

Formative Assessment Strategies and the Development of Meta-cognition in a University EFL Composition Course

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Formative Assessment Strategies and the Development of Meta-cognition in a University EFL Composition Course

大学英作文クラスにおける形成的評価方法とメタ認知の発達

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概 要

本論文では、外国語教員が大学の作文クラスにおいて形成的評価を行なう際に用いるいくつかの方策について考察する。本論文ではまた、従来の総括的評価という形式に関わる難点も検討する。評価実施に関する今日の文献を綿密に分析すれば、形成的評価が外国語の授業における学生のメタ認知と深い理解にとって有力かつ魅力的な性質をもつことが明らかになる。付録には、大学レベルのEFL英作文クラスにおける形成的評価を実施するための大枠を規定する簡潔な実行計画を含む。

Abstract

This paper will examine several strategies foreign language educators can employ to implement formative assessment practices in a university composition course. The paper will also explore the difficulties surrounding traditional forms of summative assessment. A careful analysis of the current literature on assessment will illuminate the powerful and engaging nature of formative assessment for student meta-cognition and deep understanding in a foreign language classroom. The appendix includes a concise action plan that provides a general framework for implementing formative assessment in an English as a Foreign Language university level composition course.

Deep understanding must be the goal of any educational endeavor (Earl, 2003). Foreign language (FL) classes in a university setting present an excellent opportunity to achieve this goal. FL composition courses (tertiary level) are not bound by the direct instructional modes of teaching that permeate most university settings. Current FL practitioners are encouraged to combine traditional form focused teaching with communicative approaches. Effective educators must continually coach, instruct, and assess students in order to ensure that learners are in fact achieving the learning objectives. A summative test at the end of the course or unit does not effectively measure deep understanding of a skill or concept (Earl, 2003).

Daily in-class formative assessment has the potential to develop learner meta-cognitive abilities. This paper will review the current literature regarding formative and summative assessment and its potential to increase one's capacity for learning. Specific formative assessment strategies and their relevance to FL composition will be examined. The manifest

purpose of assessment must be to enhance student learning in the classroom on a daily basis; a simple yet unrealized concept.

Formative assessment versus summative assessment

Educators' perceptions of assessment are often based on their own assessment experiences. The analogy of child rearing can be applied. Parents raise their children in the same manner they were raised - similar rules, interactions, and consequences for specific behaviour. Educators will often repeat similar assessment procedures that they encountered as students. Furthermore, educators are the students who succeeded on tests throughout their lives. They have little empathy for those who do not succeed on summative tests. Summative assessment is based on formal testing at the end of a unit, term, or school year. Students are compared with one another with the teacher being the key assessor (Earl, 2003). As Earl asserts, summative assessment is an *assessment of learning*.

Formative assessment focuses on assessing daily classroom activities to improve the quality of learning. Most effective teachers use formative assessment informally without being explicitly aware of it. *Assessment for learning* uses daily student in-class assessment to make instructional decisions (Earl, 2003). Students refer to performance based standards or expectations to close the gap between what they know and what they need to know (Earl, 2003). In *assessment as learning*, students move towards a self-regulated learning style (Black *et al*, 2003). Students are expected to self-monitor their own learning and refer to mutually negotiated personal goals and performance based standards in order to assess their mastery of a given skill or concept (Earl, 2003). The key assessment figure in this style of assessment is the student himself (Earl, 2003). It is important to note that each style of assessment is important. Summative assessment does have useful purposes. For example, reporting to parents and the community about student achievement. However, an over reliance on summative assessment has been prevalent in most educational institutions throughout the world and a greater balance between formative and summative assessment must be achieved.

Summative assessment and Learning

Stiggins' (2004) analysis of assessment as a school improvement tool illuminates the dissonance between the summative assessment and learning in contemporary society. Stiggins (2004) disparages the commonly held belief that standardized tests are good for all learners because they serve to motivate students. He notes that learners with a poor academic record often give up when the standards are heightened (Stiggins, 2004). Thus, without effective classroom assessment and support, low achieving individuals will give up in the face of high-pressure summative assessment tests (Stiggins, 2004). The most promising aspect of formative assessment is the evidence that it substantially aids lower performing students (Black, 1998). If an educator can improve the achievement of low achieving learners, a significant

improvement in the overall learning community will occur. This finding should spurn educators to carefully reconsider their daily assessment practices.

Summative assessment in Japan

Current EFL assessment in Japan is based primarily on summative assessment. Traditionally, summative assessment has been used to sort and place students into suitable vocations (Stiggins, 2004). At all levels of Japanese education, summative assessment is a deeply entrenched tradition. From the strenuous university entry exam progress to the vastly complicated drivers license qualification process, taking a test to get a license is critically important in Japanese society. I would suggest that the Japanese are among the most heavily tested people in the world. This tradition has stemmed from the top-down external accountability pressures exerted by MEXT and the competition to enter university.

Assessment Focus Areas

Black *et al.*, (2003) identified four major assessment areas that demonstrate potential to promote deep understanding. These areas include: feedback, questioning, sharing criteria with learners, and self-assessment (Black *et al.*, 2004). Educators must slowly adjust learner perceptions of assessment in order to facilitate a smooth transition to formative assessment. Earl (2003) notes that students often do not want to engage in their learning; they take the easy route and limit their intellectual tension. As a result, it is a challenge for educators to implement formative assessment. In Black *et al.*, (2003), high school teachers of English, math, and science were encouraged to focus on two areas for their assessment action plan. A focus on two assessment focus areas can allow one to manage the implementation process more effectively (Black *et al.*, 2003).

Feedback - Comment-only marking

Imagine a student examining a sixty percent mark on a writing assignment. If the majority of her classmates received a sixty percent, perhaps she will be satisfied. Conversely, if she received the lowest mark in the class, great embarrassment and loss of confidence may ensue. Students see finality in a large red percentage score or letter grade written on their paper. The intellectual tension often recedes during the handing back of tests or assignments as students frantically look for their mark and compare with other students. To facilitate deep learning, students should be trying to understand how they can improve the gap between what they know and what they need to know (Black, 1998). It is the educator's challenge to maintain the intellectual tension in the classroom when providing feedback. Comment-only marking is a means to accomplish this goal.

FL learners make infinite mistakes in the writing process - it is critical to learn from these repeated mistakes. The importance lies in the meta-cognitive reflection and teacher-student

learning dialogue that is created. Comment-only marking is helpful in developing rapport and a learning dialogue between the teacher and student. Learners with inquiries about the comments are encouraged to discuss these questions with the teacher. These informal learning discussions may be conducted during instructional time or non-instructional time (office hours). It presents a great opportunity to build teacher and student communication in the target language: an important consideration in any foreign language class.

An aid to the implementation of comment-only marking is the creation of a course comment lexicon. The educator must create a feedback lexicon that lists the potential comments (Black, 2003). Learners must then internalize the lexicon so they can effectively understand the teacher's comments. It may be helpful to produce such a lexicon as a class where learners are working together with the teacher to develop class goals and construct their own schema regarding the types of feedback they can expect to receive. The comments must be specific and coherent to the learner in order to be effective (Black, 2003).

Self assessment and Shared Criteria with Learners

Student self-assessment during EFL composition lessons is a valuable tool for increasing student motivation, reviewing learning objectives, and ensuring that students use meta-cognitive strategies. Black (1998, p.6) asserted: "...if formative assessment is to be productive, pupils should be trained in self assessment so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to achieve" (p. 6).

Self-assessment must always contain a cognitive component. The cognitive component may be based on performance-based standards (refer to appendix 2) that both the learner and teacher must have the ability to use. FL practitioners may use a firmly established performance-based standard (PBS) or they may create their own as a class, which serves to build the skill and confidence of the learning community. Halbert and Kaser (2002) suggest a pattern where educators share criteria and have the learners add or construct new criteria (PBS) and then compare that with the teacher's criteria. This procedure helps learners understand teacher language more effectively (Halbert and Kaser, 2002). In an FL setting, comprehension can be developed on multiple levels. Initially, the learners will come to understand the basic meaning of the PBS. When this has been accomplished, learners can begin to understand the implications of the PBS and how it can help them narrow the gap between what they know and what they need to learn.

Black *et al.*, (2003) suggested implementing peer-assessment as a precursor to self-assessment. Peer assessment motivates students to work carefully, as a peer in the class will be examining their work (Black *et al.*, 2003). It also allows students to share common language regarding class work (Black *et al.*, 2003). This may be particularly effective in a high-level mixed native language ESL classroom, as students may use the target language to communicate. Thus, a deeper understanding of the core concepts may be reached.

In an EFL setting, sharing the criteria with the learners is a valuable, yet difficult undertaking. Sharing criteria with the learners is a vital assessment strategy because it has a synergistic relationship with both effective feedback and self-assessment. Sharing criteria is a central aspect of both comment-only marking and self-evaluation-peer-evaluation. Sharing a performance-based standard and a class-comment lexicon are imperative to successfully imbedding formative assessment into everyday practice. To ensure sharing criteria is effective, the teacher must ensure high visibility and repetition. Visible criteria may be posted in the classroom and reviewed every class. It is also helpful if learners are given input into the crafting of the criteria. Also, the teacher must be careful to effectively present the criteria in a way that students can understand. The teachers must consider the student level and determine whether criteria will be posted in L1 or L2.

Potential implementation difficulties related to Modern Foreign Languages

Black asserts that foreign languages present the most difficulties in the implementation of formative assessment (Black *et al*, 2003). Shulmans' concept of pedagogical content knowledge is an important consideration in the implementation of formative assessment (Black *et al*, 2003). *Assessment for learning and assessment as learning* will only be effective if the teacher can use practical diagnostic processes on a daily basis. Pedagogical content knowledge or an in-depth knowledge of common areas where learners are struggling is of utmost importance. Creating common language is also a considerable difficulty as L2 proficiency may be lacking (Black *et al*, 2003). It may also promote greater cognitive dissonance and push students to strive for a deeper understanding. This is dependent on the intrinsic motivation of the students involved in the learning process.

Formative assessment has the potential to create a learning environment bound with intellectual tension and meta-cognition. As a result, students can develop an internal locus of control over their learning. During the implementation of formative assessment, daily classroom practice changes, but not drastically. Strategies such as comment-only marking, sharing criteria, self-assessment and peer assessment can be seamlessly embedded into EFL composition lessons. Modern foreign languages may pose some challenges due to the nature of the language acquisition and the debate over the use of the target language in the classroom. (Black *et al*, 2003). These adaptive challenges must be met by adjusting to the needs of the students and gradually implementing formative assessment. The need for educators to become assessment-literate is imperative for the promotion of mastery-learning in modern foreign language teaching.

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Appendix 1

Action Plan for Implementing Formative Assessment

Purpose of inquiry:

To implement effective formative assessment practices in my second-year composition classes in order to increase student learning and achievement (commencing September 2005)

Participants:

▷The participants in my inquiry are two second-year English composition classes. (The course name is *Composition IV*).

▷Class A: ten students

▷Class B: twenty-five students

SMART Goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time bound)

Specific

Formative assessment strategies (Black *et al*, 2003):

▷Comment only marking

▷Self-assessment / Peer-assessment

▷Shared criteria

Measurable

How will students be measured?

▷Performance-based standards

▷Weekly student self-assessment

▷Weekly teacher-student communication, written and contained in the self-assessment

▷Two teacher-student interviews conducted during non-instructional time-one in late October and one in late December.

▷Comparing student writing at the onset and conclusion of the course based on the performance-based standards.

How will the teacher be measured?

▷Throughout the course of the semester, I will videotape my lessons in an effort to identify my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher.

▷In the weekly student-teacher communication, I will be able to gauge the effectiveness of my teaching based on what the students are learning as expressed in the self-evaluations.

▷I will ask my local mentors at the university to view my lessons and suggest methods to improve my instruction and the delivery of my inquiry.

Attainable:

▷I used formative assessment in my classroom during the spring semester. Students have become moderately accustomed to comment-only marking and student-teacher interviews. It is hoped that self-assessment, peer assessment, and shared criteria can further develop the students' meta-cognitive abilities and help them become stronger learners and English writers.

Relevant:

▷This goal of this inquiry is relevant to Japanese students in a university setting. In a hierarchical-based society, learners are given little control or feedback regarding their learning. Therefore, formative assessment will be a departure from the traditional learning models and is an opportunity for students to develop as learners.

Time bound:

The leadership inquiry will take place from September 28th to January 18th. This is the period of the fall semester at my university. In February, my mentor and I will begin to analyze the results and see how we can improve and extend formative assessment in my setting.

Appendix 2

EFL Composition IV - Journal writing: Performance-Based Standard (adapted from BC ministry of Education Performance Based Standards, 2002)

Aspect	Not Yet within expectations	Meets expectations (minimal level)	Fully meets expectations	Exceeds Expectations
Snapshot	The writing is brief and has many basic errors. The student needs ongoing support.	The writing presents ideas with little development. Parts may be confusing with many errors	The writing presents easy to follow ideas with detail and explanation; few errors.	The writing is clear and focused. It contains elaboration and individuality.
Meaning ▷ ideas ▷ details	- topic may be unclear - few details - very short	- may give some opinions - few details and explanations	- some analysis, often connected to retelling - some supporting details, reasons and explanations of how the student felt	- a clear point of view with a sense of individuality is apparent - develops ideas with some engaging details
Style ▷ clarity ▷ variety	- basic language - errors in word choice - sentences have little variety	- generally simple language - simple and compound sentences; little variety	- clear direct language - some variety in sentence structure	- often tries new words - has sentence variety
Form ▷ beginning ▷ organization ▷ transitions ▷ ending	- beginning is confusing - ideas unrelated to topic - very short - overuses connecting words - ending is missing or illogical	- usually identifies the topic - middle is often a list of loosely related events - repeats a few simple connecting words - often does not have an ending	- introduces the topic - uses a variety of connecting words - ending may be sudden	- logically organized - develops topic through relevant ideas - smooth transitions - range of effective transitions - has a conclusion
Conventions ▷ complete sentences ▷ spelling ▷ capitals ▷ punctuation ▷ grammar/usage	- repeated errors make the writing difficult to understand - many incomplete or run-on sentences	- several errors - most simple sentences are correct - some incomplete or run-on sentences	- some errors, but these do not affect meaning - most sentences are well constructed	- Few errors; these are caused by taking risks - complete sentences

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