



Formative Assessment: a 20th Century Relic or a 21st Century Solution?

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Abstract

The paper presents some practical cases of application of principles and methods of formative assessment in teaching in general and more specifically in teaching English Essay in grammar schools. The aim is to monitor student learning by providing ongoing feedback which makes not only teaching but also learning more effective, structured and focused on problem-solving. It helps students as well as teachers identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas that could do with improvement. Peer assessment, which is presented as an example, is intended for both peer evaluation and self-evaluation, as students can apply the same technique for their own essays; with it students receive double feedback. Students are thus not only in the role of the author but also the assessor and can later transfer their experience to their own work. Although the peer assessment of essays in the form of a handout/questionnaire is designed for a group of students, the support they receive is tailored. The emphasis is on the feedback which is not in the form of grades or points yet it is very precise, specific and clear. As a result, students who do utilise their feedback comments improve in the areas previously criticised, the reasons for engagement or non-engagement become apparent, they develop self-perception of their ability and potential as writers. This method also involves students in self-reflection of learning which they can apply to any subject at any stage of their education process. The paper argues that formative assessment should have a stronger role in our education system since it provides immediate feedback to students, informs them of their progress in a constructive and stress-free manner and in the case of essay writing – enhances students' writing performance. In conclusion, formative assessment allows students and teachers to obtain a more detailed understanding of the students' work so that summative assessment can confirm the improved results.

Keywords: *formative assessment, English essay, peer assessment.*

Introduction

Formative assessment is one of the methods that have ruffled the world of teaching in the recent years. It seems that the students, the parents and the schools alike are under constant pressure to improve the results in exams, finals and externally set tests. Testing is generally considered as a good way to establish where the students are, what they know but not so much how we did as teachers or better, how much they understood and took in of what we were trying to teach them. Being a teacher means that we are concerned and interested in improving our students' learning and progress throughout the year not only at the end of a term. This is where formative assessment comes in.

Passing into the new millennium, the term 'formative assessment or monitoring' became more and more commonplace, and twenty years later we find that the results are favourable for all stakeholders. Although the term first appeared in the late 1960s, it is nevertheless authors such as Black and Wiliam, Harlen and James, Marzano, Crooks and others who place formative monitoring of teaching and learning at the foreground. As a global society, we are not yet ready for a complete transition - and summative assessment is actually present everywhere - but formative monitoring is steadily increasing its share of the educational process.

Formative assessment – like learning – is a continuous process which can include keeping student's work in portfolio, giving short self-checks, creating criteria for written or listening assignments together which helps students understand every aspect of the task, peer correction and so on. The central component of formative assessment is feedback. It basically provides the information about the existing gap between where a student is and where they would like to be. Not only does it show where the student is but it also secures a stress free environment where both the student and the teacher can identify the weaknesses and strong points, which means that the feedback is personalised.

It does not mean that summative assessment becomes obsolete but through formative assessment students get to the desired grade and achieve knowledge of higher quality. They are assessed through assistance during the process of learning not just at the end; the goal is to improve learning so



after the assessment the student goes back to the subject matter and has the opportunity to really get to the desired level of knowledge and abilities.

Case study

The below handout was designed together with and for the students of the fourth - final year in our grammar school as an aid to their first attempts to write an essay in English language. In addition to creating the elements of the essay together in class, the handout is intended for both peer evaluation and self-evaluation, as the student can use the same technique for their own work; at the same time the questions of the peer evaluation support the writing of this type of text, and students receive a double feedback:

- feedback to the author of the handout,
- feedback to the author of the essay by a peer and a professor.

After the introductory lesson where the students participated in forming the criteria for writing a 'for and against' essay comparing them with the officially published final exam assessors' criteria, each wrote their first essay on the given title at home. During the next lesson, they exchanged essays and partly at school, partly at home assessed them on the basis of the handout with all the remarks and findings. The essays together with the peer corrections were handed over for my contribution and we discussed their experience.

I went through the essays and I commented on the handout findings.

Upon returning the essays, each student examined their work together with the comments of a classmate and me. We again commented the findings as well as the experience.

Students are not only in the role of the author but also the assessor, and they later transfer their experience to their own work. The feedback has no points, no grades yet is very precise, specific, detailed and clear. In the evaluation, students singled out the detailed and specific feedback and emphasized that in this way the theory entered into practice, which is particularly valuable in the writing of an essay. It is also important to them that their first attempt in writing and essay is not graded in any way, so no points, no numbers – stress free. Nevertheless, it is reviewed in very specific detail, it is easy to pin-point the weaknesses as well as strong points.

They find that such feedback is a challenging and demanding task for them but it helps understand the theory that they can then implement into the practice of writing. For the students the whole process takes four school lessons in addition to writing the essay at home and the possible peer correcting in case the class lesson wasn't enough. After the first experience the following ones take less time, the students understand the grades and the criteria are no longer just theory but they have a very specific idea of what exactly they mean.

Table 1

Peer correction of essays

PEER EVALUATION HANDOUT

Please read your peer's essay twice before you start answering the following questions.

To avoid the confusion you should use different marking colours than your teacher (if possible use red).

CONTENT

1. Has the author of the essay written what he/she was asked to?
If not, explain:
2. Does the beginning make you read on?
3. What is the main idea of the essay?
4. Can you summarize in one sentence the main idea of each paragraph:
P1 says that.....
P2 says that.....
5. Can you find any parts that are not related to the main idea?
(underline them)
6. Does the writer support his/her opinion giving enough examples (arguments) or does he/she generalise?
Find places where you would like more explanations or details?
7. Is the essay much too short or much too long?
8. Does the essay leave the reader with something to think about?



VOCABULARY

1. Does the essay contain rich vocabulary? Write out words closely related to the topic:
Can you think of more such words? Give examples!
2. Find examples of wrong use of words if there are any.
3. Does the writer use contractions? Give examples.

GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY

1. Underline all the complex grammatical structures in the essay (passive, conditionals, reported speech....)
2. Mark the grammatical and spelling mistakes

ORGANISATION / COHERENCE

1. Is the essay divided into paragraphs? How many are there?
2. Are paragraphs logically arranged? (new idea - new paragraph)
3. Does the writer repeat ideas too often? Give examples:
4. Did you at any point lose the flow of the writing? Where and why?
5. Underline the linking words! Are they used correctly?
6. Are pronouns correctly related to nouns?

THE AIM OF THIS EXERCISE WILL BE FULFILLED WHEN YOU APPLY YOUR FINDINGS TO YOUR OWN WRITING.

Results

Our expectations need to be realistic. Formative assessment does not improve students' knowledge and grades overnight – as mentioned before, it is a process. A process for students and a process for the teacher but it does result not only in better understanding of the subject matter but in better student – teacher relationships. Teaching becomes more personalised and therefore personal.

Time management though, could pose a challenge. Discussions, debates and comparisons take time but when we decide to do things differently, we adjust and we make time. It helps a great deal if there is support among fellow teachers and administration in terms of comparison with different methods and the opportunity to attend various seminars for further teacher development. My experience is a positive one. I started with peer correction of essays as an experiment but the students' feedback encouraged me to continue. The students appreciate the individual approach, they particularly value the fact that the feedback is specific and not graded which they interpret as an opportunity for improvement, what is more, they can focus on specific elements and therefore raise the level of writing before they are graded rather than only afterwards. Having the experience of being an assessor is another element that contributes to better understanding of what it means to write an essay and students take this role seriously. In their evaluations they continuously stress the importance of role-changing since this offers a fresh insight into essay writing. The teacher on the other hand can see if the explanations were clear, if any stage of teaching should be changed on the level of classroom.

Conclusion

School systems throughout the world are periodically bombarded by the latest, the most efficient, the most innovative or the most student and/or teacher friendly methods. Why should we consider formative assessment? The reasons are numerous but it all comes down to the simple fact that it works, it is effective and user-friendly on the side of the student and teacher which is otherwise not always the case. Assessment is an inevitable element in teacher – student relationship and the summative part by default happens at the end of the teaching and learning process. The formative part fills the gap between the initially set goal and the final result. We can apply it during the learning activity, it improves learning, the process is stress-free, the feedback tailored. It is not a competition but students can focus on their own work. Teachers on the other hand can follow an individual's progress, not through grades but through their accomplishments from their first attempts to their final 'product' which in the end satisfies not only the narrow, summative goal in the form of a grade but – hopefully – there is understanding of the subject matter and real knowledge that is there to stay.



References

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