



Establishing Sustainable Assessment for Meaningful Learning of EFL in Trenggalek Vocational High Schools Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract. EFL teachers in vocational schools tend to face a common problem when teaching in class, including assessing their students' learning. In recent years, assessing EFL in vocational schools has mainly been in the form of summative assessment. Vocational students tend to lack motivation in learning EFL, resulting in a decrease in assessment development at the school. Other factors obstructing the reformation of the assessment are the lack of contextual and meaningfulness involved in the assessment; therefore, designing a reflective formative assessment is still minimal. Students cannot gain the expected benefit of learning EFL, and so they become far from the essence of learning communicative skills for their future careers. The idea of sustainable assessment, which combines several forms of assessments (assessment for and as learning) can enhance meaningful learning. However, there are some points to consider. This paper investigates how teachers perceive sustainable assessment practices in their schools. Data are collected through a questionnaire that targets EFL teachers in vocational high schools in Trenggalek, Indonesia, as respondents. Furthermore, the questionnaire questions consist of teachers' experiences in conducting assessments and opinions on sustainable assessment, including some aspects of the assessment development (such as content, orientation, approach, format, and procedure). The results will show how the teachers perceive the current assessment practices and compare them to sustainable assessment concepts. In the end, this paper can contribute to helping teachers develop adequate, sustainable assessments.

Keywords: EFL · Meaningful · Sustainable Assessment · Vocational School

1 Introduction

The obstacles to learning and teaching English in vocational schools (SMK) have been notorious among teachers and researchers, including those in Trenggalek. Learning loss, for instance, can occur due to intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and the impact lessens students' motivation and learning stability during the pandemic era [1]. Other factors can be seen from different perspectives of teachers, students, and others. Teachers tend to assume that vocational students are those who specifically set the goal to master

Table 1. Chung & Choi’s criteria of sustainable assessment

Criterion	Description
Content	Formative; focus on improving students’ self-regulation, language learning and use.
Orientation	Process-oriented
Approach	Diagnostic, reflective; assessment <i>for</i> and <i>as</i> learning
Format and procedure	Alternative, authentic
Evaluator	Teacher, students (self- and peer-assessment)

professional, practical skills in their preferred field [2]. In some schools, students may ignore the importance of learning a foreign language [3]. It complicates English teachers when they have to design adequate assessments. Conducting a formative test has been considered inefficient. Thus, the easy solution for teachers is to design a performance-based and scored-based summative assessment which unfortunately neglects to monitor the student’s learning process [4].

Sustainable assessment highlights the practice of assessment to maintain the materials being assessed to be continually useful and related to practices based on the student’s needs [5]. Combining several forms of assessment and techniques, it aims to support lifelong and contextual learning that eventually encourages learners to keep improving their language competencies [6]. Sustainable assessment is like an implementation of assessment for and as learning which records the students’ improvement and the learning processes along the learning period. Likewise, it involves the students assessing one’s learning improvement by self-assessment or peer assessment [7]. However, the ongoing model of assessment in Indonesian vocational high schools still refers to the performance-based summative and formative forms [4]. This made the students lose the connection between the essentials of learning a language and future careers. Therefore, this paper provides an initial overview of sustainable assessment development for EFL in vocational schools to engage students to learn English meaningfully.

Meaningful learning occurs when a learner perceives new facts and knowledge and then connects it to what already exists in the cognitive structure [8]. This means gaining knowledge without linking to another that we had before is not considered meaningful. Meaningfulness is associated with critical thinking because it helps our reasoning to comprehend the new input. In EFL contexts, meaningful learning is related to the language acquisition theories which believe that a learner’s existing knowledge would help them learn a new one [9]. The remaining task for schools and teachers is to make the implementation of the ideology tangible by promoting a sustainable assessment that can reflect the reality of the learning process and students’ conditions. Although teachers’ background does not contribute to assessment design, teachers’ knowledge and capability of approaching the students’ needs would affect the teachers’ choice of assessment techniques and forms that support meaningful learning. The main focus should be formative, authentic, and involve students. Chung & Choi’s criteria of sustainable assessment can be a practical reference for teachers [7] (Table 1).

Having seen the problems with EFL assessment and learning in SMK, this article focuses on the Trenggalek EFL teachers' perspectives on sustainable assessment. This article brings up the following research problems: teachers' perception and understanding, comparing the ideology to reality, and underlying factors that hinder practicing sustainable assessment in their classes.

2 Method

This research is qualitative. The data collection involved interviews with five EFL teachers in vocational high schools (SMK) in Trenggalek. The interviews obtained the teachers' perspectives on sustainable assessment to promote meaningful learning. The interview questions were developed on three topics: (1) general opinions on sustainable assessment, (2) teachers' assessment practices in comparison to sustainable assessment criteria (content, orientation, approach, format/procedure, and evaluator), and (3) obstacles when developing sustainable assessment. All information assembled through the data collection was not related to the schools or the teacher's educational background in particular.

3 Findings and Discussion

This section discloses different beliefs of Trenggalek EFL teachers on sustainable assessment. The teachers imply that it was not a familiar term to them. Before answering interview questions, they need more explanation about the characteristics of sustainable assessment. Although the interviewed teachers had given different answers and opinions, all interviewees agreed with the concept of sustainable assessment. Teachers 1, 3, and 4 believed that vocational high school students should recognize assessments as a part of the learning process, hence students can gain more advantages for their future careers in different job fields. This opinion is in line with the nature of the EFL subject for vocational high school as an ESP subject (English for Specific Purposes) [10]. For example, Teacher 2 confessed that English teachers in her school have to collaborate with other subject teachers to adjust English materials to students' needs. Teacher 5 said similar answers, though explained that whether the students would benefit from learning English depends on their career choice and determination. From the teachers' answers, it can be inferred that sustainable assessment can be advantageous when students have the exact learning goal that leads them to be self-determined [11].

The teachers confessed that sustainable assessment is beneficial for students. To reach sustainability, teachers' role as assessment developers is inevitably significant. Teachers' task is not only to create the required assessment tasks but also to share understanding with students that assessment is a way of learning [12]. In addition, Teachers 1 and 5 confessed that they had developed alternative and authentic assessments for their classes. However, when asked about how teachers assess the students, some of the interviewees (Teacher 2, teacher 3) stated that their assessment practices are yet to be categorized as sustainable assessment. They confessed that even though they had designed an ideal authentic assessment, the students would have thought it was a usual test they have to take for school grades. In other words, there have not been equal perceptions among students

about how assessments take part in a learning process. Both teachers then stated that they often make written tests that are less authentic [13]. Teacher 4 stated that assessing students authentically takes a longer time, which causes them to lose focus. In contrast, giving multiple-choice tests saved time and helped complete the learning objectives, despite the fact that it risks the learning scheme as it becomes less meaningful.

The teacher disclosed their assessment practices to compare to Chung & Choi's [7] sustainable assessment criteria. Table 2 displays each teacher's assessment practices. Teacher 1, 3, and 5 maintain their theoretical belief in sustainable assessment; here is why they wanted to apply the prototype framework of Kurikulum Merdeka which applies meaningful learning models. Before teaching, they give a pre-test as a diagnostic assessment to view students' readiness, background knowledge, and competence. Only teacher 1 added a non-cognitive assessment by asking students to write a paragraph about themselves in English. The teachers also tried to keep implementing authentic assessments despite the distance learning. They decided to apply alternative assessments which allowed them to design flexible assessment procedures to accommodate students' learning difficulties during the pandemic. For example, speaking tasks required students to make dialogues, or write on an online platform. The teachers also agreed that students should achieve more knowledge and reflection by doing assessments. Therefore, they designed assessments that can involve students' reflection. Reflective assessments were used in group presentations, question-answer sessions, and individual reflective writing. However, students sometimes felt reflective comments or peer review could harm other classmates' feelings because they would think receiving comments or critiques means that they have bad performance. Therefore, peer review is not very much adored by the teachers, and it is altered into peer questioning where the audience stimulates the performer's reflection by giving questions. The performer group then reviewed their performance before giving the answers. These activities happened in real classrooms during hybrid learning.

Teachers 2 and 4, however, confirmed that they had difficulties in designing authentic assessments. They decided to adjust the online assessment to be flexible in general as their students were not economically privileged. This, later on, caused offline assessments (in the classroom) fail to run efficiently because the students were too affected by learning loss. They tend to underestimate the learning process and assessments and neglect the concept of self-determination. The teachers realized that communicating the ideal assessments to those students takes too much time so they could not do it efficiently. Reflective assessments, student involvement, and process orientations were not applied successfully. This means teachers only have to give cognitive diagnostics assessments (pre-tests), formative tests, and summative tests which are still doable. They may not be able to see students' language competence improving, but surely the students achieve the minimum learning outcome.

The elaboration on teachers' practices shows that EFL teachers in Trenggalek are in between idealistic and paradoxical reality. Some of them had tried to comply with the ideal criteria of sustainable assessment as how it should be, for it was included in the newest framework. They believe that students have higher chances to experience meaningful learning as they can equip their vocational competence with English proficiency for their future careers. Some schools in Trenggalek placed English teachers into

Table 2. Teacher's assessment practices

Teacher	Content	Orientation	Approach	Format and procedure	Evaluator
T1	Diagnostic, formative, summative	process-oriented, outcome	Assessment <i>for & as</i> learning	Alternative, Authentic	Teacher, student
T2	Formative, summative	Product/skills	Assessment <i>of & for</i> learning	Alternative	Teacher
T3	Formative, summative	Process, product	Assessment <i>for & as</i> learning	Alternative	Teacher, student
T4	Formative, summative	Outcome	Assessment <i>of & for</i> learning	Alternative	Teacher
T5	Diagnostic, formative, summative	process-oriented, outcome	Assessment <i>for & as</i> learning	Authentic	Teacher, student

each department's (program keahliah) teacher team. This means that English should be taught as important as other vocational subjects, even connected to other subjects in the department to support meaningful learning. Unfortunately, some had not thought the same way; they decided to do what was practical and efficient.

At the same time, teachers face the reality that their students are not very eager to perceive assessment as a learning process. A teacher said that students often do not pay attention to English terms, or cheat on tests because they think writing in English is hard. That cheating in general can be affected by different factors. Wenzel & Reinhard [15] stated that cheating actions are caused by one's perception of a heavy task, which, in this context, is assessment. Perceiving tests and assessments as a 'difficult task' would burden the brain and thus trigger the fear of bad scores and stress/anxiety; therefore, cheating is a shortcut. Anxiety was most likely to disrupt comprehension in language learning [16]. When asked about this topic, teacher 5 assumed that both teacher and student should have a similar perception of learning and assessment. She thought that when students could not understand sustainable assessment as a learning process, the teacher should explain it to them more often. The teacher should push the students to get used to process-oriented activities. Therefore, the success of implementing assessment is so much related to how the teacher designs the whole teaching scheme from the theories to the teaching plan and strategies.

In addition to students' negative perception of assessments, students' lack of confidence and low motivation are the obstacles to gaining sustainability. All teachers agreed that Trenggalek students of SMK are more reluctant to show their potential compared to SMK students in bigger cities, or SMA students. Teacher 1 said students could not

compete in bigger competitions and are shy to perform a dialogue in front of their classmates. Shyness and anxiety signify low self-determination which causes low motivation. Shy students who could not perform the language very well, thus would feel difficult to reflect on or improve their communication skills. In line with research findings on low motivation, SMK students in other cities in Indonesia tend to affect their competence [12–14]. Eventually, the teacher could not assess their competence properly. If this is what happens in schools, teachers should reconsider the assessment techniques and procedures.

4 Conclusion

EFL teachers of SMK in Trenggalek agreed that sustainable assessment can be a useful assessment model for vocational high school students. As sustainable learning is formative, it does not mean that summative assessment should be neglected. The right proportion of summative and formative assessment can be ensured by developing authentic assessment procedures and tasks; reflections are also required. However, establishing a sustainable assessment is challenging according to teachers. They have to work on students' motivation and negative perceptions of assessments. It should be a new outlook for SMK EFL teachers to involve EFL communicative skills as one of the students' main capabilities after they graduate. In the post-pandemic era, it needs quite more than hard work for SMK teachers in Trenggalek to establish meaningful EFL learning. To nurture a positive mindset in learning and also to rebuild a sustainable learning model are what teachers must be concerned with.

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