The Impact of Assessment for Learning on Students' Achievement in English for Specific Purposes

A Case Study of Pre-Medical Students at Khartoum University: Sudan

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Abstract

This study tries to identify the effect of assessment for learning on a group of Sudanese pre-medical students' performance in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The study also attempts to identify students' perception and attitudes towards this type of assessment. The sample of the study is composed of 53 subjects from the Pre-medical students at Khartoum University in Sudan. These students are placed into two groups; an experimental and a control group. The experimental group students are taught their ESP material in accordance with assessment for learning principles and techniques, the control group; however, is taught the same material using the traditional summative assessment procedures. The experiment lasts for one term, i.e., 16 weeks. The experimental group instructor is subjected to an intensive training course on how to implement assessment for learning strategies in classroom setting. At the end of the term, the two groups sit for a final exam which is intended for all Pre-medical students. Comparison of the scores of the students reveals a significant difference between the two groups in favor of the experimental group. Students' attitudes towards assessment for learning are checked through a questionnaire and interviews. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of the students' responses show their positive attitudes towards this type of assessment. The study ends up with a set of recommendations and suggestions to improve assessment for learning practice and to make it more effective in a Sudanese setting.

Keywords: assessment for learning, attitude, feedback, learning strategies, English for Specific Purposes

1. Introduction

For quite a long period of time, many educators have viewed assessment as a means for measuring learning final outcomes and this is mainly actualized through what is known as summative assessment (Black &William, 1998). But quite recently, educators have begun to widen their scope of assessment to cover not only students' learning outcomes at the end of specific period in order to decide who passes or fails, but also to enhance learning by modifying classroom instruction (Rabinowitz, 2010). This is exactly what assessment for learning does as it aims to improve the quality of teaching and use assessments result to modify students' learning.

Assessment for learning is based on providing instant and specific feedback after each learning step to avoid unnecessary delay of correcting students' errors. For such type of evaluation to realize its maximum benefit, it is suggested that assessment should not be a once and done activity. Rather, it must be a continuous act, which guides teaching-learning process through provision of timely feedback. It is widely acknowledged that the effect of feedback is enhanced if and only if it is immediate and clearly articulated in order to guide the learning process and to rectify possible shortcomings (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996).

Language teachers have long been aware of the importance of feedback for language learning. In fact, feedback assists students to increase their sense of responsibility and helps them develop self-monitoring system. Actually, the learners become directly engaged in proper activity of self-assessment and self-correction.

From the above account, one can see the difference between assessment for learning which is intended to support the learning process and the traditional summative assessment which is mainly concerned with measuring the learning outcome.

This study will try to explore the efficacy of assessment for learning in improving the performance of a group of pre-medical Sudanese students learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP), during the second term of the academic year 2015-2016. The findings of this study may be used to enhance the process of modernizing the educational practice and help to facilitate the learning of English, a language which stands as a key factor in deciding students' future success in their relevant specializations.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

At Khartoum University, where this study is conducted, learners take intensive ESP course throughout the second term of their first academic year. However, at the end of that course, the learning outcome has not always been satisfactory. It is reported that a large number of students tragically fail their final exam yearly, and even those who pass, they start their undergraduate studies with a low level of English proficiency which reflects negatively on students' performance in their major specializations (Aslam, 2015). Summative assessment that is a once -and-done activity, is believed to be one of the major causes of such saddening results as it never diagnoses students' learning problems appropriately or timely. This problem needs to be addressed more carefully through the use of more adequate assessment procedures. In this study, the researcher will try to investigate the effect of assessment for learning on a group of pre-medical students' achievement in English for Specific Purposes. If its efficacy is proved, then this type of assessment can be recommended as an alternative for the traditional summative evaluation techniques. The study will also attempt to identify learners' attitudes towards this type of assessment.

1.2 Need for the Study

In view of the importance of English as an international language, and as a medium of instruction in most scientific colleges in Sudan, there is pressing need among Sudanese students for this language. Assessment for learning is claimed, by many researchers, to have the most positive impact on students' achievement (Black &William, 1998). At the moment, there is a need to decide if the implementation of such assessment approach with its timely feedback in a Sudanese setting will enhance the learning process and make the English language learning experience more interesting and more fruitful.

1.3 Questions of the Study

This study attempts to find answers for the following research questions:

1)   To what extent does assessment for learning affect ESP learners' achievement in English?

2)   What are the learners' attitudes towards assessment for learning?

1.4 Hypothesis of the Study

1)   Assessment for learning has no significant effect on ESP learners 'achievement in English.

2)   Learners have negative attitudes towards assessment for learning and its procedures.

2. Literature review

2.1 Assessment for Learning: A Definition

Assessment for learning or constructive assessment is defined as a process used by teachers and learners during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional goals (Sadler, 1989). For Pophan (2008), assessment for learning is a planned process in which evidence of students' status is used by teachers to modify their ongoing instructional procedures or used by students to adjust their current learning strategies.

Assessment for learning or for constructive purposes is intended to assist learning while instruction and learning are taking place. It is practiced to close the gap between learners' current status and their intended learning goals (Heritage, 2012).

Assessment for learning is commonly contrasted with summative assessment. Assessment for learning differs from summative assessment in that the latter is generally concerned with summing up or summarizing the achievement status of students , and is directed towards reporting students' status at the end of a course of study for purposes of certification (Sadler, 1989). It is also reported that summative assessment is inherently passive and does not normally have immediate impact on learning although it often influences decisions which may have profound educational and personal consequences for the students (Sadler, 1989).

Summative assessment function is limited to determining whether a student has reached a certain level of competence after a particular period of learning; for example a unit, a year of study, or even a 12 -year-period of schooling (NRC, 2001). Historically, educators have focused on summative assessment to measure students'

learning outcomes and they are rarely concerned with other aspects of the learning process (Herman, 2013). Today, however, there is an increasing awareness of the weak points of summative evaluation of learning and a wide recognition and increasing evidence of the effectiveness of assessment for learning.

It is widely documented that assessment for learning can play an important role in assisting students, all students, achieve high standards in their academic subjects (Herman, 2013).In explaining the merits of this assessment approach, Umar (2013) states that instead of looking back to judge what has been learned, assessment for learning looks forwards.

Assessment for learning involves an ongoing collection and use of assessment results during instruction to know where the students are in relation to the desired goals. Then such data are utilized to take immediate actions ,i.e., to modify teaching and learning procedures to assist the students to get where they need to go (Herman, 2013). To make this point clearer, Achieve Inc. (2013) adds that assessment for learning "*draws on information gathered in the assessment process to identify learning needs and adjust teaching*" (p. 7).

Assessment for learning is now viewed as an integrated part of the teaching and learning process, rather than as a separate activity taking place after a phase of teaching (Achieve Inc, 2013). The process of Assessment for learning includes classroom interaction, questioning, structured classroom activities, and feedback geared at helping students to bridge the learning gaps. Students are also actively engaged in the assessment process through self- and peer- assessment (Sadler, 1989). Data from other types of tests and school administration could also be used constructively to identify learning needs and to reformulate teaching approaches (Black & William, 1999).

For Black and William (1999), and for many other experts in the area, this type of assessment is not an instrument or an event, but a collection of practices with common features leading to take some actions that improve learning.

William and Leahy (2007) state that an assessment can only be termed assessment for learning when "*information from the assessment is fed back within the system, and actually used to improve the performance of the system in some way*." (p. 31). Sheppard (2000) suggests that what makes this assessment effective is that "*it is immediately used to make adjustment so as to form new learning*" (p. 281).

2.2 How to Collect Data for Assessment for Learning?

There are several ways to collect data for this type of assessment. Griffin (2007) suggests that evidence of learning can be obtained through three observable types of behavior: these involve what a person says, what a person writes, or what a person does. This reveals that data can be collected through a variety of methods during the process of teaching and learning that are mostly planned before instruction. Data can also be obtained spontaneously during observations of students' behavior, written assignments, book presentations, teacher-student interactions and interactions among peers. But initially, data can be collected through formal methods, e.g. through administration of tests that are specifically designed for improving learning purposes.

2.3 Feedback in Assessment for Learning

Sadler (1989) describes feedback as a decisive element in assessment for learning. He sees feedback as an attempt to give information to close the gap between the students' current learning status and desired learning goals. However, Sadler (1989) has conceded that "*information itself is not feedback, but only becomes so when it is actively used to alter the gap*". According to Heritage, (2013), the teacher gets feedback from assessment evidence while learning is taking place, and uses the information to adjust teaching, and to provide feedback to the students about how they can move their learning forward. In this way, the teachers' methodological response and direct provision of feedback are made contingent upon the evidence generated.

To address feedback through marking, teachers should be aware of research findings which have established that whilst students' performance can be improved by feedback through comments, the giving of grades or marks has a negative impact because students commonly ignore comments when marks are given (Butler, 1988; Heritage, 2013; Griffin 2007).

2.4 Assessment for Learning Strategies

Different scholars have proposed different strategies for performing assessment for learning. However, the strategies proposed by Sadler (1989) for this type of assessment seem to be the most popular. These strategies are reflected in some ideas which form what is called "Assessment for Constructive or Formative purposes". It is a practice designed to satisfy students' needs to increase both motivation and achievement, by involving them from the beginning in their own learning. These ideas are eventually indorsed by Umar, (2013) who develops

them to form the following questions:

1) Where are you trying to go? (Identify and communicate the learning and performance goals).

2) Where are you now? (Help the students to self-assess their current level of understanding).

3) How can you get there? (Help the students with strategies and skills to reach the goals).

These questions are then rephrased from the students' point of view to read: *Where am I going? Where am I now? And how can I close the gap?*

2.5 Cycles of Assessment for Learning

William and Thompson (2007) propose three cycles of classification for assessment for learning based on the duration of instruction. This classification covers three levels:

1) Short cycle: minute-by-minute or day-by-day assessment that concentrates on student learning within and between lessons.

2) Medium cycle: occurs within and between instructional units covering a one- to four- week - period of instruction.

3) Long cycle: this normally extends between four weeks and one year.

At another level, Shavelon (2008) defines the continuum of assessment for learning that ranges from informal to formal and differs in terms of specific preplanning. This continuum is tailored for short- and medium- cycle tools. Unplanned or "on-the-fly" assessment capitalizes on teachable moments through planned interactions during the course of teaching that are particularly designed to support learning and generate evidence of it.

Regardless of its cycle time or formality, constructive assessment or assessment for learning starts by statement of the learning goal and how it is likely to develop. Teachers design specific activities to reveal students' understanding of the specific learning goal, and supplement a framework to interpret and analyze students' responses and provide feedback relative to the learning goal, and may get involved in subsequent interaction to fine-tune the interpretation and feedback. Such design and interpretation may need a detailed plan of progression to show: where the students are relative to the set learning objective, how they are expected to develop over the course of the instruction, and how to interpret students' responses along the path (Herman, 2013). Such a detailed sense of progression will reveal "*what does typical progress look like? What are the intermediate points along the way? What are common misconceptions or obstacles along the way? And how are they detected*? "(Herman, 2013: p.10)

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The subjects of this study belong to two classes (Class 1 & 2) of pre- medical students at Khartoum University. The subjects are initially assigned to their groups in accordance to their performance in a Placement Test. Actually; the two classes are at similar proficiency levels. They are classified as beginners in English as measured by a locally designed Proficiency Test given in the beginning of the first semester of the academic year 2015-2016. The control group class is composed of 26 students and the experimental group includes 27 students. They are all Sudanese and their ages vary between 16.9 to 17.2 years at the time of the experiment. All of them have studied English for a minimum of six years in schools and one term (16 weeks) at the university. In this study, one of the two classes is randomly selected to represent the experimental group. It happens to be class 2, and the other class is assigned to represent the control group. To make sure that the two groups, i.e., the experimental and the control group stand on equal footing, a proficiency test is administered just before the implementation of the experiment.

The result of this test indicates that the two groups, i.e., the control and the experimental group are of similar levels in general English. This result is reflected in the table and the graph below:

Table 1. Scores of the control and experimental group before experiment

	Control group	Experimental group

N	26	27
Mean	70.8%	70.9%
Median	72	71
Mode	72	67
Std. Deviation	4.42	5.42
Range	16	21
Minimum	62	60
Maximum	78	81
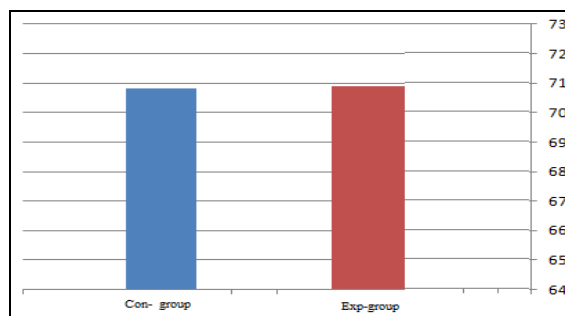
Graph 1. The level of performance of the control and the experimental group before experiment

The above table and graph show that the mean score of the experimental group is (70.9%) and that of the control group is (70.8%). The mode is (72%) and (67%) for the control and experimental group respectively. Apparently, there is no difference in the level of performance between the two groups according to these measures of central tendency, but to make sure double sure a t-test is conducted to confirm this finding, and the following result is revealed:

Table 2. T-test for difference between control andexperimental-group

Group	N	M	SD.	T-value	df.	α-Co.eff. ..	Sig. at level 0.05	result
Con. group	26	70.8	4.42	.01	48	.917	insignificant	There is no significant differences between the two groups
Exp. group	27	70.9	5.42					

Table 2 shows the result of a t-test which verifies that the difference between the two groups is not significant. The t-value is found to be (0.01) which is quite insignificant at the level of (0. 05). This result can be cited to prove that the control and the experimental group are really standing on equal footing before the treatment began.

3.2 The setting and Instructors' Training

The study is conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2015-16. During this semester, the students normally start their English for Specific Purposes (ESP) program, after they complete the General English Language Course during the first semester. Two instructors with similar qualifications are assigned to teach the experimental and the control group. The experimental group instructor; however, is given an intensive training course on how to use assessment for learning techniques while teaching ESP. The training course which lasts for five days is arranged during the break between the first and the second semester.

The study, then, begins in the first week of the second semester of 2015-16. Classes are equipped with some educational aids and lap tops with loud speakers. Each class is designed to accommodate 30+ students. There is a white board and control desk for the instructor and normal seats and desks for students.

3.3 The Teaching Materials

The teaching material involves an ESP textbook entitled English for Medicine .It comes within the series of Oxford English for Careers. This book includes 15 units. It aims to give the students the language, the information and the skills they need to start their medical study through an English medium. The units usually involve key vocabulary on body bits and medical terminology, reading authentic material related to health and medications, real medical staff talking about their work in hospitals and other medical settings, together with key interpersonal skills to interact with patients and colleagues in the medical field. This textbook is backed up with "*Online Interactive Exercises*" to revise and recycle language components learnt in various units. The book is also accompanied with a CD and a *Teacher's Resource Book* together with a *Workbook*.

3.4 Procedure

The tools used for implementing assessment for learning include learning portfolios, classroom observations, after class exercises and quizzes, and learning notebooks. Learning notebooks are required to be handed in once a week and their content normally involves a summary of a week's study, a plan for the next week and suggestions to the teacher. After marking which does not involve any grades, the teacher returns the notebooks to the students. Classroom observations are conducted by the instructor who regularly records the students' progress towards achieving the set objectives, their participation in class activities, and the problems and difficulties that face them in classroom. Then he communicates with the students in time for solving the problems observed in class. Group work is particularly encouraged throughout this experiment and quizzes are carried out after the teaching of each unit to examine students' mastery of the course content.

All diagnostic data and insights to modify the teaching-learning processes are generated from the range of activities shown above. These may also include classroom questioning and feedback.

3.5 Final Stage of the Experiment

After a semester's teaching experiment, during which assessment for learning principles are fully implemented and used with the experimental group according to the plan detailed above, the students sit for their final examination. This is designed by a group of experienced staff members in the English Department. The test is an achievement test intended to measure the students' performance in listening, grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing. The test questions are strongly related to the ESP material covered in *English for Medicine*, so the test content validity is strongly observed and secured. The face-validity of the test is obtained when the test draft is initially handed over and checked by three senior EFL specialists who confirm the suitability of the test for what it purports to test.

The students in the control group are taught the same material by an equally qualified instructor, but without using the assessment for learning techniques.

At the end of the experimental teaching period, the students in the experimental group are required to fill out a questionnaire. All questions in the questionnaire are aiming to collect information about the subjects' attitudes and opinions regarding assessment for learning.

The data collected through these instruments are processed using statistical software SPSS 17.0. The results obtained are summarized in the tables below and used to answer the study questions and to verify or reject the hypotheses.

4. Results

The experimental and the control groups' scores in the final examination are summarized in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Students' scores after experiment

	Control group	Experimental Gr
N	26	27
Mean	77%	84.4%
Median	76	87
Mode	75	87
Std. Deviation	7.83	9.93
Range	35	42
Minimum	56	54
Maximum	91	96
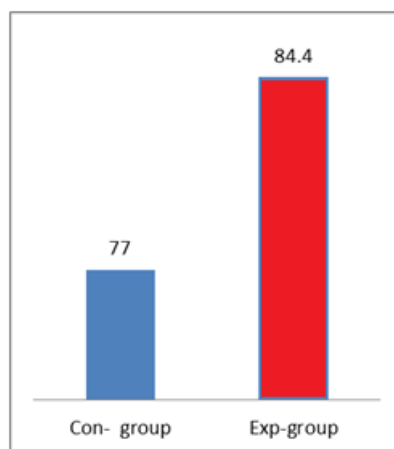
Graph 2. Students' mean scores after experiment

The above Table and Graph indicate a notable difference between the Mean scores of the control and the experimental group. The mean score of the control group is found to be (77%) compared to (84.4%) by the experimental group. The Median of the control group is (76%) compared to (87%) by the experimental group and the mode is (75%) for the control group and it is (87%) for the experimental group. All these measures of central tendency can be cited to suggest that there is a difference between the two groups in favor of the experimental group. But whether this difference is significant or not, a *t*-test needs to be performed to answer this question.

Table 4. *T*-test for the difference between control and experimental group after experiment

Group	N	M	SD.	T-value	Df.	α-Coeff.	Sig. at level 0.05	Result
Control group	26	77	7.83					There is a significant difference between the two groups at 0.05 level on the side of exp.-group
Experimental group	27	84.4	9.93	3.91	19	.000	significant	

The independent sample *t*-test to the final scores of students shows that there is a significant difference between the experimental and the control group in favor of the experimental group. The *t*-value is (3.9).

These findings indicate clearly that using assessment for learning can significantly improve the English level of the pre-medical students at Khartoum University. This finding can be cited to answer the first question of the study which inquires about the impact of assessment for learning on the subjects' level of performance in ESP.

The same data can be used to reject the first hypothesis of the study which claims that this type of assessment will have no influence on students' performance in English.

4.1 Students' Attitudes towards Assessment for Learning

To measure the subject's attitudes towards this form of assessment, the students are asked to fill in a questionnaire which is designed to elicit their views about this type of assessment. Students' opinions about this practice are summarized in the following table:

Table 5. Students' attitudes towards assessment for learning

No	Response	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Dis-agree	Strongly disagree
1	Assessment for learning has motivated me to learn	10%	65%	04%	12%	08%
2	Assessment for learning has helped me to improve my performance in English	12	66	02	14	06
3	Immediate feedback helps me to know my mistakes before it's too late	45	39	01	08	07
4	Self-assessment has given me the chance to understand my own weaknesses to overcome them	17	53	15	10	05
5	Self-assessment has increased my self-confidence and autonomy	23	68	04	03	02
6	Peer assessments has helped me to practice team work and learn from my colleagues	55	27	10	04	04
7	Assessment for learning activities and techniques are varied and colorful	45	35	06	08	06
8	Assessment for learning allows us enough time to think and to learn	46	40	04	06	04
9	Assessment for learning helps us become more responsible for our learning	16	58	12	08	06
10	Assessment for learning helps to reduce the tension of final exams	17	71	05	04	03

Table 5 above reflects the subjects' attitudes towards assessment for learning and its different procedures. Students seem to be impressed by some of this assessment activities and techniques. For instance*, the* students are found to be very positive about instant feedback provided as part of the assessment procedures. The students are also found to be positive about the opportunity given to them to assess themselves or to their peers to evaluate each other's work. Team work is particularly appreciated by the subjects of this study.

Talking in figures, it is found that (84%) of the subjects agree or even strongly agree that immediate feedback helps them to know or discover their mistakes early enough. Obviously, this would give them the chance to amend these mistakes before it is too late. Furthermore, (81%) of the sample believe that self-assessment which is practiced during assessment for learning has increased their self-confidence and autonomy .They acknowledge that self-assessment gives them opportunity to understand their weaknesses and to overcome them.

Along the same line, members of the sample admit that peer assessment as one of assessment procedures has been of great benefit to them. In this respect, (82%) of the sample admit that peer assessment has helped them to practice team work and learn from their colleagues. At another level, the majority of subjects in the experimental group, i.e., (75%) acknowledge that this type of assessment has motivated them to learn and to exert more effort to meet the set objectives for each lesson. This perception seems to influence the students' achievement in English and, indeed, this is exactly what has happened, as (78%) of the subjects agree that assessment for learning has helped them to improve their performance in English.

Subjects in the experimental group have also acknowledged that this assessment activities and techniques are varied and colorful. This has been the case of (90%) of the subjects in this group. Furthermore, (86%) of the subjects admit that this form of assessment allows them enough time to think and to learn with concentration.

About three quarters of the total sample, i.e., (74%) acknowledge that assessment for learning helps them

become more responsible for their learning. But one of the most important findings is revealed when (88%) of the subjects admit that this type of assessment helps to reduce the tension and anxiety of the final exams.

4.2 Students' Responses to an Interview (Qualitative Analysis)

The above questionnaire is accompanied with a series of interviews with the students of the experimental group which are intended to generate more specific and detailed information about the students' impression and attitudes towards assessment for learning. Students' responses to these interviews are analyzed qualitatively and summarized below:

When asked about the benefits of assessment for learning, one of the students said that this type of assessment has helped him to understand how much he needs to improve. Not only how much, but also what he should do to improve. Another student reports that this method of assessment helps them to track their progress and gives them information to see how far they have progressed. He admits that it also lets them know how fast they are progressing and corrects them if they go wrong. A third student says: "*Assessment for learning allows me to see areas where I need to improve and work on for my language study plan. It allows me to think about how to respond to situations that I may come across in my field of specialization which is medicine and be efficient in my questions and answers.*"

A fourth student reflects on the variety of activities provided by assessment for learning saying that the different techniques used by the teacher in presenting the lesson make the learning experience very interesting and colorful ."I *didn't feel bored or frustrated";* Said the student.

One candidate commends the space of freedom offered to them during the presentation of each lesson saying: "*This type of assessment allows us more freedom. We are left to progress at our own pace*".

Other students show a positive attitude towards the assessment for learning because they believe it has helped them to improve their performance in English, a subject that is so crucial for their future study of medicine which is mainly taught through an English medium. Furthermore, this group of students claims that this form of assessment has improved their learning strategies and motivations to do better in English.

On the other hand, some students have indicated some negative feelings towards assessment for learning claiming that it does not give grades during the learning process. One student complains that without grades, the whole process seems vague and it doesn't tell exactly where one stands. Some other students have expressed their frustration with the too many requirements of assessment for learning procedures.

Apart from the few who have expressed negative views about assessment for learning practice, the majority of the sample have been in favor of this practice .Their responses can be cited to highlight their very positive attitudes towards this form of assessment and to answer the second question of the study. One can easily claim that students' attitudes are predominantly positive towards this type of assessment.

Furthermore, the same data can be quoted to reject the second hypothesis of the study which assumed that students have negative feeling towards assessment for learning. In fact, with exception of the very few subjects who express concerns about not being given grades for their work or those who complain of the too many assignments during assessment practice, the overwhelming majority of the participants seem to be very positive towards this type of assessment and its different techniques. They feel that it is beneficial to them, interesting and even motivating.

5. Discussion

Assessment for learning involves a variety of practical techniques, beginning with teacher's planning; sharing learning goals with students; marking, feedback, evaluations and target setting. Each strategy satisfies a particular purpose of assessment. These techniques ensure that learning outcomes are clear and the next steps in short-term planning are accurately passed over to students. This could guarantee that the learners and teacher focus on the purpose of the task and they are both aware of learning intentions. Assessment for learning strategies, therefore, allows the teacher to track and to diagnose the progress students have made and to provide targets and records of students' learning needs. In other words, it is ensured that teachers know where students exactly are in their learning, in order that they can plan where their students need to go next.

Through effective questioning and careful observation, the teacher can assess the students' understanding and can move them forward in their learning. Students can only achieve a learning goal if they understand that goal and can assess what they need to do to achieve it. So self-assessment is essential to learning.

Assessment for learning that explicitly aims to promote learning encourages ways of evaluating performance, feeding performance results back to students with strategies to close the gap between their actual level of

performance and the intended learning outcome.

An important feature that appears in recent research on assessment for learning as practiced in ideal classroom is the issue of providing support for the students and helping them to feel safe to take risks and never be intimidated by their errors while learning. In this way, the students will easily reveal what they do not understand and become more legible to learn effectively (OCED, 2005).

Feedback is the corner stone in assessment for learning. Indeed, it is the key element of this type of assessment. However, most current research reveals that feedback is most effective when it is timely, and when it is strongly tied to criteria regarding expectations and includes specific suggestions for how to improve future performance and meet learning goals (Herman, 2013).

Effective questioning is another important element in assessment for learning .It is used to measure the learners' understanding level and to identify possible shortcomings. By definition, effective questioning goes beyond the level of shallow questions intended to elicit "Yes" or "No" answers, or questions based on recall rather than reasoning process. These types of questions give little information on the students' understanding and may conceal serious thinking errors (OECD, 2005).

Motivation is another important issue raised repeatedly in the discussion of assessment for learning. No doubt students' motivation is essential to learning and it is well known that assessment procedures have an influence on students' motivation. It is important, therefore, to try to increase the motivational effects of constructive assessment for learning. Research evidence indicates that the greatest motivational benefits will come from focusing feedback on the quality of the student's work, and not on comparisons with other students (Black, 2000).

A point that usually raises disagreement among assessment for learning practitioners is related to giving marks and grades during the practice of this type of assessment. In response to this issue some researchers say marks or grades alone do not yield learning benefits (Herman, 2013). Indeed, there is some evidence that students gain the most learning value from assessment when feedback is provided without marks or grades. Where marks are provided, they often seem to occupy students' thinking, and to be seen as the ultimate goal of the assessment.

6. Conclusion

Assessment is an essential element to any educational process. At university, the most common assessments, at the moment, are summative assessments. Summative types of assessment are used to measure what students have learnt at the end of a course to move to a higher level, to ensure they have met required standards to get a degree, or as a method for selecting students to enter a specific college. However, quite recently assessment for learning or constructive assessment has emerged in the educational arena as a more effective evaluation technique. Assessment for learning refers to frequent, interactive assessments of students' progress and understanding to identify learning problems and adjust teaching to student's needs. A wide range of literature review reveals that this type of assessment is quite effective in raising students' level of academic performance and in increasing their motivation for learning.

The reputation of assessment for learning as a successful modern technique of evaluation has induced the researcher to take the initiative of investigating the viability of this largely occidental assessment approach in a Sudanese context.

An empirical study which involves an experimental and a control group is, therefore, launched to check the efficacy of using assessment for learning in improving the performance of Sudanese pre-medical students in English. Results of this study indicate that the mean scores of the experimental group students are remarkably higher than that of the control group. This result has led the researcher to conclude that the impact of this type of assessment is quite positive on the subjects' academic achievement. At another level, the researcher checks the learners' attitudes towards this form of assessment, through a questionnaire which is distributed to the students immediately after they have completed the course. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the responses of the subjects to this questionnaire reveal that the students' attitudes towards this assessment are very positive. These students acknowledge that assessment for learning practice has motivated them to learn, helped them to improve their performance in English, and allowed them more freedom and time to learn better and to become more responsible for their own learning. But what is really interesting is the students' belief that this type of assessment has helped them to overcome examination anxiety and tension.

7. Recommendations

This empirical study has proved the efficacy of assessment for learning in teaching ESP and it shows that the students' attitudes towards this method of assessment are predominantly positive. Taking into consideration

these findings, the researcher strongly recommends this form of evaluation and suggests that it is to be generalized and used at a wider level in the future in teaching English and even other subjects at the University of Khartoum. But to secure the success of implementing such a method of assessment in a Sudanese setting, the instructors and teachers need to be given intensive training on how to conduct this form of assessment and that, instructors need to be fully acquainted with the philosophy and merits of such a modern occidental technique of evaluation and to encourage them to abandon the barren traditional summative assessment practices.

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