"Original Research Article"

Exploring Teachers' Assessment Practices and Skills

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Abstract	Article Info
The need for increased use of test results to improve educational outcomes is urgent; yet, there is little understanding in the research literature of practitioners' knowledge and skills in interpreting and using educational data (test results) to enhance classroom instruction and student learning. This study aims to survey 40 high school teachers who work in El Jadida region, distributed between males and females, of different years of experience, with the purpose of learning about their assessment practices, and identifying the barriers that prevent thoughtful applications of formative assessment in classrooms. A questionnaire and an interview were used as a data collection technique. The findings point to use of a varied number of assessment strategies ranging from homework assignments to in-class written tests but mainly for summative purposes. In light of the results, the study ends with implications for teachers and policy makers.	

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the context of reforming the Moroccan educational system, several attempts have been made to boost educational standards, the latest of which is the implementation of the standards-based approach to foreign language teaching. This approach places several obligations on practitioners ranging from identifying students' needs and meeting them through monitoring students' learning to differentiating instruction. However, concrete corresponding changes in assessment practices have been lacking. Undoubtedly, teachers who have been focused merely on the assignment of grades in assessment have neglected an important component of the teaching/learning process. An important function of classroom assessment is promoting students' learning, and raising their motivation levels. This type of assessment is termed "formative assessment".

As its name delineates, formative assessment means that we assess students as part of forming their competences and skills and helping them continue to develop these competences (Brown, 2003). It is used to support and inform learning, build self-confidence, and capacity for success (Stiggins, 2001). It is assessment for learning rather than of learning, and it is becoming increasingly the focus of research (Black & William, 1998; Crooks, 1988; Sadler, 1989; Stiggins,

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2001). On the other hand, summative assessment refers to the assessment of learning, summarizing the development of learners at a particular time. It performs the function of measuring and quantifying the competence or the skill that the student has attained, (Stiggins, 2001).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Fleming and Chambers (1983) conducted a survey of teachers' written classroom assessments and came to the conclusion that teachers' test items were of low quality according to principles of good item writing. Specifically, what characterized these items were ambiguity as well as an inclination to rely primarily on recall rather than on higher-order thinking skills. Over all, teachers were found to be deficient in devising quality tests, a finding that testifies to teachers' low assessment literacy levels.

In a similar vein, Marso and Pigge (cited in Wise, 1993) conducted a study which consisted of a direct analysis of teachers' self-constructed tests. They found out that these classroom tests revealed frequent violations of common question writing guidelines. The study consisted also of ratings by classroom teachers, principals and supervisors of classroom teachers that identified needs for a variety of testing competencies. Teachers expressed a high need for competencies including the use of test results for instructional purposes. Over all, they reported they needed training in the following: grading and scoring activities, identifying pupil strengths and weaknesses, and training in test validity-related competencies including matching questions with objectives, writing questions that trigger the use of higher order thinking skills, and measuring true progress of pupils.

In the same line, Plake (1993) conducted a study on teachers' capacity to develop assessment methods appropriate for instructional decisions, scoring, interpreting and communicating results to students, and exploiting results for further learning and right decisions concerning instruction. Results pointed to a weakness on the part of teachers particularly in communicating results to students. The majority (85%) also reported an interest in developing skills in assessment. Similarly, Mertler (2004) compared assessment literacy levels of pre-service teachers and in-service teachers. Overall, results were quite parallel to those reached by Plake (1993) with some quite insignificant differences. Respondents performed quite well in administering, scoring and interpreting test scores. Yet in this study, the lowest scores were on developing valid grading procedures in addition to communicating test results.

Black and Wiliam (1998) reviewed more than 250 articles related to formative assessment. They stated that the studies "show conclusively that formative assessment does improve learning," and that the gains in student achievement are "amongst the largest ever reported" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 61). However, the study pointed to a difficulty on the part of teachers to effectively incorporate formative assessment into their teaching practices. To repair the damage, Black and Wiliam (1998) have suggested that a number of practices may lead to more successful implementation of formative assessment. It is noteworthy that these suggestions are shared by other researchers. First, it is suggested that clear learning targets and criteria upon which performance will be judged are made clear to students (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Schunk, 2003). Second, teachers are advised to administer effective feedback on student performance (Black &Wiliam, 1998; Crooks, 1998). Third, students should be involved in the process of formative assessment so that they can develop meta-cognitive skills (Black &Wiliam, 1998;

Sadler, 1989; Schunk, 2003). Last but not least, results should be timely available to students so as not to miss out on their instructional role and transformative potential (Popham, 2004).

Vaden-Goad (2009) conducted an experimental study in which he compared formative and summative assessment. He found out that the amount of information and motivation levels increased as a corollary of changing the function of assessment from summative to formative. However, continuous assessment in itself is not sufficient to serve the purpose of scaffolding learning because there are conditions that need to be present so that assessment can be formative; notable among these conditions is timely feedback to students. Consequently, teachers need to receive training in administering formative assessment, an important component of which is giving effective, appropriate and timely feedback. Another study bearing on elementary teachers' knowledge and self-efficacy for measurement concepts reported that practicing teachers were relatively skilled at classifying assessment types and interpreting student scores (French & Gotch, 2011). Conversely, results of items assessing teachers' ability to act on standardized scores by using them to make appropriate instructional decisions indicated a weakness in this skill.

Yamtima and Wongwanichb (2014) investigated the levels of classroom assessment literacy of primary school teachers. Nineteen primary school teachers at Wat Phai Rong Wua School completed a classroom assessment literacy questionnaire and 8 teachers participated in a focus group discussion. The findings showed that most of the participants had scores for classroom assessment literacy at the poor level. In light of this finding, the researchers suggested a developmental approach for improving the classroom assessment literacy of primary school teachers which emphasized cooperative learning and teamwork.

Babaii and Damankesh (2015) investigated the effect of high school final examinations on students' test-taking and test-preparation strategy use. The findings revealed that the examinations influenced the students into employing strategies which exerted a negative influence on their learning as they directed them toward a measurement-driven approach to learning rather than to an approach focused on improvement of learning.

The literature on feedback also establishes that while feedback is of paramount importance if given in the form of comments, it fails to deliver on this potential if paired with marks or grades because students tend to overlook comments and content themselves with marks or grades (Butler, 1988). The comment, descriptive though it may be intended by the teacher, will be interpreted as an explanation of the grade. Hence, descriptive comments will only be read as descriptive if they are not accompanied by a grade. In turn, Sadler (1989) stated that empirical evidence demonstrated that feedback can yield positive effects only if intentionally oriented towards improvement of learning. This finding was corroborated by subsequent studies conducted on feedback.

Black and Wiliam (1998) also concluded that when feedback was of high quality, it improved students' work, thus contributing to an increase in standards. In his turn, Hattie (1999) conducted an extensive synthesis of a wide range of educational research and concluded that feedback was the most powerful factor that could enhance achievement. Along the same lines, Higgins et al. (2002) argue that students, despite exhibiting an interest in grades, also demonstrate an intrinsic motivation to learn from feedback. All in all, giving quality feedback serves a scaffolding function which is essential for stretching one's "comfort zone".

In Morocco, Melouk (2001) conducted an exploratory study on classroom assessment in high school. A survey of national exams in the nineties and exams in the latest decade showed that little change has been produced in the way exams are designed. In a way consistent with what has been found out in other parts of the world, Melouk (2001) concluded that the majority of teachers have received a very limited training in assessment. The majority of his respondents (teachers) expressed their interest for training in item production and item management as well as some general background in testing. The study also researched whether learners were trained in new test types and exam papers or not, the result of which was that training was generally insufficient. In addition to that, Melouk explored the content of official exams; more precisely, he investigated teachers' views about whether baccalaureate exams are skills-based or knowledge-based. On this point, a substantial number of teachers thought that exams are knowledge-based, a finding that reveals that exams do not foster creative and critical thinking.

Khtou (2011) investigated students' and teachers' attitudes to assessment in Fez and Rabat faculties of arts, and at a time when the current system was not yet fully implemented (around 2004-5). Utilizing questionnaires and interviews, Khtou probed faculty and students' attitudes to assessment, both terminal and continuous. Concerning teachers, 60% of questionnaire respondents stated that the system of assessment that was prevalent at the time of the study was unfair; and asked for a system that would provide students with feedback on their work to help them learn and improve their performance. In similar terms, many students (63%) reported that the system of assessment was unfair, and, in turn, expressed their wish for the inclusion of feedback. These students were dissatisfied with the fact that not only was feedback withheld, but so were the scoring criteria as well. Therefore, there was no room for improvement, and the likelihood for the same mistakes to continue to appear in new situations was strong.

Bouzidi (2009) investigated the type of feedback given to students in higher education. The researcher investigated 2000 marginal and end comments on student essays at Ibn Zohr University. He analyzed these comments in terms of their linguistic features and their intended pragmatic effect on the students. Then, he had a second look at the revised drafts to measure the impact the comments had on the students' revision and to assess the extent of improvement that occurred as a result of the comments. He concluded that the comments were mainly form-based rather than content-based, the most-focused-upon aspects being spelling, punctuation and neatness/appearance of paper while more important aspects like thesis statement, related ideas and development of ideas, for instance, did not obtain equal attention by the teachers. Consequently, the impact of such comments was restricted to some structural changes while the overall essay quality did not improve.

By and large, three conclusions can be drawn from the literature review: first, the value of formative assessment is paramount in driving learning forward (Babaii & Damankesh, 2015; Black & Wiliams, 1998; Vaden-Goad, 2009); second, quality feedback improves students' work; and third, teachers' assessment literacy levels are low in the absence of training (Fleming & Chambers, 1983; Marso & Pigge, 1993; Plake 1993; Yamtima & Wongwanichb, 2014).

With respect to research in Morocco, classroom assessment is still under-researched as attests Melouk's conclusion regarding "scarcity of field research in this area in Morocco" (Melouk, 2001, p.51). Additionally, the few studies surveyed in Morocco do not focus on high school continuous assessment, but on high school terminal assessment (Melouk, 2001) and university assessment (Bouzidi, 2009; Khtou, 2011). Accordingly, research addressing teachers'

assessment practices in high school is highly desirable. This provides the rationale for the present study.

3. METHOD

This study falls within exploratory research type. Research utilizing an exploratory design mainly explores an existing phenomenon; numbers, though, may also be used to characterize individuals or groups. The design, therefore, is both qualitative and quantitative as the study employs a questionnaire and an interview for triangulation purposes.

3.1. Participants

The context of the present study is secondary schools in the town of El Jadida. High school teachers of English constitute the sample of the study. Overall, there are 58 teachers of English in high school in the town of El Jadida, 37 males and 21 females. The sample chosen for this study consists of 40 teachers. It was difficult to include all the teachers in the town as some teachers refused to take part while three female teachers did not return the questionnaire.

The study utilized non-probability sampling, where exclusion or inclusion from the sample is deliberately done by the researcher. Effort was made to collect data from educational practitioners of different backgrounds (age, experience, and education). In this regard, the researcher had opted for equality in number between men and women practitioners, but because male practitioners outnumber female practitioners, this equality was not possible. The final number was 24 male teachers and 16 female teachers distributed as follows:

Table 1. Background of respondents

Items		Count	Percent
Gender	Male	24	60
	Female	16	40
Diploma	Bachelor's degree	31	77.5
	Master's degree	9	22.5
Experience	1-5 years	9	22.5
	6-10	12	30
	11-15	13	32.5
	16-20	3	7.5
	21+	3	7.5

3.2. Materials

3.2.1. Questionnaire

A questionnaire was selected as a data collection technique because, unlike other data collection techniques, it has several advantages. First of all, a questionnaire is cost effective in terms of money and time; it can be administered to a large number of people in one place, thus providing a high proportion of usable responses. Besides, a questionnaire permits anonymity, which would cause respondents to feel at ease and express themselves freely. It also provides respondents with ample time to deeply think about their answers as they are usually not required to fill out the questionnaire on the spot. Moreover, a questionnaire is objective as the researcher's influence is reduced in a questionnaire than in other data-collection instruments.

The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section one includes 14 questions regarding teachers' assessment practices. The participants are, for instance, asked about the frequency of testing their students and the type of assessment and questions that they give to the students. The questionnaire is in the appendix.

3.2.2. Teacher interview schedule

By way of enriching and crosschecking data obtained in the questionnaire, a semi-structured teacher interview which used open-ended questions was designed. It was selected in this study because it is useful in that it provides clues into the reality of teachers' practices, thus filling any gaps that might have arisen from utilizing the questionnaire. Unlike the structured interview which uses questions followed by choices from which the interviewee selects the answer, the semi-structured interview does not provide answers, thus allowing for free individual responses.

The questions in the interview are phrased in such a way as to allow for free answers. There are no choices from which the interviewees can select their responses. The interview aims to uncover the strategies, types of questions that teachers use in their assessment of students, and the purposes for which assessment is carried out, the frequency with which they assess students, the kind of feedback they provide, the turn-around of tests, and the barriers, if any, that hinder the implementation of formative assessment. All in all, the items in the interview are aimed at eliciting answers that will be compared with answers to questions in the questionnaire. The number of interviewed teachers is five. The interview schedule is in the appendix.

4. RESULTS

The respondents and the interviewees were probed about their classroom centered assessment practices. As to frequency of assessment, 72.5% of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they assessed their students once a month; whereas 27.5% of the teachers stated they did so twice a semester:

Table 2. Frequency of assessment

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	once a month	29	72.5	72.5	72.5
Valid	other	11	27.5	27.5	100.0
	Total	40	100.0	100.0	

This finding was supported by findings from the interview. All interviewees claimed that they assessed their students twice a semester; two teachers, though, pointed out using quizzes in addition to tests. All interviewees attributed the frequency with which they tested students to administrative reasons. One teacher, for instance, said that: "*The administration requires two marks, so we administer two tests*" thereby delinking assessment from instruction. To a follow-up question, the interviewees all made it clear that they did not assess at the beginning of the year. In other words, they assessed at the end of a unit of study.

Concerning the type of assessment which teachers conducted in their classes, the answers came as follows:

Table 3. Assessment strategies

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Written tests	40	100
Oral tests	3	7.5
Homework assignments	38	95
Self-assessment	2	5
Peer assessment	2	5
Other	0	0

As can be seen from the chart above, all participants used written tests. Also, most of the respondents (95%) claimed that they assigned homework tasks to students. However, only two percent of the respondents claimed they made use of peer and self-assessment:

Similarly, the interviewees identified a variety of assessment strategies ranging from written tests to homework assignments. However, the overall umbrella for this variety of assessment tools is written tests as teachers talked about dictations, cloze tests and essays. One teacher said: "*I introduce variety into my assessment practices to test a variety of dimensions of intelligence*".

The respondents also indicated that they used all types of questions: multiple-choice questions, short-answer questions, matching questions, essay questions, true/false questions, and fill-in-the-blanks. Two of the respondents added other types; namely, cloze tests, scrambled sentences and dictations. Likewise and in line with the acclaimed variety of assessment strategies, all interviewees reported using a variety of question types ranging from w/h questions, to fill-in-the-blanks and multiple-choice questions. One of them said: "*We need to diversify our questions so as to allow for simple as well as difficult questions to be included*". Another teacher said: "*Variety of questions is important because it enables weak students to answer some of the questions*". Obviously, this teacher was speaking about variety in terms of simple and difficult questions.

In addition, the respondents also reported targeting both levels of difficulty in their tests, deep understanding of concepts on the one hand, and surface knowledge and recall of facts on the other hand. That is, they conducted tests that used a combination of items that disclosed students' thinking processes and deep understanding as well as items that targeted recall and knowledge of facts. However, three of the interviewees admitted that they emphasized recall more than understanding and higher-order questions while the remaining two teachers said they used a variety of questions with some assessing recall and others assessing deep understanding.

Concerning informing students of the objective of tests, only 5% indicated that they informed students of the objective of testing while 87.5 % administered tests and quizzes without any explicit delineation of why the assessment was being conducted:

Table 4. Percent of teachers informing students of objective of testing

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	5	12.5
No	35	87.5
Mean frequency & percent	20	50

Similarly, four interviewees clarified that they only informed their students of the date of the assessment without delineating the objective behind testing. One of them, for instance, said: "*No, I don't tell them that, only the day when they sit for the assessment*". The fifth interviewer, however, claimed he informed his students of the objective of assessment: "I tell them what they will be assessed on and why".

As for test duration, 60% of the respondents said that they used tests that lasted between one hour and two hours, and 35% claimed they used 30-60 minute tests while only 5% of the respondents claimed that they used short quizzes the duration of which ranged between 15 and 30 minutes. The following diagram provides a good illustration of this point:
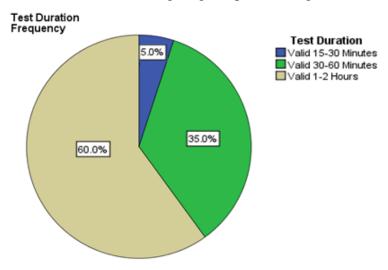

Figure 1. Test duration frequency

Three of the interviewees claimed that the duration of their tests was one hour while the other two teachers said that they also made use of short quizzes the duration of which ranged between quarter of an hour and half an hour. One of them commented that: "*only a long test makes me assess students' true achievement*" while one of the interviewees who reported using quizzes said: "*Quizzes allow for quick check-up of recently learnt material*". However, the teachers did not report a frequent use of quizzes; one even reported using quizzes as a strategy of calming down a noisy classroom, thus indicating using assessment as a punishment instrument rather than as an instructional means.

Respondents were further inquired about availability of test results. Fifty percent of the teachers indicated that results were available in not less than two weeks' time, and 45% returned tests in two weeks' time:

Table 5. Availabilty of results

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Less than a week	2	5,0	5,0	5,0
	Two weeks	18	45,0	45,0	50,0
	More than two weeks	20	50,0	50,0	100,0
	Total	40	100,0	100,0	

In a like manner, four interviewees reported that they did not return tests in less than two weeks while the fifth teacher said: "*As long as it takes me to correct them*" and indicated that correction was a hard task to do particularly that "*we teach an average of five or six classes of more than 40 students each*". Additionally, all five interviewees indicated that the type of feedback they wrote on papers was no more than a comment on the grade. The comment given to a student with a grade of ten, for instance, was "average", while a student with less than ten would receive less than average or weak. Similarly, a student with more than ten would get "good" or "very good" depending on how high their mark was.

Additionally, 55% of the teachers indicated that they did not hold correction sessions with their students while 45% did. This finding was also supported by findings from the interview with four interviewees claiming that they contented themselves with informing students about their marks. An interviewee said: "*students don't care about correction, why should I make it?*" This statement was echoed by another teacher who commented: "*Even if you correct, the majority of students will not follow with you because all they are interested in is grades*". The remaining teacher who claimed he held correction sessions pointed out that he contented himself with giving students the correct answers.

Table 6. Test correction sessions

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	18	45
No	22	55

Respondents were further required to indicate if they disclosed to students scoring rubrics before the test was conducted. 42.5% of the teachers made it clear that they did not disclose to students scoring rubrics while 57.5% said they disclosed scoring rubrics, a finding also confirmed by interview results with all interviewees claiming that they did not disclose their scoring rubrics except on the day when the results were available. "*I show the students the marks for every item when I give them back their papers,*" said one interviewee.

Table 7. Percent of teachers disclosing scoring rubrics

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	23	57.5
No	17	42.5

Eighty percent of the teachers indicated they did not write comments on students' papers, and the rest (20%) said they did so. By contrast, four interviewees indicated that they wrote comments on test papers. The following table illustrates the point for the questionnaire respondents:

Table 8. Percent of teachers writing comments

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	8	20
No	32	80

The respondents who claimed that they offered their students feedback were further required to give description of the type of feedback that they provided to students. As can be seen from the chart below, all 8 teachers who said they gave feedback termed it "descriptive feedback" while the interviewees clarified the point by saying that the type of descriptive feedback they gave was restricted to essay writing when assigned as homework. Otherwise, comments were kept within the bounds of stating whether the work was good or not.

Table 9. Type of feedback given by teachers

Type of feedback	Frequency	Percent
Descriptive	8	100
Rewarding/Punishing	0	0

Respondents were also asked to indicate the purposes for which they administered assessment tasks. They were required to choose from the following: 1) identifying students' strengths and weaknesses, 2) predicting student performance on final Baccalaureate exam, 3) assigning grades for administrative reasons, 4) tracking students' progress toward proficiency in English, or 5) other purposes which teachers were required to name. Respondents could select multiple purposes for assessing students. The following table describes the distribution of the responses. As can be seen from the table below, the vast majority of the tests were administered in order to assign grades for administrative reasons (100%), followed by predicting students' performance on final Baccalaureate exam. Although the purpose of "identifying students' strengths and weaknesses" received 62%, it came third in the ranking.

Table 10. Purposes for assessment

Purposes for assessing	Frequency	Percent
Identifying students' strengths and weaknesses	25	62
Predicting students' performance on final Bac exam	36	90
Assigning grades for administrative reasons	40	100
Tracking students' progress toward proficiency in English	27	67.5
Other	0	0

The interviewees, in turn, indicated more than one purpose for assessment. One of them claimed: "*I assess to make students see themselves in the mirror so that they know where they are from the learning obje*ctives" (sic). Another one said: "*I assess to give marks to students*". Still, a third claimed that: "*I assess because without assessment and tests, students will not learn*".

With regard to the barriers that hindered the provision of feedback, returning results quickly, or conducting remedial work, 85% of the respondents indicated that they did face barriers that hindered them from providing feedback, returning results quickly, or conducting remedial work as the following table demonstrates:

Table 11. Percent of teachers indicating the existence of barriers

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	34	85
No	6	15

When asked to mention these barriers, all the respondents who answered positively to the previous question indicated that the obstacles were restricted to large classes, pressure to finish the text-book, and weak level of students. Similarly, all interviewees pointed to their concern with finishing the syllabus as well as over-crowdedness of classrooms as barriers to an implementation of a formative framework of assessment. However, other interesting barriers which were mentioned were related to assessment knowledge and skills. One teacher said: "*I do not understand what you mean by formative assessment*". A second interviewee reported that "*teachers have not been trained in conducting such a type of assessment*", while a third raised the issue of incentives and motivation for teachers: "*How do you expect from a teacher who has financial constraints to do his job well? Without motivation, there is nothing*," he commented. A further barrier that was mentioned was the absence of motivation in students.

5. DISCUSSION

The results seem to point to a general formative use of assessment. Respondents indicated that they used different assessment strategies ranging from written tests to homework assignments. The questions included in tests and quizzes have also been found to be varied (multiple choice, true/false, gap filling,…). Additionally, results point to the fact that assessment is conducted for some of the purposes that are formative like tracking student progress toward proficiency in English, identifying student strengths and weaknesses, and predicting student performance on the final Baccalaureate exam. Nevertheless, few respondents indicated that they used results to modify teaching method or instruction, which is an important aspect of formative use. Likewise, few respondents indicated that they used alternative modes of assessment which are at the heart of formative assessment, Vis, projects, portfolios, peer and self-assessment. Feedback, in turn, was found to be lacking in students test and quiz papers according to the respondents. Obviously, feedback is another key component of formative assessment.

The overall tendency seems to be towards the inclusion of some aspects of formative assessment. However, there are serious limitations in teachers' assessment practices. Most respondents, for instance, indicated that they administered no more than two tests a semester. Moreover, no interviewee indicated conducting diagnostic assessment, whose importance cannot be overemphasized in determining the students' learning stages, at the beginning of the year. Such practices run counter to characteristics of formative assessment which require that assessment be frequent, continuous, diagnostic and at the service of instruction. Brookhart (2011) and Popham (2011), for instance, argue that formative assessment is more effective as an assessment instrument when conducted frequently. The teachers, therefore, are called upon to make their assessment as frequent as possible so as to increase student motivation and performance. In this context, the literature points to a strong correlation between formative classroom assessment and student motivation and achievement on both classroom and large-scale assessments (Rea-Dickins & Gardner, 2000; Torrance & Pryor, 2002).

Likewise, although teachers indicated that they used a variety of assessment strategies and a variety of question types, only two respondents indicated that they conducted peer and self-assessment, which are key forms of formative assessment. Similarly, no one indicated the use of projects or performance-based assessments which are another critical aspect of alternative assessment. These types of assessment which are absent from teachers' practices are also at the heart of the standards-based approach that the Moroccan educational system officially adopts, and which is in line with formative assessment. The advantage of these modes of assessment is

that they aim at simulating real-world contexts, focusing on processes as well as products, and drawing upon higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills (Lynch, 2001).

Similarly, respondents said that their assessment targeted both surface knowledge and recall of facts on the one hand, and deep understanding on the other hand while the interviewees made it clear that recall of facts dominated over critical thinking in their assessment practices. This is in line with Melouk's finding (2001) that exams do not foster creative and critical thinking as they are knowledge-based. A critical aspect of formative assessment is to make the second objective (critical thinking) more prevalent. The literature on formative assessment indicates that formative use of assessment tends to disclose students' thinking processes with a view to deepening and sharpening them. Assessment tools, therefore, have to be designed in such a way as to target and nurture a culture of critical thinking.

The literature also indicates that although teachers were familiar with various types of assessment practices (e.g., cloze tests, performance assessments, etc.), they have been found to lack a clear framework for implementing assessments that would reflect and support student learning (Torrance & Pryor, 2002). At the heart of this framework is the disclosure of scoring rubrics and the objective behind testing. Among the findings of the present study is that few teachers disclose to students scoring rubrics (42.5%), and more than that number do not hold correction sessions with their students. In the absence of such a transparent system, students' final grades are likely to appear to them to be arbitrary unlike in the presence of it, not only will students regard the practice as fair and democratic but will also be effectively included in the decision-making process and hence will have a share of the responsibility. According to the literature, assessment can be formative only if learners are involved in the process (Wiliam & Black, 1998). Likewise, formative use of assessment is made possible when teachers are familiar with quality criteria and scoring rubrics which should be shared with the students (Black &Wiliam, 1998; Sadler, 1989; Schunk, 1996; Stiggins, 2007). According to the findings of the present study, tests are created and administered without any explicit delineation of why the assessment is being conducted. Students do not know why they should sit for a test except that it is time for a test as required administratively. Obviously, an important component of formative assessment is that tests serve learning purposes which must be clear to the learners.

In a similar vein, a test which lasts for one hour or more raises the question of turn-around. Most teachers administer tests that are no less than one hour. Besides, they made it clear from their answers that it is difficult to return tests in due time for instructional objectives, given the large number of classes they teach. This is in line with the respondents' responses which are to the effect that teachers return tests in no less than two weeks. The literature on formative assessment (e.g., Popham, 2004) suggests that formative use of assessment results is more likely to occur when results are available in a timely fashion. That is the case because a big time lag between a test and availability of results is likely to lead to students missing out on chances for learning.

Written feedback also tends to be absent from student test papers. Very few respondents and interviewees indicated writing comments on students' test papers which they described as descriptive. In this context, Vaden-Goad (2009) concluded in his study that continuous assessment cannot scaffold learning in the absence of some conditions like the provision of feedback**.** Consequently, teachers are advised to administer effective feedback on student performance (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Crooks, 1988) which in the context of test papers should be written so that it can act as scaffolding towards more developed learning stages.

As to purposes of assessment, in spite of the fact that teachers pointed to some formative purposes, the main purpose of assessment remains assigning grades. All respondents highlighted such a purpose for assessment while the formative purposes did not obtain such a consensus. This is again consistent with what has been found in the literature; namely, that teachers are not quite adept at conducting assessment for formative instructional purposes. This finding raises questions on teachers' assessment practices. Melouk (2001), for instance, states that "the way evaluation is carried out today has stripped it of its pedagogical dimensions" (Melouk, 2001, p. 51). Obviously the pedagogical dimension is for assessment to be put at the service of learning; otherwise, it is more summative than it is formative. Even more dangerous than this is the claim of one interviewee that he uses quizzes as a way of calming down a noisy classroom, a practice which amounts to using assessment as a form of punishment.

The respondents and interviewees were also aware of the fact their assessment practices were far from being totally formative and indicated the existence of some obstacles which hindered the implementation of formative assessment. These obstacles, according to them, were restricted to large classes, pressure to finish the syllabus, and students' weak language proficiency level. However, the proponents of formative assessment argue that adopting a formative theory of assessment is likely to yield solutions to these problems. Concerning large classes, formative assessment offers a solution to this problem by suggesting that students be given scoring rubrics to self and peer correct. As to the second obstacle, teachers fear sacrificing coverage of the textbook; but in the rush to cover the syllabus, students are actually learning less and losing much on opportunities for reinforcement. They are denied time to reflect on and interact meaningfully with new information which affects the amount of learning they assimilate. As to weak language proficiency level of students, formative assessment is the best opportunity to help struggling learners and give them a second chance. These students need scaffolding which is a pillar of formative assessment (Bruner, 1978).

6. CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

This study took preliminary steps to understand practitioners' classroom centered assessment practices and knowledge of assessment issues in a contemporary standards-based environment and within a formative framework of assessment. Formative use of assessment results is an important attribute of effective instruction. Such a use is a critical component of teaching, and when done in an appropriate manner, boosts the quality of instruction students receive. Therefore, implementing such a formative model is likely to result in improved instruction and student learning. Teachers who have limited assessment literacy skills move through the teaching and learning process blindly and are more likely to do harm than good to the students. Accordingly, teachers do need the proper training in assessment issues that will allow them to perform their careers in the best way. Sound assessment practices are not a skill that one typically acquires without support in the form of solid training at training centers and subsequent professional development sessions.

Real change requires teachers to give up old teacher-centered approaches with which they feel comfortable. Teachers are called upon to learn, reflect and experiment with new teaching and assessing practices which are more learner-centered. They should make their assessment strategies as varied as possible to capture different dimensions of intelligence. They should also surrender some of their assessment responsibilities to students. This can be done by promoting practices of peer and self-assessment. In so doing, teachers would nurture in their students

practices of self-reliance, thereby encouraging them to become life-long and self-regulated learners. By sharing the responsibility for assessment, students will also develop into responsible citizens.

On their part, educational policy makers and trainers need to make significant and sustained investments in teacher professional development to support effective teaching and assessment practices. Professional development should be targeted clearly to areas of need which have been identified by the teachers: grade giving, differentiation of instruction according to assessment results, design of tests, provision of feedback and overall formative assessment practices. Hence, it is the duty of educational policy makers to better prepare teachers for the teaching tasks awaiting them, and to raise their awareness as to the way in which the different components (curriculum, instruction, and assessment) interact and feed off each other.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

This questionnaire serves a research function. It aims to explore teachers' assessment literacy levels and their ability to use assessment scores to guide instruction and to make appropriate classroom decisions. Your help is highly requested and appreciated. The information you will provide will be treated in strict confidentiality. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Section One

1. How frequently do you assess your students? Tick what applies to you:

  ☐ Once every month ☐ Once every two weeks

  ☐ Once every week ☐ Other, specify

2. What kind of assessment do you conduct with your students? Tick what applies to you:

  ☐ Written tests ☐ Self-assessment

  ☐ Oral tests ☐ Peer assessment

  ☐ Homework assignments ☐ Other, specify: _____

  Can you explain why: _____

  _____

3. In testing, what kind of questions do you use? Please tick what applies to you; you may use numbers from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important) if more than one choice applies

  ☐ Multiple-choice questions ☐ Short-answer questions.

  ☐ Matching questions ☐ Essay questions

  ☐ True/false questions ☐ Fill-in-the-blanks ☐ Other, specify:_____

  Can you explain why: _____

  _____

4. In your assessment/testing of students, do you target deep understanding of concepts or surface knowledge and recall of facts or both?

  ☐ Deep understanding of concepts ☐ Surface knowledge and recall of facts ☐ Both

5. Do you inform students why they are taking the assessment?

  ☐ Yes ☐ No

6. Approximately what is the duration of the test? Tick what applies to you:

  ☐ Fifteen minutes ☐ Between 30 to 60 minutes

  ☐ Between 15 to 30 minutes ☐ Between 1 to 2 hours

  ☐ Other, specify: _____

7. Approximately how many days does it take to return test results after completing the test?

  ☐ Results are available in less than a week

  ☐ Results are available in two weeks

  ☐ Results are available in more than two weeks

8. Do you correct with students their errors when you give them back their test papers?

☐ Yes ☐ No

9. Do you disclose to students scoring rubrics?

☐ Yes ☐ No

10. Do you write feedback on students' papers?

☐ Yes ☐ No

11. If yes, what type of feedback is it?

☐ Rewarding/punishing ☐ Descriptive (describes students' errors and shows how they can improve)

12. What are the main purpose(s) of administering assessment? Tick what applies to you:

☐ Identifying student strengths and weaknesses

☐ Identifying students in need of remedial work

☐ Predicting student performance on the final Bac exam

☐ Assigning grades for administrative reasons

☐ Tracking students' progress toward proficiency in English

☐ Other (specify): _____

13. Are there any barriers that prevent you from providing feedback, returning results quickly, or conducting remedial work? ☐ Yes ☐ No

14. If yes, please mention these obstacles:

_____

Please add any comments you wish:_____

Section Two

1. Gender:

☐ Male ☐ Female

2. Teaching experience:_____ years

3. Highest academic degree: _____

4. Do you participate in some professional development?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, please describe: _____.

Additional comments

Please use the space below for any comments that you may wish to make about this questionnaire or the topic under investigation.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR HELP

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Teacher interview schedule

The aim of this interview is to get an idea about high school English teachers' assessment practices and skills. Please feel free in your answers. The information you will provide will be treated in strict confidentiality.

1. How frequently do you assess your students? Why?

2. Do you assess at the beginning of the year?

3. What kind of assessment do you conduct with your students?

4. What kind of questions do you use?

5. Do you target recall or higher-order thinking in your questions?

6. Approximately what is the duration of the test?

7. Approximately how many days does it take to return test results after completing the test?

8. Do you hold correction sessions with your students?

9. Do you disclose to students scoring rubrics in the test?

10. Do you write comments on students' test papers when you correct them? If yes, of what type?

11. For what purpose(s) do you administer assessment?

12. What barriers, if any, prevent you from conducting formative assessment?