ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ASSESSMENT: COMMON AND BEST PRACTICES IN SHANTOU UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The paper discusses the most common practices of English as a Foreign Language learning assessment in Shantou University. It is based on the results of a quasi-experimental study carried out during the academic year 2016-2017, which involved a sample of 128 students enrolled in different majors in the aforementioned university. For its realization, the author utilized surveys, observation and critical analysis of documents as methods for data collection. As a result of his study, the author argues that assessing to measure learning and assessing to enhance learning are not necessarily antagonists. Similarly, the article explores the contradictions between teacher-centered and student-centered assessment. Thus, it provides an analysis of learning assessment functions and the involvement of teachers and students in this process. The study carried out suggests that the best practice of language learning assessment should include a combination of formative and summative assessment, as well as teacher and student-centered assessment.

Key words: *English as a Foreign Language, learning assessment, teacher-centered assessment, student-centered assessment, formative assessment, summative assessment*

1. INTRODUCTION

In education, every activity is susceptible to assessment, but the latter has a special connotation when it is specifically associated with the teaching learning process (TLP). Effective learning assessment may have long-term impacts on the students' personalities, even beyond their academic achievements. This is especially true in the TLP of English as a foreign language (EFL), given the diversity of approaches utilized for the purpose of assessment.

The goal of this paper is to analyze some of the common practices and implications of EFL learning assessment. The analyses provided are based on the results of a study developed in Shantou University (STU), China, during the school year 2016-2017. The study involved 128 students enrolled in different EFL courses offered by the English Language Center (ELC) at STU. These courses are known as *Global Law English III, ELC III-Intercultural Communication* and *ELC IV-Making my Case*. The methods utilized for the collection of data included surveys, observation and critical analysis of documents. Additionally, an experiment was conducted to confirm the findings attained.

The data analysis and the review of the literature permitted the description of EFL learning assessment practice in STU. In this sense, the results refer to the functions fulfilled by assessment and to the role played by the agents involved in the teaching-learning process.

2. LEARNING ASSESSMENT AS AN EDUCATIONAL PHENOMENON

Learning assessment is generally believed to be one of the most important components of the educational process. Although the teaching practice might occasionally prove otherwise, it is generally accepted that assessment should be used as a means to enhance learning rather than as an end to measure it. This idea has been extensively discussed in the literature (Harlen 2005; Mukhtar & Ahmad 2015; Regier, 2012; Taras 2010; Utaberta & Hassanpour 2012). In China, teachers, academics and administrators have turned their attention to this phenomenon, as confirmed by several works published in recent years (Brown & Gao 2015; Cheng, Wu & Liu 2015; Zhou 2011).

2.1. Assessing to measure learning vs. assessing to enhance learning

Traditional approaches focus on the functions of assessment as a data provider in terms of the students' learning achievements. Under this conception, emphasis is placed on the results rather than the process. Generally, the information gathered through assessment is not used in the TLP, since its results are considered final. A common practice related to this approach is "teaching for testing", which regards test results as the ultimate evidence of learning. A recent work published by Ghiatău, Diaca and Curelaru (2011) has provided arguments both in favor of and against the effectiveness of this approach.

In the case of language learning, the implementation of this approach is conducive to training test takers instead of language users. It should be noted that this approach is coherent with the summative function of assessment, as described by various authors (Harlen 2005; Taras 2005).

A more updated conception of assessment considers it as an effective tool to promote learning. Although this approach dos not deny the validity of information regarding the learning outcomes, it focuses on the process of learning rather than exclusively on the results. The literature describes a variety of studies that account for the necessity of formative assessment as a powerful tool for learning (Brown & Gao 2015; Regier 2012; Taras 2005, 2010). Under this conception the data on learning outcomes is constantly collected, analyzed and fed back into the TLP. A common practice related to this approach is "assessing for learning", which regards assessment as a source of feedback and feedforward to improve learning. This kind of practice can also be related to another function: diagnostic or initial assessment.

In this paper, a conciliatory approach to the contradictions between assessment as a measuring tool and as a learning tool is assumed. As a teacher of EFL, the author of this article believes that a "*well-dosed*" combination of both is highly convenient in the TLP. In fact, it would be difficult to demonstrate that assessment as a learning tool does not require measuring learning results. The key element would be, however, the consideration of assessment as a means rather than as an end.

2.2. Teacher-centered assessment vs. student-centered assessment

The academic community has given much attention to the agents participating in the assessment process. Traditionally, teachers have been regarded as the ones "in charge" of the teaching learning process, thus, the "owners" of learning assessment. Classroom practice under this approach rarely provides opportunities for actual participation of the students in assessing their learning process and outcomes. Even if the teacher uses assessment results to improve the TLP, that information might not be complete since the students' views are not considered as valid input. In the specific case of EFL teaching, teacher-centered assessment practice may be related to the notion of the teacher as a model of the language, instead of as a model of language learning. This could be one of the reasons why some teachers tend to believe that only they are responsible for assessing their students' learning.

The literature reports different views on this matter, especially with regards to the prevalence of teacher-centered assessment. A study conducted in Spain suggests that the type of assessment that is more frequently carried out is teacher-centered (Rodriguez et. al 2013). In like manner, Davidson and Leung refer to it as *teacher-based-assessment*. In their work, they discuss that its advantages include "involving the teacher from the beginning to the end (…), [possible] to be adapted and modified by the teacher (…) and being carried out in ordinary classrooms, not in a specialist assessment center". However, these authors also acknowledge that it is possible to use self and peer assessment in conjunction with teacher assessment. (Davison & Leung 2009, 395-396)

In line with these ideas, an increasing number of publications have reported evidence that attest for a shift in paradigm from teacher-centered to student-centered assessment. This issue has been raised in various recently published works (Weisi & Karimi 2013; Yastibas & Yastibas 2015). This approach values the students' judgments of their own learning. Since such judgment can only be made after self-reflection, the assessment process becomes a tool for learning.

Self-assessment and peer-assessment are considered to be effective means of enhancing students' learning. They are regarded as part of the efforts to heighten the authenticity and inclusiveness of assessment (Alias, Masek & Salleh 2015, 310). Most authors agree that in EFL teaching, self-assessment benefits learning by promoting reflection and motivation. This idea has been discussed in numerous

papers recently published (Alishah & Dolmaci 2013; Brown & Hudson 1998; Brown 2005; Gil-Salom & Benlloch-Dualde 2016; Khonbi & Sadeghi 2013; Matsuno, 2009; Price, O'Donovan & Rust 2007; Sahragard & Mallahi 2014; Weisi & Karimi 2013). The undeniable and unavoidable psychological impact of assessment needs to be understood by EFL teachers as a premise to assume the necessity of implicating the learners in assessing their learning. As Davidson and Leung summarize it, "the learner's role is crucial because it is the learner who does the learning" (Davidson & Leung 2009, 339).

Peer-assessment is another participatory practice that is inherent to student-centered assessment. In language learning, the learner's engagement in judging other students' outcomes is a powerful opportunity for improvement. While performing as an assessor, the student necessarily continues to reflect on his own learning. It would be reasonable to believe that one of the main sources of the student-assessor's judgment is the comparison between what his/her peer has accomplished and his/her own accomplishment. These ideas are in line with with Ballantyne's description of many students having reported that peer-assessment facilitates their learning (Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas 2002)

Another perspective of peer assessment is the students being assessed by their peers. It has been argued by some authors that peer feedback could be even more influential than teacher feedback (Khonbi & Sadeghi 2013). Learners are generally met by a different perspective when they receive peer feedback, thus allowing them to further reflect on their own learning process and results. Hence, it could be regarded as one of the benefits of student-centered assessment.

However, some authors have referred to the limitations of this approach. One possible peril is that some students might feel uncomfortable in giving or receiving peer feedback (Miladinovic & Markovic 2013). The impact of students' subjectivity has also been discussed in the literature, which is evident in the works published by (Khonbi and Sadeghi 2013; Sahragard & Mallahi 2014). Weisi and Karimi have listed some of the potential problems that might arise under this approach: "inaccuracy of student judgments, (…) evaluative biases, students having limited experience of assessing themselves, student perception of assessment as being the teacher's responsibility, and (…) unreliability of scoring procedures." (Weisi and Karimi 2013, 732).

Admittedly, it would be reasonable to argue that most of the limitations that might appear in student-centered assessment may as well apply to teacher-centered assessment. While more research is needed to explore the impact of teachers' subjectivity on assessment, it is undeniable that teachers' judgment of students' learning is mediated by individual and unique perspectives. Hence, subjectivity in learning assessment is usually unavoidable, regardless of who performs as assessor.

The study described in this paper assumed that a combination of both teacher-centered and student-centered assessment is a beneficial approach in EFL teaching. While this alternative approach acknowledges the role of the teacher in providing guidance, it also requires the active participation of the students in the assessment process.

3. LANGUAGE LEARNING ASSESSMENT PRACTICE IN STU

The study of language learning assessment in STU was carried out during the academic year 2016-2017. It was initiated as a response to the author's need to adapt his teaching style to a new teaching environment. Having had no prior teaching experience in a Chinese context, the researcher wondered what would be the "best practice" in terms of learning assessment in this particular educational system, with these particular students and curriculum.

In this sense, it was decided to explore the most common practices in terms of the agents involved in the assessment process and its functions in the TLP. The philosophy on which the study was based may be outlined by the following premises:

- The study has a limited scope since it considers only two specific aspects of assessment: its functions in the TLP of EFL and the role of the agents involved.
- A detailed empirical exploration to determine the most common practice is needed as a premise to assume the best assessment practice.

- Teaching style is unique to each teacher. Therefore, the "best practice" identified by this study is so only for the author.
- The best assessment practice identified is the result of the combined analysis of the exploration referred to above and the researcher's daily teaching activity.

The methodology followed for the study (Figure 1) included the determination of the dimensions for the collection of data. Based on the researcher's intentions, the dimensions were defined as: A) The functions fulfilled by assessment in the teaching learning process of EFL in STU; and B) The role of the agents involved in the assessment process.

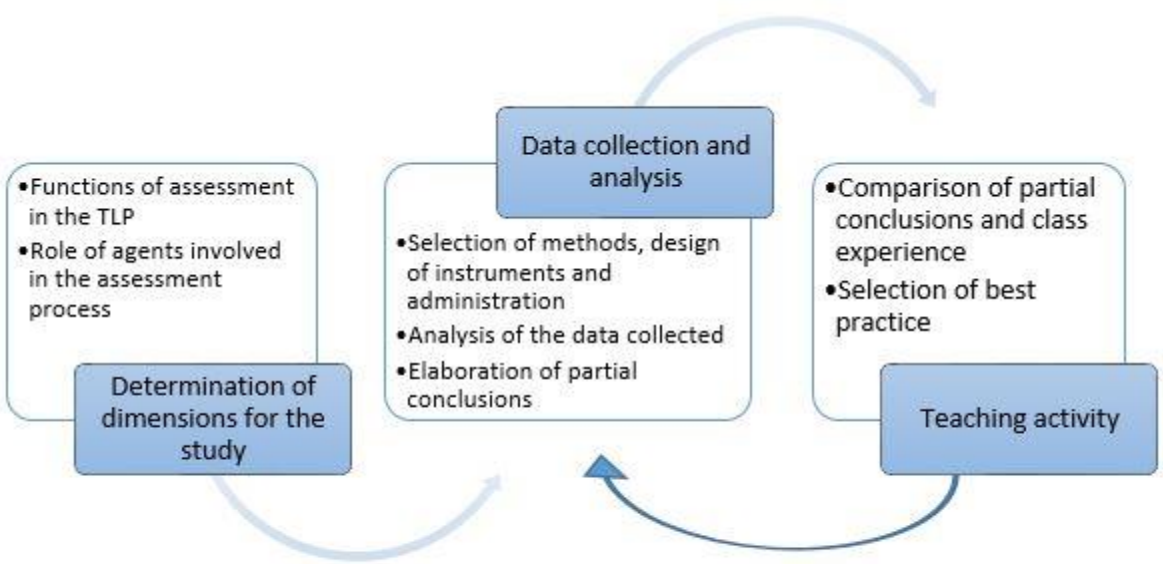


FIGURE 1. METHODOLOGY FOLLOWED FOR THE STUDY

The exploration of dimension A was aimed at deducing information related to the most frequent functions that learning assessment is used for. The three functions of assessment assumed in this study are *diagnostic*, *summative* and *formative* assessment, as analyzed in section 2.1 of this paper. Conversely, the exploration of dimension B was aimed at determining the frequency and implications of the agents involved in the assessment process, namely the teachers and students. The categories used for this end were *self-assessment*, *peer-assessment* and *teacher assessment*, as analyzed in section 2.2 of this article.

3.1. The language learning assessment functions in Shantou University (STU). Realities and best practice

The preliminary assumptions based on the observation and critical analysis of documents suggested that the three above-mentioned functions of assessment are considered in the teaching learning process (TLP) of EFL in STU. Nevertheless, it was not clear whether they were adequately implemented or not. To gather more information about this particular aspect, the researcher conducted class observations and administered a survey to a sample of ELC teachers. The critical analysis of documents was performed on lesson plans and syllabi of three different courses: Global Law English III, ELC III-Intercultural Communication and ELC IV-Making my Case. The analysis of the data collected reveals disparity in the assessment process in what concerns its functions.

The diagnostic function of assessment is generally not part of the system, and its implementation does not play a major role in the assessment process as a whole. The main referent for initial (or diagnostic) assessment of EFL learning in STU is the so-called *Placement Test*. It is administered at the beginning of each school year and the testees are usually freshmen. Its format is based on IELTS speaking assessment, and its results are used as input information to decide the starting course that the student will be assigned to. Neither the students nor the teachers receive feedback regarding the placement test

results; thus, this specific assessment activity does not implicate a diagnostic function. The test results are used to rank the students in terms of the communication abilities they possess, based on their performance in a very specific situation. Therefore, it could be stated that the function of the placement test is summative rather than diagnostic.

Summative assessment has a more specific implication in the TLP of English as a foreign language (EFL) in STU. There are two specific moments in which assessment takes an exclusively summative approach: the mid-term test and the final exam.

The mid-term test is generally instrumented six to eight weeks into the semester. It is mostly a written exam, although a supplemental oral assessment is conducted in all three courses analyzed in this study. The test regularly includes a listening section, as well as reading and writing sections. This makes it possible for the four general communication skills to be assessed through this test. The results attained by the students contribute 15% to 20% of their final grade.

On the other hand, the final exam is administered on the seventeenth -and last- week of the course. Its structure is similar to the mid-term test, including an oral assessment that is previously done. The students' results in the final exam are worth 50% to 55% of their final grade.

The mid-term and final examinations are clear examples of summative assessment of EFL learning in STU. One evidence in this sense is that the feedback the students get concerning their test results is not always sufficient. The analysis of documents and class observations conducted as part of this study suggest that the time allotted for in-class mid-term test revision and analysis is limited. Although most teachers do allot time to discuss the test results with their classes, it is often aimed at giving the students the opportunity to check their test papers and ask the teacher for clarification if doubts arise.

In the case of the final exam, the opportunities for the students to get feedback concerning their performance are more limited. The students have access to their grades through an automated system, without having the possibility of analyzing their results as a means for reflecting on their learning. Hence, both the mid-term and the final exams serve to measure the students' learning outcomes at a specific moment with no further repercussions on the TLP, which is consistent with summative assessment.

The implications of formative assessment of language learning in STU were also revealed through class observations and critical analysis of documents. The information deduced from those methods suggests that there is regular and intentional practice of learning assessment in its formative function. All the course syllabi and lesson plans analyzed include assessment actions aimed at providing feedback to enrich the teaching learning process. The two examples that more clearly illustrate that statement are the in-class writing assignments and the assessment of students' participation in class.

The in-class writing assignments are frequently done in all the three courses included in this study. To that end, the students are assigned to write an in-class essay related to one of the topics included in the course contents. Generally, the students' papers are graded by the teacher based on a rubric previously discussed with the students. The essays are later returned to the student-writers with a copy of the rubric that contains the comments and feedback of the teacher-assessor. As a common practice, general class feedback is provided by the teacher, as well as specific feedback to each student. As a follow up, the students are then assigned to write an out-of-class revised version of their original paper. The new version is graded by the teacher based on the same rubric, and its results are discussed with the students.

The in-class writing project is developed as a process, and its results constitute 20% of the students' final grade. As a practice of formative assessment, this project is continuous, provides teacher's feedback and gives the students the opportunity to reflect on their own learning. The in-class writing assignment focuses on the assessment of learning over a span of time rather than on the results of the students' performance at a specific moment. Figure 2 illustrates the formative nature of the in-class writing project as an assessment activity.

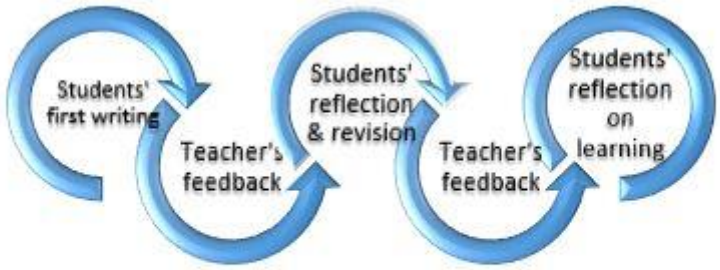


FIGURE 2. IN-CLASS WRITING PROJECT AS FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The continuous assessment of students' participation in class is another common practice of formative assessment of EFL learning in STU. The courses included in the study have among their grading requirements the systematic assessment of the students' in-class discussions, homework, teamwork and other tasks. Class observations revealed that feedback is frequently provided by the teachers as a means to enhance students' learning. It should be noted that the assessment of students' participation in class constitutes 10% of the course final grade.

To corroborate the findings provided by class observations and the analysis of documents, the researcher conducted a survey on a sample of ELC teachers. The respondents were asked to select the type of assessment that the curricula of their courses focus their attention on. In addition to *diagnostic*, *summative* and *formative* they were given the option of selecting a combination of more than one. Coinciding with the analyses previously made by the researcher, none of the respondents selected *diagnostic* as a common function of assessment in STU. As shown in Figure 3, most of the respondents (75%) believe that their curricula promote a combination of *summative* and *formative* assessment.

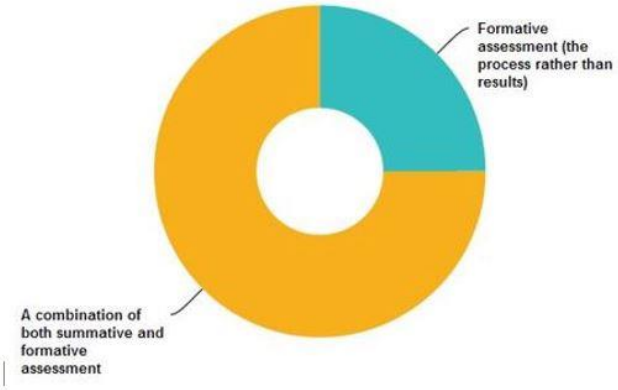


Fig 3. Prevalent Functions of Assessment According to ELC Teachers

A different perspective on this matter is provided by the correlation between the amount of in-class time used for different functions of assessment and their impact on the students' grades. As previously argued in this paper, the mid-term and final exams –including their oral sections- are a manifestation of summative assessment. It has also been noted that their combined results constitute 70% of the students' final grade. Moreover, the amount of in-class time used for their administration is generally under five class-hours per student, which represents slightly less than 8% of total time allotted to the course.

Consequently, the students' performance during the 8% of the in-class time is considered to determine 70% of their grade. On the other hand, formative assessment might potentially be carried out during the rest of the in-class time, but it only contributes 30% of the students' grade. In other words, the students' performance during 92% of the total in-class time determines only 30% of their grades. Figure 4 illustrates this correlation.

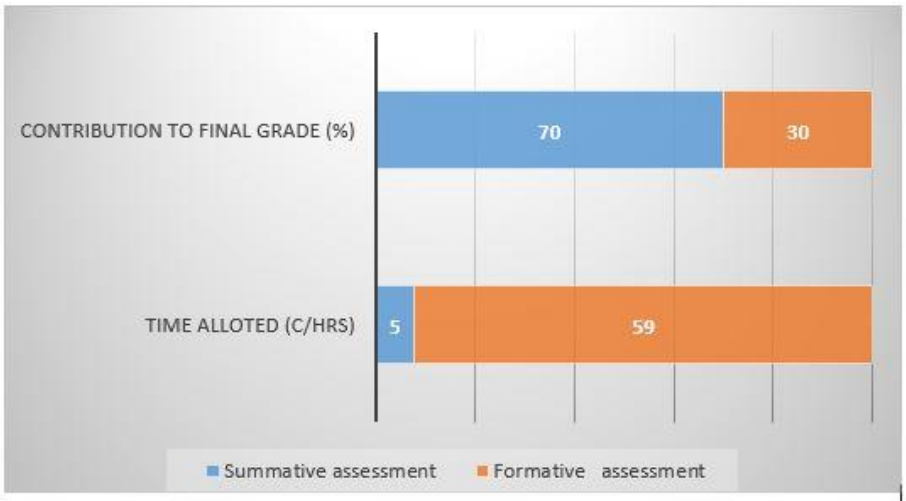


Fig 4. Correlation between In-class Time Allotted and Contribution to Final Grade

The information deduced from the collected data reveals that in the teaching-learning process of English as a foreign language in STU the three functions of assessment are unequally considered. Summative assessment seems to prevail, although the curricula design allows for flexibility towards a teaching practice based on a combination of summative and formative assessment. Diagnostic, or initial, assessment does not contribute to the common teaching practice in the courses included in this study.

3.2. Agents' involvement in language learning assessment in STU. Common and best practice

The preliminary observation of language assessment common practice in STU suggested that it was most frequently done by the teacher. However, it was not clear how frequently the students were intentionally involved in the process. In addition, there was no evidence to judge the effectiveness of a likely combination of teacher-centered and student-centered assessments.

To explore the realities around these issues, the researcher collected data through a questionnaire administered to a sample of students involved in the study, as well as a sample of ELC teachers. Likewise, class observations were used as a source of information along with the analysis of the researcher's daily teaching activity.

In the questionnaire administered to the teachers, the respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of students' self-assessment, peer-assessment and also the assessment done by the teacher. The rating options given were: *completely ineffective, rather ineffective, effective, very effective* and *extremely effective*. The respondents were asked to do the rating based on their own experience as teachers of EFL in STU. Figure 5 illustrates the results of the questionnaire.

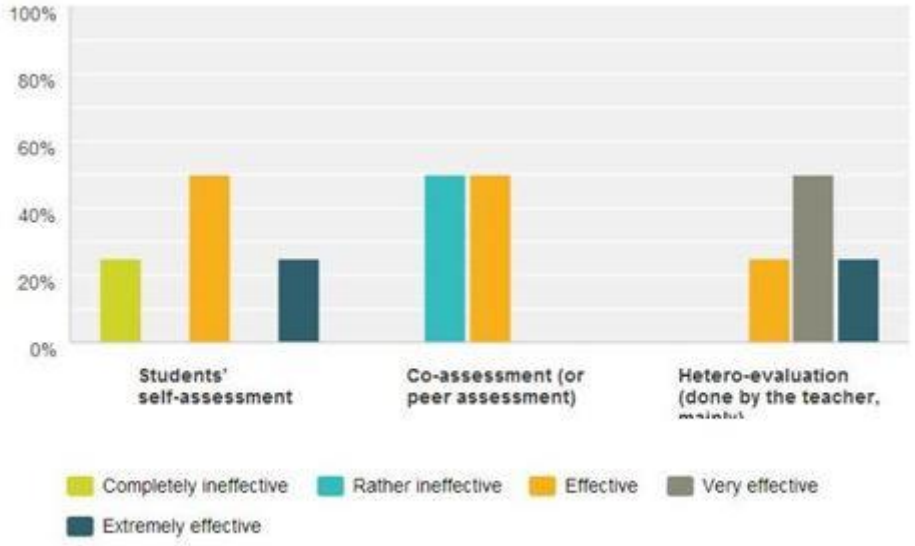


Fig 5. Teachers' Ratings of Students' Self-assessment, Peer-assessment and Teachers' Assessment

Figure 5 shows that 50 % of the respondents regard student-centered assessment as an effective teaching practice, while 30% consider that it is completely ineffective. While one third consider that students' self-assessment is extremely effective, one out of two respondents regard peer-assessment as rather ineffective. The interpretation of these data support a partial conclusion: in terms of student-centered assessment, ELC teachers tend to favor students' self-assessment rather than peer assessment.

The absolute majority of the respondents rated teacher-centered assessment positively (from effective to extremely effective). Nevertheless, such was not the case with any of the variants of student-centered assessment, which received both negative and positive ratings. From the analysis of the data collected through the questionnaire, a general conclusion that seems to confirm the researcher's preliminary observations could be drawn: learning assessment in STU is more frequently done by the teachers, followed by students' self-assessment. Peer-assessment appears to be the least frequent assessment practice in ELC courses.

Interestingly, the students' views in terms of preference on this matter seem to differ from those of the teachers. While 55% of the respondents to the students' questionnaire prefer to be assessed by their teachers, only 13.7% would prefer to get involved in the assessment of their own learning. As illustrated by Figure 6, the students' ratings seem to change the order of preference by rating peer-assessment higher than self-assessment.

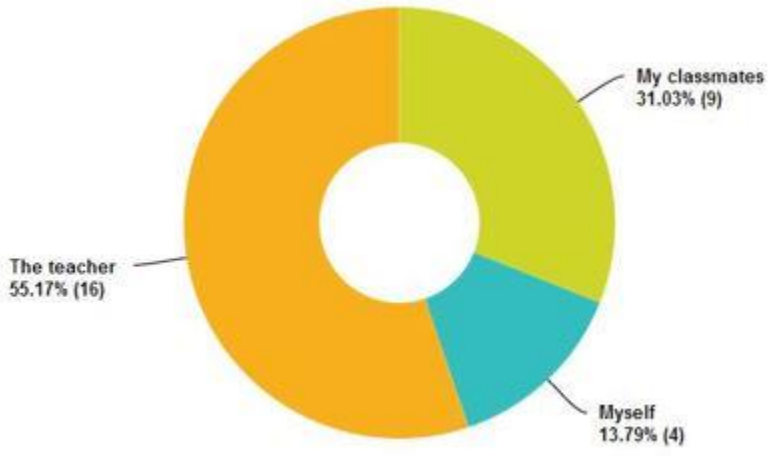


Fig 6. Students' Preference in Terms of the Agents Involved in their Learning Assessment

The students' ratings of peer and self-assessment seem to confirm the findings described by Alias, Masek & Salleh (2015). One possible explanation is the students' awareness of their tendency to score themselves lower than a peer would.

3.2.1. Peer-assessment practice

The results attained so far suggest that a best practice in terms of language learning assessment in STU would be based on a well-balanced combination of student-centered and teacher-centered assessment. However, the shortcomings of student-centered assessment described by the literature, and the reservations that some teachers seem to have about it, are a reminder of the necessity of more research on this aspect. The two main limitations found in the literature are the impact of the students' subjectivity, as reported by (Orsmond et al. 1997, Sullivan & Hall 1997, Woolhouse 1999 quoted by Khonbi & Sadeghi 2013), and the low rates of coincidence between the students granted scores and those granted by the teacher, as described by Alias, Masek & Salleh (2015).

As previously discussed in this paper, subjectivity is unavoidable since assessment necessarily involves judgment. The question is how negative is the impact of subjectivity on the students' process of assessing their peers' learning and their own. Moreover, it is completely understandable that the scores given by the students will differ from those given by the teachers, since they appeal to different sets of standards and experiences while judging. It is just as possible that students and teachers may differ while passing judgment on someone else's learning as it is that two teachers would grant different grades on the same paper or performance. If that were not true, it would not be necessary to conduct norming sessions on most of the occasions that teachers perform together as team-graders.

Based on those premises, the researcher decided to conduct an in-class experiment to test the validity of peer-assessment. In its first stage, the experiment was conducted on a sample of 31 students enrolled in *Global Law English III*. No special assessment activity was arranged for this purpose. Instead, the researcher selected the oral section for the final exam (also known as *Final Discussion*). Being students from the Law School, the participants were assigned to work in teams to perform a mock trial in which the defendant was one of the characters from the short story *The Benefit of the Doubt*, by Jack London. As a pre-experiment arrangement, the students were given the choice to participate in the peer-assessment or not. Accordingly, one student decided not to perform as an assessor, but accepted to be assessed by her classmates.

Before the teams' performances took place, a grading rubric was provided by the teacher. It contained the aspects to be considered for the purpose of assessment, which could be summarized as follows: active participation in the presentation, language use and accuracy, speech fluency, and willingness to cooperate with others. The assessment scale was from zero to 100 points, but no specific band descriptors were provided. The students were free to peer-assess all or some of their classmates.

At the same time, the researcher-teacher conducted his own assessment on each of the students' performance based on the same rubric the students were using for peer-assessment. An average peer-granted score was then calculated for each student and compared to the score granted by the teacher. Since the participants were usually arranged in two groups for regular class meetings, the experiment was also conducted in two groups of sixteen and fifteen students. For the purpose of this paper those groups are labeled Class A and Class B, respectively. Figure 7 illustrates the comparison between peer-granted scores and the ones given by the teacher for each student.

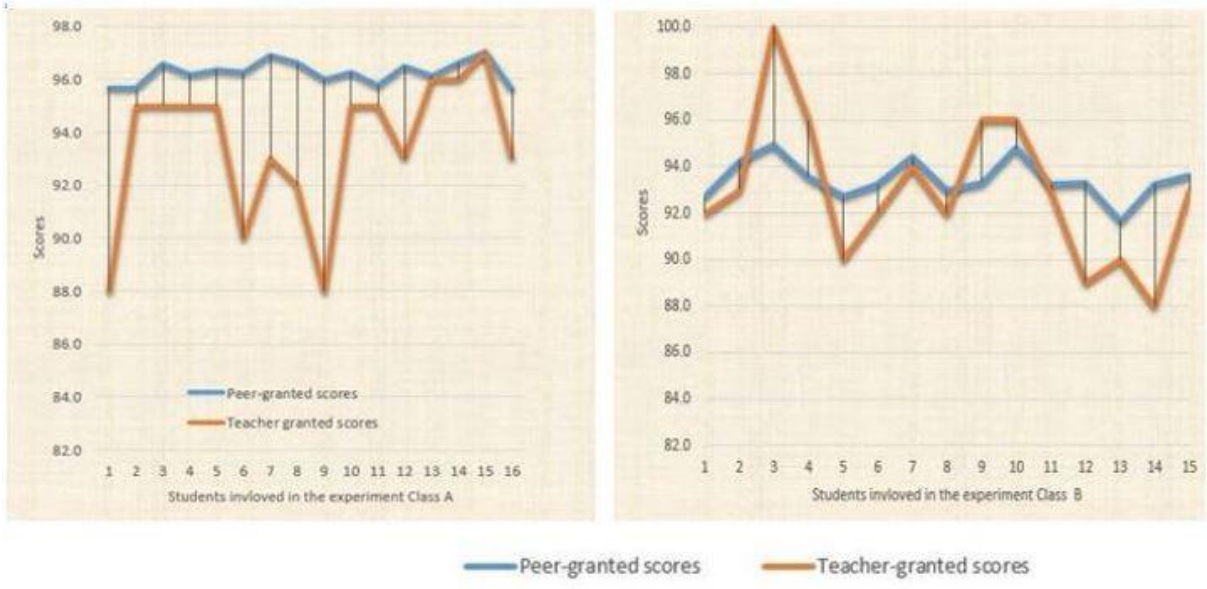


Fig 7. Correlation between Peer-granted and Teacher-granted Scores

As shown by Figure 7, the peer-granted average score for each student was consistently higher than the scores granted by the teacher, which corroborates the findings reported by Alias, Masek & Salleh (2015). The exceptions are four students from Class B, who were granted lower scores by their peers than those given by the teacher. There are, at least, two possible explanations for that. The first one is that in that particular class most of the students decided not to assess their teammates. This caused all the calculated peer scores to be based on non-teammates' assessment, which might have led to lower scores. The second possible explanation is that at least two of those four students are considered "high proficiency level" students, which might have influenced their classmates to score them lower. For this second possible explanation there are antecedents in the literature, as described by Cheng & Warren (1997) and Kwan & Leung (1996), quoted by Khonbi & Sadeghi (2013).

To further explore these two possible explanations, a new stage of the experiment was conducted, and different analyses were made from the data collected. To find new evidence of the students' tendency to grant lower grades to their classmates with higher-quality performance, the researcher-teacher classified the students into three categories: **H**, for high language proficiency level students; **M**, for average and **L** for low language proficiency level students. The classification was done based on the teacher's observations of students' regular performance in class and their learning results towards the end of the course. Figure 8 illustrates the information deduced from those data.

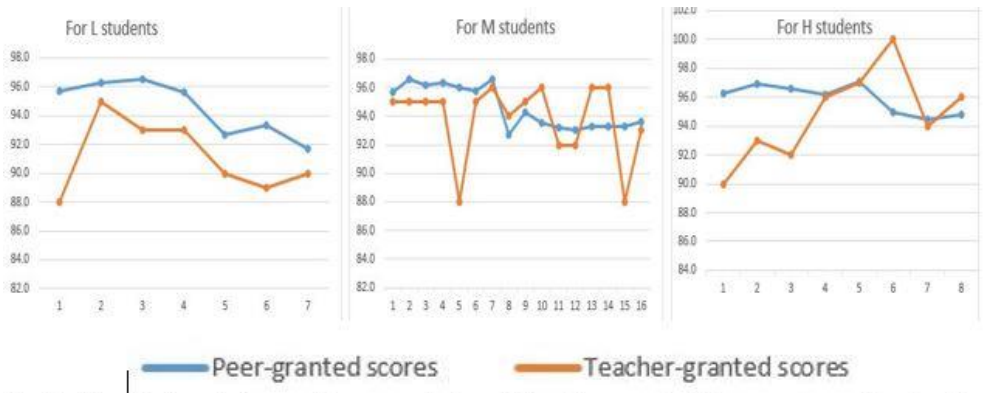


Fig 8. Correlation between Peer-granted and Teacher-granted Scores According to the Students' Language Proficiency Level

The analysis of the data suggests that the tendency of some students scoring their peers lower than the teacher does is not only true for high language proficiency level students. In fact, a significant number of average students were scored slightly lower. In contrast, low level students were consistently scored higher by their peers than by the teacher.

Therefore, there is not enough evidence to support the idea that the perceived language proficiency level of the students has a significant impact on their peers' assessment of their work. However, an alternative explanation could be crafted by a different analysis of the data collected. Figure 9 illustrates the scoring tendencies for all the students involved in the experiment.

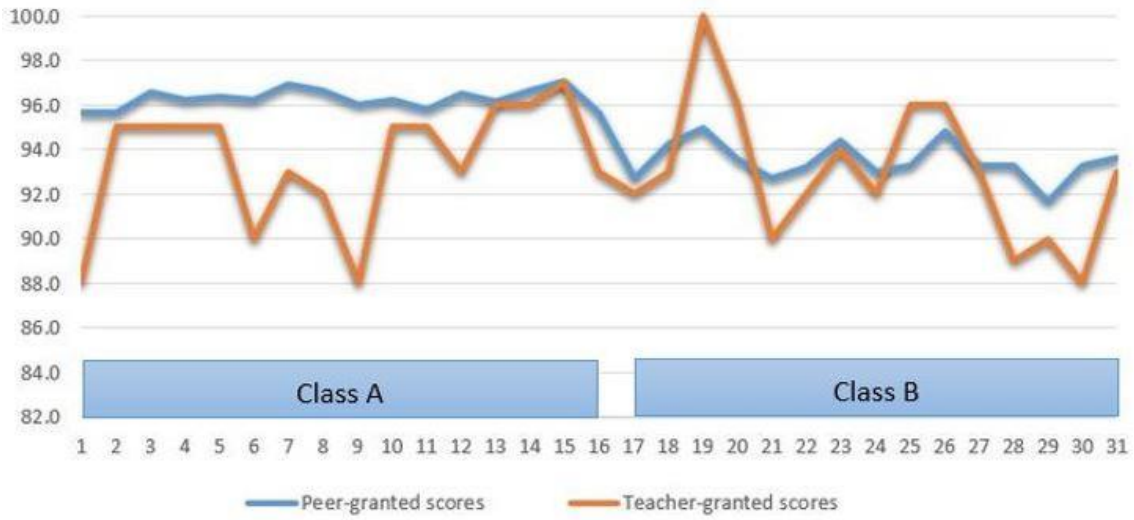


Fig 9. Scoring Tendencies for the Total of Students Involved in the Experiment

As can be observed in Figure 9, the students-granted scores tend to be more constant in each class than those granted by the teacher. This corroborates the findings reported by Cheng & Warren (1997) and Kwan & Leung (1996), quoted by Khonbi & Sadeghi (2013). Yet, there is a general coincidence in the peak variations between the two lines. That is, when the teacher's line descends so does that of the students, in general terms. This analysis seems to suggest that the students tend to create their own assessing standard, and try to score their peers as close to it as possible. In doing so, they tend to keep "*fairness*" by granting slightly higher scores to the students who perform better and slightly lower scores to students who do not. The most interesting finding in this case is that the students' comparison of their peers' performance generally coincides with that of the teacher, regardless of the scoring range.

Finally, to search for evidence that would support or deny the idea that team affiliation has an impact on students' peer assessment, the experiment was replicated with a different sample. A class of 24 students from different majors enrolled in ELC-IV was assigned to work in teams to make an argument about English as a global language. The class regularly develops in-class teamwork, and the teams are permanent. This element was helpful to avoid creating *ad hoc* teams for the sole purpose of the experiment.

As part of the experiment, each team was instructed to choose one of its members as the spokesperson. The role of the team was to help that particular student to get ready for making an oral point regarding either the benefits or the shortcomings of English as a global language. The student was also supposed to explain his/her point, provide evidence and make a final push towards the argument. As a pre-assessment arrangement, the teacher explained that the score granted to the speakers would not be regarded as the team's score. Thus, it was clear for all the student-assessors that they were not assessing a team's work, but an individual student's oral performance.

There were five speakers (one per team) and they were all assessed by their classmates (teammates and non-teammates alike) and by the teacher on a 0 to 40 points scale. An average class-granted score for each of the speakers was then calculated and compared to the average teammate-granted score. Both average student-granted scores were also compared to the score granted by the teacher, as shown in Figure 10.

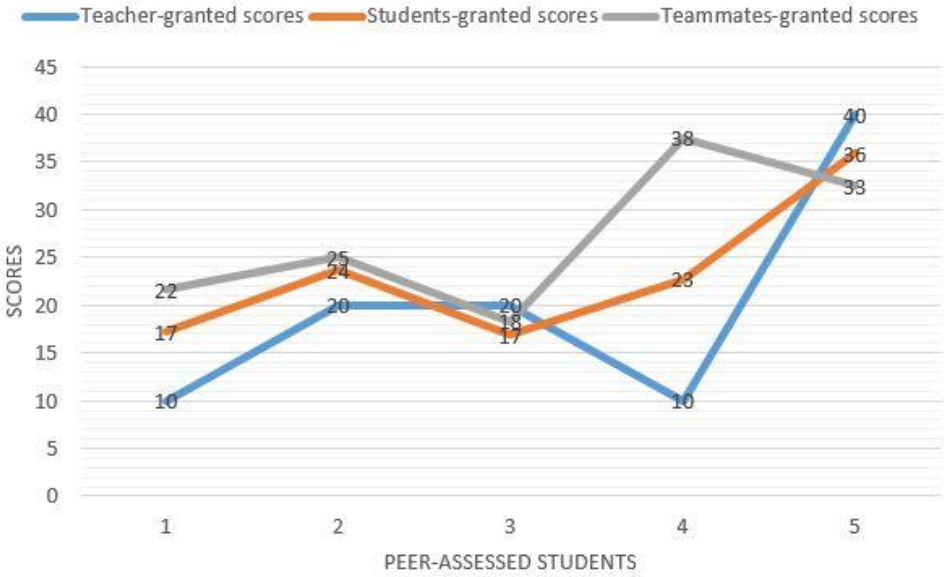


Fig 10. Correlation between Class-granted Scores and Teammates-granted Scores in peer-assessment

Figure 10 shows that the peak variations of the student-granted scores and those of the teammates are very similar. Except for one of the cases, there is a general coincidence in the assessment of the speakers' performances done by the students as a class and as members of a particular team. Although this evidence may not be considered as conclusive, it does suggest that the students do not tend to establish different standards for assessing teammates and non-teammates.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of English as a foreign language learning assessment in Shantou University provided the elements needed by its author to identify the best practice in this regard. First, it provided the arguments to corroborate that teacher-centered assessment is the most common practice in this context, followed by self-assessment and peer-assessment. It also provides evidence to confirm that summative assessment prevails to the detriment of its formative and diagnostic functions.

Second, the study described in this paper adds elements of reason to an ongoing debate regarding the impact of the students' subjectivity in peer-assessment. The analysis of the data collected during the study suggests that while subjectivity is unavoidable in student-centered (as much as it is in teacher-centered) assessment, its impact is generally not negative. A point has been made that the students tend to create their own assessing standards, which tend to be based on a reliable comparison of their peers' performance.

Finally, the critical analysis of common assessment praxis in STU has allowed this author to identify a best practice. It is not intended to be generalized, but rather assumed as a personal teaching philosophy. The best-assessment practice should be based on the constant and systematic identification and acknowledgment of the students' learning outcomes, aimed at improving the teaching-learning process. It should also empower the learners by sharing with them the role of protagonist, which may be attained by a customized combination of teacher-centered and student-centered assessment.

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