

Formative Assessment in English Learning and Teaching: An Instrumental Tool for Students and Teachers

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Abstract

The National English Curriculum Standards for General High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revised) emphasizes that teaching assessment should be carried out throughout the teaching process and be reflected in all aspects of teaching practice, including the process of collecting information through multiple channels, as well as various types of assessment on teaching practice. Assessment plays a crucial role as the last part of the teaching and learning process. Starting from the characteristics and role of formative assessment, this paper excavates the shortcomings of formative assessment in practice and put forward some feasible suggestions.

Keywords

Formative Assessment; English Teaching; English Learning; Assessment for Learning.

1. Introduction

The National English Curriculum Standards for General High Schools (2017 Edition, 2020 Revised) prescribes that teaching assessment reflecting the core competence of the English subject should be based on formative assessment and supplemented by summative assessment. The assessment should focus on the diversity of assessment subjects, the diversity of assessment forms and the comprehensiveness of assessment contents. The results of assessment should be able to comprehensively reflect the development of students' core competence in English and the level they have reached, fulfill the functions of motivation and promotion of learning, and have a positive impact on English teaching and learning as well. Promote the continuous development and improvement of the English curriculum.

Among the many assessment methods, formative assessment has attracted much attention not only because of the positive role it can play in the teaching process, but also because formative assessment can play an important role in guiding students' learning and teachers' teaching. It can be seen that formative assessment runs through the entire English teaching and learning process and plays a vital role in high school English classroom. It is one of the development trends of modern assessment in education. In recent years, the research focus of the testing academia is shifting from Assessment of Learning to Assessment for Learning, from a summative assessment based on examinations as the main form and a score-based approach to a formative assessment that tracks the learning process and focuses on teaching assessment.

2. Definition of Formative Assessment

The concept of formative assessment was first proposed by Scriven (1967) in the United States when talking about curriculum reform. At that time, assessment was mainly used to develop curriculum. In the process of preparing a new curriculum plan and in the later experiments on this curriculum plan. A systematic assessment is required to obtain assessment information, so as to modify and improve the new curriculum plan. The main purpose is to obtain assessment

information to promote the completion of the new curriculum plan. But Scriven did not give an exact definition. Later based on his thinking and understanding, the researcher conducted in-depth discussions and research. The American educator Bloom (1981) applied the concept of formative assessment to education and teaching assessment practice for the first time. He believed that formative assessment is an assessment to promote students' development and improve teachers' teaching. From this, it can be concluded that formative assessment is to provide teachers and students with teaching and learning assessment information so as to improve teaching and promote students' learning.

Black & William (1998) defined a formative assessment in a broad sense. They believed that formative assessment should include all activities of teachers and students that can collect learning information and can diagnostically regulate teaching and learning. Chen Yukun (1999) believed that formative assessment should evaluate the education plan or make plans in advance, formative assessment can find problems in educational activities and provide assessment information to improve the assessment of educational activities. Chen Shaohong (2006) proposed that formative assessment focuses on the learning process and attempts to improve learning results by improving the learning process. In addition to evaluating quantifiable aspects such as knowledge and skills, it is more suitable for evaluating qualities such as interests, attitudes, strategies and spirit of cooperation. The assessment results are mostly expressed in the form of grades and comments. It is often conducted in an open, relaxed, friendly and informal environment, which is a low anxiety assessment method. It can be said that formative assessment is both an assessment method and a learning method.

3. Features of Formative Assessment

To maximize the usefulness of formative assessment we need to understand its characteristics.

3.1. Student-centered

Formative assessment is student-centered and aims to promote students' development. The application of formative assessment in the classroom is essentially to make the students become masters and develop their self-management skills. In this process, formative assessment attaches importance to the students' learning process and provides timely assessment to teachers to adjust teaching methods and plans. Formative assessment not only has the effect on improving the teaching methods of teachers, but it can tap the potential of students, promote the intelligent development of the students and improve students' learning. In the formative assessment system, the most concerned issue for educators is what students need. The role of students has been greatly enhanced, and all educational activities must target students' development.

3.2. Diversity

The diversity of formative assessment is reflected in the diversity of assessment subjects, the diversity of assessment methods and the flexibility of assessment criteria. The diversity of assessment subjects means that not only teachers and students participate in the assessment, but parents and instructors also participate in the assessment. Teacher assessment still plays an important role, but it is no longer the only assessment, the students have become the subject of the assessment. Formative assessment can build interactive assessment systems for students, teachers, parents, managers, communities and experts and use multi-channel assessment to promote students' development. Formative assessment obtains students' learning status through various methods. In addition to traditional tests, formative assessment can be used to keep abreast of students' learning through classroom questions, classroom observations and weekly diaries. Formative assessment is scientific and operable.

3.3. Dynamic Assessment Process

Formative assessment is a dynamic assessment process. It is a systematic activity used in the classroom teaching process. To help students understand themselves, it pays attention not only to results, but also to their growth and development. On the one hand, it can summarize the teaching situation of the previous stage, summarize the experience, find the problems and correct the learning. On the other hand, it can provide useful information for the next stage of teaching and help to improve teachers' teaching and students' learning.

4. Functions of Formative Assessment

Zhou Weiyong (2002) pointed out that assessment has three basic functions:

Firstly, formative assessment can promote development, including promoting the development of students, teachers and schools. Formative assessment can effectively diagnose problems in educational practice and provide effective assessment to enhance the development of the students, teachers and schools. This feature is further subdivided into guidance, adjustments, incentives, reflections and recording capabilities. Compared with educational goals, assessment can guide education activities more directly. In order to facilitate assessment, the educational objectives must be split into components. For example, English language skills are composed of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Only by conducting a target assessment of each component's skills can the teacher or school make a correct judgment and make further work decisions.

Obviously, there are various problems in English learning. Formative assessment tells the teacher what the student needs to learn. It diagnoses problems, analyzes problems and provides solutions. Some problems are internal, and others are external. Internal issues are closely related to the student's mental state. while external issues involve the educational environment. Internal problems are more difficult to resolve due to their complexity. Once the assessment from the previous phase of learning is obtained, teachers and students can adjust their teaching and learning. Assessment allows them to recognize their own gains and losses, and then adjust accordingly to promote their own development. In daily teaching activities, it is necessary for teachers and students to reflect on all behaviors and activities (Pan Mingwei et al., 2019). Introspection helps to form a rational and reasonable next-stage teaching plan. The results of the reflection can help the relevant personnel to carry out further introspection. Introspection can be done at any time, either independently or together. Teachers and students will benefit greatly if they turn reflection into a regular activity.

Secondly, formative assessment can identify the current level of students. Education is a purposeful activity and the realization of educational goals is an eternal concern. Formative assessment makes it possible to judge educational goals. In the judging process, the assessment can identify how the educational goals are consistent with the various indicators. For example, in classroom practice, the assessment must distinguish students between good students, average students and poor students in order to reorganize anew class or adopt a different approach.

Formative assessment has different priorities for these three functions. Formative assessment emphasizes students' ability and motivation, develops students' internal learning motivation, promotes students' self-management learning and plays an increasingly important role in improving students' learning. They can also improve the learning atmosphere by enhancing mutual trust and cooperation between teachers and students (Liu Jianda, 2019).

All in all, the rigorous identification and selection functions are fading, but they have their own reasons for continued existence. The solution is to integrate as much as possible into formative assessment and become an integral part of the latter. On this basis, it is possible to make fair, reasonable and comprehensive conclusions about the future of the students.

It is conducive to improving students' learning confidence. In college English teaching, teachers can discover students' English potential and promote students' in-depth learning by adopting formative assessment. In traditional teaching, the mid-term and final exams are mainly adopted to test and evaluate students' learning achievements through their examination results. This assessment method is very one-sided and cannot solve the problems students have in their ordinary learning, which is not conducive to teachers' guidance of students, thus making students' problems more and more, causing the emergence of students in difficulty and triggering the problem of polarization (Zhang Jianzhong, 2016). In the actual teaching, by using formative assessment, teachers can make comprehensive assessment of students through the exercises of each unit or by assigning homework to better understand students' daily learning and solve the problems they have in learning, thus improving students' learning efficiency. By using formative assessment methods, students' classroom status can be improved. And by guiding students to self-evaluate, teachers can make students better understand their own learning situation and learn from the strengths of other students at the same time, which has the effect of complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses, and can also stimulate students' sense of competition, cultivate their sense of time and classroom ownership, and equip them with higher independent learning ability and the ability to evaluate others, thus making them the masters of classroom learning and allowing them to develop good learning and thinking habits.

5. Problems of Formative Assessment in English Teaching

Despite the many advantages of formative assessment as described above, there are some problems in practice.

a) Lack of Theoretical Knowledge about Formative Assessment of Teachers

As the main implementers and participants of formative assessment, the comprehensive quality of the English teachers determines whether formative assessment can be successfully implemented in the English classroom. Based on the results of the interviews, all nine English teachers supported the use of formative assessment to evaluate students. The recognition of the positive effects of formative assessment is an important prerequisite for its implementation (Li Xiangqing, 2019). However, teachers indicated that they had only a general understanding of formative assessment, did not receive professional training related to this method, and lacked theoretical knowledge about formative assessment.

It can be seen that teachers themselves are also aware of the lack of theoretical knowledge about formative assessment and are willing to receive professional training to improve themselves and update their knowledge in order to better implement.

B) The Overly Generalized Assessment in Formative Assessment

Assessment in formative assessment is primarily provided during the teaching and learning process and it is in various forms. The main purpose of assessment is to deliver valuable and actionable information in time, so that teachers and students can identify problems and make adjustments in the teaching and learning process. According to Li Ying & Huang Yanming (2002), assessment includes verbal assessment and written assessment. And written assessment includes blackboard assessment, exercise assessment, and homework assessment. In the actual investigation, teachers made more use of exercise assessment and homework assessment after class, but the assessment was mainly in the form of scores and grades.

Interaction-based formative assessment requires teachers to have the ability to provide students with effective assessment when they need it. Although assessment in the form of scores and grades is relatively efficient, it is too general to provide students with targeted and specific guidance. Besides, students tend to pay more attention to their scores or grades. The purpose to help students identify problems and adjust in the learning process cannot be fully

realized. Compared with the formative assessment described in the National English Curriculum Standards for General High Schools, there is a gap in using descriptive comments to play the incentive and adjustment role of assessment.

6. Suggestions for Schools and Teachers

Formative assessment will encounter many problems in the process of concrete implementation. Therefore, education authorities and school administration departments must work together with front-line teachers to listen to the difficulties they encountered in teaching and help solve them.

6.1. For School Management Departments

Regularly organize teachers for formative assessment related training. Regarding the expansion and renewal of teachers' knowledge and improvement of teachers' theoretical level as a major matter, we regularly organize English training courses for Senior High School English teachers to formal normal universities. The education administration and school management part should enrich the English teachers in the school, appropriately expand Senior High School English teacher teams to ensure that the teachers carry out teaching with sufficient energy, and fully implement the formative assessment in the teaching.

School management departments should work together with front-line teachers to listen to the difficulties they encounter in teaching and help to solve these difficulties and regularly organize teachers to conduct training related to formative assessment. At the same time, the school management department should appropriately expand English teachers to ensure that there are enough English teachers to carry out teaching job.

6.2. For Teachers

As a link between students, parents and society, teachers' performance in the implementation of formative assessment will directly affect the progress of the entire assessment system (Yang Manzhen & Liu Jianda, 2019). Teachers should not only pay attention to students' language learning, but also focus on the progress of students in emotional attitudes, learning strategies and learning habits. Teachers should also pay attention to the differences of students. Every student has his own strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, when carrying out formative assessment activities, teachers should analyze students' individual differences, learning styles, intelligent potentials and characteristics, so that students can achieve results and gain confidence by participating in various assessment activities.

In the minds of students, teacher assessment plays an important role. If used well, it is a good course resource, which is contagious and appealing to students. However, improper handling may make the assessment unfair and may hurt students' self-esteem and self-confidence. Therefore, teachers should be aware of their key role in the formative assessment process. As a link between students, parents and society, the performance of teachers in the assessment implementation process will directly affect the impact and promotion of the entire assessment system in society. Therefore, as an English teacher, only when he or she realizes the importance of himself or herself in the assessment process, can he or she implement formative assessment seriously with a positive attitude.

The teaching concept of Senior High School English teachers needs to be updated, and new educational teaching concepts and theoretical knowledge should be learned and absorbed. Teachers should give play to their initiative and enhance the learning of assessment knowledge. In the process of practice, they should continuously internalize and improve the assessment ability. There is a lot of knowledge about assessment, teachers must first understand the purpose of assessment, and choose the appropriate assessment method according to the assessment goals. Under the guidance of scientific and systematic knowledge, English teachers

continue to practice in actual teaching, and finally they can acquire appropriate assessment skills.

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