

EFL TEACHERS' STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY THROUGH ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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| ARTICLE INFO | | ABSTRACT |
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| Received: | 27/5/2024 | This qualitative study delves into EFL teachers' strategies for promoting inclusivity in language assessment through their utilization of alternative approaches to accounting for students' diverse sociocultural backgrounds, language learning experiences, and levels of proficiency. Drawing on data from a narrative frame and semi-structured interviews, the research engaged 10 English teachers from a private university in Vietnam. These participants have employed various forms of AA in their teaching. The findings highlight the transformative potential of AA in catering to individual differences among students and empowering them with opportunities for personalized and holistic learning experiences. The teachers' strategies for inclusivity were implicated in their design of AA, incorporation of culturally relevant content, and provision of additional support. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of creating a supportive classroom environment that values diversity and collaboration. The insights gleaned from this research contribute to the ongoing discourse on enhancing inclusivity in assessment practices within the context of Vietnamese higher education. |
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CÁC CHIẾN LƯỢC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN NHẪM NÂNG CAO TÍNH HÒA NHẬP THÔNG QUA CÁC HÌNH THỨC ĐÁNH GIÁ THAY THẾ Ở BẬC ĐẠI HỌC

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| THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO | | TÓM TẮT |
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| Ngày nhận bài: | 27/5/2024 | Nghiên cứu định tính này tập trung vào các chiến lược của giáo viên tiếng Anh nhằm thúc đẩy tính hoà nhập trong đánh giá ngôn ngữ thông qua các phương pháp đánh giá thay thế để xem xét sự đa dạng về văn hóa xã hội, trải nghiệm và mức độ thành thạo của sinh viên. Dựa trên dữ liệu từ khung tường thuật và các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc, nghiên cứu có sự tham gia của 10 giáo viên tiếng Anh từ một trường đại học tư thục ở Việt Nam. Các giáo viên này đã sử dụng nhiều hình thức đánh giá thay thế khác nhau trong quá trình giảng dạy. Kết quả nghiên cứu nêu bật tính linh hoạt của các hình thức đánh giá thay thế trong khi xét về sự khác biệt cá nhân giữa sinh viên và giúp cho họ có cơ hội trải nghiệm học tập mang tính toàn diện và cá nhân hóa. Các chiến lược đánh giá nhằm tăng tính hòa nhập mà giáo viên áp dụng được thể hiện trong việc thiết kế các hình thức đánh giá, tích hợp các nội dung phù hợp về mặt văn hóa và hỗ trợ thêm từng sinh viên. Nghiên cứu này nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của việc tạo ra một môi trường lớp học mang tính hỗ trợ, coi trọng sự đa dạng và phối hợp với nhau. Các kết quả nghiên cứu này góp phần vào việc nâng cao tính hòa nhập trong thực tiễn đánh giá ngôn ngữ trong bối cảnh giáo dục đại học Việt Nam. |
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1. Introduction

Assessment plays a crucial and widely recognized role in English language teaching, serving various educational purposes [1]. It evaluates students' language proficiency and influences their learning by guiding their focus, providing motivation, and shaping their actions [2]. In addition to motivating learners and helping them set learning goals, assessment provides valuable feedback to teachers for tailored instruction [3], [4]. It also contributes to curriculum development and offers insights into the effectiveness of language teaching programs. Assessment is usually categorized into three main types based on their purposes: certifying achievements (Assessment of Learning), supporting the learning process (Assessment for Learning), and facilitating sustainable practices (Assessment as Learning) [5]. Recently, McArthur [6] has introduced the concept of assessment for *social justice*, which focuses on ensuring fairness in higher education assessment and recognizes its role in fostering learning that contributes to achieving justice in society.

Although assessment is a universal practice, students' assessment experiences can vary significantly, especially for those from nonconventional backgrounds [7]. As higher education has become more accessible and inclusive, a more diverse student population whose sociocultural backgrounds and aspirations are different can be anticipated [8]. This diversity brings considerable issues and challenges to the assessment process, necessitating assessment practices which are inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of students. As a result, the concept of *inclusivity* in assessment has gained considerable attention from researchers and teachers [6], [9]. Inclusive assessment refers to the deliberate design and implementation of fair and effective assessment methods as well as practices which enable all students, regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances, to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding, and abilities to their fullest potential [10]. Inclusive assessment goes beyond providing equal opportunities for all students; it recognizes and values the diverse ways in which students may approach and demonstrate their learning [9].

In recent years, assessment practices within the field of English language teaching and learning have undergone notable transformations. Alternative assessment (AA), defined as a diverse range of methods designed to monitor and evaluate the learning process in authentic and meaningful ways, has gained significant prominence in EFL/ESL contexts due to its distinctive characteristics [11]. AA can be seen as a departure from conventional testing, emphasizing authentic tasks and real-world performance [1] - [3]. It can also be understood as a process of ongoing, formative feedback that supports learning and development, rather than a one-off summative evaluation [4], [5], [9]. Unlike the traditionally dominant paradigm of summative assessment, alternative approaches aim to monitor and evaluate student learning through a diverse array of means. This shift can be attributed to several factors, including the growing influence of constructivist perspectives on language learning, the widespread dissatisfaction with conventional assessment methodologies, and the emergence of more holistic conceptualizations of linguistic competence [11]. Proponents of AA argue that these approaches offer tangible benefits for both teachers and learners [11], [12]. From an instructional standpoint, AA practices enable teachers to more effectively monitor and analyze their students' academic progress while promoting greater learner autonomy and self-reflection. For students, engagement with AA can foster a deeper understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, and areas needing improvement, thereby facilitating continuous development. In EFL/ESL classrooms, AA can manifest in various forms, including portfolios, reflective journals, performance-based tasks, observational notes, conferences, and diverse modes of self- and peer-assessment [4], [11]. Such diversity contrasts with the limited scope of traditional summative evaluations, providing a more comprehensive and dynamic means of gauging student learning and progress in language acquisition.

To foster a more inclusive approach to assessment, various studies have provided valuable insights. Researchers have suggested that cultivating a sense of belonging and value for all students is important [7]. Additionally, the need for a positive and supportive learning

environment has been emphasized [13], [14]. Notably, AA approaches have been found to facilitate more inclusive learning environments that respect and appreciate the diverse perspectives and contributions of students [15] - [17]. By offering multiple avenues for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, AA can accommodate varied learning styles and abilities, thereby promoting greater equity and cultural responsiveness in educational settings [7]. Bourke [15, p. 197] comments that AA practices in higher education “allow for a greater choice over what inclusive assessment practices to employ”. In the same vein, Gravestock [18] notes that the utilization of AA methods not only enhances inclusivity in assessment but also mitigates the negative impacts of sociocultural factors on assessment validity and fairness. However, the author [15, p. 195] warns that offering students alternative assessment options does not automatically make assessment more inclusive, as students may feel anxious about unfamiliar assessment methods until they realize there is no single "right way" to demonstrate their learning.

In their seminal work that highlights the principles of Universal Design for Learning, Meyer et al. [19] depict specific actions to ensure the development of more effective and inclusive assessment practices within EFL contexts. They emphasize the critical importance of aligning course assessments with stated learning objectives systematically and rigorously. Also, teachers are encouraged to incorporate a variety of evaluation methods, ranging from traditional examinations to written assignments, quizzes, and project-based assessments. Building on this notion, Quansah et al. [20] suggest that teachers adopt flexible assessment options for learners with special educational needs through the judicious modification and incorporation of AA strategies, such as authentic assessment, performance-based assessment, and portfolio assessment. McConlogue's [17] shares a similar viewpoint, asserting that AA designs are crucial for catering to students' individual strengths and preferences. Additionally, Meyer et al. [19] suggest that when feasible, students should be given the opportunity to customize or choose the assessments they will complete. In this regard, Meyer et al. [19], Tomlinson [21], and Tosuncuoglu [4] stress the importance of providing students with abundant chances for formative assessment and skill development through low-stakes, scaffolded activities. These alternative practices allow students to practice and sharpen their skills while enabling teachers to identify areas that need additional instructional support. It is also essential that assessment expectations and criteria be communicated clearly and with ample advance notice to students, since this empowers them to focus their efforts on achieving the intended learning objectives [14], [15], [19].

In the Vietnamese context, quite a few studies have explored the applications and feasibility of AA practices [22]-[24]. However, there is still a noticeable gap in the research regarding the association between AA and inclusivity in English language teaching. Although the broad benefits and employment of AA in EFL contexts are well documented, little has been undertaken to explore the issue of inclusivity in assessment and how EFL Vietnamese teachers can achieve this through AA practices. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating how EFL teachers in Vietnam employ AA strategies to foster inclusivity in language assessment. It is guided by the following research question:

How do EFL teachers in Vietnam utilize AA strategies to promote inclusivity in language assessment?

2. Methodology

2.1. Settings and Participants

The research was carried out at a private institution in Vietnam with the mission of offering students an education that meets international standards. In pursuit of this objective, the university provides an English intensive curriculum and a variety of out-of-class learning activities to enhance students' opportunities for language practice within and beyond the classroom. Additionally, it enforces a somewhat rigorous language competency requirement for graduation, with a minimum overall band score of 5.5 on the IELTS (International English

Language Testing System) or a comparable score on other standardized language proficiency tests. This language benchmarking surpasses the B1 level required by the Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training as this level is equivalent to an overall IELTS band score ranging from 4 to 5 [25]. Each English course includes both formative and summative assessment. Teachers have the autonomy to use their own forms of formative assessment to measure their students' ongoing language performance (30% of the course score) and administer a speaking test (20% of the course score). The summative component, which accounts for the remaining 50%, entails an end-of-term achievement exam in the form of multiple-choice questions that focus on vocabulary, grammar, listening, and reading skills.

The participants in this study were 10 teachers of Vietnamese nationality employed full-time at the university. This group included nine females and one male whose teaching experience varied from 10 to 20 years. Nine out of ten participants had Master's Degrees in TESOL or Applied Linguistics and one participant held a doctoral degree in TESOL. They took part in this investigation voluntarily, with the researchers' commitment to guaranteeing their confidentiality and anonymity. The participants also had the right to withdraw from this project at any given moment or refuse to respond to any inquiries they considered to be personal or unrelated. From a preliminary informal survey, all the participants acknowledged having prior experience in applying AA.

2.2. Procedures and data analysis

This study draws on a qualitative approach, using a narrative frame and semi-structured interviews to gather data on AA methods. A narrative frame is a written story template that allows participants to share their experiences and perspectives on the association between AA practices and inclusivity in language teaching [26]. The input for devising the narrative frame and interview guide drew on the existing literature on inclusivity in education and the ways in which inclusivity elements can be integrated into AA in language classrooms [5], [8], [9], [12], [16]. All participants completed the frame in English. Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the narrative frame was completed, providing further insights into teachers' strategies and adoption AA to promote inclusivity. The interviews were conducted in-person or via video conferencing, allowing for open-ended discussions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The study used an inductive approach to analyzing narrative and interview data, focusing on emerging themes and findings [27]. The analysis followed three phases proposed by [28] including preparation, organization, and reporting of results. The preparation phase allowed researchers to develop initial insights by scrutinizing and organizing data. The organization phase involved carefully examining data and labeling codes, which were then grouped into themes and corroborated with excerpts. Narrative and interview excerpts were abbreviated as "nar" and "int". The final stage involved reporting on the findings based on the researchers' interpretation of identified themes and supporting excerpts.

3. Findings & Discussion

3.1. Recognizing and Valuing Student Diversity

The teachers in the present study utilized AA strategies based on their perceived value of AA contributions to accounting for student diversity. They highlighted the influences of AA on students from diverse cultural backgrounds. For example, Participant 1 stated that "AA can have a profound impact on students from diverse cultural backgrounds... empower learners and validate their unique experiences" (int). Similarly, Participant 7 noted that "AA can have a positive impact on students from diverse cultural backgrounds by providing opportunities for them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in ways that resonate with their cultural experiences" (int). These sentiments were echoed by Participant 8, who emphasized that "I believe AA have a positive impact on students from diverse cultural backgrounds by providing opportunities for personalized and holistic learning experiences" (int). These teachers

emphasized the importance of recognizing and valuing student diversity through AA. Such findings support previous research on the role of AA strategies in promoting inclusivity in language education [15], [17].

Participants' accounts also underscored how AA, such as presentations, portfolios, and discussions, empower students from diverse cultural backgrounds by allowing them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in ways that resonate with their experiences. This is consistent with McConlogue's [17] assertion that flexible and adaptable assessment designs are crucial for catering to students' individual strengths and preferences. The use of diverse assessment methods, as described by Participant 2, provided multiple means of action and expression, further promoting student agency and confidence *"I use diverse methods like presentations, portfolios, discussions, and storytelling to assess student learning. Such practices promote student agency and confidence while allowing me to align assessment methods with course objectives"* (nar). Similarly, Participant 9 utilized reflective journals and performance tasks as tools for promoting deeper understanding and student autonomy *"The AA that I choose to use are reflective journals and performance tasks. I prioritize these methods because they enhance deeper understanding, allow students to apply their skills, and promote student autonomy in self-assessment"* (nar).

In summary, this section highlights the crucial role of AA in acknowledging and valuing the diverse backgrounds of students in EFL classrooms. The teachers emphasized the positive impact of AA in empowering students and validating their unique experiences. These elements create a more inclusive learning environment that caters to individual strengths and preferences, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of students and their language studies.

3.2. Creating Inclusive Learning Environments

The participants emphasized the role of AA in creating inclusive learning environments. These forms offer opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in varied and culturally relevant ways. In this way, students have opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in diverse and culturally relevant ways. Participant 1 noted that these assessments empower learners and validate their unique experiences, while Participant 7 highlighted the use of culturally relevant assessment tasks in *"providing opportunities for personalized and holistic learning experiences"* (int).

The utilization of culturally relevant assessment tasks, as mentioned by Participant 7, reflects a recognition of the importance of validating students' diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. This approach resonates with McConlogue's [17] emphasis on adaptive assessment design, which aims to cater to learners' individual needs and preferences. Furthermore, Participant 1's recognition of AA's ability to empower learners and validate their unique experiences aligns with the broader aim of inclusive assessment to create a sense of belonging and value for all students [7].

The acknowledgement of sociocultural challenges in implementing AA and the strategies employed by the participants to address them further highlight the importance of contextualizing assessment practices. Participant 9's focus on fostering a supportive classroom environment in which students feel valued and respected is crucial for creating a safe space for all learners to express themselves and engage in activities *"I try to foster a supportive classroom environment where students feel valued and respected and they can express themselves better as well as engage more in the activities"* (int). This approach aligns with the broader literature on inclusive assessment, which emphasizes the need for a positive and supportive learning environment [14].

In short, this section highlights the value of AA in fostering an inclusive learning environment. The teachers in the current study highlighted the importance of utilizing diverse and culturally relevant assessment tasks to create a supportive classroom atmosphere where all students feel valued and respected, ultimately promoting active participation and meaningful engagement in learning activities.

3.3. Promoting Equity and Addressing Sociocultural Challenges

The participants reported incorporating culturally diverse materials, providing scaffolding and support for students, and fostering a classroom culture that values diversity and collaboration, reflecting a commitment to creating a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students (e.g. Participants 1 and 7). For example, Participant 1 tried to “*promote inclusivity in assessment design, providing scaffolding and support for students, and fostering a classroom culture that values diversity and collaboration*” (int). The incorporation of culturally diverse materials and examples, as highlighted by Participant 7, is a key aspect of culturally responsive assessment and reflects a recognition of the importance of validating students' diverse cultural identities and experiences. This was achieved by “*incorporating culturally diverse materials and examples, providing clear guidelines and expectations, and offering additional support and scaffolding for students who may face cultural barriers*” (Participant 7, int). The provision of clear guidelines and expectations, as well as additional support and scaffolding for students who may face cultural barriers, is crucial for ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to succeed.

This approach is consistent with the findings of Bourke [15], who emphasizes the importance of providing differentiated support to students in order to promote equity and inclusion.

Furthermore, the adaptation of assessment tasks to align with students' cultural backgrounds, as mentioned by Participant 8, demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that assessments are fair and relevant to all learners in “*adapting assessment tasks to align with students' cultural backgrounds and providing additional support to ensure equitable participation and success*” (int). This study highlights the need for providing differentiated support and clear guidelines to students, especially those facing cultural and linguistic barriers. Teachers reported specific strategies such as scaffolding and providing additional resources to ensure equity. While differentiated support is a well-established concept in education [15], the detailed strategies and examples provided by Vietnamese EFL teachers offer new insights into how these practices can be effectively implemented in diverse classroom settings. These findings regarding strategies for promoting equity and addressing sociocultural challenges in assessment provide corroborating evidence for the significance of AA in promoting inclusivity in language teaching [15], [17].

This section underscores teachers' commitment to promoting inclusivity in language assessment through AA. By incorporating culturally diverse materials, providing scaffolding and support, and cultivating a classroom culture, teachers actively address sociocultural challenges and create a more equitable learning environment. The emphasis on differentiated support, clear guidelines, and culturally relevant assessment tasks demonstrates the teachers' dedication to ensuring that all students have opportunities to develop their language skills.

3.4. Responding to students' different learning approaches

The participants aimed to create inclusive assessment practices that honored diverse ways of knowing and learning. This included conducting various assessment practices such as presentations, group work, individual recordings, projects, and competitions. This allows students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in ways that best suit their individual strengths and preferences. Participant 9 described incorporating culturally relevant examples and contexts into assessment tasks such as “*role play or storytelling, to help students make connections to their own experiences*” (int). This finding supports existing research on the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse ways of knowing and learning in assessment [15], [17].

By connecting assessment tasks to students' own experiences and cultural backgrounds, teachers can create a more meaningful and engaging learning experience for all students. This approach is consistent with the broader literature on inclusive assessment, which emphasizes the need for assessments to be relevant and meaningful to learners from diverse backgrounds [7].

Furthermore, the emphasis on differentiated support, as demonstrated by Participants 3, 7, and 6, aligns with the principles of inclusive assessment, which advocate for providing all

learners with the necessary tools and resources to succeed. By ensuring assessments are accessible to all learners, providing clear guidelines and additional support, and designing assessments that cater to individual strengths, teachers can create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students. This approach is consistent with the findings of Bourke [15], who emphasizes the importance of providing differentiated support to students in order to promote equity and inclusion. Participant 3 emphasized ensuring assessments are accessible to all learners in “*considering the diverse levels of students in my classes, I need to ensure that the chosen AA are appropriate and accessible to all learners*” (nar). Participant 7 highlighted providing clear guidelines and additional support, whereas Participant 6 stressed the importance of designing assessments that cater to individual strengths “*With AA, I have the freedom to design assessments that cater to the unique strengths and preferences of each student*” (nar). By incorporating diverse assessment methods, culturally relevant content, and differentiated support, teachers can create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment that honors the diverse ways in which students learn and demonstrate their knowledge.

Evidently, the teachers in this study expended numerous efforts to create a more inclusive learning environment by accounting for diverse learning styles and providing students with the necessary tools and resources for learning. The findings underscore the significance of connecting assessment tasks to students' experiences and cultural backgrounds, making learning more personally meaningful and engaging.

3.5. Pacing deployment of alternative assessment

The participants' recognition of the need for gradual integration, particularly for students who may be unfamiliar with alternative learning styles and assessment tasks, underscores the importance of scaffolding and support in inclusive assessment practices. While the gradual introduction of new assessment methods is mentioned in previous research [20], this study provides a more detailed exploration of the practical steps and teacher strategies for successful implementation in EFL contexts. Participant 8 noted that “*With students who do not get used to the learning styles at university as well as the alternative tasks, it is necessary to integrate the assessments and tasks gradually and well-prepared instruction*” (int). By gradually introducing AA and providing clear instructions and expectations, teachers can ensure that all students, regardless of their prior experience, feel comfortable and capable of participating in these assessments. This approach aligns with the findings of Bourke [15], who highlights the need for teachers to provide clear guidance and support to students when implementing alternative assessment practices.

Similarly, Participant 6 highlighted the value of giving clear instructions and expectations “*We ensure clear instructions and expectations so that all students, regardless of their cultural background or language proficiency, understand the assessment tasks and can participate fully*” (int). By ensuring that all students understand the assessment tasks and can participate fully, teachers can create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. This approach is consistent with the broader literature on inclusive assessment, which emphasizes the need for clear communication and transparency to ensure that all learners understand what is expected of them [14]. In short, the findings reinforce the importance of a thoughtful and gradual approach to implementing AA, along with clear communication and differentiated support, to ensure that all students can participate fully and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a variety of ways.

In brief, this section emphasizes the importance of prudent planning and step-by-step implementation of AA to foster inclusivity in EFL classrooms. The teachers highlighted the need for scaffolding and clear instructions, particularly for students unfamiliar with AA, to ensure all learners feel comfortable and capable of participating in these forms of assessment.

4. Conclusion

This research study illuminates the transformative potential of alternative assessment (AA) methods in creating a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape for students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. The teachers in the present study viewed these assessment forms as valuable tools that not only validate students' unique experiences and cultural perspectives but also foster essential skills like critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. By incorporating culturally relevant content, providing tailored scaffolding, and nurturing a supportive classroom environment, teachers can effectively mitigate sociocultural barriers and empower all learners to succeed.

The findings underscore the importance of moving beyond traditional assessment practices that may inadvertently disadvantage students from diverse backgrounds. By embracing alternative methods, teachers can tap into students' diverse strengths and talents, enabling them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in meaningful ways. This shift towards more inclusive assessment practices benefits individual students and enriches the overall learning environment, creating a space where every student could feel the sense of being valued.

The study also reveals a unique emphasis on reflective practices, such as journals and performance tasks, within the Vietnamese context. These practices promote deeper understanding and student autonomy. It also identifies the need for thoughtful and gradual integration of AA, with well-prepared instruction and clear guidelines to ensure all students, especially those unfamiliar with alternative assessments, can fully participate and benefit. Additionally, the findings align with the broader literature on inclusive assessment, reinforcing the need for differentiated support, culturally relevant materials, and transparent communication. The participants' strategies reflect a commitment to creating a more equitable learning environment that honors diverse ways of knowing and learning.

However, the study also highlights the need for further research to fully understand the long-term impact of AA on student outcomes. Future investigations should explore the specific mechanisms through which these assessments influence student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement, particularly for students from marginalized groups. Researchers could also examine the most effective strategies for incorporating culturally relevant content into assessments and providing appropriate scaffolding for diverse learners.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence supporting the use of AA methods as a means of promoting educational equity and inclusivity. By embracing these innovative approaches, teachers can create a more just and equitable educational system where all students, regardless of their backgrounds, have the opportunity to reach their full potential. However, institutional support, including adequate resources, professional development, and clear policies, is crucial to fully realize the potential of AA.

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