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The bumpy road of assessment for learning during pandemic of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

A worldwide discussion about the practice of assessment for learning (AfL) in online classes during the pandemic COVID-19 is scarce. The current research can have a significant impact on teaching and learning practices, and contribute to the development of evidence-based policies and practices that support student success. Thus, the current study aimed at exploring English teachers' AfL practice in online classes. This study belonged to a basic qualitative approach and recruited four English foreign language or EFL teachers from the secondary school level. Observation and semi-structured interviews using an interview guide were conducted to gain the data. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, other documents were collected. Subsequently, utilizing the spiral strategy, the gained data were analyzed. The results revealed that the implementation of AfL deviated from the course. Insufficient knowledge, curriculum, internet accessibility, and technological acceptance are pivotal causes of such deviation. Thus, teachers might not diagnose students' current learning level and decide on a further teaching action. Further studies on other educational levels are demanded to explore the practice of AfL.

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Assessment for learning (AfL) is now widely recommended and is closely linked to instruction. Unlike assessment of learning or AoL, which focuses on judging student achievement (also known as summative assessment), and assessment as learning or AaL, which reflects both teacher and student activities, AfL is an ongoing process that begins right after the teaching-learning process starts and continues until the end of the class session [1], [2]. Additionally, it provides information on the effectiveness of the teacher's teaching, the progress of student learning, and feedback on the level of curriculum implementation. Previous researchers [3]–[5] state that there are three main processes of assessment for learning, they are: i) Establishing where learners are in their learning; ii) Establishing where they are going; and iii) Evaluating/feedback on what needs to be done to achieve student success.

Despite being recommended, AfL is often not implemented as intended. This is due to a misconception that leads to a blending of formative and summative elements in its application during the teaching-learning process. As such, teachers tend to prefer a combination of formative and summative assessment practices [6]. As a result, classroom practices may not always provide insights into students' current

conditions, but rather focus on evaluating their cognitive abilities. Therefore, it can be concluded that AfL practices in the teaching-learning process may not always be purely formative.

Scholarly discussions and research generally support the potential of AfL. The main objective of AfL is to align learning goals with the integration of students' and teachers' responses and feedback to establish better instructional goals [7], [8]. Additionally, implementing AfL, which is a formative assessment, has a positive correlation with student learning outcomes [9]. Furthermore, to enhance the effectiveness of AfL, student engagement, subject discipline, and tool utilization are crucial factors to consider when teachers incorporate it into their teaching activities [7], [8], [10]–[12]. Therefore, AfL has the potential to improve the teaching-learning process.

Despite several studies on AfL, there is a lack of research on its implementation in the context of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to expand on previous research by examining the practice of AfL in online teaching and learning activities in the Indonesian context during the pandemic. In addition to diagnosing students' learning, this study can be useful in helping teachers improve their teaching and assessment methods during the pandemic.

2.   ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

Nowadays, there are three popular terms regarding assessment practice namely assessment of learning (AoL), assessment as learning (AaL), and assessment for learning (AfL). The former is concerned with the report of students' progress summatively. As such, the assessment function is to measure and judge students' knowledge of what has been learnt for a certain period. The second deals with students to constructively criticize, and reflect on their learning; adjustments, and identification for the next steps of learning. Different from the two types in question, AfL provides diagnostics information, from which a teacher can set a next better step or plan of teaching to promote student learning [11].

In addition, it is an essential component of the teaching-learning process and a part of educational practices carried out by students, teachers, and peers during the teaching-learning process. As such, it should be employed in such a way that it might enhance students learning achievement [6], [13], [14]. The AfL, which is also termed a formative assessment [5] has increasingly been regarded as an assessment type for enhancing student learning achievement [15]–[17].

In practice, the AfL is potentially employed through establishing learning direction and learning action [3], [4], [18]–[20]. Therefore, the involvement of classroom participants, teachers, learners, and peers, is demanded in its employment. Besides, clarifying and sharing learning intentions, classroom discussion, assignment or task, quiz, project, portfolio feedback are very essential in its practice. Thus, through such activities, it has the potential to know students' learning stages so as to make good decisions for better teaching action.

Pushing the feedback further, AfL is implemented through questioning activities during classroom interactions. The information about students' progress in learning which subsequently helps teacher to take future better action; can be obtained using questioning [2], [21]–[24]. To add on, questioning is of benefit to modify and adjust the teaching activity for a better learning goal. Questioning should be employed in such a way that it serves a function as guidance to reflect teaching-learning process and to be diagnostic information for a further better instructional process [25]–[28]. Thus, the function of teacher questioning is to evaluate the current conditions of students' learning. Taken together, AfL is carried out during teaching learning from which teachers can gather information to plan a future better teaching. It functions to determine students' current learning stage and plan to have future teaching actions.

3.   RESEARCH METHOD

Four English foreign language (EFL) teachers teaching at the secondary level were the subjects of the study. They were chosen while considering the knowledge and experiences they have been exposed for more than six years in teaching English. The participants in this study whose ages were 31 years old were yelled nom de plume for the sake of confidentiality. The participants were Nick (N), Tenat (T), Philip (P), and Ceicil (C) as seen in Table 1. The researcher used a convenience sampling technique to recruit the available participants to provide the maximum insight and understanding of the explored phenomenon [29]. Before recruiting the participants, the researcher consulted with the school board regarding the requirements for the participants. Having been informed of the participants, the researcher then approached them and explained the purpose of this present study. Then, all participants agreed and gave contributions to this study.

An audio recorder was utilized in gathering the data. The purpose was to know their teaching activities and was carried out three times. The recording was not to compare the subjects. Rather, both were conducted to have comprehensive data about the practice of AfL during the teaching-learning process. In this context, it

is not unclear that the researchers' presence was likely to disturb the classroom condition. Therefore, the researchers recorded with permission and brought no camera with them for the sake of being uneasy. Following the principles of conversation analysis (CA) the recorded data were analyzed. Finally, to strengthen the data, the researcher did semi-structured interviews with an interview guide that contained twelve questions about the practice of AfL. Each teacher was interviewed three times over three months, lasting for approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes. The interviews were carried out in the Indonesian language to minimize the anxiety and have the opportunity to manage the discourse during the interview.

Regarding the interview analysis, spiral strategy [30] was used. As such, the researcher enters with text or audiovisual materials and exits with an account or a narrative. It includes six steps. First, the researcher managed and organized data. In this regard, the researcher handled all Indonesian interviews to English versions and assembled all related documents dealing with AfL practices. Second, the researcher looked through and took notes important ideas. As such, the researcher carried on with reading and writing important notes of the transcripts and participants' teaching-learning artifacts. Third, the researcher told of and categorized codes into themes. Following content analysis of Krippendorff [31], the researcher analyzed transcriptions of the interviews. Fourth, the researcher evolved and assessed interpretations. In this stage, the researcher made a comparison of individual notes and codes as a researcher triangulation method to verify analysis for the sake of final themes. Fifth, the researcher indicated and pictured the data. Here, relevant excerpts were grasped to aid the narrative of the participants. The last was reckoning the findings. In this last stage, the researcher narrated the manuscript following the participants' experiences in practicing AfL.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
4.1. Results

To know the practice of AfL in the teaching-learning process, observation was carried out. Table 1 highlights the results of the observation and interview analysis. Data in Table 1 have proven that all participants practiced the AfL. However, it cannot be run smoothly as no instrument is used to assess students' work, except the second participant (teacher). The teachers required students to do the task, quiz, or presentation without providing feedback from which teachers might obtain data to decide further better action of teaching. Since questioning activity is also one of the AfL techniques, there is a necessity to observe participants' questions in their teaching activity which includes display, referential, clarification and request [32]. Table 2 summarizes their questions.

Table 1. The practice of assessment for learning

Teacher	Skills	Technique	Note
N	Speaking, reading, writing	Presentation, quiz, task	No instrument to assess
T	Speaking, reading, listening	Retelling story, presentation, quiz	Well-prepared instrument
P	Reading, listening, Writing	Written quiz, task	No instrument to assess
C	Reading, speaking, writing	Written quiz, project, presentation	No instrument to assess

Table 2. Observation of teacher questions

Q	T1			T2			T3			T4		
	N	R	NR	N	R	NR	N	R	NP	N	R	NR
D	22	5	17	23	4	19	19	6	13	23	3	20
Ref	8	3	5	11	4	7	7	2	4	6	2	4
C	4	0	4	7	2	5	7	1	6	4	2	2
Req	7	2	5	6	3	3	10	3	7	13	5	7
T	41	10	31	46	13	34	43	12	30	46	12	33

Note: Q: question, D: display, Ref: referential, C: clarification, Req: request, T1: teacher 1, T2: teacher 2, T3: teacher 3, T4: teacher 4, R: response, NR: no response, N: total number per type

The above data appear to confirm that display or closed questions was the most frequent question type employed by the teachers and respectively followed by referential, clarification, and request types. In this respect, the teachers raised display questions to check students' understanding and knowledge regarding the topics being discussed. Meanwhile, referential or open questions; the questions that the teachers do not know the answers appeared as a logical consequence of topic elaborations and the talk enlargement during the discourse. Clarification questions were raised to bringing about an explanation or redefinition of preceding contributions. The teacher clarified students' responses or some preceding contributions and to relating directions or behaviour. Finally, to ask the students to perform certain acts, the teacher employed request

questions. As the name suggests, these questions were concerned with performing actions or preparatory conditions of willingness, ability, or the possibility of performing actions as conventionalized in the English language. However, although the questions were raised, the participants got no responses to pave the way for future learning. Concerning the interview, Table 3 summarizes the overall findings from the participants. In this context, the researcher obtained three themes and 11 codes, and 41 excerpts.

Table 3. Theme, code, and excerpts

Theme(s)	Code(s)	Sample of the excerpt(s)
Knowledge of AfL	Having insufficient knowledge of AfL	"…what is AfL? What I have done is a summative test"
	Having sufficient knowledge of AfL	"…task, portfolio, project are techniques I have done. I did them during my teaching activity."
	Having insufficient knowledge to conduct AfL	"Overall, I prepared the task and required my students to do a project. But I do not understand how to score as I have no well-prepared instrument."
AfL practice	Positive thinking on	"Project is good. It helps my students to elaborate more on the topics. Small quizzes are done to know their understanding of the topics."
	Negative thinking	"…I am not sure my students can complete the project. Moreover, the questions raised in my teaching activity could not help me to judge my students' levels."
	So so	"…I do not pay attention to the assessment type. I just teach and do my duty as a teacher. Evaluate and assess my students work."
Obstacles and challenges	Students' condition	"I questioned my students many times. Though it is a simple question, they give no response at all. They were there and the camera is still not no active."
	Network	"…But, no voice. Probably, the network is bad or they do not know to do what they should do. It is tiring and wasting time to wait the responses."
	Teacher knowledge	"I heard the term. But what is about?"
	Government policy	"…then, we are confused what to do. It changes many times. We have not done and are still learning the previous one. Then, new curriculum is launched even the textbooks."
	Technological acceptance	"…integral to network, I and my students are still learning and adapting with technology. Most of the time are spent adapting ourselves rather than focusing on the material being discussed."

Integral to the above findings, the data have been narratively displayed in-depth to exemplify the common. This present study also comes up with sample excerpts from the participants to hold up the narrative. In the sample, the participants mingled the pronoun "I" and "we" to refer to their personal or collective. The participants (N, P, and C) informed that the network is a big challenge to implement AfL in their teaching activities. For example, the participants N and C explained:

"We ask our students to complete the tasks. Although there is no valid instruments, we are happy if they complete them on time. Sometimes, we do not return their works so as to give detailed corrections. However, we realize that providing tasks or projects helps us to know the extent of our students' learning." (N)

"…no time for us to prepare the instrument. We are pushed by the time. The curriculum and or the textbooks force us to complete the teaching material on time. Our target is the completion of the material. We know that Assessment for Learning (AfL) is good and helps us in teaching but the time is a big deal." (C)

This interview supports the above findings saying that the teachers implemented the AfL in their teaching activities. They confess that the purpose of AfL through projects, and quizzes are of benefit to see students' level of learning. Thus, such knowledge along with their positive thinking encourages them to conduct AfL in their teaching activities. However, they could not get proper feedback as they did not prepare well-constructed instruments. As such, it might affect their precise decision to diagnose students' current level of their learning. The teaching activity is more on topics-oriented and ignores the assessment procedure, particularly on instrument of assessment.

In addition, one participant claimed that AfL gives more advantages for him to diagnose students' current conditions of their learning. Though he is in doubt about the time of complementing the task or

presentation and whether it belongs to the principle of AfL (act, he prepared good instrument for the task in question). The participant T explained:

> "*I do not know whether the technique I have used belongs to Assessment for Learning (AfL) or not. But, I need an instrument to assess students' tasks, quizzes, or presentations during the teaching process. I do prepare it. Even though the students have limited time to finish them, I still do that.*" (T)

Interestingly, all participants claimed difficulty of the questioning activity. As one of the techniques of diagnosing students learning level in implementing AfL, questioning activity plays a vital role. By questioning, ideally, teachers get feedback on what they have done and of what action should be taken further during the teaching-learning process. Unfortunately, all the participants explained that their questioning provides no benefits. The internet network and technological acceptance for both teacher and students are the main factors. For example, the participants N, P, and T confessed:

> "*I questioned my students many times. Though it is a simple question, they give no response at all. They were there and the camera is still not active. But, no voice. Probably, the network is bad or they do not know to do what they should do. It is tiring and wastes the time.*" (N)

> "*Simple question provides no response. Yes/no question just needs a simple acknowledgment. To change the form into W-h questions, the situation might be getting worse.*" (P)

> "*I have an expectation that as I change my question into yes/no question or declarative with a final raise phrase, the students can give a response. As other forms need a complex and long answer, I have to reformulate my question into the simple one. I got nothing. It is very difficult to know their current condition regarding the topic I am explaining.*" (T)

4.2. Discussion

The AfL is recommended nowadays [10]–[12]. Since the online teaching-learning process appears to be a good alternative in this pandemic era, exploring such an assessment type is quite important. Nevertheless, previous research studies did not cope with this issue in much detail. For that reason, this present study aimed at exploring the implementation of the AfL in question in online teaching activities.

Based on the observation data, the researcher found that the participants have implemented the AfL by utilizing projects, quizzes, portfolios, and presentations. Although in fact, they confessed that the assessment in question is of benefit in their teaching, its implementation was still out of expectation. Their knowledge, as well as positive thinking, was not in line with their practice. It was found that three of them (participants N, P, and C) did not prepare instruments that should be used in assessing students learning progress. Consequently, they could not obtain data to diagnose students' current level of learning. These findings support the previous studies revealing that the teachers lack preparation in making instruments [33]. The use of instruments should be a definite requirement in assessment.

Moreover, in an overall context of instruction, four essential components are so-called standards of content namely competencies to teach, instructional plan, implementation of the instructional plan in question containing utilization of standards of the teaching-learning process, and assessment process. These four components are interrelated with what to teach as the vision and how to assess as quality assurance measures. In this context, assessment results should be informative feedback on stages previously done and valid data to decide further better action in teaching [34], [35]. As such, the assessment instrument should be constructed in such a way that it helps teachers to know students' current stage and take decisions for further teaching activities. Unfortunately, the three participants in question deviated from this course.

In addition, the results of the interview have confirmed that their target was only on topics completion as required by the curriculum. This supports the findings of researchers [9], [14] saying that teaching is much concerned with the mastery of instructional materials organized as topics. Teaching activity seems to complete a list of topics to teach and for students to learn. In this respect, they eventually damage measurement and evaluation. As a consequence, the quality of measurement and assessment is low. They are not able to uncover the reality of students in their learning so as to direct their further learning actions. This surely is not desirable.

Along this line of findings, the participants could not implement AfL due to the government's policy on curriculum including the textbooks from which assessment should refer. The Indonesian curriculum always varies from time to time without having any feedback from the field. Moreover, the government tends to generalize and construct the curriculum according to the interests and values of dominant groups in society while ignoring those of marginalized groups, which might cause inequality [36], [37]. Despite the fact the participants are still learning and or adapting to the previous curriculum, the newest one is launched and is

recommended to use. This is a huge problem in their assessment practice. This mirrors the findings of researchers [38]–[41] revealing that they are forced to follow such policy and have no voice to debate on it.

Pushing further, exploring questioning as an AfL tool should include the reflection of the learning goals in each stage. As such, the pattern of interaction (IRF) is insufficient to examine, rather goes beyond it. Teacher questions should provide an impact on students' understanding and should be critical in terms of directing them to higher learning levels. The responses given by students should mirror the level of their learning that subsequently help teachers to decide better future actions to bring them towards their learning goals.

However, data in this study as shown in Table 2 shows that teachers' questions could not help teachers to know students learning stages. In this study, teacher questions provide less responses and led teachers to encounter problems in examining the current stage of students learning. This is due to the fact the students could not give response to the posed questions. Furthermore, the teachers are difficult to take follow-up actions to direct students' learning goals. Most of the questions posed were answered by the teachers themselves which definitely limits students to expose thinking skills and leads them more teacher-dependent. This mirrors the findings of [1], [23] confirming that the students are very dependent on their teachers and they have no space to respond.

Furthermore, teacher questions could not provide feedback comprehensively. Theoretically, the teacher's feedback should include task self-level, self-regulation level, process, and task level [1]. Although those four levels should promote more effective learning, this current study found that teachers' feedback appeared none to those in question. Classroom interactions were made as a ritual and evaluations were less meaningful to facilitate learning and students' critical thinking. In this respect, teachers mostly followed plans on predetermined action and responded to the students' answers by simply saying right and wrong) as there were no good interactions occurred [23], [32].

In proportionate terms, the findings show that nearly most of the participants' questions are more on low-order questions than higher questions. This finding supports the previous studies [21], [42]–[45] which found that lower questions are mostly raised by the teachers. To add, the seemingly similarity result from the research is understandably bearing in mind that the students give no response due to students critical thinking, this current study found the technological acceptance and internet accessibility of both teacher and students, were the ones [46]–[51]. The collective problem faced by the teachers is having no answer for simple questions and or even they respond to them by themselves. In turn, there is no demand for them to ask high-order questions so as to help students think creatively and imaginatively. Briefly, the participants could not obtain data, diagnose students' current learning levels and were not able decide to take further teaching action as highlighted in the conception of AfL.

By and large, the implementation of AfL in Indonesia is still bumpy. On one side, teachers implement it through some techniques that meet the conception of the assessment in question. Meanwhile, on the other side, there are tricky ways to pass through. Teachers' knowledge and positive thinking toward the assessment did not come into their practice. The instruments were not well-prepared to assess students and to diagnose their current stage of learning. In addition, although there is an acknowledgment of its benefits, the technology acceptance and internet accessibility of both sides (teacher and students) are the central issues. Questioning activity during online classroom interactions was not able to give information about students learning levels. Therefore, the interrelation of content standards, instructional processes, and assessment is unquestionable and might not determine and direct learning progress. This bumpy practice is supported by the curriculum which varies from time to time. Teachers have to learn and adapt to the new curriculum so as to assess students. Thus, although it is an optimistic way of diagnosing students learning, it is an incomplete vision [52].

5. CONCLUSION

Dwelling on the finding of this study, it can be concluded that the employment of AfL in online classes during the pandemic of COVID-19 is bumpy. Sufficient knowledge is pivotal to implementing the assessment type in question. Besides, curriculum policy led the teachers to pay more to topic completion and less attention to assessment requirements. Integral to these, this present study showed surprisingly that both teachers and students still found it difficult to deal with technology tools in online classes. Therefore, less technology might not benefit the teachers to gain data from their questioning activity as gained no response from students. Then, the teachers could not diagnose the current stage of students learning and were not able to take further action in teaching.

However, this study has several limitations during its implementation. Firstly, this present study only focused on four participants that happened to implement AfL. Moreover, the participants were English teachers at the secondary level. Thus, how AfL is implemented at higher educational levels is unknown. Secondly, this

study had only observation, the participants' confessions during the interview, and documented data. Thus, future research studies should address these limitations to extend the literature on online class assessment activities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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