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### Promoting Assessment for Learning: Students' Perceptions of Informal Assessment in the English Classroom

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#### Abstract

This study aims at investigating students' perceptions toward informal assessment conducted by the teacher. This assessment provides a solution regarding the fact that many Indonesian students feel frustrated due to the use of formal assessment. The participants of this study were 22 graduate students majoring in English Education in one of the universities in Indonesia. The design of this study was qualitative. This study used observation and a questionnaire to collect the general data and an interview to investigate students' more in-depth understanding. The finding revealed two aspects: the types of informal assessment by the lecturers and the benefits of using informal assessments in the learning activities. The types of assessment the lecturers were linguistic and non-linguistic aspects, presentation, observation, giving compliment, group discussion, question and answer, interview, and portfolio. Furthermore, several benefits of this assessment viewed from students' perspective were they more focused on the process instead of the judgment, they got useful feedback based on the learning problems faced by the students, they could solve their learning problems using the feedback given, and it made them more motivated in participating the classroom activities, they felt less stressful while doing this assessment, they got more knowledge and more in-depth understanding about the material, they got reflections which is very crucial in altering their learning progress, and it improved their participation in the classroom activities.

*Keywords:* informal assessment, learning process, qualitative, students' perception

#### Introduction

The term assessment is generally understood in the wrong way in which many students show their negative opinion about it regarding the fact that they feel frustrated while doing the assessment. Some students who are more capable than others feel motivated by the assessment given to them since they can show their superiority. On the other hand, many students get

nervous and even intimidated. It resulted in an unhealthy competition that produces more losers than winners.

Harris & McCann (1994) identified several wrong assumptions about assessment, which resulted in an adverse effect on the learning process. The first is the assumption that recognizes assessment is the same as testing. It is inappropriate since testing as one example of formal assessment is only a part of the assessment. Testing indeed conducted to know the student's competence causes some troubles such as anxious, worried, inadequate, and no feedback provided, which is significantly needed to alter the student's learning process. However, this is not the only way to conduct an assessment. There are informal assessment and self-assessment which contribute to their learning process. The second is a prejudice considering assessment is held at the end of the course as a final test. The feedback that should be given after students did the test is no longer applicable here. Although it is essential to provide the feedback, it is impossible to be done since they are not in the classroom anymore. The learning activities are done after the test. The third is that the kind of feedback in the form of grade or mark does not help students identify their learning problems and overcome them. The fourth is the way assessment conducted that focuses more on one of the aspects such as grammar. Even in the spoken assessment, for example, the teacher usually only concerns the grammatical items instead of combining it with speaking skill. It has a negative effect in which the students think the only matter is grammar. They do not need to learn how to communicate using the target language in the classroom. The last one is that assessment treats the students incorrectly. Instead of showing what they have learned, the assessment usually displays what they have not learned. It is quite intimidating and stressful.

Those inappropriate assumptions related to assessment lead to the drawback of conducting assessments in the classroom. Informal and self-assessment, other types of assessment, are uncovered by the negative effect of formal assessment, making students feel insecure and inadequate. When assessment becomes more frightening for the students, it is necessary to provide them with a new paradigm that emphasizes the benefit of it for the students. They need to understand that there is an assessment used for the sake of their learning progress. This assessment is called informal assessment intended to help the students identify their learning problems and give useful feedback. By conducting an informal assessment, the teacher can help the students to recognize their weaknesses and provide suggestions on how to overcome them. This type of assessment is intentionally used for learning purposes.

Informal assessment is occasionally used interchangeably with formative assessment since both have the same purpose: the assessment used for learning. Brown (2004) emphasized that using formative assessment is the ongoing development of the student's language. So, whenever the teacher gives feedback about the learner's errors, it is done for learning. It means that the students can use the feedback to revise and develop their knowledge and competence. It is in line with the statement from Dorobat (2007); informal assessment is used to help students identify difficulties and provide positive feedback to develop student's awareness. Even Brown highlighted his idea in which all informal assessments should be formative.

Furthermore, there is research that distinguishes both informal and formative assessments. Ruiz-Primo & Furtak (2006) as cited in Bell & Cowie, (2001); Shavelson et al., (2003) said that formative assessment has two types: formal and informal. The teacher initiated the formal one, who designed an activity that is usually curriculum-embedded and focuses on a specific aspect of learning. Besides, it can also be in the form of a direct question, quiz, brainstorming, generation of problem, etc. (Bell & Cowie, 2001). The main focus of these activities is that the teacher

already has the aspect that is going to be assessed. He or she then interprets the student's difficulties and plans the next step needed to take action. This formal formative assessment may be conducted at the beginning, during, and at the end of the course.

Conversely, the natural form of formative assessment acquires the improvisation of the teacher. Instead of relying on the teacher's initiative, this assessment may be started with a student's correct response or unexpected question taking place in any student-teacher interaction in the class, small group, or one-on-one level. It is embedded and strongly linked to learning and teaching activities (Bell & Cowie, 2001, p. 86). The information gathered may be unrecorded and can be in the form of a nonverbal one based on the teacher's observation. The teacher's response or feedback is more immediate, spontaneous, and flexible that could be in the form of responding with a question, eliciting other points of view from other students, conducting a demonstration when appropriate, and repeating an activity (Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2006).

Those formal and informal forms of formative assessment are significant in helping students develop their learning process. However, the informal style is more contextualized with the student's need in which it directly hits the problem and provides the solution. The students get more benefits from the informal one conducted in the classroom. For that reason, this study focuses on informal assessment viewed from students' perspectives, whether they benefit from its implementation. The graduate students participated in this study, whereas their lecturers used informal assessment as a medium to improve the student's learning development. This study aims to explore their perspective on the implementation of informal assessment in the English classroom. This study is significant in providing more information and data related to the use of informal assessment in the English teaching and learning process. Due to the limited research on this topic, hopefully, it will benefit the teachers, students, and other researchers who are interested in investigating this topic.

### **Methodology**

This study aimed at investigating the students' perception toward informal assessment conducted in the English classroom. The design of the study was a qualitative descriptive study using a purposive sampling technique.

### **Participants**

Seventeen graduate students majoring in English education from one of the universities in Indonesia participated in this study. There were five males and 12 female students. They were chosen to participate in this study based on the consideration that their lecturers conducted the informal assessment in the classroom activities. It means that the students have been familiarized with this assessment and experienced it during the classroom activities.

### **Instruments**

To collect the data, the researcher used observation, questionnaire, and interview. The first one is used to find the classroom condition whether the lecturers apply informal assessment or not. The researchers also used an open-ended questionnaire that consists of 11 questions in finding the student's perception of the informal assessment asked. Furthermore, an interview is applied to investigate the students' answers related to this assessment.

### **Data analysis**

The analysis of the data was done in the following steps: collecting the data from seventeen participants, classifying the data by coding to generate the setting and people, selecting/displaying the data to make it easier in analysis, and interpreting data which is involved interpretation or meaning of the data.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **The use of informal assessment in the class**

To find out the data, the researcher used three instruments as the triangulation to validate the data in qualitative research. Those instruments used here were observation, questionnaire, and interview. In the beginning, the researcher conducted observation in the several classes in which the participants were learning English. This observation revealed that some lecturers used informal assessments in their class. The forms of this assessment varied e.g., uttering "Good question," "I do agree with your opinion," "Well done," while the students asked questions or finished their job. There was also a lecturer who took advantage of presentations to make students do some practices related to writing proposals. In this case, he did not judge the performance but gave comments and suggestions so the students may revise it later. It was quite similar to responding to an essay draft in assessing writing informally. The other lecture used the presentation to give feedback related to the technique of presentation. Correcting students' pronunciation directly after the incorrect words pronounced was also used to correct their errors. The lecturers in this class applied various forms of informal assessment based on their preferences. It was also related to what aspect that they were going to assess in their lecture.

On the other side, the students who experienced those various informal assessments had their opinion on whether they got advantages or not by the application of this assessment. This part would be presented later as the result of the questionnaire and interview revealed. Furthermore, based on the researcher observation, the students in this class seemed enthusiastic and actively participated in the learning process when the lecturer gave compliments. They always asked questions in his class, and even they still gave him some questions after the class. This observation showed that the students got advantages of the informal assessment conducted by the lectures.

### **The use of informal assessment viewed from students' perspective**

The study participants were 17 graduate students majoring in English Education in one of the universities in Indonesia. Of the total population, 29.4% were male, and 70.6% were female. All of the participants studied English for a master degree in the same class. They also experienced some lecturers conducting informal assessment in teaching and learning activities in the class.

The research finding showed that all participants knew and understood the informal assessment and how it was implemented in the learning process. It can be seen from their answer while elaborating on the definition of informal assessment. They mentioned some basic principles of this assessment, as presented in the literature review. It was conducted in normal classroom conditions without setting tests' atmosphere. It revealed the learning problems encountered by students; it provided feedback that is useful to develop their learning process. From their answers, it can be concluded that basically, the participants had enough knowledge related to informal assessment. This knowledge is significantly needed to adjust whether their perspective is scientifically accepted or not, mainly whether this research is reliable or not.

Figure 1.

*The question in the questionnaire (Do you think your lecturers conducted the informal assessment in the class?)*

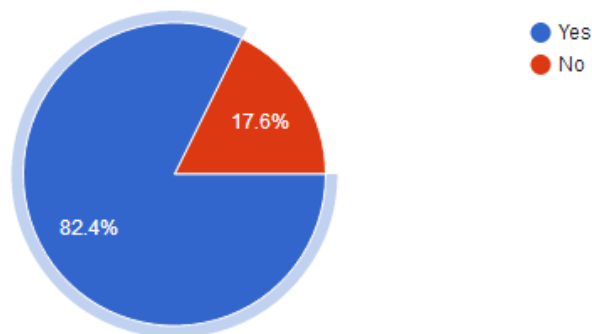


Figure 1 showed that most of the students said that their lecturers applied informal assessment in the teaching-learning activities. The participants (82.4%) agreed that this assessment is conducted in the classroom. This result is in line with the outcome of observation conducted by the researcher in which it emphasizes that the lecturers used informal assessment in their teaching activities.

Table 1.

*Types of informal assessment*

Types of informal assessment
Linguistic and non-linguistic
Presentation
Observation
Giving compliment
Group discussion
Question and answer
Interview
Portfolio

Table 1 revealed the kinds of informal assessments implemented in the classroom. The participants mentioned eight types: linguistic and non-linguistic, presentation, observation, giving compliment, group discussion, question and answer, interview, and portfolio. From those types of assessments, the most favorite one is observation (23.5%). The rest of it (76.5%) was distributed evenly in other models but not more than 23.5 %.

There are various types of informal assessment as cited by several experts e.g., giving comment or compliment, linguistic and non-linguistic aspects, assessing speaking (presentation, group discussion, interview), looking at the students' portfolio (assessing writing), and conducting question-answer session (Brown, 2004; Dorobat, 2007; Harris & McCann, 1994). Since there are various informal assessments, the teachers or lecturers should choose which type is appropriate for their class. Some considerations are needed before they accept the proper variety. It depends on what aspect is going to assess, and when it will be conducted (Dorobat, 2007).

According to the participants, the interview revealed that observation became the most favorite since it can reflect what happens in the classroom. The problems encountered by them

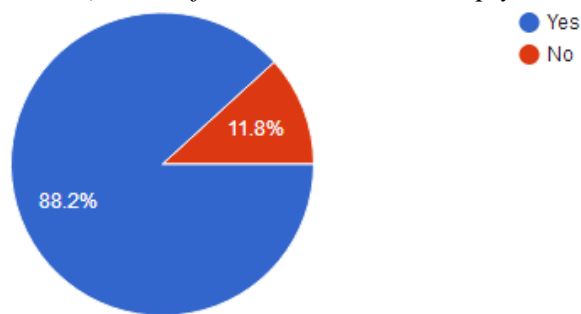
were easily recognized while the lectures did observation in the class. In particular, the lecturers could observe the students' behavior, attitude, and motivation in learning. It would easily be detected if there were some problems related to those aspects.

### The benefits of informal assessment

The drawback of formal assessment (tests) influences the popularity of other assessment types, which is significant in helping students develop their learning process (Bell & Cowie, 2001; Shavelson et al., 2003). Since the tests give more disadvantages to the students, many people look at the other perspective, which provides more benefits for the students' learning. This new paradigm concerns the assessment for learning, not the assessment of learning. Informal assessment in the form of formative assessment appears as an alternative to giving solutions related to the adverse effects of tests. Dorobat (2007) elaborated some benefits: helping learners identify their difficulties and giving positive feedback to develop their awareness. The learners should be aware of their learning process, or in particular, they need to know the problems and how to overcome them.

Figure 2.

*The question (Does informal assessment help you in your learning process?)*



The participants of this study were asked whether they benefited from the implementation of informal assessment. The majority of them said yes to this question. Figure 2 showed that 88.2% of participants agreed that informal assessment helps the students in their learning process. The participants took some advantages of this implementation such as it more focused on the process instead of the judgment, they got useful feedback based on the learning problems faced by the students, they could solve their learning problems using the feedback given, and it made them more motivated in participating the classroom activities. Those benefits are the same as presented by some experts in the informal assessment. Also, based on the interview, the participants felt less stressed while doing this assessment since the lecturers did not design a test condition. They also said that they got more knowledge and a more in-depth understanding of the material because they could be more focused on learning than the assessment. Reflections were the last benefit mentioned by them, which is very crucial in altering their learning progress.

Figure 3.

*The question (Does informal assessment improve your participation in the classroom activities?)*

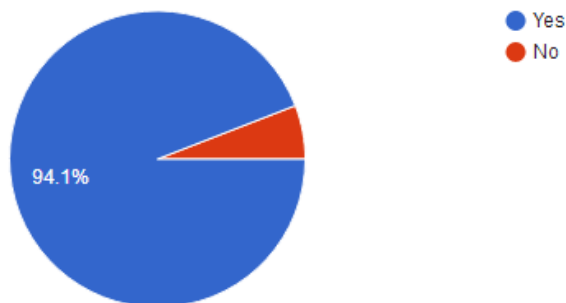


Figure 3 emphasized one more benefit of informal assessment: improving students' participation in the classroom activities. Most of the participants (94.1%) agreed with this statement. Since they were motivated, it increased their involvement in the activities.

### Conclusion

This study found that the majority of the participants experienced informal assessments in their learning activities. The findings of the study revealed that there were several types of informal assessments applied in their class, for instance, linguistic and non-linguistic, presentation, observation, giving compliment, group discussion, question and answer, interview, and portfolio. This study also revealed the most favorite type of informal assessment and the reasons they chose it. The problems encountered by them were easily recognized while the lectures did observation in the class. In particular, the lecturers could observe the students' behavior, attitude, as well as motivation in learning. It would easily be detected if there were some problems related to those aspects.

This study also found several benefits of using this assessment viewed from the students' perspective. Those benefits were it more focused on the process instead of the judgment, they got useful feedback based on the learning problems faced by the students, they could solve their learning problems using the feedback given, and it made them more motivated in participating the classroom activities, they felt less stressful while doing this assessment, they got more knowledge and more in-depth understanding about the material, they got reflections which is very crucial in altering their learning progress, and it improved their participation in the classroom activities. Besides, informal assessment improved students' involvement in classroom activities. Most of the participants (94.1%) agreed with this statement. Since they were motivated, it increased their participation in the activities.

Although it was proven that informal assessment is crucial in helping students develop their learning and be more aware of this process, the researcher suggested that teachers and lecturers who are going to use it should carefully choose the type of informal assessment. This type should fit their condition to work well. They also need to comprehensively design the feedback that will be given since it is significant for the learners. It will be wasting time if the feedback is not appropriate or does not suit the learners' condition because some learners do not like direct feedback given in front of the class. The research on this topic should be improved in terms of numbers since there was only limited research. The researcher found difficulties in finding the journal about informal assessment that influences the understanding of the word. The more significant number of researchers, the more comprehensible input will be gotten so it can be analyzed comprehensively.

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