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Exploring the theory and practice of formative assessment in EFL classes

Exploration de la théorie et de la pratique de l'évaluation formative dans l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère

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Résumé

Depuis l'introduction du concept d'évaluation formative par M. Scriven en 1967, beaucoup de travaux de recherche ont été faits sur ce concept. Cet article vise à explorer la littérature sur la théorie et la pratique de l'évaluation formative et a pour objectifs spécifiques (i) d'examiner les fondements théoriques de l'évaluation formative et (ii) d'identifier les principales stratégies d'évaluation formative utilisées dans les classes. Une revue critique et approfondie de la littérature a révélé que l'évaluation formative n'a pas de définition précise. En ce qui concerne les fondements théoriques, on a essayé de placer l'évaluation formative sous la coupe de la théorie de l'apprentissage connue sous le nom de constructivisme socio-culturel (E. Thrumbull and A. Lash, 2013 p. 1). Cependant, cet article a démontré que l'appui excessif sur l'autoévaluation et l'évaluation par les pairs nécessite beaucoup de temps pour élaborer les critères d'évaluation et s'assurer que les critères sont bien appliqués par les apprenants. Enfin, les principales stratégies d'évaluation formative telles que le partage des objectifs d'apprentissage, l'autoévaluation qui prend la forme de métacognition, l'évaluation par les pairs, le questionnement combiné avec les techniques de temps d'attente et de feux tricolores ont fait l'objet d'une discussion critique.

Mots-clés: Évaluation formative, Anglais Langue Étrangère, objectifs d'apprentissage, stratégies d'évaluation

Abstract

Since the introduction of the concept of formative assessment by M. Scriven in 1967, a lot of research work has been conducted on it. This paper aims to explore the literature on the theory and practice of formative assessment and more specifically (i) to examine the theoretical underpinnings of formative assessment and (ii) to identify key formative assessment strategies used in the classroom. A critical

and in-depth review of the literature revealed that there is no precise definition of formative assessment. Concerning the theoretical foundations, attempts have been made to place formative assessment under the socio-cultural constructivism learning theory (E. Thrumbull and A. Lash, 2013, p. 1). Nonetheless, this paper has demonstrated that over-reliance on self-assessment and peer assessment requires a lot of time to develop assessment criteria, and to ensure that the criteria are adequately applied by the learners. Finally, some key formative assessment strategies such as goal sharing, self-assessment which often takes the form of metacognition, peer assessment, questioning combined with wait time and traffic light techniques have been critically discussed.

Key words: Formative assessment; EFL; learning goals; assessment strategies

Introduction

Since the introduction of the concept of formative assessment by M. Scriven in 1967 (D. L. Hauser, 2015, p. 25), much has been written on the dichotomy between formative assessment and summative assessment (S. Ketabi and S. Ketabi, 2014, p. 436). While the contours of summative assessment seem to be clear, the same may not be said about formative assessment. Even in publications that focus solely on formative assessment (B. F. McNaughton, 2011, p. 140; S. Brookhart et al., 2008, p. 52), attempts to provide clear demarcations of the concept remain scarce. Formative assessment is often presented with various components that it may be quite challenging to apply in the actual classroom setting. Therefore, it is useful to explore the literature and highlight key aspects in a language that may be easy to grasp by most secondary school EFL teachers, teacher supervisors and teacher educators.

In practice, teaching in itself is already a challenging enterprise and having to pay particular attention to formative assessment adds to that challenge. In addition, because of the desire to cover prescribed curricula, teachers are often tempted to impart knowledge without ensuring that learners have got the message they intend to convey in terms of knowledge acquisition. This is what I often witnessed in many of the classes I visited as a teaching advisor. Teachers often taught their lessons without verifying whether or not their students learnt what they were supposed to learn. In some cases, the objectives of the lessons were not even clearly spelled out; in some other cases, no objectives were defined for the lessons at all. In both situations, it is difficult to check the level of understanding of the lessons by the learners. All this is due to lack of awareness of the pivotal role played by formative assessment in the teaching/learning process.

In view of the aforementioned problems, this paper aims at exploring the literature on the theory and practice of formative assessment. Its specific objectives are: (i) to examine the theoretical underpinnings of formative assessment and (ii) to identify key formative assessment strategies used in the classroom. In other words, this paper is an attempt to address the following two questions: (a) What are the theoretical underpinnings of formative assessment? (b) What are the key formative assessment strategies used in the classroom?

In order to address the following questions adequately, over a hundred journal articles and book chapters were collected and skimmed so as to select the most relevant ones, including the book on a seminal study conducted by OECD and published in 2005. Various definitions of the concept of formative assessment were critically analyzed and a definition has been suggested on the basis of this critical analysis. Following the clarification of the concept of formative assessment, the articles and book chapter were reviewed in order to identify their respective contributions to the theory and practice of formative assessment, their relations and contradictions (APA, 2010).

1. Theoretical Underpinnings of Formative Assessment

After reviewing some definitions of formative assessment, formative assessment has been analyzed in view of the socio-cultural constructivism. Some elements of formative assessment have equally been explored.

1.1 Defining the Concept of Formative Assessment

Different scholars have tried to define the concept of formative assessment that is sometimes referred to as assessment for learning (Assessment Reform Group, 2002, p. 2; H. Öz, 2014, p. 775). In his *Dictionary of Education*, Y. K. Singh (2010, p. 62) defines formative assessment as assessment that “provides information needed to adjust teaching and learning while they are happening”. Although the idea of adjustment here can be likened to improvement, Y. K. Singh (2010, p. 62) reduces formative assessment to what happens in the classroom even if he makes it clear that formative assessment concerns both teachers and learners. Formative assessment goes beyond the confines of the classroom insofar as it remains a form of assessment and it can be administered either in the classroom or outside the classroom in the form of homework for example.

For P. Ur (2012, p. 168), formative assessment is a form of assessment that may provide a grade in the same way as summative assessment but its specificity is that it occurs “in the middle of a period of learning rather than at the end, provides clear feedback in the form

of error correction and suggestions for improvement, and has the primary aim of enhancing future learning”. Compared with the previous definition by Y. K. Singh (2010, p. 62), this definition indicates that formative assessment is carried out in the middle of a learning period to contrast it with summative assessment. However, it should be stated that feedback does not take only the form of error correction. The feedback can take the form of encouragement as well as confirm the response given by a learner (N. Kurtoglu-Hooton, 2016, p. 40). Furthermore, while the idea of feedback is key to formative assessment, the primary aim as it has been presented by P. Ur (2012, p. 168) lacks accuracy. In fact, teachers and learners can draw lessons from previous learning experiences to improve future learning but the overarching aim of formative assessment is to verify whether what has been set to be learnt has been learnt or not. In case it has not been learnt, the data gathered during the assessment are used to provide feedback to the learners to bring them closer to the learning goals.

In a more detailed manner, P. Black and D. William (1998, p. 7) defined formative assessment as “all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged”. There is no doubt that the modification of activities is intended for learning betterment. All the same, the information collected is the data to be used to develop the feedback and do not represent the feedback. One can even go further and state that the modification of the teaching/learning activities is already a form of feedback.

In view of the foregoing, within the framework of this paper, formative assessment is defined as assessment carried out during the teaching/learning process in order to verify if learning goals are being reached and to take corrective measures if necessary.

With the above definitions, it is now clear what formative assessment is and what it is not. Now, theoretical considerations about formative assessment can be dealt with appropriately.

1.2 Theoretical Considerations about Formative Assessment

Here, the relationship between formative assessment and the socio-cultural constructivism theory have been discussed. After that, elements that should be in place to foster formative assessment have been examined.

1.2.1 Formative Assessment and Socio-cultural Constructivism

As mentioned earlier, the term formative evaluation was first used by M. Scriven in 1967 in a monograph of the American educational Research Association. However, it is not clear how the

shift from formative evaluation to formative assessment occurred. Furthermore, M. Scriven did not ground the concept in a particular theoretical framework. But as the concept grows in popularity, attempts have been made by educational researchers and theoreticians to establish a link between formative assessment and educational theories.

Formative assessment has been viewed through the lenses of the socio-cultural constructivism theory (E. Thrumbull and A. Lash, 2013, p. 7) which postulates that learners actively participate in the construction and understanding of knowledge in a social environment also known as community of practice (I. Clark, 2010, p. 348) and they build new knowledge using what they already know (P. M. Greenfield et al., 2006, p. 655; J. D. Bransford et al., 2000, p. 37). In the socio-cultural constructivism theory, teachers play the role of mediators between the learners and the learning goal by providing support or scaffolding to learners (E. Thrumbull and A. Lash, 2013, p. 348). As it appears, teachers and learners have specific roles to play in the teaching and learning process. Nonetheless, the socio-cultural constructivism learning theory assigns a more predominant role to the learners. That is the reason why its advocates believe that self-assessment and peer assessment are the most important formative assessment strategies (J. A. Ross, 2009, p. 2; P. Black and D. William, 2009, p. 6). Paraphrasing J. A. Ross (2009, p. 2), E. Trumbull and A. Lash (2013, p. 6) stated that self-assessment contributes to student learning provided the teacher develops a set of criteria to be used by students to evaluate their own work. It should still be noted that there are a number of limitations to the use of self-assessment.

First and foremost, not all knowledge areas in language teaching/learning lend themselves to the development of performance criteria. In many aspects of language teaching such as writing and reading comprehension, it is difficult to develop criteria that students are going to understand easily and use to evaluate their own work. Secondly, assuming that the criteria are developed, it would still not be easy for the teacher to ensure that such criteria are being properly applied by the students. Apart from these two aspects, there is a time factor that researchers who are not language teaching practitioners overlook when they theorize on formative assessment. It takes some time to generate the criteria and formative assessment may even become more time-consuming in case the teacher realizes that the criteria have not been well applied by the learners, especially in large classes where it is not possible for the teacher to monitor individual students.

What is true about self-assessment is also true about peer assessment. Proponents of the socio-cultural constructivism learning

theory advocate that student discussion during peer assessment provides a good source of information to the teacher as to the extent to which the learning goals have been reached. Some even go so far as to suggest that the assessment criteria should be jointly developed by the teacher and the learners to improve peer assessment (P. Black and D. William, 2009, p. 30). Again, the time factor is an issue. Given the fact that formative assessment should be built into the lesson plan, it is not clear when the teacher is going to develop the criteria with the learners. What should not be overlooked is that formative assessment comes after some teaching has taken place and in no way can it become a substitute for teaching that it is intended to improve.

On the basis of the foregoing, self-assessment and peer assessment should be used sparingly as formative assessment strategies in as much as they require much time for the development of the assessment criteria and to ensure that such criteria are properly used by the learners. As a consequence, the socio-cultural constructivism learning theory does not provide a strong theoretical framework for formative assessment.

1.2.2. Elements of Formative Assessment

Various sources indicate elements that should be in place or kept in mind for formative assessment to be carried out. Some of those sources have been explored, compared and contrasted. The table below displays an overview of the elements.

Table: Elements of formative assessment

| Sources | Elements of Formative Assessment |
|--|--|
| OECD (2005, p. 46) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Establishment of a classroom culture that encourages interaction and the use of assessment tools <input type="checkbox"/> Establishment of learning goals, and tracking of individual student progress toward those goals <input type="checkbox"/> Use of varied instruction methods to meet diverse student needs <input type="checkbox"/> Use of varied approaches to assessing student understanding <input type="checkbox"/> Feedback on student performance and adaptation of instructions to meet identified needs <input type="checkbox"/> Active involvement of students in the learning process |
| K. M. Caulley and J. H. McMillan (2010, pp. 3-5) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Providing clear learning targets <input type="checkbox"/> Offering feedback about progress towards mastering learning targets <input type="checkbox"/> Attributing student success and mastery to moderate effort <input type="checkbox"/> Encouraging student self-assessment <input type="checkbox"/> Helping students set attainable goals for improvement |
| S. Brookhart et al. (2008, pp. 56-57) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Clearly communicating to students the learning target <input type="checkbox"/> Giving descriptive feedback that is tied to the learning target <input type="checkbox"/> Giving guidance that helps students realize they can do what they need to do <input type="checkbox"/> Raising the quality of classroom discourse |

From the above table, it appears that establishing clear learning goals or targets and communicating them to learners is one of the key conditions of formative assessment that appears in the three sources. Without such learning goals, formative assessment is difficult to carry out. The goals provide the yardstick against which the formative assessment is conducted. The provision of feedback is another important element that is common to all three sources. In fact, the feedback is what makes an assessment formative. Feedback is for students what treatment is for a patient as the formative assessment represents the diagnosis or laboratory test to identify possible disease.

The involvement of students or helping students set goals for improvement is another element which portrays student-centeredness. It is good for teachers to set goals but it is better for them to help students convert such goals into personal learning goals. The other element that needs to be emphasized is assessment strategy or approach. While K. M. Caulley and J. H. McMillan (2010, pp. 3-5) advocate the encouragement of student self-assessment, the OECD (2005, p. 46) underscores the use of varied assessment approaches. This latter view seems to be more relevant in that the use of one single assessment strategy may create boredom in the learners. The more diversified formative assessment strategies are, the better they enable teachers to have a clear picture of learning goals attainment by learners.

2. Key Formative Assessment Strategies Used in Classrooms

The practice of formative assessment starts with goal sharing and it takes various forms including at the stage of lesson planning, goal sharing, questioning, self-assessment and peer assessment, and end-of-lesson plenary to name but the few I deem important (B. F. McNaughton, 2011, p. 148; L. Volante and D. Beckett, 2011, p. 244; OECD, 2005, p. 47). In a case study on a single teacher, B. F. McNaughton (2011, p. 146) rightly pointed out that formative assessment should be borne in mind during lesson planning so as to decide on elements to be used. That is certainly the reason why the Assessment Reform Group (2002, p. 2) stated that it should be part and parcel of effective lesson planning and classroom practice. However, in the classroom, formative assessment starts with the assessment of prior knowledge to ensure that students have the prerequisites to understand the lesson to be taught (B. F. McNaughton, 2011, p. 148). Therefore, assessment of prior knowledge can be considered as a formative assessment strategy.

Goal sharing is part and parcel of formative assessment in as much as it enables students to know “what they are expected to achieve in the lesson” (J. Sheba and G. Maxwell, 2005, p. 199) as well as it creates transparency in lessons (J. Looney and D. William, 2005, p.

134). In some cases, students may even receive different goals because the assessment of prior knowledge has revealed that the students in the classroom have differing needs (B. F. McNaughton, 2011, p. 148). From a different perspective, sharing goals may also enable to encourage students to get more involved in their learning. To put it in a nutshell, sharing lesson goals with students gives the opportunity for teachers and learners to have a common ground and understanding of what the lesson is all about.

While lesson planning and goal sharing can be viewed as laying foundations for formative assessment, questioning is one of the key strategies. According to L. Volante and D. Beckett (2011, p. 244), questioning is a very powerful way of monitoring student progress towards learning goals. Given the importance of questioning, teachers are to be mindful of the way they word their questions and the types of questions they pose in their classes. B. F. McNaughton (2011, p. 149) suggested using two types of questions: “checking questions” and “exploratory questions”. The last category of questions is what J. Looney and D. William (2005, p. 134) referred to as “why questions” whereas C. DeLuca et al. (2012, p. 11) referred to checking questions as closed questions. However, the use of closed questions should be limited insofar as they tend to limit student responses and do not enable to uncover students’ misconceptions (C. De Luca et al., 2012, p. 11; J. Looney and D. William, 2005, p. 134). What teacher may keep in mind is that, as suggested by B. F. Mc. Naughton (2011, p. 149), both types of questions must be combined or even used separately depending on the lesson content being assessed or time available for the assessment.

However, for questioning to be effective in formative assessment, questions posed must be followed by wait or thinking time. In fact, research has shown that when teachers pause for three or more seconds after asking a question, the quality of responses provided by learners increases (J. Ingram and V. Elliott, 2016, p. 43; B. M. Rowe, 1986, p. 2). In addition to wait time, teachers involved in the King’s Formative Assessment Programme used a technique called traffic light whereby they distribute green, amber and red cards to students to raise when they understand, are not sure to understand or do not understand a concept at all (J. Looney and D. William, 2005, p. 142). This technique is quite useful in helping the teacher to check very quickly how the lesson has been received by the students just by counting the number of students in each category.

Apart from questioning, the other formative assessment strategy worth mentioning is peer and self- assessment which has been widely advocated (L. Volante and D. Beckett, 2011, pp. 246-248; K. M. Caulley and H. McMillan, 2010, p. 5; S. Bookhart et al., 2008, p. 53; J.

Sebba and G. Maxwell, 2005, p. 195; J. Looney and D. William, 2005, p. 135). Even though self-assessment can take the form of assessment of learning, it often takes the form of metacognition in which students reflect on their performance. To that effect, K. M. Caulley and J. H. McMillan (2010, p. 5) suggested that the teacher could ask questions such as “What are you thinking now about how best you are learning?” or “What study strategies do you think worked best?” In some cases, students may be asked to ask themselves and answer questions like “Why did I get a level 2 [on a four point scale – level 4 being the highest]” or “How can I make this better” (L. Volante and D. Beckett, 2010, p. 247).

As far as peer assessment is concerned, it takes various forms. Students may be requested to mark their peers’ works using rubrics or criteria developed by the teacher. However, J. Looney and D. William (2005, p. 135) strongly recommended that students should be well-trained and weaker students should be paired up with stronger ones. In addition, the “two stars and a wish system” (J. Looney and D. William, 2005, p. 142) whereby students mention two things they like about their peers’ work and one thing to improve is a system used to prevent students from being too critical about their peers’ work. Another form of peer assessment consists in students quizzing each other on words learnt during a lesson using flash cards and green, yellow, and red construction paper sheets. When the answer is correct, the questioner puts the flash card on the green, when the answer is hesitant, the flash card is put on the yellow and when the answer is incorrect, the flash card is put on the red sheet (S. Brookhart et al., 2008, p. 54).

An innovative formative assessment strategy is to discuss the relevance of learning intentions for real life situations (B. F. McNaughton, 2008, p. 151). In fact, students are asked to find out the extent to which what they have learnt is applicable in real life or can be useful in people’s jobs. There is no doubt that students will not be able to establish such links if they do not have a clear understanding of what they have learnt.

Finally, the end-of-lesson plenary is another important formative assessment strategy. According to J. Looney and D. William (2005, p. 145), the end-of-lesson plenary consists in summarizing the lesson and asking learners some questions to check understanding. This can be done either by the teacher or a group of learners, in which case, it becomes a form of peer assessment.

3. Discussion of the Theory and Practice of Formative Assessment

This study has explored the theory and practice of formative assessment. It has revealed that the definition of the concept of formative assessment varies slightly from one researcher to the other,

which confirms the idea that there is no precise definition of the concept (S. Ketabi and S. Ketabi, 2014, p. 437). For that reason, it may not be easy for teachers in general and young teachers in particular to understand and carry out formative assessment in their classes, hence, the importance of this study. This lack of precise definition is probably one of the reasons why I. Clark (2010, p. 342) referred to formative assessment as “an artful process as opposed to a scientific process”. Formative assessment is considered as an art and not a science. This is all the more true since teachers can be creative in the ways in which they use the various strategies.

Furthermore, it appears that formative assessment does not fall easily within a given educational theory. Even though the socio-cultural constructivism theory seems to provide a framework for formative assessment, its emphasis on self-assessment and peer assessment as strategies raises a practical time management issue. Teachers have to develop assessment criteria to be used by learners and to ensure that the criteria have been adequately applied by such learners (I. Clark, 2010, p. 344). Doing this requires a lot of time, especially in EFL teaching where some skills such as writing and reading comprehension are not always easy to assess even by the teachers themselves, let alone students. As a consequence, although many teachers are aware of the positive impacts of formative assessment on student learning, they complain that it takes a lot of time and affects the amount of the curriculum they are able to cover (C. DeLuca et al., 2012, p. 9). Strategies that are known to be time-consuming are not to be overused. For all these reasons, formative assessment does not completely fit into the socio-cultural constructivism.

From a practical perspective, peer assessment is one of the most advocated strategies. In a field investigation, L. Volante and D. Beckett (2011, pp. 244-248) captured teachers’ opinions on the use of peer assessment. While teachers thought that peer assessment gives students the opportunity to learn from their peers, they also claimed that one of the difficulties related to it is that students may not know much about content and may even be subjective. For that reason, teachers found that peer assessment was difficult to implement.

The study also reveals that the end-of-lesson plenary has not been frequently mentioned in the literature. This is a major gap because most of the time, it is at the end of their lessons that teachers carry out formative assessment.

Conclusion

Formative assessment is a key aspect of the teaching/learning process in EFL classes. Notwithstanding the fact that it has no precise definition, it enables teachers to take stock of where their learners stand

regarding the learning goals they set for lessons. The socio-cultural constructivism theory provides some theoretical framework for the concept of formative assessment but it overemphasizes the use of self-assessment and peer assessment.

Furthermore, some practices of formative assessment deserve to be highlighted. The foundational strategy in the performance of formative assessment is defining learning goals and sharing them with students. In addition, peer assessment is one of the most advocated strategies but there are a lot constraints related to its implementation such as time constraints and subjectivity on the part of students. The next strategy is questioning that is cross-cutting to other strategies. For its effectiveness, questioning should be used with wait time and the traffic light technique for checking understanding. Another strategy is the discussion of the relevance of lesson goals for everyday life. If learners are able to relate the lesson to everyday life, it means that they have a thorough understanding of the lesson.

After the overview of the theory and practice of formative assessment through the literature, it should be noted that what makes assessment formative is not only the absence of grades but also and mainly feedback. It will therefore be interesting to investigate the ways in which feedback can be handled so that formative assessment can play its role in the teaching/learning process. Finally, it will not be superfluous to conduct field investigations in Benin to find out how EFL teachers mainstream formation assessment in their daily teaching activities.

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