

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

"We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light." — Plato

Assessment in its broadest sense might refer to any observation, measurement or evaluation of phenomena that might occur relative to any given art or science or in contexts external to formal disciplines of study. This investigation explores the different ways a formal assessment protocol issued within the context of a second language learning program affected different second language learners differently. Assessment, as discussed within the context of this investigation, has been defined as the "process of collecting information about a given object of interest according to procedures that are systematic and substantively grounded (Bachman, 2004, p. 7)." To be distinguished from casual observations, the formal assessments considered by this study must have been carried out in visible, methodical steps that could conceivably be replicated with adequate reliability. Assessments qualify as substantively grounded when they are rooted in relevant theory. Assessments discussed here most often refer to the assessments that take place in the field of second language acquisition.

Assessments that take place in second language acquisition and learning contexts serve at least three broad purposes: (1) assessments made in the context of second language learning and acquisition provide useful information that can be used to make important decisions about learners and learning systems; (2) assessments made in the context of second language learning contexts add a consequentiality to learning that would not exist without the presence of some sort of measurement and feedback; (3) assessments made in the context of second language learning serve as pedagogical devices that, themselves, provide the input, activities, communicative tasks—and even interaction—that occasion learning (Manitoba Education, Citizens and Youth, 2006). These purposes work interdependently with one another to establish conditions thought favorable to acquisition and invariably fluctuate in the degree to which they are represented within individual learning contexts. One context, for example might contain a number of assessments that provide information but little consequence; another might use assessments to cause learning but withhold the data from learners and their permanent records. Functionally within learning systems and cultures, assessments serve as the basis for admission, placement, certification and graduation to and from learning programs and employment scenarios and also, relatedly, as tokens of achievement not only to be bartered but shared casually and celebrated

among peers (Bachman, 1990; Bailey, 1998; Popham, 2005; Reynolds, Livingston, and Willson, 2010). Naturally, when designing blocks of learning, the balance of these functions must be taken into careful consideration (Richards, 2001).

1.2 Background and Rationale

Regardless of their remarkable utility to learning, and although the formal instruction of second languages has been shown to contribute substantially to acquisition (Krashen and Seliger, 1975), receiving formal language assessments within the context of a second language learning course is not strictly necessary for the acquisition of a second or additional language to occur. It has been furthermore observed that individuals who may perform well on language assessments relative to individual learning paradigms may not demonstrate similar proficiency in other contexts (Ng, 2007; James, 2012; Flowerdew and Miller, 2005; Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

Many individuals have recently expressed concern that the frequency and manner with which high stakes assessments are administered on nation levels exceeds acceptable levels and perverts the fundamental values and purposes of education assessment. They argue that while modern education focuses diligently on the production of learning evidence, the critical occasion of learning itself has fallen by the wayside (KXL, 2013; KGW Staff, 2013; Strauss, 2013; Goyal, 2012; Project Student Autonomy, 2013). The larger effect of assessment-based learning systems has been poor overall, they argue—demotivating and sometimes dehumanizing for instructors and either unhelpful or harmful for learners (Baker, et al., 2010; Kohn, 2000; Amrein and Berliner, 2002). The unrest has been sufficient for individuals in every branch of education and related fields to reconsider the fundamental purposes of assessment and whom it truly aims to benefit (Kohn, 2000; Popham, 2005; Massachusetts Professors and Researchers, 2013; Nichols and Berliner, 2007).

Most second language learning contexts, even those heavily associated with communicative and acquisition-oriented approaches, favor some formal evaluation of learners (Littlewood, 1981; Krashen and Terrell, 1983). Many second language learners moreover depend upon standardized language examinations like TOEFL scores in order to participate in study or to qualify for work opportunities. If measured constructs used on standardized and classroom language assessments do not correspond sufficiently to the nature of actual language use, learners may develop incomplete or imbalanced proficiencies (Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Powers, 2010).

The research objectives of this study were operationalized using very specific methods of language assessment. The overarching aim of the study however was to investigate the effects of language assessment as a general concept rather than to investigate the effects of any single or specific method or form of language assessment. The types of language assessments used in this study, mainly multiple-choice and short-answer varieties, were chosen for their relative practicality and genuine appropriateness to the learning context and also because they are known to be widely used in similar such scenarios and therefore a good representation of language assessment as a construct and not the specific variety of language assessments used themselves. Correspondingly, while the results of the study may pertain in strictest

terms to the various effects of the specific methods of assessment used within the study, the overall implications of the study, it is hoped, will bear more relevance to the broad concept of assessment as an institution rather than any single form of assessment or instrument-type. Hence discussion within the study generally prefers use of the term language assessment rather than, for example, language examinations.

Motivating Questions

- 1 Is language assessment necessary to second language acquisition?
- 2 Does language assessment improve second language learning?
- 3 Can formal language assessments interfere with language learning?
- 4 For whom are these questions relevant and why?

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

With such considerations in mind, the following questions and objectives were formulated to inform research in the target context:

Research Questions

- 1 For whom will the inclusion of frequent language assessments improve learning?
- 2 For whom will the inclusion of frequent language assessments affect opinions?

Research Objectives

- 1 Investigate the effects of frequent assessment on second language learning among upper secondary learners of English in Thailand relative to their resulting English language ability.
- 2 Investigate the effects of frequent language assessment on the opinions and reactions of upper secondary second language learners of English in Thailand towards the course of instruction.

1.4 Hypothesis of the Study

- 1 The inclusion of frequent language assessments will have no effect on resulting English language ability.
- 2 The inclusion of frequent language assessments will have no effect on the opinions of second language learners towards the course of instruction.

1.5 Scope of the Study

1.5.1 Scope of the Population and Sample

The population refers to upper secondary second language learners of English in northern Thailand. A total of 416 students aged 13–19 ($\mu=15.51$) participated in the study. Prior to instruction, learners were randomly assigned by class section to receive treatment or to serve as the control. Prior to analysis, a purposeful sample of 200 students was generated to include 25 learners from each of four proficiency ranges for

each treatment category, yielding comparison groups of 100 learners with statistically similar starting proficiencies.

1.5.2 Scope of the Treatment

The treatment was comprised of three short, predominantly multiple-choice treatment instruments issued on three consecutive weeks of study at the end of every lesson, constructed to review the language skills and microskills presented in every lesson, which were:

- 1 Understanding and discussing film
- 2 Providing and understanding descriptions
- 3 Identifying words within a poem.

Tasks used on treatment instruments included: dictation, multiple-choice questions regarding content, cloze passages and a limited quantity of short answer responses. The treatment instruments were scored and returned to learners in the following lesson, with the exception of the final treatment instrument, which was returned to learners through another instructor. Treatment instruments were worth five, ten and five points respectively and amounted to 5% of learners' total final grades. Treatment instruments consumed between twelve and twenty minutes of each class.

1.5.3 Scope of Independent Variables

Learners in treatment groups received treatment instruments at the end of each session and untreated learners did not. Instruction otherwise remained uniform and constant.

Table 1 Independent Variables

	<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Measuring Instrument</i>	<i>Treatment</i>	<i>Control</i>
1	Assessment	Treatment Instruments	✓	
2	Instruction	Final Performance Examination	✓	✓

1.5.4 Scope of Dependent Variables

The dependent variables were the final resulting English language ability learners and the resulting opinions learners formed toward the course of instruction. Ability was measured using a final assessment of ability and opinions were measured using an end of term survey.

Table 2 Dependent Variables

	<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>Measuring Instrument</i>
1	Resulting English ability	Final Performance Examination
2	Resulting opinions towards the course	End of Term Survey Questionnaire

1.5.5 Scope of Lesson Content and Instruction

Instruction focused on conversational language skills (listening and speaking) and micro-skills (comprehending and discussing film, providing and understanding descriptions, and identifying words in poetry). The underpinning theory of instruction corresponded to principles associated with communicative language teaching (CLT) and instructional blocks favored the use of authentic materials and discussion-based tasks. In the first session, learners watched and discussed the English-language film *Twilight*. In the second session learners were introduced to the relevant vocabulary to provide and understand descriptions of people in English and practiced doing so. In the third class, learners listened to several short poems and participated in a structured discussion of content.

Table 3 Objective/Microskill Breakdown

	<i>Objective/Microskill</i>	<i>Material</i>	<i>Tasks</i>	<i>Treatment Instruments for Treated Learners</i>
1	Understand and discuss film	<i>Twilight</i> —American Film	Watch and Discuss Film	Topical
2	Provide and understand descriptions of people	Slideshow Presenting Descriptive Vocabulary—prepared by instructor	Learn descriptive vocabulary; construct descriptions; identify based upon descriptions; draw people based upon descriptions.	Identification of vocabulary items; use of vocabulary; providing descriptions; identifying people based upon descriptions.
3	Identify words within a poem	<i>Acquainted with the Night</i> by Robert Frost—a sonnet	Listen to and discuss a poem.	Distinguishing individual words in a poem using cloze passages.

1.6 Definitions of Terms

Achievement: Performance of language learners relative to established objectives and standards, here listening, speaking and conversational skills and the micro-skills of comprehending and discussing narrative and dialogue within film, providing and understanding descriptions, and identifying words within a poem.

Assessment: The purposeful and systematic evaluation of phenomena, in language education, what learners know and can do relative to language knowledge and use. In this study, assessment was confined to measurement of listening and speaking skills and micro-skills.

Frequent Assessment: Assessment that take place on a frequent basis. The frequent assessments that took place in this study were given at the end of every class whereas control groups received no such assessment.

English as Foreign Language Context: A learning context wherein the target language is not spoken at a significant level outside of the classroom.

English Language Ability: Ability, discussed here, refers to proficiency of language use with respect solely to the conversational language skills listening and speaking per the requirements of the contexts and the microskills presented in each class: (1) the ability to comprehend and discuss film narratives and dialogue, (2) the ability to provide and understand descriptions of people, and (3) the ability to identify words

within a poem.

Listening Skill: The receptive auidial language skill defined by the sensible comprehension of language information contained in sound and measured using tasks that include such processes.

Opinions towards a Language Learning Course: Judgments made by learners relative to the course of instruction, specifically delineated in this study by the five following judgments: (1) judgments about the class in general; (2) judgments about the lessons and lesson material; (3) judgments about the assessments used; (4) judgments about the effectiveness and preparedness of the teacher; and (5) judgments of learners' own confidence.

Speaking Skill: The productive vocal language skill associated with the verbal or otherwise sounded production of language information and measured using tasks that include such processes.

1.7 Significance of the Study

Second language acquisition remains an unreliable, unstable and often unsuccessful process (Bley-Vroman, 1990). Whereas most individuals successfully and completely, almost effortlessly acquire their native language during childhood, second language acquisition is much less successful (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Learners in the United States have recently expressed supreme dissatisfaction with the rate they are assessed and its significance to their lives (Project Student Autonomy, 2013). Meanwhile, studies in psychology routinely demonstrate that circumstances promoting autonomy equip individuals to achieve more and to feel better whilst doing so than circumstances in which individuals are manipulated or controlled (Pink, 2009). Learning contexts that foist assessments upon students without their negotiation may impinge upon autonomy. Nevertheless, the measurement and evaluation of individuals within second language learning contexts provides several known advantages for learners and learning and may improve the learning experience for certain learners. In Thailand, where the study was conducted, class time is strangled by cancellations and holidays. Understanding when and for whom classroom assessment improves language learning would be of tremendous value for any learning context and especially one in which obstructions to progress remain profound and do not look to be quickly or easily reconciled.