves how formative assessment can be used for making learners independent and interdependent. The present study investigated learners' perspective about how assessment can be modified by providing an insight to learners about their existing level of learning, encouraging them to partake the responsibility of their learning and developing connection among learners and teachers. Data were gathered through focus group interviews which were taken from the students who had recently graduated from various colleges of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Interviews were recorded and thematic analysis was performed. Findings of the research helped to suggest how existing assessment can be upgraded and formative assessment techniques can be incorporated for teaching of English at graduate level in Pakistan.

Keywords: formative assessment, feedback, agentive learners, assessment/feedback literacy,

Introduction

Over the period of time, various researches have been investigating various factors which influence learning of English as a second language. Insights borrowed from various fields of psychology, neuro-linguistics, sociology etc. have been used to provide guidelines to language teachers and policy makers (Freeman & Freeman 2001 as cited it Khalid 2016). English is taught as a second and a compulsory language at graduation level in Pakistan. In the assessment process teachers have primarily been dominating the assessment process as testers, while students are passive testees. As Lee (2010) says, 'Assessment is something teachers 'do to' rather than 'with' students, mainly for administrative and reporting purposes (i.e. summative). Such assessment, being more retrospective than prospective, holds little value for teaching and learning'. In recent times, assessment has become a significant component of teaching English as a second language.

Assessment can be classified into different types according to its purposes. When it summarizes the achievements of students for making a decision on awarding them some kind of certification it is summative assessment. However, for providing students with feedback on their work with the notion to support their learning is formative assessment (Yorke, 2003 & Falchikov, 2013 as cited in Ahmad, M. at el., (2021).

This study intends to explore graduate students' experience of assessment or feedback given to them on their written work by their teachers of English at college level and how this feedback is perceived by learners. Assessment and evaluation are two most significant of aspects of language teaching. Language teachers are concerned about what to teach (content), how to teach (methodology), to whom (learners), where and when to teach (classroom environment). They evaluate linguistic performance of their learners and give feedback. While teaching English at various levels in Pakistan usually learners' writing skills and grammatical competence are assessed through class tests or terminal exams. After final exams learners get marks or grades.

Assessment or Feedback of Learning

Assessment is a challenging task and effective classroom assessment requires knowledge about different approaches of assessment and mastery over assessment (Thomas, 2012). Teachers' comments or feedback about learners' (linguistic) performance are very significant for learners. Feedback can assist learners in becoming aware of any gaps that exist between their desired goals and their current knowledge, understanding, or skill and guides them through actions necessary to obtain the goal (Ramaprasad, 1983; Sadler, 1989 as cited in Boston 2002). Feedback is the information about learners' performance which shows how successfully something has been done (Sadler, 1989). Mere evaluation of learners' linguistic performance and correction of their mistakes does not guide them about how they can modify and improve their performance. In traditional assessment system in Pakistan learners get to know about their performance or learning through marks through exam at the end of the course.

Concept of Formative Assessment

Etymologically the adjective 'formative' is from forming or molding something for achieving a desired end. Assessment of student's work denotes appraisal, judgment or evaluation of students' work or performance. Formative assessment refers to how judgments about the quality of student performances, works can be used to shape and improve learners' competence. Feedback is a key component of formative assessment, it is the information about how successfully something is being done. Teachers use feedback (information about learners' performance) for planning and decision making about remedial work. However, students use the feedback for monitoring the strength and weaknesses of their performance. Jarvis (2004) emphasized on a dialogical relationship among learners and teachers, when learners can freely interact with their teachers they are motivated to learn, teachers are careful about their voice, tone, choice of words and body language. Summative assessment on the contrary merely summarizes or sums up the achievement status of a student at the end of course for certification (Sadler, 1989). It focuses on the outcome of activities usually after the completion of some course. Summative assessments give information about students' overall performance over a specific period of time. Learning is measured at the end of a course against a bench mark or criteria. But formative assessment is monitoring learners' learning for giving ongoing feedback which can be used by the teachers to improve their teaching and for learners to improve their learning (Renard, 2017).

The global teaching assessment scenario has been shifted from traditional examination culture to flexible assessment system where assessment is performed for facilitating learning. Learners are actively involved into the learning process by making sense of the information provided to them by teacher, by relating it to prior knowledge and endeavoring to master the skills involved. In such a metacognition process students monitor their own learning (Thomas, 2012).

In Pakistan teachers- centered summative assessments have usually been used for evaluating learners' performance in colleges. Exams or class tests are two commonly used techniques. College teachers are given prescribed course and textbooks. They are required to complete the syllabi prescribed by the universities which conduct final centralized exams.

Background of the Study

English is taught as a compulsory language till graduation level in Pakistan. After fourteen years of formal teaching English learners' writing and speaking skills proficiency remain under-developed. Learners' linguistic performance is evaluated through tests, quizzes or exams. Dissatisfaction with learners' writing skills in English is ubiquitous among language teachers. Learners also express dissatisfaction about their productive linguistic skills in English. As college level, teaching of English is exam oriented where teachers' main focus is on completion of prescribed syllabi by the university in time. Assessment of learning is through central examinational system where final exam are taken by the university but send up exams are taken by their affiliated colleges. Both of the exams taken are based on the text books which are prescribed by the university. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Which assessment strategies were used in your colleges at bachelor level?

2. How is assessment of English performed in colleges at graduation/bachelors level?

3. How can feedback or assessment be made helpful for learners?

Objectives

- To explore learners' experiences about assessment of English at graduate level

- To investigate how assessment is performed and perceived by graduate learners

- To suggest how assessment can be made beneficial for learners

Literature Review

Assessment is an essential part of teaching. Giving feedback about the assessment to the learners is a skill. Feedback is the information given to the learners by their teacher about their current level of performance and how existing level of performance can be improved. Generally the term 'assessment' is used for referring to all those activities undertaken by teachers—and by their students in assessing their teaching methodologies and learning. The acquired information called feedback is used to modify teaching and learning activities. Such assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet student needs" (Black & William, 1998). Assessment for learning is very different from assessment of learning which is called summative assessment. This type of assessment is carried out at the end of course or through traditional exam system to measure level of learning against some prescribed criteria for certification.

In global education system assessment culture of learning has been changed. Formative assessment which is primarily concerned in helping the learners to be critical of their learning has become popular.

"An assessment functions formatively to the extent that evidence about student achievement elicited by the assessment is interpreted and used to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions that would have been taken in the absence of that evidence." (William, 2009)

Formative assessment involves the creation of, and capitalization upon, moments of contingency in the regulation of learning processes. Following are significant in this regard

- Establishing learners' existing level

- Establishing where they heading to

- Finding out the ways to get there

- Participants (Teachers, peers & learners)

Dual Pathway gave a model of formative assessment in which learners use three sources of information for forming a mental representation of the task-in-context and to appraise it: (1) current perceptions of the task and the physical, social, and instructional context within which it is embedded; (2) activated domain-specific knowledge and (meta) cognitive strategies related to the task; and (3) motivational beliefs, including domain-specific capacity, interest and effort beliefs." (Boekaerts, 2006)

Theoretical Framework

Assessment is a significant component of teaching. It is a judgment about learners' performance. In educational scenario this judgment can be a product, process or interaction. Black & Williams defined formative assessment as eliciting evidence, interpreting evidence and taking action (1996). A teaching assessment becomes formative when a teacher takes evidence to adapt teaching methodology to meet the learners' needs. On the contrary, summative assessment takes place after a period of instruction and requires making a judgment about the learning that has occurred. It can be grading or scoring a test, analysis of students' work including home works and tests. Timing of feedback is very significant (Black & Willaims, 2009), integration of feedback into the instruction makes it useful

This research is guided by the concept of formative feedback given to Williams and Black. Through assessment the information is communicated to the learners and it is intended to modify their linguistic behavior for the purpose of improving their learning (Shute 2008 as cited in Ludvigsen, Dysthe, Smith, Havnes, 2011). William & Black mentioned four categories: Questioning (carefully planned), Follow-up activities (for meaningful interventions for extending pupils' understanding), Feedback through marking (by using written tasks with oral questioning, encourage pupils to show understanding. Comments which should identify what has been done well and what still needs improvement, and give guidance on how to make that improvement. Opportunities for pupils for following up comments are planned as part of the overall learning process. To be effective, feedback should promote thinking. Last one is Peer and self-assessment: The criteria for evaluating any learning achievements must be transparent to pupils because it enables them to have a clear overview. Skills of peer collaboration is significant in assessment. They should assess their own progress according to the aims of their work. Keeping concepts of formative e and summative assessment, various items of questionnaire were designed. The basic purpose was to explore assessment experiences of the learners to understand which type of assessment strategies are used. Through focus group views of various learners about current assessment practice in colleges at graduate level were taken.

Research Methodology

This study was a descriptive research. A mixed method approach was used. There were two research tools. Through questionnaire information about learners' previous experience of receiving assessment were taken. Their perspectives about the impact of assessment upon overall behavior

of learners and their learning were taken. Through focus group interviews, learners' in-depth viewpoints about the interaction with teachers and impact of feedback they received were taken. There were two groups of recently graduated learners which were included in this study. All of the participants were girls, enrolled in the masters' degree program at NUML. These graduates have passed their graduation from various colleges of Rawalpindi and Islamabad recently. As research participants they were told about the topic, purpose and nature of research before conducting the focus group interviews and filling of questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Interview Findings

1. **Exam Experiences**

Quantitative assessment of exam performance

Learners were asked to talk about the feedback which they got when they were graduating. Did they receive feedback on any class tasks or assignments? I don't really recall teachers telling us how we were performing, we were not given much of the written assignments. I could not recall home assignments as such, it was just textbook we just went home read it, and in the class maybe discussed it, but it was usually teacher coming into the class and giving lecture. They got quantitative assessment of their performance in form of marks. Majority of them had the same experience. Some of their teachers used to discuss general mistakes after marking the terminal papers which they found helpful.

Class Discussion about grammatical mistakes

Teacher used to highlight grammatical mistakes in written work, there was a class discussion about learners' sentence structures which they found to be quite helpful for the students.

Strict exam marking of papers

During graduation assessment was only through examination and students came to know about their mistakes after exam, marking was very strict and once result was declared students did not get a chance to improve their college performance.

1. **What type of classes did you have in college?**

Text-book based teaching

Teaching of English was always textbook-based. It was never interactive, there were no presentations or no group work. Teachers just sticked to textbook, however usually they gave words meaning.

Lengthy syllabus

BA syllabus was very lengthy so teachers tried to finish the prescribed course in time they did not like to waste the class time.

2. Is it helpful if teachers only concentrate on text book material?

Oral feedback

Students did not like text book only approach of their teachers, sometimes they were assigned home assignments and next day any student was randomly nominated to read her work loudly, the teacher gave comments on her mistakes, highlight some mistakes and pointed out the areas which would be examined during exams.

Appreciation

Students were asked to read aloud, good linguistic proficiencies were appreciated and that practice was considered encouraging by the students, which led to improvement in their performance.

How are negative or positive comments of teachers perceived by the students? Can it be temporary or have lasting impact?

Almost all of the learners emphasized that teachers should be appreciative and should never say negative things about learners' performance.

What type of feedback is helpful for the learners? Marks, remarks or an analysis of their mistakes?

As students there is not much interaction among teacher and students due to large strength of students in the class so teacher cannot specifically point out individual mistakes.

Any suggestion how should a teacher give a feedback to the students?

Encouragement and Acceptance of mistakes

Students should be encouraged to speak in English, there mistakes should be accepted. Making mistakes is part of learning, you have to make mistakes to get there where you want to be. Nobody should laugh or make fun of you, we come to learn. Schools are the places where you go to learn. Institutions (schools) are places to learn if one already knows, if you know everything then there is no need of going to school.

How mistakes should be treated by the teachers?

Point out the mistakes

Mistakes are to be pointed out so that learners can handle them.

Same mistakes are repeated despite they are being pointed out. Is it so? Do you agree or not? Do you think learners can take detailed feedback?

Acceptance of Feedback

Feedbacks are appreciated by learners but it depends on the temperament of the learners. If they are working they will take and appreciate constructive criticism. Feedback can help them to work on their weaknesses, they try to overcome whatever shortcomings they have. For those who are trying to improve feedback is very important, as they can work on their weaknesses and try to overcome their shortcomings.

Is Feedback taken positively by the learners?

Instead of pointing out the mistakes, good points should be appreciated. Most of the teachers are exhausted and they do not feel like interacting with learners.

Comments given by the teachers are very important specifically when they do so without pointing out the name. Pointing out mistakes through interaction with learners is helpful.

Is body language of a teacher significant?

We have a mixed class, our teacher pointed out our mistakes through angry looks because when she mentioned girls' mistakes boys made fun of them and many girls started crying. Comments can make or break learners. If a teacher says that you have a potential of doing something those magical words are capable of doing wonders.

Comparison among learners

Our teachers made comparison among students and used to consider BSc students better than BA students, drawing is unfair. Low marks are discouraging for learners.

Division and labeling of students

Our teacher used to divide us into three categories including good, average and poor, her comments of calling students incompetent were derogatory.

Issuing Threats

Some students were threatened to bring their parents when they perform poorly, which they found insulting. Some students suggested to have parent-teacher meeting in colleges. But others though at college learners are grownups and can handle the feedback independently.

Group 2

When you were in college, did your college give some feedback on your performance? What type of feedback did you get?

Positive and constructive Feedback

Feedback about my individual performance was helpful. My teacher used to point out ares which were my strength and also the area where I needed improvement. There were about 49 students in

the class we used to have group discussion which was helpful for improving our performance. If we read about TV programs, we were asked to research on different TV programs ourselves. Feedback given was based on individual's class performance. Our classes were all the time interactive. Feedback given was constructive and helpful. Criticism is necessary for the learners to know about how they are making progress. A teacher is a good judge about learners' good areas and mistakes. I was favorite student of my teachers, as English was my favorite subject so I always performed well. It was pointed out that teachers usually interact with good students and criticize week students.

Discussion

Majority of the learners receive summative feedback but some of them also receive formative feedback and those who received formative feedback were confident and vocal. Discussion about learners' mistakes in general were appreciated by learners. They did not like negative and discouraging remarks of teachers. Learners were also aware of teachers' limitations, which were completion of prescribed syllabi on time, inability to give individual feedback to every learner. They also pointed out that comments such as 'well done, irrelevant work, faulty language' do not guide the learners in improving their performance, they emphasized on guiding learners about their mistakes in general through feedback.

Findings of Questionnaire

<u>**Section A:**</u> **Feedback Received by Learners in College**

	M	S	N	Z	Analysis	
1. Teachers of English in college used to give class tasks from the text books.	53	42	5	0	**53**	**M**
2. Teachers of English used to give home tasks related to topics discussed in the class.	55	42	3	0	**55**	**M**
3. Teachers talked about usefulness of specific topic to be discussed in the class	52	36	12	0	**52**	**M**
4. Teachers discussed the importance of any specific task or activity with learners.	42	47	8	3	**47**	**S**
5. Teachers asked about the key points discussed at the end of the class from the students.	41	45	11	3	**45**	**S**
6. Teachers discussed grammatical mistakes of some specific learners in front of the whole class.	37.5	37.5	23	2	**37.5** **37.5**	**M** **S**
7. Teachers discussed grammatical mistakes made by most of the learners in general.	39	41	17	3	**41**	**S**
8. Teachers gave negative comments about your performance.	8	47	45	0	**47**	**S**
9. Teachers' feedback had negative impact on your performance.	14.5	37.5	48	0	**48**	**N**
10. Teachers' feedback had a positive impact on your performance.	73	27	0	0	**73**	**M**

Discussion

Majority of the learners agreed that teachers primarily rely on textbooks and home tasks were also based on textbooks. However when usefulness of topics was shared with learners, it was appreciated by them. In formative assessment there is a constant monitoring of learners' performance and feedback provides information to the learners for improving their performance and according to majority of the learners they did not get guidelines about how to improve their performance, what they got was evaluation of their performance. Their classrooms was dominated by their teachers. In summative assessment teaching is teacher-centered and he does the decision making. On the contrary in formative assessment teacher and learner monitor learning, here learners' overall learning was not monitored by their respective teachers. Sometimes however their grammatical mistakes were discussed. They sometimes got negative criticism which they did not have much impact on their performance. Majority of them pointed out the significance of positive impact of teachers' feedback on learners' performance.

Analysis of Questionnaire

### Feedback Recieved by Learners in College - Section A
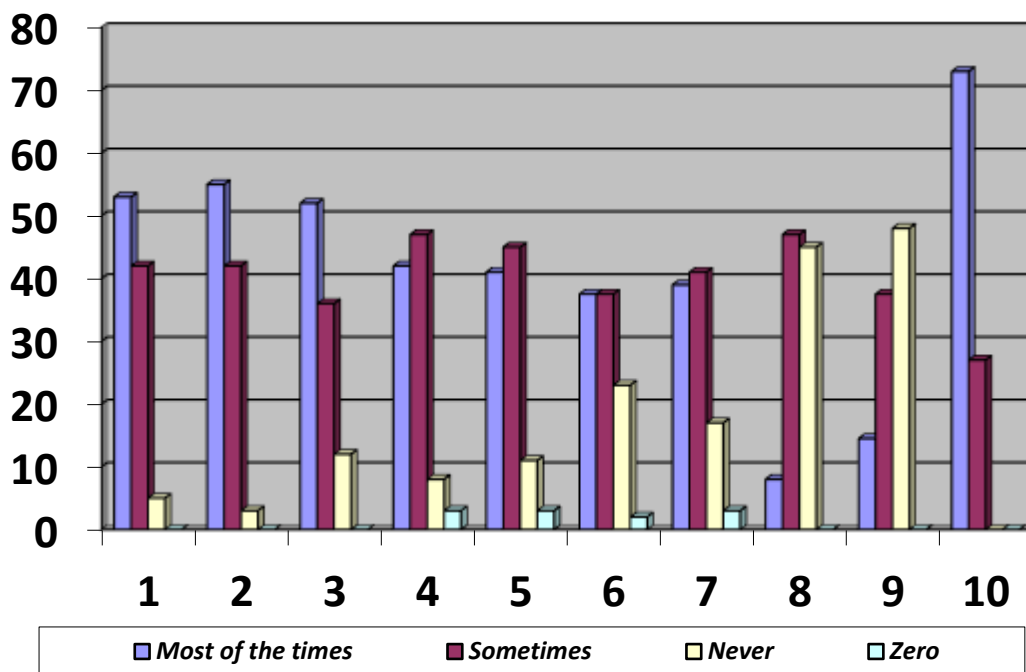
Section B: Learners' Perceptions about Teachers' Feedback

	M	S	N	Z	Analysis	
1. Learners' like their teachers pointing out mistakes in their work.	22	48	15.5	14.5	**48%**	S
2. Learners like to have positive remarks about the strength of their work.	83	14	0	3	**83%**	M
3. Learners find it difficult to accept the critical or negative remarks of teachers upon their performance.	52	47	1	0	**52%**	M
4. Learners feel their English language teachers are very strict in marking of papers.	56	34	8	2	**56%**	M
5. Learners feel teachers do not share their assessment criteria with them before exam.	25	45	30	0	**45%**	S
6. Learners think most teachers lack the skill of giving constructive feedback.	22	64	11	3	**64%**	S
7. Learners believe teachers' major concern is completion of syllabi in time.	70	23	5	2	**70%**	M
8. Learners believe teachers are not interested in giving feedback to facilitate their learning.	22	41	37	0	**41%**	S
9. Learners like their teachers to ask about the things learners have learnt or understood after the completion of a chapter or unit.	59	36	5	0	**59%**	M
10. Learners appreciate when teachers ask about the things learners find difficult or do not understand after the completion of a chapter or unit.	67	27	6	0	**67%**	M
Overall	**Most of the Time 60%**					
	Sometimes 40%					

Discussion: Quantitative analysis of questionnaire revealed that majority of them only sometimes wanted their teachers to point out their mistakes (which was opposite to what was said in by the majority in interviews). They appreciated positive feedback of their teachers but find it difficult to accept negative remarks of the teacher (the same was expressed in interviews). They found marking of the teachers very strict. Teachers do not share their assessment criteria with them they all agreed on that. They highlighted that majority of teachers lack the skill of giving constructive feedback. Most of the time teachers are concerned about completion of syllabi in time. Thus they do not give such feedback which can facilitate learning. Majority of the learners like their teachers asking about the things which they find difficult or do not understand.

Learners' Perceptions About Teachers' Feedback - Section B

Chart legend: ■ Most of the times ■ Sometimes □ Never □ Zero
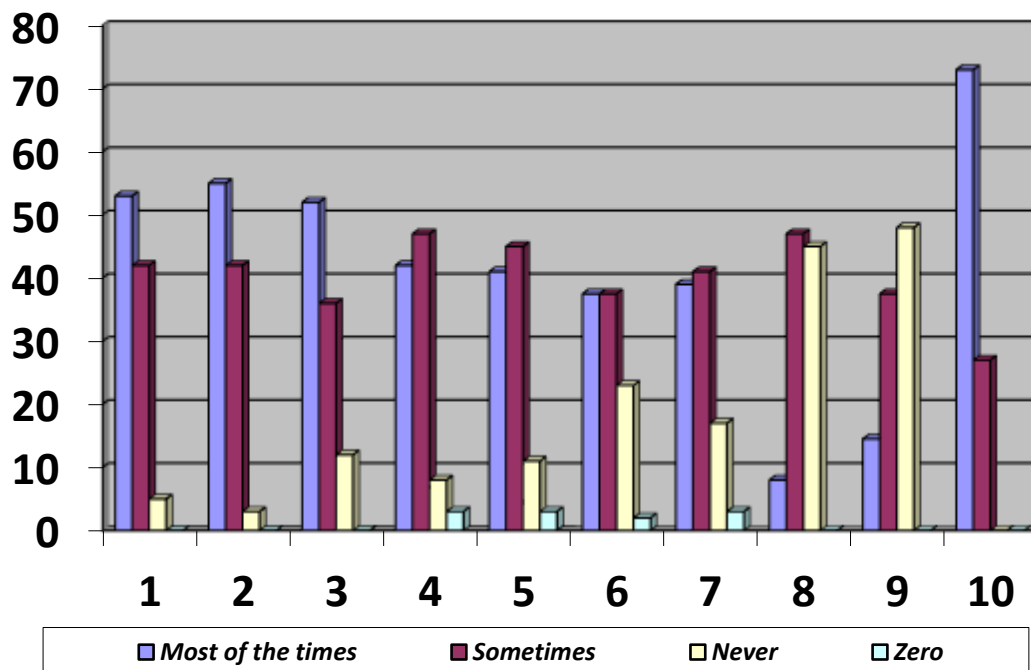
Findings

It was found out that majority of the learners received summative assessment of their performance but they were desirous to get such information which can guide them in improving their performance. They were of the opinion that teachers are not trained to give effective feedback to their learners. Through interactive teaching teachers can improve their relationship with their learners. A feedback which contains explicit guidelines for the learners is facilitative for the learners. In addition to that sometimes teachers sometimes do hyper-correction which is counterproductive because learners find them discouraging and thus it has negative effect on learners' motivation and readiness to learn.

Conclusion

If teachers need to connect assessment to improvement in learners' performance in meaningful ways, they must look at assessment through new eyes (Stiggins, 2002 as cited in Mulvenon & Dunn, 2009). Feedback is a skill which is to be developed as an essential professional skill among the teachers, the teachers should use different strategies for involving learners actively into the monitoring of their own learning.

In our system of education one of the biggest challenges is lack of systematic feedback procedures including how feedback can be applied in future learning and assignments by the learners and the teachers. We need to incorporate systematic feedback procedures into our classroom assessment.

Recommendation

Assessment system from secondary to graduation level should be revised for improving the quality of learners' linguistic performance in English. There should be a continuous assessment of learning through individual, pair or group activities. Teachers should be given autonomy for developing an active and personal communication with learners and they can be trained in how to share learners' weaknesses with them without being over critical or judgmental by developing their emotional intelligence. Teacher should make learners active partners while assessing and monitoring improvement in their performance.

There is a strong need to develop a culture of assessment which will involve leadership of teacher and learners working together like a team. They can work together for achieving desired goals in a democratic classroom environment. Last but not least we need to develop a feedback literacy among both teachers and students.

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