University Student Perceptions of English Skills Assessment

Leni Amelia Suek

Universitas Nusa Cendana, Kupang, Indonesia
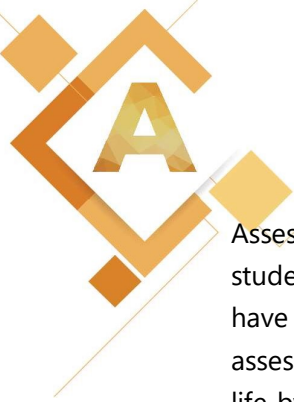
Corresponding author: leni.suek@yahoo.com

Abstract

Investigating students' perspectives on assessment has been widely studied, however, relatively little is known about how university students respond to assessment. Assessment is an important part of teaching and learning process because it is used to measure students' knowledge, skills and also to evaluate the program. Students' perspectives are particularly important because the power of assessment directly impacts on their motivation and attitudes towards learning. This study focused on finding out the student perceptions of the test, test result, test procedure and feedback of four skill-subjects that they had taken. The study explored the students' opinions of English language assessment in English Department of Universitas Nusa Cendana, Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia through the draw and write technique and interview. The results showed that assessment might cause positive or negative feelings among the students. This paper helps understand how assessment impacts the students' lives, how teacher can make a well-designed assessment to measure the students' ability and skills properly without discouraging them from learning, and how the draw and write technique can be used to document the student perceptions.

Keywords: *Draw and Write, English Assessment, English Skills, Student Perceptions*.

Introduction

Outcomes and assessment of a proposed program should be decided before starting the teaching and learning process because assessment plays a role in determining instruction in the classroom. Assessment is not only documenting students' progress, but also identifying their needs and preparing lessons and methods for teaching. In the preparation process, teachers need to also identify whether the assessment tool that they use will be a valid one or not. It means that the teachers need to make sure what assessment tool to be used, how to use it, and how it is going to measure the students' ability and skills. It is important to reliably measure the students' progress and to assess the effectiveness of the course.

Assessment is extremely important in language learning because it measures the students' language skills and knowledge. Without assessment, the teachers will not have any input on how to evaluate the teaching learning process. Nevertheless, assessment is a major part of the students' life. The students spend half of their school life by taking examinations, doing homework or quizzes, writing a project, and other types of assessment. Therefore, assessment is essential because it tests the students' skills, both productive and receptive skills, and also language elements such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (Gibbs, 2004).

Assessment is a fundamental element of classroom instruction because it measures the students' performance as well as the lesson. It will eventually reveal whether the lesson objectives are achieved or not. Assessment makes the teachers and school management think whether they teach should be taught or test what should be tested (Hughes, 1989). Assessment may also inspire the teachers to think of other methods or materials that promote better teaching.

There are two functions of assessment in language learning, the first one is to measure the students' proficiency and another one is to measure whether the course already achieves the goals of learning or not. The most usual way to measure the students' achievement and proficiency in language learning is testing. However, not many teachers are capable of making reliable test items. Henning (2012) points out common errors made by the teachers in test construction and provides the checklist for the teachers to help them constructing a valid and reliable test. These mistakes are related to the characteristics of the overall test, the test items, the test validity and reliability, the test administration, and the scoring system.

A test is needed to assess the outcome of learning, and the test comes with several different formats. In terms of assessing language proficiency, the test should not only measure the language skills, but also knowledge. Paper-based tests are used for assessing each component of language knowledge or of language skills (Wigglesworth, 2008).

There are three key principles of a test: practicality, reliability, and validity. An effective test should be practical which means that it is not costly, not time consuming, clear scoring system, and easy administration (Brown, 2004). In addition, a reliable test should be consistent so that the students will get similar results of the test either for the same or matched students on two different test situations (Brown, 2004). Timed tests may cause a disadvantage on the students who cannot do well on a test with time constraints. Thus, the score of the students determines the reliability of the test. Besides practicality and reliability, validity is one of the utmost aspects in constructing a test. A

valid test should measure what is intended to be measured (Hughes, 1989). A valid reading test should measure the students' reading comprehension, not the students' vision, nor their prior knowledge, nor some other irrelevant variables. If the students are taught reading, the test should be about reading, not the other skills.

The test should be administered according to certain procedures. Administering a test should start from the preparation phase where the teachers prepare the test booklets and equipment until the selection of the invigilators, rooms, and rules (Hughes, 1989). There are several protocols that should be clearly delivered to the students before they start the test. They include the time constraints, rooms, rules, examiners, invigilators, seating arrangements, and the booklets. These are important factors in administering the test because a simple issue, like seating arrangement, may also distract the test takers. In the listening test, for example, the invigilators need to make sure that the test takers in the room can hear the sound clearly and with a good volume.

Feedback in educational settings contributes to learning; however, some teachers may neglect it. Feedback is significant in assessment in order to provide sufficient support for the students' learning, and which may help improve the students' achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback should be constructing and contain advice on the students' tasks or tests. One problem instructors often have is seeing the feedback from the student's perspective. Teachers should keep in my mind that giving feedback is a two-way communication in which that the students should understand what we convey. Teachers' comments should help the students understand not just what they do wrong, but what could be done to improve their scores. Sadler (2010) claims that feedback has varied forms, including comments (written and oral), gestures, and also grades.

Student perceptions of the assessment is a key component for evaluating the language program. The perceptions might be a fundamental decision for the teachers to design the further course whether they have to use the same materials, method and assessment or not. It is argued that a difference of views about assessment may lead to lower results of assessment (Scouller, 1998). Perception of assessment can be said as the students' views on the assessment under investigation (Watering, Gijbels, Dochy, & Rijt, 2008). This means that after the students take the test, they are being investigated through interview or other methods to find out their perceptions on the test. Several studies have examined the perceptions of assessment in the learning process. Scouller (1998) studied about the students' opinions of a test with a multiple choice format. He found that that the student perceptions were not always correct. Some students had a misconception that the examination measured higher order thinking. As a result, they utilized wrong learning strategies which aimed to answer higher order thinking questions. Hence, the grades that they expected to have might

not be achieved. This leads to negative perceptions of the test and may change the students' attitudes towards learning.

Drawing technique is currently used by researchers to analyze people's perceptions. This method is now popular in health-related research (McWhirter, 2014; Renslow & Maupin, 2018); however, it has also used been to collect the data on the educational field as well because most students feel less pressured when they express their feeling through drawing (Driessnack, 2006; Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Generally, collecting data in the classroom setting may become a pressure to the students because they might think that this process affects their grades (Mauthner, 2006; McWhirter, 2014). Thus, such a drawing technique may break the barrier between the researchers and students in which the students can feel more relaxed in expressing their feelings.

This study added new input towards the research of the students' perceptions on second language assessment particularly in higher educational settings. Assessment is conducted in all levels of education including higher education. These days, the perception of university students on tests has gained increasing attention in literature. The students still have a concern on the quality of assessment given by lecturers. However, very little research has been carried out to assess the students' experience of assessment. The evidence for what factors within assessments actually contribute to student engagement is not fully understood and more research is required. In addition, not many studies have investigated the perceptions of the students on the assessment of four basic language skills.

This study aimed to investigate how the students perceived their experience in English skills test that included both receptive and productive skills. This study sought to understand the student perceptions of the test, test results, test procedures, and teachers' feedback.

LITERATURE REVIEW
LANGUAGE TEST

There are several types of language tests such as proficiency test, diagnostic test, achievement test, formative test, summative test, norm-referenced test, criterion-reference test, and communicative test (Hughes, 1989). In a higher educational setting especially for a department that majors specifically on language, four skills are tested discretely since each skill is being taught in one specific course. So, reading is tested disjointedly from speaking, listening and writing. The receptive skills (reading and listening) are generally evaluated through close-ended types of questions, whereas the

productive skills (writing and speaking) are usually measured through performance tests.

The tests given by the teachers should be valid, practical and reliable. Besides, authenticity and washback effects should be also considered. When the test is administered properly, the students are expected to get grades based on their ability and level of proficiency. Hence, the test can properly discriminate between low and high performance students. The tests can psychologically make the students feel under pressure, and whenever they have good grades they will be satisfied because they gain achievements. However, when the students fail in the tests, they will be discouraged. This will affect their motivation in learning, and therefore, test results can be also motivating and demotivating (Hughes, 1989).

TEST RESULTS

A well-designed test should yield a reliable test result. After taking a test, the students will get their score or results to indicate their level of proficiency. Scoring system is a pivotal part in a test construction because it affects the students' motivation later on. The scoring system should be reliable so that the students understand that they will obtain fair and objective scores to assess their competence (Hughes, 1989). Teachers or instructors are responsible for scoring the test and share the results to the students. In order to minimize the errors in scoring the students' test, instructors need to grade each question in the test (Brown, 2004). The difficulty level of the test items should be considered in the scoring system as well. The students may get motivated and demotivated by the results of their test (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). However, some also feel motivated when their get low scores as long as the test is fair and truly reflects the students' knowledge and skills.

TEST PROCEDURES

Administering a test should follow several procedures and consider some important factors. The test takers should all be informed on the date, place and materials for the test (Hughes, 1989). Factors such as students' motivation, physical discomfort, and anxiety affect test scores as well. Therefore, the teachers need to make sure that the students are under well condition to take the test. Besides, the teachers need to set the test venue to get good light level, temperature and noise free.

Each student must be clearly informed on the expectation and the rules during the test. The invigilators or examiners also need to read all the protocols of the test and make sure that the students understand these (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Administering a test for each skill might be different due to its nature (Watering, *et al.*,

2008). For example, when testing listening, the examiners need to ensure that the audio is set and clearly heard by all the test takers in the room without any noise. In testing speaking, the examiners must create a situation that helps the candidates of the test feel comfortable to talk and express their ideas. Individual or groups settings should be considered in giving a speaking test although it also depends on the objective of the test. For testing reading and writing, the test booklets must be eligible and presented well both in screen or paper so that the test takers do not have technical issues in reading the booklets.

TEACHER FEEDBACK

The most valuable feedback is a two-way communication where both students and teachers frame a dialogue (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Feedback with constructive input should encourage the students' motivation in learning, not demotivate them (Tunstall & Gsipps, 1996; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Plank, Dixon, and Ward (2014) state that teachers have a different perception of the role of feedback. At the extreme point, teachers believe that in giving feedback the teachers are the controllers and the students are the passive recipients. While at another spectrum, some teachers emphasize on the students' role in the feedback process in which they are the active participants and can raise questions about the feedback.

The latter spectrum is favorable because the students will not only just listen to the teachers' feedback, but also may seek for clarification. They can also consult with the teachers on what they should do to improve their scores. This may contribute to develop good rapport between students and teachers (Plank et al., 2014). In higher education settings, this type of feedback is effective to develop the students' higher order thinking because the students may learn from their mistakes and also critically analyze their weaknesses as well as stimulate them to improve their performance with their own method.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

Several studies have revealed that student perceptions are an essential factor in determining student behavior (Harris & Brown, 2009). This means that the students' behavior in learning is highly related to the program's assessment. Whenever the students perceive assessment as a positive experience, this may motivate them to learn. On the other hand, if they have a bad experience in the test due to poor test administration or their own low performance, this may discourage them to study. Hence, the students' behavior might change after the test. Therefore, investigating the student perceptions of the test is not only useful to understand the students' attitude to learning, but also to achieve the goals of the test.

Having a good performance in the test may invoke the students to feel proud of themselves (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Students who get good results or grades may feel satisfied and delighted because they can achieve the goals. This perception needs to be maintained during the course to ensure the students' enthusiasm to finish the course. The satisfied feeling of the students come from their good experiences including feedback (e.g. praise and good marks) (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011). Teachers have a significant contribution to develop positive attitude and perception. When the teachers appreciate the students' performance with praise and good scores, they develop positive perceptions. However, praise is not only for those who perform well, but also for those who do not get better marks. The teachers should be able to show the positive side of the students, such as pointing out an area that the students good at. This will also develop the students' positive experiences in assessment even though their grades are not satisfactory.

DRAW A PICTURE TECHNIQUE

This technique has been used to investigate children' personal feelings about school (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). However, sometimes adults also find it hard to express their feelings, either in spoken or in written forms. Thus, writing facilitates them to express their feelings without worrying to choose diction or tones. A written prompt is given to accommodate the drawing procedure (Harris & Brown, 2009). In research, it is important to make sure that the researcher gets the valid data and the respondents understand what kind of drawing they need to do. This strategy has been highly utilized to examine how the students feel about what they experience during assessment (Harris & Brown, 2009).

This draw and write technique also invites the students to express their ideas and feelings without barriers and support them which are less verbal and allow them to express ideas on sensitive topics (Driessnack, 2006; Renslow & Maupin, 2018). Evaluating the test administered by the teachers and giving feedback might be sensitive issues for the students, especially those in Asian countries, like Indonesia. This is because, culturally, Indonesian students seldom criticize people who are older or superior than them. Drawing a picture is a fun activity and it gives the students a sense of freedom to express their feelings. They can just draw as simple as one single picture or emoticon without thinking about expressions in spoken or written forms. Besides drawing, the students are allowed to write to describe their feelings for those who think that their drawing does not represent their perceptions or for those who are not good at drawing during the data collection period. The draw and write technique may not only release the respondents from pressure, but also build good rapport between them

and the researcher because it is done under a relaxed condition.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative method. The study participants were 44 first year students of English Department of Universitas Nusa Cendana (Nusa Cendana University), Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. The study used drawing a picture technique and semi-structured interview.

The procedures of data collection consisted of three stages. In the first stage, before the students drew a picture, the researcher gave verbal prompts. The prompts contained an instruction to draw their perceptions about the test, test result, test procedure, and teacher's feedback. Afterwards, the students had 5-10 minutes to draw their perceptions for each variable. They were also allowed to write some expressions to describe their pictures or feelings. In total, each student drew four pictures within 20-40 minutes. They were encouraged to draw their perceptions for each language skill.

In order to understand the student perceptions clearly, semi structured interview was done to ask the students to describe their pictures. Further questions were asked to make the description clear to the researcher and to confirm the meanings with the students. The questions mainly were only used as a clarification of the students' drawing to minimize misleading interpretations. The researcher also felt assured that the pictures were clear and conveyed certain meanings. The meanings were also clarified to the students in order to reveal positive or negative perceptions they expressed. The students drew their perceptions on writing, reading, speaking, and listening midterm tests. In addition, their perceptions on the test results, test procedures, and feedback were also investigated in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE TEST

The data illustrated that the students drew three types of perceptions: positive, negative, and combination of both. Positive perceptions showed happy and relaxed feelings when they knew that they could answer the questions in the test. These also related to being confident in taking the test because they already studied well. In contrast, negative perceptions displayed nervous, worrying, and confused feelings because they did not know the answers or did not understand the questions in the test. A mix between positive and negative feelings showed that the students felt uncomfortable in taking the test because psychologically the test itself is an under-

pressure experience, but also they thought that the test was a good activity to measure their language knowledge and skills.
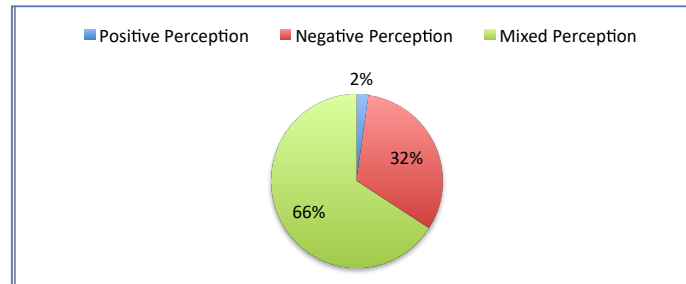

FIGURE 1. The percentage of student perceptions of the test

FIGURE 2. The perception of the test in a student's drawing

Figure 1 indicates that among 44 students, 66% of them expressed mixed perceptions in which they perceived the test as a positive and also a negative construction. In other words, they understood that the test is good for them to measure their ability and they should take it, but they also felt worried if they could not do well on the test and thus, got bad marks. On the other hand, 32% of the students thought that test was a bad experience due to bad marks and lack of preparation. And, only 2% perceived the test as a positive experience no matter what score he received. In general, most of them believed that the test was a good tool to measure their English proficiency, but it was also a challenging task.

Figure 2 is the example of a student's drawing. She expressed herself as a person who carried various feelings in her mind before entering the test room. Even though she has studied and prepared for the test, she still felt anxious and worried. She was part of the students with mixed feelings towards the English test.

The results showed that the students had different responses to the results of their writing, reading, listening, and speaking midterm tests. Some students were satisfied, while other were dissatisfied with their test results. The students felt successful when they obtained good grades, and they felt bad if they received low marks.
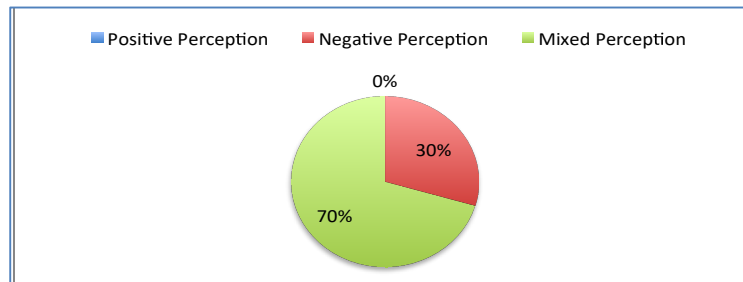

FIGURE 3. The percentage of student perceptions on the test results
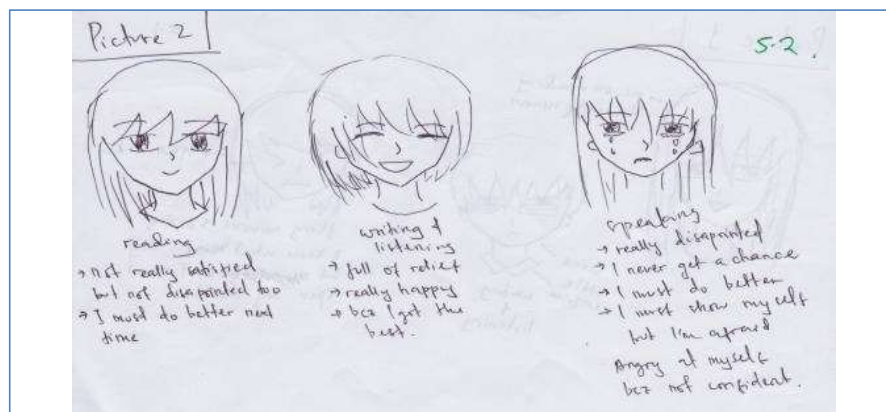

FIGURE 4. The perception of the test results in a student's drawing

Figure 3 reveals that 70% of the students felt both satisfied and dissatisfied with the results of the test. This is because for some skills, they got good grades but in other skills they got bad scores. They expected to get good marks for all four English skills, but none of them were able to achieve the goal. While none of them perceived the test positively, 30% of them thought that they failed the test due to bad grades.

Figure 4 shows their perceptions on the test results by describing their feelings discretely for each language skill. Both external factors and internal factors were mentioned by the students in the interview when they described their feelings about the results. The external factors that contributed to their test results were the teachers' method in administering the test, in which it was done without prior notice or the seating arrangement that made them found it difficult to concentrate during the test.

Additionally, the internal factors included the students' motivation and preparation before taking the test.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE TEST PROCEDURES

The students were asked to express their perceptions on the test procedures or test administration including the level of difficulty of the test items, seating arrangement, and also time management. It was revealed that all teachers conducted appropriate test procedures, and even though the students found the tests challenging, they felt that the level of difficulty was appropriate. The teachers did not just give in class tests, but also take home tests, depending on the nature of the course and the goals of the program itself. The students agreed that both in class and take home tests were appropriate for testing the English skills.

The receptive skills such as reading and listening were tested in the classroom settings. For the listening test, the students were only being dictated by the teachers due to lack of facilities, such as electricity and speaker. However, the students perceived the test positively because they considered it as a good way to practice their listening skill. For the productive skills, the speaking test was done in the class in the one-to-one setting, in which the students took turn to be interviewed by the teachers. In contrast, the writing test was a take-home test in which the students made an essay of a certain topic. The students submitted the essays on a specific date. All of the students perceived that the tests for both productive and receptive skills were administered properly with appropriate time constraints, settings, and also levels of difficulty.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER FEEDBACK

The study revealed that all of the students viewed the feedback from the teachers a positive process. Although some teachers gave bad comments, the students perceived them positively and motivated them somehow. They constructed positive reinforcement, no matter how bad their grades and how hard their teachers' comments on them. The feedback was good for them because the students knew their weaknesses, and that they could improve their skills. None of them felt discouraged after getting the feedback, suggesting that the students have good emotional management. Some teachers pointed out their mistakes and showed them how to improve their skills. However, some teachers focused only on their mistakes and ignored their strengths. This situation made the student feel sad, but it did not discourage them to learn further. They still perceived the feedback as a positive experience to enhance learning.

After getting the feedback, the students understood their drawbacks and they planned a strategy to improve their marks in the final tests. Nevertheless, the feedback from the teachers on each skill varied among the students. Some teachers gave direct feedback in the middle of test performance, such as speaking. The teachers immediately corrected their pronunciation. On the other hand, the writing feedback was given at the end of the test after the teachers corrected their essays. In terms of reading and listening, the feedback was only in the form of scores because they were objective tests. The students directly knew how many correct answers they got from the tests. All of the feedback did not discourage the students to learn later for the English test, and they even felt motivated to improve their skills because they viewed feedback as a positive insight. These university students have a propensity to perceive feedback, both critiques and praises, as a constructive experience.

Conclusions

The study aimed to reveal the student perceptions of the test, test results, test procedures, and teachers' feedback. Their perceptions on four English language skills were investigated.

Through a drawing-picture technique and semi-structured interview, it was found that the students in the higher educational setting perceived the English test as a positive measure in their learning journey. They felt confidence although worried at the same time when they entered the examination room. No matter how challenging the test, they believed that test is the best method to measure their ability. In terms of the test result, not only grades were being given by the teachers but also some comments. The student perceptions of the test results were predominantly negative because they did not achieve the target scores. This happened due to some external factors such as bad test administration and internal factors such as lack of preparation for the test. In terms of the test procedures, both take home test and in-class test conducted by the teachers to assess their language skills were administered properly. All the protocols of the tests based on the regulation of the university were applied. Teachers' feedback was important and constructive for the students. The students were encouraged to perform better no matter how challenging the test was and how bad their grades were. They also perceived bad comments from the teachers as a positive experience to boost their performance and recognize their potentials.

This study may contribute to the researchers who are going to conduct further research on the perception of English assessment. Some gaps might be filled by other studies such us investigating a larger group of participants and specifically to one language skill.

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