Chapter 1

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1.0 Background and Rationale

In the last couple of decades, language testing has witnessed remarkable development in the area of English Language (ELT). There was a time when testing occupied the backbench and was perceived as something to be conducted at the end of an academic year for evaluating the learners’ level of learning. Even the modes, methods and techniques remained static for quite some time under the influence of traditional and structural approaches to teaching. It is only with the emergence of communicative language testing that such terms as ‘testing’, ‘evaluation’ and ‘assessment’ were defined and distinguished in order to make the teaching and learning process more effective. These developments in the last couple of decades have been more dynamic and meaningful, wherein testing and evaluation have been considered and made very much a part and parcel of the everyday teaching and learning process. Various concepts and techniques emerged over a period of time, some of which are provided below as a background to the present study on Formative Assessment.

In recent years, educators have encouraged learners to take more responsibility for their own learning, redressing the gap between what has been and what may be learned. In addition, with training, learners may be well situated to both self-assess and to recognize gaps in their own learning through such practices of formative assessment as including self-assessment, peer-assessment, teacher feedback, conferencing, and other ongoing learner-empowering pedagogical methods. Moreover, several studies have cited formative assessment as the essential element responsible for enhanced classroom learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b; Harlen & Winter, 2004; Van de Watering & Van der Rijt, 2006).

Most recently, formative assessment practices have been refined into a dynamic and reflective approach called Assessment for Learning (AFL), an interactive, learning-focused pedagogy. AFL asks learners to be actively involved in their own learning, to appropriate the goals of assessment, and to carry out self and peer assessments. AFL also asks teachers to encourage learners’ involvement in assessment, to guide them in understanding assessment goals, to provide feedback useful in learner development, and to adapt lesson planning in consequence of assessment outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; 1998b; 2005; 2006). The AFL has been shown to empower learners
of mathematics and science with greater learner autonomy, to establish a more positive approach and increase achievement, and to help teachers better identify what learners know and need to learn (Harlen & Winter, 2004; Rea-Dickins & Gardner, 2000; Weeden & Winter, 1999). With some exceptions, however, formative assessment and the AFL have scarcely been researched in L2 classrooms (Rea-Dickins, 2004).

Likewise, authentic assessment is another overarching concept that generally refers to a more meaningful, worthwhile, or significant form of evaluation (Wiggins, 1990). Researchers such as Goodrich-Andrade (2000) and Hart (2004) suggest that assessment is authentic when it enables students to communicate their academic strengths, as well as their educational needs. It has also been argued that this type of assessment enables students to move away from passive or simple responses to the active construction of meaning and it mirrors good classroom instruction as students are now being asked to demonstrate, in a significant and personal way, what they know and are able to do rather than merely measuring specific or isolated skills (Montgomery, 2002). Moreover, it gives students ongoing feedback that enables them to reflect on their learning accomplishments, identify future learning needs, and develop goals and strategies to achieve them.

As a result, this type of assessment may not only empower students to become self-directed or autonomous learners, but it may also allow teachers to use classroom assessment information for future instructional improvement.

Many educators have come to recognize yet another concept, Alternative assessment, as an important means of gaining a dynamic picture of students’ academic and linguistic development. “Alternative assessment refers to procedures and techniques which can be used within the context of instruction and can be easily incorporated into the daily activities of the school or classroom” (Hamayan, 1995, p. 213). It is particularly useful for second language students because it employs strategies that ask students to show what they can do. In contrast to traditional testing, “students are evaluated on what they integrate and produce rather than on what they are able to recall and reproduce” (Huerta- Macias, 1995, p. 9).

There are two common ways to carry out an assessment, either during the life of the course (formative) or at the end of the course (summative) to provide information about students’ learning (Chisga-Negril, 2011, p. 735). According, to Crooks (2002 cited in Ali 2011, p. 11) summative assessment provides a well-founded, clear and up-
to-date picture of the students’ current capabilities and progress over time and enhancing their development. However, formative assessment deals with how the quality of student responses can be used to improve students’ competence (Sadler, 1989). Furthermore, formative assessment is used to identify what students have learned, what they have not learned and where they are having difficulty, and this can support the teaching-learning process (Gipps and Murphy, 1994 as cited in Buhagiar 2007).

The above discussion shows that the world of ELT today is encouraging and experiencing new trends in the name of AFL, Authentic Assessment or Formative Assessment, which have some common trends in the sense that they are all learner-centered, and are conducted during actual teaching and learning in the classroom. Besides, the fact that these concepts are still in its infancy in the ESL/EFL contexts, very limited research has been done to identify their prospects in developing countries like India and others. In addition, most of researches, so far, with regard to assessment in these countries have been related to the principles and processes of evaluation and testing, which is now often termed as Summative Assessment. Even today the policy makers, educational administrators and institutions look at assessment as a means to judge the learners’ achievements in their course.

In the light of the above, the present study intends to identify the prospects of applying Formative Assessment techniques to undergraduate ESL courses at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU).

1.1 Aims and Objectives

The present study aims to:

i. understand and discuss the origin definition, and aspects of Formative Assessment;

ii. discuss theoretical premise of Formative Assessment;

iii. identify the practice of Formative Assessment techniques at AMU;

iv. figure out the need for Formative Assessment in ESL classroom;

v. identify the scope and prospects of Formative Assessment in ESL classroom.
1.2 Research Questions:
Through this study, an attempt will be made to answer the following research questions:

i. What is Formative Assessment? What are its characteristic features? How is it different from the Traditional Pen and Paper Method of assessment?

ii. To what extent theoretical constructs relating to learning, teaching and assessment can be made effective in the Undergraduate ESL classroom at AMU?

iii. To what extent are the aspects of Formative Assessment being practised in the Undergraduate ESL classroom?

iv. To what extent the Formative Assessment techniques are needed in the Undergraduate ESL classroom?

v. To what extent the curriculum of the Undergraduate ESL classroom can be enriched/adapted through prospects of Formative Assessment?

1.3 Research Methodology
The present study will be both qualitative and quantitative in nature. While it would be discussing the various aspects of Formative Assessment (FA), it would also conduct data analysis to identify the need, use and prospects of Formative Assessment.

1.3.1 Participants
Two sets of participants are involved in the study, they are:

1.3.1.1 Students
The target population opted for this study will be about 600 undergraduate students, with equal spread of male and female. Students will principally be from the age group of 17-21 years, who have already had English language instruction from 5-15 years. The students who participate in the survey study English as a compulsory subject at undergraduate level in the faculties of Arts, Social Science, Science, Life Science, Commerce, Law and others. A majority of them come from various Indian provinces with diverse socio-cultural and linguistic background.
1.3.1.2 Teachers

Another set of participants are teachers from the Department of English and Women’s College at AMU who teach or have taught compulsory English course to undergraduate students at faculties of Arts, Commerce, Science and Social Science. The educational qualification of teachers involve in this study range from PhD, MPhil, to MA degree either in English Literature or English Language Teaching and are appointed as Professors, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor or Guest Faculties. The years of their teaching experience may vary from 1-30 years. Even the teachers come from various socio-cultural and linguistic background of India.

1.3.2 Instrument and Tool

Two sets of questionnaires are intended to be designed and put for the pilot survey for the purpose of making them more valid and authentic. Then, parallel questionnaires will be administered on the students and teachers. The quantitative information will obtain through questionnaires to identify important variables of formative assessment at undergraduate level.

1.3.3 Data Interpretation and Analysis

For the purpose of analysis, the statistical software package SPSS for Windows (Version 19) will be applied to process the collected data, to tabulate results and to analyze them. The statistical procedures used in this research were descriptive statistics- frequency, percentage and Reliability via Cronbach’s Alpha Method.

1.4 Plan of the Study

The present study intends to contain the following four chapters, besides, the present, chapter one, “Statement of Intent”.

Chapter 2 will provide a review of the literature, on the present study.

Chapter 3 aims to present a comprehensive overview on ‘Assessment’ in general and ‘Formative Assessment’ in particular, besides its various aspects.

Chapter 4 will discuss empirical case study based on the data at AMU to report the findings based on the teachers’ and students’ responses to the questionnaire.

Chapter 6 will provide a summary of the results, conclusion, recommendations, suggestions and limitations of the present study.
1.5 Significance of the study

The present research is significant in the sense that it explores ‘Formative Assessment’ as a contemporary trend of language testing which has eventually emerged as a mode for language pedagogy. It bears an attempt to bear significant application of formative assessment both theoretically and practically. While, on the one hand, this research explores the meaning, definition and other aspects of ‘Formative Assessment’, on the other hand it also makes a case study of the Compulsory English classes to identify and analyze the practice, the need and the prospects of Formative Assessment at Aligarh Muslim University. An input on these aspects promises to help improve the learning and teaching scenario at AMU. Besides, this study attempts to inform educators and material developers to become conscious of the need and wants these strategies in the Compulsory English class. Another significance of this research is that it is a serious attempt to get an understanding of Formative practices in the L2 learners’ environments. Then this study can assist both teacher as well as learners to facilitate progress in the teaching-learning process by implementing appropriate formative practices on the basis of the findings of this investigation. The research is also expected to be a good source of information for the syllabus designers in a way that the result of the investigation may contribute material designers to develop appropriate course books with the essential emphasis on formative techniques. At last, the findings of this research might be useful to those interested individuals in the field of ESL promoting language-learning through formative assessment activities to get a better comprehension of the development of second language learning.
References


