

Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Formative Assessment and Feedback for Improvement of the English Writing Composition Skills: A Case Study of Secondary Level ESL Students of Private Schools in Lahore, Pakistan

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to analyze students' perceptions of the formative assessment and feedback as effective contributors in the development of English writing composition skills of the Secondary Level ESL Students in Lahore, Pakistan. Data was collected through open-ended questionnaire and individual semi-structured interviews. The major findings of the study indicate that English language formative assessments helped students to improve their writing skill by providing them with the effective learning opportunities. The formative assessments encourage learners autonomy through self-monitoring as it is believed that the frequency and accuracy of target behaviors or performance increase through reflection on one's performance (Vanderveen, 2006). The study propose that the formative assessment system needs to be further strengthened and promoted in both the private and public sectors of education pertaining to all levels of education within Pakistan.

Keywords: Formative assessment, formative feedback, English writing skill, English classroom activities.

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1. Introduction

Assessment is a central part of learning. The core purpose of assessment is to consider students' learning styles, strength, weaknesses, and their leaning needs. It reflects students' learning achievement against the objectives of the assessments (Munson et al, 2010). Assessment must be well planned and designed however, students' abilities, curricular expectations and developing students' higher thinking abilities are the main objectives of any assessment. Generally, assessment assists students in getting proper, quick and effective feedback for their own self - monitoring in order to recognize their own strength and weaknesses (Black & William, 1998). Assessment has many types and formative assessment is one of them. Specifically, formative assessment aims to assess all activities conducted by teachers to provide information to students as feedback for modifying the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged (Black & William, 2006). Thus, formative assessment delivers information during the learning process before the summative assessment (Popham, 2006).

1.1 Need of Assessment for Writing Skill

A new approach towards teaching English is required by empowering the learner to have more self- confidence through learning English. There is a growing need to respond to the needs of the learner and the society (Zughoul, 2009). According to Andrade, Wang, Du, and Akawi (2009), assessment is commonly recommended as a tool for improving writing instruction. The types of assessments undertaken by teachers have manifold effects. They influence writing with regards to the teaching mechanism, types of feedback given to students on their written performance and determining the ways in which assistance can be provided as per students needs. Teachers evaluation is crucial in shaping the students perceptions of their performance based on their grade.

Specifically, acquiring appropriate writing skills are essential for ESL learners. Formative writing assessment enables students to be more appropriate in conveying their thoughts and ideas through text" (Graham, Harris & Hebert, 2011). Iqbal, Saiqa and Abiodullah (2009) believe that quality assessment is viewed as an ongoing student- participatory activity. It is not just as something teacher "does" to students as an end of term activity to assign grade.

1.2 Importance of Formative Feedback

Writing improves when teachers provide students with feedback about the effectiveness of their writing and when teachers monitor students' progress on an ongoing basis (Graham et al., 2011). Feedback, "is information with which a learner can confirm, add to rewrite, tune or restructure a piece of composition" (Bulter&Winne,

1995). The primary role of feedback is to guide and encourage students to improve their quality of their written work in order to develop their writing skills. It should be formative since it enhances their writing skill by showing them their strengths. Similarly, weaknesses need to be improved by upgrading their concepts and application about grammar, vocabulary, content, organization, sentence structure and mechanics of the language.

1.3 Research Questions

Objectives of the study included:

1. To assess the view of secondary level high school ESL students about the efficacy of English Language formative assessment and the feedback for improving their writing skills
 - a. **To analyze the students' perceptions of formative written assessment to improve writing skills**
 - b. To examine students' perceptions about the effectiveness of formative feedback for enhancing writing skills

2. Literature Review

There is a wider range of assessment in use than there was twenty- five years ago. These new forms and range of assessments mean that the traditional model of assessment has undergone changes. Changes in education at times reflect changes in assessment. Research evidence suggests that effective use of assessment promotes effective learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Carr et al., 2000; Crooks, 1998; Natriello, 1987& Sadler, 1989 as cited in Rawlins, 2007). Several literature and research have been written in order to highlight the critical role of formative assessment that this can play vital role in student's learning. According to Torrance and Pryor (1999), formative assessment is defined as measurements of students' gains that take "place during a course with the express purpose of improving student learning". Under this definition, assessment includes teacher observation, classroom discussion and analysis of student work including homework and tests. In current literature, formative feedback is now generally understood to be the assessment that promotes learning by providing formative feedback to the students about present understanding and skill development (Black &Wiliam, 1998a). However, the main purpose of formative feedback is to guide both the teacher and the students during the ongoing learning process (Rawlins, 2007).

2.1 Importance of Writing Skill

Suleiman (2000) discussed the importance of writing skill and said that writing is a central element in English language. However, every reading or language programs must consider the value of writing skill in several areas like in 'instructional practices, assessment, and in language development programs. In addition, Al-Buainain (2009) said that the most frequently expressed specific needs were vocabulary and grammar. As commented by Rao (2007), EFL writing is useful in two respects: Firstly, it motivates students' thinking, organizing ideas, developing their ability to summarize, analyze and criticize. Secondly, it strengthens students' learning, thinking and reflecting on the English language (Rao, 2007).

2.2 Role of the Teacher in Teaching Writing

Role of the teacher is the most important in teaching writing. It is essential to remember that writing is an individual effort and a specific skill which requires teachers is to provide constructive criticism as well as guidelines for errors correction. Proper classroom explanation is needed by the teacher so that students can well understand what is expected of them (Harris, 2001 as in cited Al-Buainain, 2009).

2.3 Formative Feedback

A key element in assessment for learning or formative assessment is feedback since through this, learners can 'close the gap' between current and desired performance (Stobart, 2003). In assessment for learning, formal and informal feedback is used as part of an overall strategy in order to increase student autonomy and enhance their ability to make their own judgments about their learning (McDowell, 2006 as cited in Laight et al.,2011).

The primary role of feedback is to encourage student writers to produce better work while teaching the writing skills. Therefore, it should be formative in nature by pointing out their strengths and weaknesses to be improved by upgrading their levels of understanding about grammar, vocabulary, content, organization and sentence structure (Hamid, 2012). In writing, for instance, a formative assessment may monitor students' ongoing progress along several dimensions, spelling, grammar and usage (Graham et al., 2011).

3. Research Methodology

Qualitative (case study) approach was opted to conduct this research.

3.1 Participants

Purposive sampling was used for this study, consisting of class VIII private school students from two schools, namely Beaconhouse School System (BSS) and Ibn-e-Sina Collage Lahore. The selected sample size consisted of forty students; twenty students each from the two private secondary schools.

3.2 Data Collection

Semi- structured individual interviews and open ended questionnaire were used for collecting data.

4. Results

Data was analyzed by sorting out the frequencies of activities done by the students.

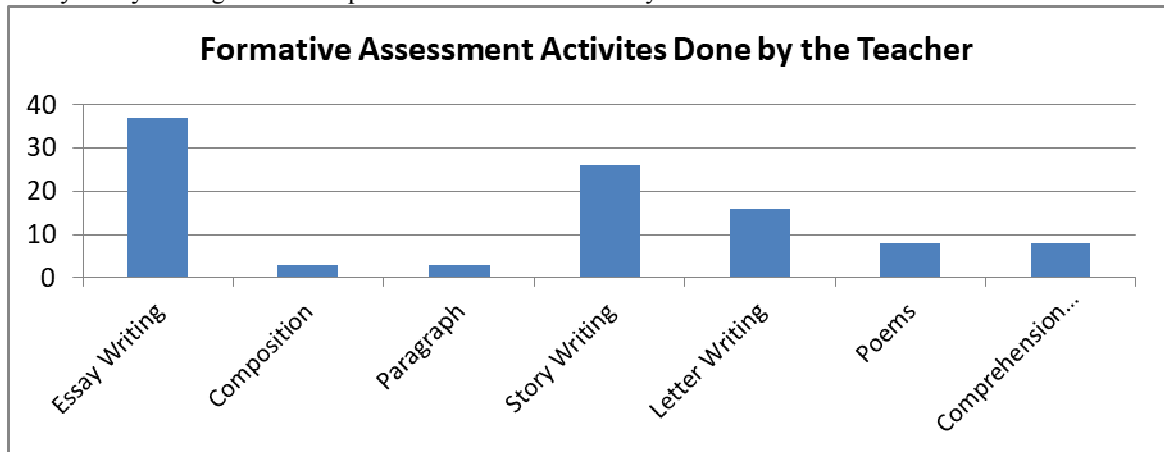


Fig 1: Formative Assessment Activities Done by the Teacher

The graph indicates that 37%essay writing, 3% paragraph writing, 26% story writing, 16% letters writing, 8% poem writing, and 8% comprehension question and answer activities were done.

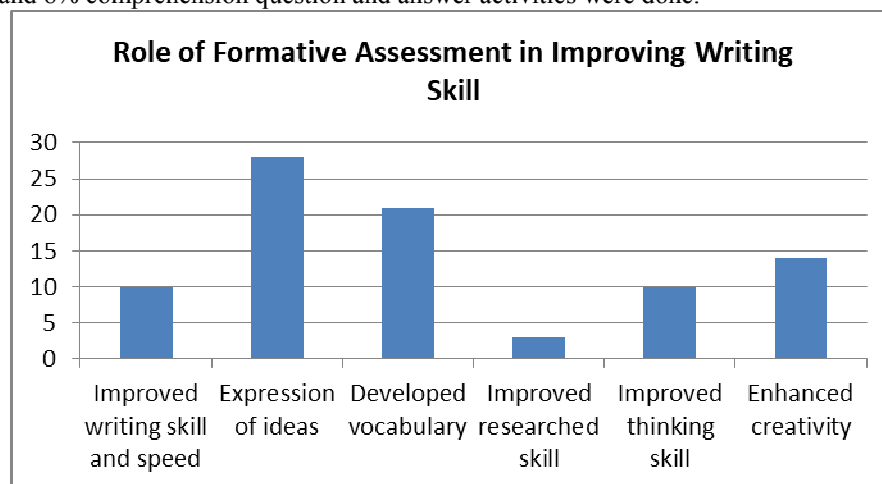


Fig 2: Role of Formative Assessment in Improving Writing Skill

The results indicated that students' writing skill and speed improved 10%,expression of ideas improved 28%,vocabulary developed 21%,research skill improved 3%, thinking skill improved 10% and creativity enhanced 14%.

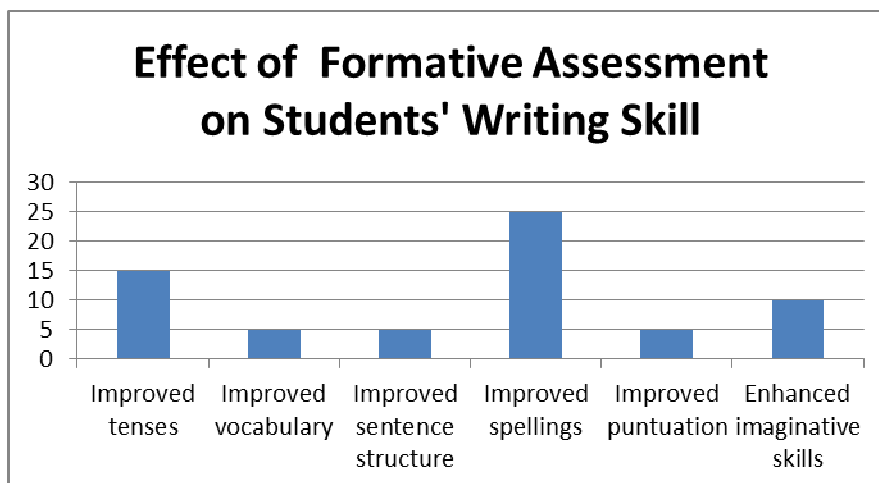


Fig 3: Effect of Formative Assessment on Students' Writing Skill

The results showed that formative assessment improved tenses 10%, vocabulary improved 5%, sentence structure improved 5%, spelling improved 25%, punctuation improved 25%, and imaginative skills enhanced 10%.

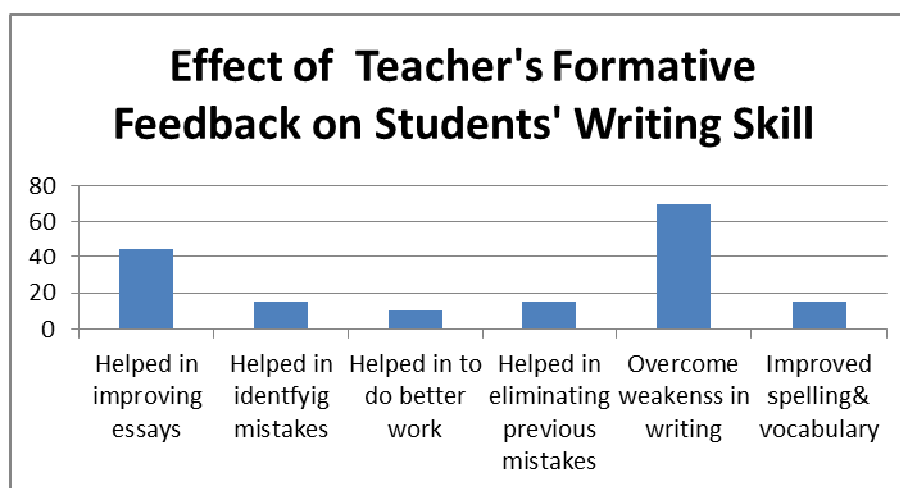


Fig 4: Effectiveness of Teacher's Formative Feedback on Students' Writing Skill

The results showed that teacher's feedback improved students' essay writing skill 45%, helped in identification of mistakes 15% improved, helped in doing correct work 10% improved, helped in eliminating previous mistakes 15% improved, helped in overcoming weaknesses in writing 70% improved and spelling and grammar improved 15%.

4.1 Results of Semi Structure Interview

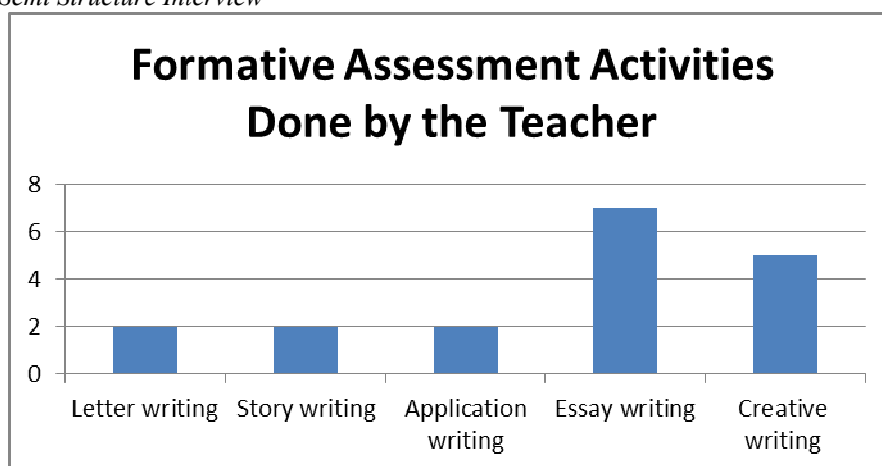


Fig 5: Formative Assessment Activities Done by the Teacher

It was found that 18 respondents stated that there is a variety of formative assessment used by the English Language teacher to assess them in the class.

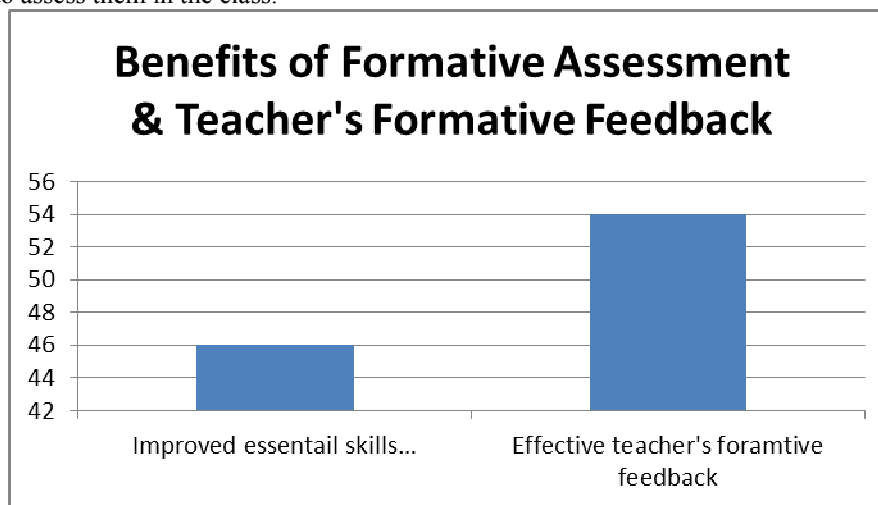


Fig 6: Benefits of Formative Assessment & Teacher's Formative Feedback

It was found that 44% students stated that teacher's formative feedback is effective and beneficial for them while 56% students said that formative feedback improved their essential skills like vocabulary, grammar, spelling and creativity.

5. Discussion

A key finding from this research is that the participants were familiar with different types of English language formative assessments being carried out in their class. They seem to be aware of its purposes and its effective role in developing their writing ability. The findings indicated that essay writing activity was done most frequently by class 8 students however written formative assessment followed by story writing, letter writing both informal and informal, writing poems and doing comprehension activity.

The participants' views about formative assessments are convincing enough to realize that developing writing proficiency in ESL or EFL setting is widely acknowledged as an important skill. According to Andrade, Wang, Du and Akawi (2009), assessment is considered as a means for the improvement of writing instructions. In addition, the students consider English formative written assessment to be useful. The main reason is that it provided formative feedback which is the most crucial part of the assessment process. Formative feedback was given by the teacher on their writing deficiencies related to improvement to grammar, spelling, thinking skills, creative skill and vocabulary and also generating of new ideas. It can be seen that the students' responses regarding the purpose of formative assessment appears to be in accordance with Torrance and Pryor (1999) whose definition of formative assessment is primarily concerned with measuring students achievement during courses with the objectives of learning improvement.

Furthermore, the findings support the studies which advocate assessment as a powerful tool not just to measure improvement but also enhance learning. (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2003; Black & William, 1998b; Murnane, Sharkey & Boudett, 2005). In their survey Leki and Carson (1994) found that the majority of the students prefer to learn "more language skills" while vocabulary and grammar are the most required areas (Al-Bunain, 2009). As indicated in the Introduction, there is research evidence that suggests that effective use of assessment promotes effective learning (Black & William, 1998a; Natriello, 1987 & Sadler, 1989 as cited in Rawlins, 2007). According to the given findings, the highest number of written formative assessment conducted in the English class consists of essay writing to be followed by creative writing. Ahmad (2010) hints at the possible reason by stating that ESL/EFL writing is still one of the most challenging areas for teachers and students and essay writing specifically constitutes a problem for many ESL/EFL students worldwide.

Another reason for this is that it does not only develop the writing skills of the students but also enhances higher order skills as indicated by the given results. Previous studies also relate the importance of these skills as stated in The New Zealand report 'Assessment for Better Learning' (1989) regards that higher order skills prove of more enduring value and greater versatility and form the basis for further learning and appropriate interpretation of factual information (as cited in Gipps, 1994). These findings appear to be in accordance with current literature where formative assessment is now generally understood to be the assessment that promotes learning by providing formative feedback to the students about present understanding and skill development (Black & William, 1998a). However, the main purpose of formative feedback is to guide both the teacher and the student during the ongoing learning process (Rawlins, 2007). A key element in assessment for learning or formative assessment is feedback since through this learners can 'close the gap' between current and desired

performance (Stobart, 2003). Feedback for essay writing motivates students to work harder and improve their essay.

These findings further confirm that assessment for learning occurs when students continue the learning process and remain confident that they can continue to learn at productive levels if they keep on trying. In other words, “students don't give up in frustration or hopelessness” (Stiggins, 2002). Usefulness of written feedback for creative writing is to identify mistakes, overcome written weaknesses and make improvement. Assessments become formative when the information derived from it is used to adapt teaching and learning to meet students' needs. The teachers can make the informed decisions only when they know the students ongoing performance and weak areas. This information enables teachers to make necessary instructional adjustments such as re-teaching, trying alternative instructional approaches, or offering more opportunities for practice. These activities can lead to improve students' success (Sawyer, Graham, & Harris, 1992).

6. Conclusion

Formative written assessment and formative feedback play an important role in improving the writing skills of secondary level high school ESL students. On the basis of the findings it was found out that the students fully know the importance of English language writing skill both inside and outside the classroom. The study revealed that students were well aware of their learning needs and were able to provide pertinent information about various types of English formative assessments and formative feedback and how the two played a major role in helping them improve their writing skills. In addition, the different assessments indicated inclusion of broader assessment of learning coexisting along with the standardized form of testing commonly known as assessment of learning (summative assessment). This is in itself an indication that a balanced assessment plan is followed by teachers responsible for teaching ESL writing. The study also provided an insight into students' writing deficiencies and how the formative assessments turned out to be helpful in overcoming those weaknesses due to the availability of formative feedback. They appeared to be conscious of the teacher's supportive role. It also showed the effort on the part of the teacher to provide relevant information that sought to bring improvement within the written content. According to students, feedback proved productive for them. Teacher's feedback consisted of giving guidelines, conveying new ideas, pointing out students' mistakes, identifying possible reasons that how to make the necessary corrections and most importantly acknowledging and praising students' efforts.

7. Recommendations

Improvement in writing skill with the help of formative feedback should not be limited to the private sector only but must include public sectors of education of Pakistan. Teachers need to be given the knowledge and training in order to implement effectively formative assessment and formative feedback that could lead to more positive results regarding students' ESL learning and acquisition particularly with regard to their writing ability.

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