Application of Formative Assessment in College English Teaching

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Abstract

A comprehensive, objective, scientific and accurate evaluation system is a key component in College English teaching. On the one hand, it helps the students to obtain feedback to adjust their learning strategies in order to improve their learning efficiency. On the other hand, it provides the teacher with information to better achieve the teaching goal and ensure the teaching quality. The formative assessment is in nature a procedural evaluation that aims to cover the whole growth and progress of a student in learning a specific course, to provide an accurate judgment on whether and to what extent the students have achieved their learning objectives from various aspects. It facilitates the effective monitoring of students' autonomous learning, and is particularly important in the college English teaching. This article makes an analysis on the characteristics of formative assessment, points out the principles in implementing formative evaluation and discusses the specific approaches to applying formative assessment in the college English teaching.

Key word: Formative and summative assessments; College English teaching; Application; Student-centered principle

1. FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Formative assessment is typically contrasted with summative assessment. Formative assessment helps to aid students in improving their learning process rather than place emphasis on the end result. Bloom (1988) has made it clear that the significant difference between the two kinds of evaluation lies in purpose. He further points out that the main purpose of formative observation is to determine the degree of a given learning task being mastered and to shed light on which part is mastered. It is not for the purpose of rating or ranking learners, but to help students and teachers to focus on how to make the necessary regulation to cope with the upcoming learning tasks effectively. Bloom mainly explores students' learning achievement evaluation, but its fundamental principle is also applicable to other aspects of education evaluation.

Formative assessment and summative assessment require different degrees of generalization on the evaluation results. Formative assessment is analytical and it does not require a high degree of generalization on the evaluated objectives while summative assessment is comprehensive and is conducted to obtain information about a high degree of generalization.

Summative assessment aims at rating. Its direct purpose is to make assessment of the educational effect and give judgment on good or poor, rating performance or accreditation. Summative evaluation is related to the accountability of teaching effectiveness and is used to provide evidence for individual decision making, education resources investment priority.

Formative assessment and summative assessment cover different phases in the process of education. Formative assessment points directly to the ongoing educational activities with the purpose of improving this educational

activity, therefore, it put emphasis on the process of evaluation and not always involve the whole educational activities. Summative evaluation focuses on the result of teaching, so it is an investigation of the whole course of educational activities. It is generally carried out at the end of the educational process. Formative Evaluations can be an ongoing process throughout the entire term of instruction. The advantage of a formative evaluation is that it allows the instructor to make adjustments to the course as it progresses. This process allows the teacher to be flexible in adding appropriate learning material or adjusting teaching methods in order to satisfy the students' needs.

In education scheme evaluation, formative assessment investigates social needs, education activities, the need for the participants in educational activities, feasibility, problems existing in the implication of educational activity to serve the purpose of improving the quality of teaching activities.

Formative assessment and summative assessment have different audience. Formative assessment is internal-orientated, whose references are to be provided to educators who are going in for ongoing educational activities. Summative evaluation has external orientation, evaluation report is handed over to management personnel who make policies of all levels, mainly as reference for them to make policies or take administrative measures. This distinction between formative assessment and summative assessment determines the external characteristics of these two kinds of evaluation activities: evaluators of formative assessment and participants of learning activities are dependent on each other. Summative evaluators, however, to a certain extent, maintain their independence. This independent identity constitutes the basis for them to implement the assessment with an objective attitude.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Feedback is the core function of the formative assessment. What it usually focuses on is the students' mastery of the detailed content, rather than a simple test score or whether students have reached a certain standard. Good feedback can provide students with high quality guidance and cultivate their self-assessment ability in learning. It encourages communication and dialogue between teachers and peers about learning content and methods. It also facilitates students to build up self-esteem and positive learning motivational belief. Most important of all, it provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance in terms of teaching and learning. According to James and Harlen (1997), formative assessment has the following features:

a) Formative assessment is virtually part of the teaching practice, aiming to promote teaching and learning. Without formative assessment, both teaching and learning will lack vitality and stimulation. It enables the teacher and students to take appropriate corrective measures and make teaching a "self correcting system".

b) Formative assessment requires that learners should play a leading role in the learning activity. They are supposed to play an active and autonomous part in their own learning and be responsible for their performance and achievements. Successful students ought to be aware of their merits and shortcomings, and know how to overcome their weakness and give full play to their strength.

c) This assessment is not absolutely criterion-referenced. Each individual's progress, the effort he has made, the attitude he takes towards the study and other aspects of learning that may be unspecified in the curricula requirement is all taken into consideration. When evaluating learning habits, we pay attention to the performance in listening to the teacher in class, the habit of positive thinking in class, review after class to consolidate the habit, the habit of using English after class, homework writing habits, etc. Encouraged and pushed by the classmates and the tea.cher, the students' good habits are gradually formed. Therefore, the evaluation of learning attitude and learning habit is an important task of formative assessment.

3. PRINCIPLES IN IMPLEMENTING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

3.1 Student-Centered Principle

The object of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way. Students are the object to be assessed. The purpose of the assessment is to improve the students' learning efficiency. Students are supposed to actively participate in the activity, i.e. student self-evaluation and peer assessment. This means that students are involved in deciding how to demonstrate their learning. Developing assessment that supports learning and motivation is essential to the success of student-centered approaches.

3.2 Combination of Qualitative Assessment and Quantitative Assessment

Summative assessment focuses on the quantity and extent of students' knowledge, while a single test result, like a final-term exam score is sometimes inadequate to accurately reflect the student 's situation in language learning. While in formative assessment, students' attitude, hard-working, learning strategy and progress are all taken into account, thus may provide a more comprehensive appraisal to students' performance. Due to the complexity of language ability assessment, the mixed

use of qualitative assessment and quantitative assessment is particularly necessary in language teaching.

3.3 Diverse In-Process Means of Assessment

Diverse means of assessment include an oral test, written task, in-class performance, on-line self learning data, extracurricular activity, questionnaires, standard testing, team competitions and activity records. Formative assessment aims to make an appraisal both on students' achievement and progress in mastering basic knowledge and skills and their attitude towards learning activity. It also serves to provide feedback on the effectiveness of their learning strategies.

3.4 Backwash Effects on Teaching

The result of the formative assessment will produce beneficial backwash effect on language teaching. Teachers are supposed to make full use of the result of the formative assessment to reflect on their own teaching .They should always be alert of the effectiveness of their teaching method and adjust them to better meet the students' needs. Formative assessment allows teachers' teaching process to be subjected to observation, evaluation and self-supervision, thus contributing to the enhancement of their teaching effectiveness.

4. APPLICATION OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING

4.1 Self-Assessment

Self-assessment means that college students have the ability to make evaluation on their own performance in the process of language learning. For example, they may ask questions like whether they are active in class in answering questions or getting involved in group discussion; how well they do in finishing their assignment; whether they pay enough attention to pronunciation and intonation; Are they fluent enough in reading texts? Are they familiar with the new words in the context? Are they better at guessing the meanings of new words through the context than before without looking up the dictionary every time? Are the methods used in language learning as efficient as expected? What progress have they made? Which learning strategies remain to be employed and which ones ought to be discarded? In making self-evaluation, they are expected to raise the awareness that

they should be responsible for their learning, rather than the teacher.

4.2 Peer Assessment

Peer assessment is the evaluation made among learners themselves. Students are divided into several small groups. Each member of the group is responsible to score other partners according to certain evaluation criteria. For instance, each evaluator is asked to write comment on a certain student's learning behavior, pointing out his or her merits and meanwhile offers advice for improvement. And accordingly, the assessed student is supposed to reflect on peers' opinion and work out a plan of his own for improvement. In order to make the students get familiar with this evaluation approach, the teacher should work as a role model first. By experiencing this peer assessment, students get to fully understand the requirement of the teacher and the course, which will better guide their learning effort. The most valuable aspect of this process lies in the opportunity to learn from each other and trust and cooperate with partners. Fair, friendly discussions carried out among peers, can eliminate their worries and pressure in language learning and make them more self-confident.

4.3 Teacher Assessment

Teacher assessment is the most important form of formative evaluation. A teacher can make judgment on a student's performance in various ways. The most frequently used is assignment, including written work, oral assignment, comprehensive reading assignment and presentation assignment。Both in-class tasks and out-of-class assignment are to be counted. Besides, there are also short term work and long term project for the learners to accomplish. There is also the division of individual assignment and group work. Various forms of tests can be employed to inspect and supervise students' achievement. These tests and quizzes serve to diagnose and regulate students' learning strategies. Regular, flexible tests provide reliable evidence to examine the development of students' learning abilities. Learning attitude and in-class behavior are another aspect of formative assessment. In the completion of a learning task or series of tasks, students demonstrate different effort and enthusiasm towards learning activity which is to a great extent relevant to their learning achievement. This kind of evaluation requires that the teacher observes closely the students' state of mind, that is, whether they are willing to get involved, whether they are attentive in learning.

Table 1
Teacher Assessment Criteria

Excellent	Being able to master all the skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), fully meet the requirements of the course
Good	Being able to master three-quarters of the skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), liable to achieve the teaching goals
Fair	Acquiring two-thirds of the compulsory skills, basically meet the requirements of the course, more effort required
Poor	Not being able to master half of the required skills, fail to attain the requirement of the teacher, guidance required to regulate learning methods and plan

4.4 Quantitative Evaluation

For quantitative assessment of the learners, students need to actively participate in the learning activity. Questions are often designed for the students to answer to gather specific information rather than a general opinion about the course in this type of evaluation. The students can do this type of performance evaluation throughout the teaching semester or just at the end of the course.

4.5 Qualitative Evaluation

A qualitative evaluation is designed to assess the quality of the students' performance. This type of evaluation generally only works if the teacher is conducting the evaluation throughout the course work. Not only does the teacher want the students' opinion on how they feel about comprehending the coursework but he also wants to make assessment on the quality of work that is submitted. This type of student performance evaluation is more based on content and will be less affected by class size.

4.6 In-Class Assessment

Successful students are inevitably active learners in class. They show much willingness and interest even enthusiasm in the language learning process. And their active involvement in learning activities in class will in turn enhance their learning efficiency and improve their learning achievement. Teachers should always encourage students to take an active part in learning activity by commenting, scoring and keeping a record of students' classroom activity and study results or even by conducting interviews or hold meetings to discuss them in classroom performance. Oral English test, as a most typical subjective language test, is an effective and most often used means in checking students' language study in class.

4.7 Extracurricular Activity Assessment

Learning a foreign language takes much time and effort. Therefore, only spending time learning in class is far from attaining the goal of mastering a foreign language. Time and effort spent out of the classroom is vital and necessary. Assessment on learners' out-of-class performance constitutes an integral part of the overall effort of a student in learning language. Extracurricular activities are complementary forms of classroom teaching. It is the complement and extension of classroom teaching .It may take such forms as online self-learning, on-line communication in English, English interest group, English corner, English evening, spoken English competition, translation competition, English song competition, English speech, English short-play. These forms aim to stimulate students' interest in learning English and to improve students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. They also contribute to build self-confidence in learning English, to form individual effective learning strategies, to develop good study habits and to provide opportunities for them to use English in expressing themselves.

4.8 Setting Up Learning Portfolio

In the beginning of each semester, teachers should set about establishing learning record for each student in his class. The purpose of this process lies in making a record of each student's strengths and weaknesses. It may include the following items: difficulties for each student, strategies and advice to overcome these problems; test records of different periods; learning tasks done by students including their reading tasks, writing composition, translation work, audio record, video materials they make, presentation they make in class, attitude and performance in class and on-line self-learning data. These records provide the students with evidence and material to reflect on the effectiveness of their own learning process and progress. Teachers should not only be the organizer in class, but also a guider in language learning activity, and most importantly, the one to motivate to learn. Motivation comes from both proper praise and certain kinds of punishment. Favorable comment on performance in class includes oral praise, prize awarding, performance ranking. On the contrary, negative attitude and behavior ought to get criticized. Appropriate evaluation functions to help students arouse their interest, establish sense of achievement. It aims to motivate, encourage and promote their language learning.

4.9 Students' Assessment on Teaching

Formative assessment also includes students' feedback and grading on teaching. In accordance with modern need analysis theory, students' assessment on teaching is another effective approach to investigate and analyze students' practical needs in learning. Students' evaluation is an important way for teachers to assess the effectiveness of their instruction. Teachers should first determine what information they want to gather from their students' evaluations. By setting goals for the information to be gathered from the students' evaluations, the teacher will be able to better tailor his class to the learning style of the students. The following chart serves as an example of the items students may evaluate on a teacher, which indicates that teachers' attitudes, approaches and methods are all taken into account when being evaluated.

Table 2
Examples of Student Assessment on Teaching

ID	Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Tend to agree
1	The teacher generated enthusiasm about the subject	3	2	1
2	The teacher encouraged the students to participate	3	2	1
3	The teacher seemed well prepared for each session	3	2	1
4	The teacher presented in an interesting way.	3	2	1
5	The teacher gave specific help on ways to improve.	3	2	1
6	Teacher spoke clearly, at the right speed	3	2	1

CONCLUSION

Formative assessment is more valuable in daily teaching to adapt to the needs of the students. In the process of formative assessment teachers can monitor students' progress, and modify the instruction accordingly. While the students, by getting feedback from their peers as well as the teacher, can monitor their own learning process. In language teaching and learning, formative assessment focuses on the process, which describes the ongoing situation of the students' language study. Students are provided with opportunities to get involved in modifying and planning the upcoming classes. In consequence, their autonomy in language learning is motivated and their awareness of using effective learning strategy is raised. Evaluation should also include that of the teachers, i.e., the assessment of their teaching processes and effects. In addition to teachers' attitudes, approaches, and methods, the content and organization of their curricula and the teaching effectiveness should also be considered.

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