The Application of Formative Assessment on College English Learning in Chinese Independent College

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Abstract. Formative assessment, a positive and encouraging assessment method, has attracted a great deal of attention in the field of English language teaching and learning (ELTL) [1]. However, given the limited studies on College English learning in the context of Chinese independent college, this paper is to fill the gap to some extent, by discussing the current assessment problems in College English Learning and accordingly, some effective formative practices from both sides of teachers and students will be suggested.

Introduction

Currently, in Chinese universities, a fundamental change is happening in English language teaching and learning—that is a significant shift from “teacher-centered” to “student-centered” English language classroom. Consequently, the call for a more “student-centered” English classroom is also stressed in Chinese independent colleges-taking my teaching college as an example. As for assessment, contrary to a traditional summative assessment focusing on grades of the final-term exam or levels of College English Test 4 (CET4) and CET6, formative assessment plays an important role teaching and learning in the context of English as a Foreign Language [1], for it informs students of their learning progress, strengths and weakness as well as effective feedback [2]. As a result, automatic learning might be encouraged in those students. Meanwhile, benefiting from the previous formative assessment, teachers might make timely adjustment in their following teaching plan [2]. Thus, both students and teachers may get benefit from using formative assessment in the classroom.

Although formative assessment does have more advantages than summative assessment in ELTL, it still has not been wildly discussed and used in Chinese independent colleges where both final-term exam and CET4 are regarded as ways of assessing students’ English academic performance. Hence, this paper will firstly compare the differences between summative assessment and formative assessment, which might present a broad perspective on assessment. Then, the interrelation between formative assessment and learning could be shared with an aim of proving the necessity of using formative assessment in ELLT. What’s more, current assessment problems will be analyzed and corresponding effective formative assessment practices would be suggested in the following paragraph as well.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment, a more student-centered assessment method, has long attracted attention in the field of English teaching and learning [2]. More specific details on the comparison between summative assessment and formative assessment will be summarized and the relationship between formative assessment and learning will be discussed as follows:

Summative Assessment vs. Formative Assessment

Assessment is usually defined as two distinctive terms- Summative assessment and Formative assessment, based on different functions and timing as well as purposes [3].
With respect to the functions, summative assessment is used primarily as a monitor and records on what students have attained, which forms a basis of judgment on the competency of students [4]. College entrance exams are examples of summative assessment, therefore, it usually contains administrative purposes, such as giving marks to students, arrange them into suitable classes, to some extent [5]. In contrast, formative assessment intends to distinguish scale and possibility of improvement [6]. There is a structure, which given by formative assessment, facilitates teachers to plan their following teaching based on data collection and analysis; students might understand the connection and meaning of each small successive procedure in learning with the help of formative assessment [4].

When it comes to the timing, summative assessment is to be undertaken at the end of a model, term or course, and also provides accreditation to students when finishing a certain period of learning [7]; On the other hand, formative assessment shows continuity in classroom learning, which is happening during a learning course.

Lastly, the purposes of these two assessments are apparently different. Summative assessment focuses on passing exams for the pursuit of progression or certification, CET4 and CET6 belong to this kind; while formative assessment emphasizes on the involvement of students or teachers through practices such as feedback, promoting learning [7]. Frequent teacher feedbacks are constructed on student achievement against learning goals and on the student’s weakness for the pursuit of improvement. In the meanwhile, formative assessment needs to be mainly based on student experience, which means student needs to think and evaluate what and how they have learnt [3].

**Formative Assessment and Learning**

It is asserted that formative assessment can promote learning [3]. However, what learning theory might prove it and how it integrates with formative assessment deserve more attention, which are shown as follows:

To begin with, in the view of cognitive scientists, learning should be an interactive process: students cannot just meet and grasp learning materials from easy to difficult level; instead, they need to take part in and try to internalize what they have met and then integrate it to the development of schematic understandings [3]. Based on this perspective, learning and formative assessment have one thing in common: the role teacher-student interaction should be involved in the learning process. It might means that, in formative assessment, teacher makes judgment on students’ progress and provides instructional feedback, which aims at facilitating students to understand and grasp new knowledge and problems [3]. Thus, learning and acquiring the new language might occur naturally. Moreover, according to zone of proximal development (ZPD) [8], Vygotsky’s contribution to psychological theory, there is a gap between actual development level as decided by students’ independent performance and their potential level as present by performance under adult guidance or in collaboration with more competent peers. Therefore, students might move to a higher learning level with the help of adult support and guidance.

**Current Assessment Practices and College English Learning in Chinese Independent College**

In the field of ELTL, some problems of current assessment practices have already been noticed [9], lacking consistence in teaching and learning, relying heavily on marks and grades and being unaware of individual students’ learning need. Apart from those problems, some more complicated and obvious problems in the context of Chinese independent colleges also need to be understood. Firstly, a single summative assessment in College English is no longer satisfy the diversified need of students and teachers in independent colleges. As the teaching objectives, the teaching content as well as the teaching method are slightly different from Chinese regular universities, independent colleges are usually restricted by the relative low English level students and limited teaching resources [10]. Therefore, a more comprehensive formative assessment might be advocated. Secondly, students from the independent college are generally lack of effective learning strategies.
and learning confidence [11], a grade-orientated assessment does little good to students’ automatic learning and the feeling of frustration might be triggered thereby. Lastly, as discussion by [12] Cheng, L.Y. et al. assessment objectives and processes are strongly influenced by external tests, teachers would like to use mandated syllabus and curriculum guide to instruct their assessment practices within the classroom, which are mainly for instructional purposes rather than student-centered learning.

**Formative Assessment Practices in College English Learning Classroom**

Based on the previous discussion, more effective practices: question, feedback, and peer-assessment and self-assessment will be introduced in order to promote the using of formative assessment in College English learning in independent college.

For the teacher part, two significant techniques would be used in the classroom assessment: feedback and questioning, which might promote communication between teachers and students [9]. When it comes to feedback, an essential aspect in formative assessment, which serves to assess students’ current performance and shows what will be the next step according to their learning processes. Instead of marking on performance, giving comments which focuses on what should be done to motivate students to improve their learning; since grades would steer students’ attention on “ability” rather than on enhancement of endeavor, impairing less capable students’ confidence [9]. However, comment making needs more time than grade marking, which challenges teachers to squeeze enough time building effective comments.

In terms of questioning, asking more open questions to students would encourage student thinking and facilitate teachers to understand their students better; and then teacher will make useful teaching plans for following learning [9]. As a matter of fact, in order to limit the difficulty of controlling big-sized classroom, many teachers might prefer to some simple and closed questions which serve to recall rather than figure out answers. Hence, it is suggested that more topic-related questions might be used in College English learning, as those questions might help students to familiarize the language content. And thus, learning might be encouraged automatically. However, time issue and the frame of question might be weaknesses of questioning. How much time should be spent on question wait-time and what to ask need to be careful considered in each class period.

For the aspect of students, it is necessary to consider more about peer-assessment and self-assessment, as involving students into the assessment process would let students know what should be enhanced by which the teaching and learning would be improved [13]. Therefore, acting as student tutors or examiners, students assess their own or others’ performance, such as class work, homework or presentation to the class, which would improve their motivation to learn [9] and the fear of losing face can be limited. At the same time, students would feel confident to present a well-organized work that their classmates will mark. Moreover, more intercommunication between peer discussions, which facilitates students to deal with disagreement on an answer. Comparing with teacher’s criticisms of their work, it is more easily for students to accept criticisms from their peers since they would not take it too seriously.

**Summary**

With the clear distinctions between summative assessment and formative assessment as well as the interrelation between formative assessment and learning in mind, there is no doubt that the necessity of using formative assessment in college English learning become much more apparent. Hence, the call for the application of formative assessment in the independent college might not be ignored any more. With the help of formative assessment, more specifically, the use of feedback, questioning on the side of teachers and self-assessment and peer-assessment from the side of students, both the teachers and students might be encouraged in the college English learning classroom.
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