Formative Assessment in Online Teaching, the Case of Teaching Swedish as a Second Language

Ulrika Serrander
University of Gävle (Sweden)
ulaser@hig.se

Abstract

Current didactic research stresses the formative aspects of assessment of teaching [1]. Formative assessment is considered to enhance students´ performance when including direct subject guidance through interaction. This is a challenge for teachers working online and exclusively with computer based student interaction. I teach courses in the didactics of Swedish as a second language, and the absolute majority of the students are teachers of Swedish or Swedish as a second language in primary school. The subject of this particular course segment was genre pedagogy and the challenge was to create a self-assessment test that gives the students direct feedback in the form of right answers. Students answer a number of multiple-choice questions and find out immediately whether they have given the right answer. In addition, a short explanation is posted in writing next to the right answer. Using the Blackboard platform for online teaching I wanted to create an online assignment in an attempt to create a learning path. It consists of several multiple-choice and yes/no question linked to. They are interdependent so that students can only proceed to the following question when answering the previous question correctly. Thus, the test features progression and students can be guided along a line of thought. Unfortunately, one of the questions was inadequately conceived and I had to record a short video in which I explained that question. I changed the settings for that particular question so that students could proceed without having to answer correctly, but they had to watch the video before they could go on with the remainder of the test. Interestingly, by giving the wrong answer and benefiting from further explanations about the concept to which that question referred, students later showed a better understanding of that particular concept in comparison with other notions for which they were tested at the exam. This was indicated in the final (summative) assessment and confirmed by the students themselves in their evaluations of the course. This incident has made me reflect upon the importance of the quality of the feedback used in online teaching and assessment. I identify this as one of our main challenges in online teaching and assessment right now.

1. The concept of formative assessment

Traditionally, assessment refers to a judgment or evaluation of students´ performance in relation to a set of objectives; the judgment is often related to numeral ratings and generates a course grade [2]. In recent years, the distinction between summative and formative assessment has been stressed. Summative assessment is the judgment of students´ performance up to a given point. Formative assessment requires feedback indicating a gap between the students´ performance and teachers' expectations or course goals [3]. This feedback should also entail student strategies to minimize the gap. This type of assessment, with qualitative feedback, has been highly emphasized within the sociocultural paradigm where teachers are expected to evaluate student performance continuously within the zone of proximal development [4]. This way, formative assessment is thought to modify and enhance future students´ performance [5].

The term *formative assessment* in the present paper refers to what is sometimes called *formative feedback*. According to research, formative feedback should be non-evaluative, multidimensional and supportive [6]. Formative assessment can consist of corrective feedback, explanations or examples illustrating an idea or a concept. The different types of feedback can be administered in direct association with the students´ performance, or delayed in time.

1.2 Teaching observations

The University of Gävle is one of the leading universities in Sweden in terms of providing distance education. All courses at the university uses the Blackboard platform which makes all courses online to a certain extent and approximately half of all courses are taught fully online. The course module in focus of this paper gives 7.5 points of credit over a period of ten weeks and is fully taught online. The course content is didactics of teaching Swedish as a second language and genre pedagogy. A group

of forty students follow the course and most students are teachers of Swedish or Swedish as a second language in mandatory education. The course content is reviewed in five online lectures. The students are invited to participate online or watch the lectures afterwards at a time and place as they please.

Attempts were made to assess student performance with both summative and formative assessments. At the end of the course module, students write an exam based on open questions where argumentative answers are expected. Course marks were based on this exam, principally related to the Bloom´s taxonomy for learning domains [7]. As a complement to the written exam students are obliged to complete small online exams containing short questions related to each lecture. These small exams were not given marks, but students had to complete all of them, ten in total, in order to access the final course exam. This is the formative assessment and the focus of this paper.

The students were instructed to complete each exam with one hundred per cent accuracy. If students fail to answer one of the questions correctly, they were instructed to review the corresponding sections of the course literature, their trial would be reset and they would be given a new opportunity to redo the exam which they had failed. The exams were published in the online assessment tool in the Blackboard platform in such a way that they form a sequence of interrelated questions which the students are obliged to follow, i.e. a learning path. Thus, the test features progression and students can be guided along a line of thought. As students complete one exam with full accuracy, they automatically gain access to the following exam.

This learning path was created for several different purposes. One purpose was to give the students incentive to start reading the course literature from the start. Another purpose was to clarify some basic key concepts as they appear throughout the course module so that all students would all have a profound understanding of these concepts when writing the final exam. This was thought to enhance students´ performance on the final exam because they can focus on higher order skills (according to Bloom´s taxonomy) rather than spend too much time with simple definitions of concepts. This way the learning path was testing facts and modifying students´ understandings of these concepts and the final exam was testing the students´ ability to use these concepts in scientific reasoning. Picture 1 illustrates the idea of the overall assessment procedure of the course module.
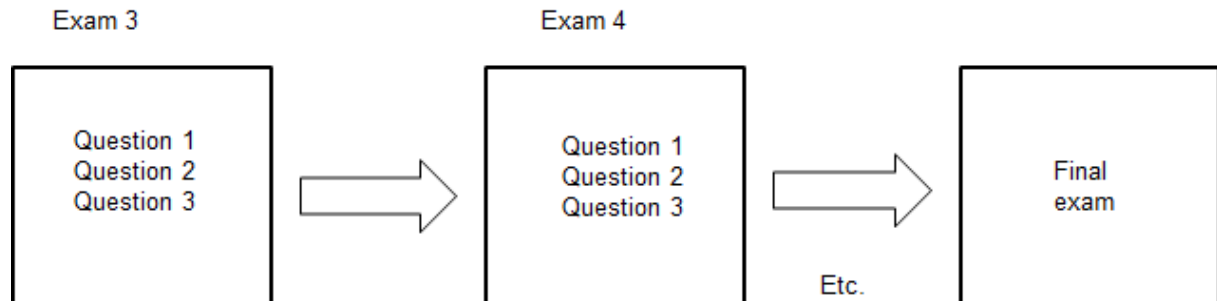
Picture 1: Illustration of the different assessments of the course module: the learning path and the final exam.

The learning path consisted of questions which were either multiple-choice questions or questions requiring a yes- or a no-answer. Two or three questions form one exam and the total amount of exams where ten. The questions were designed in the assessment tool in the Blackboard platform with automatic feedback on different levels. Upon completion of each exam, corrective feedback appears informing the student about accuracy scores on each question and a comment appears referring to what sections in the course literature in case of inaccurate completion and a comment saying "well done, proceed with the next exam" when completion was fully accurate. The following is an example of one multiple-choice question:

What can a *metalanguage* be used for in teaching?
　　A) A metalanguage is used to write in scientific genres.
　　B) A metalanguage is used to make the structure and choice of words explicit in teaching to write in different genres.
　　C) A metalanguage is used to highlight the summative aspects in teaching different genres.

D) A metalanguage is used in giving explicit feedback (i. e. *scaffolding*) in teaching how to write in different genre.

Students are expexted to indicate option B and D as accurate. One of the questions in exam number three was ill conceived and a little more than half of all students (approximately 20 students out of the total 40 students) answered it inaccurately. The question was the following:

What characterizes a good text?
   - A good text of any genre is always abstract.
   - A good scientific text is always context independent.
   - A good text of any genre always follows the norms of the genre considering its structure and choice of words.

Students were expected to indicate anwers B and C as correct. Most students admitted to having trouble with this question, and in particular with option C. This option was ill formulated because texts of all genres do not have to follow the genre specific norms for choice of words and text structure in order to be perceived as good texts. For example, texts in fictional genres are allowed to stretch our conceptions of norms and standards and in this way challenge the reader. So option C should not have included texts of all genres. This was discovered when many students had already completed this exam and attempts were made to benefit from this mistake without letting the students retake this exam (number three). Therefore, the threshold for accuracy was lowered in order to allow students to continue the learning path without having to redo the exam. A small audio-video clip, of approximately eight minutes, was recorded were the teacher explained why the question was ill conceived. Students were then obliged to watch the small recording in order to gain access to exam number four. This remodeled the learning path in a way that picture 2 illustrates.
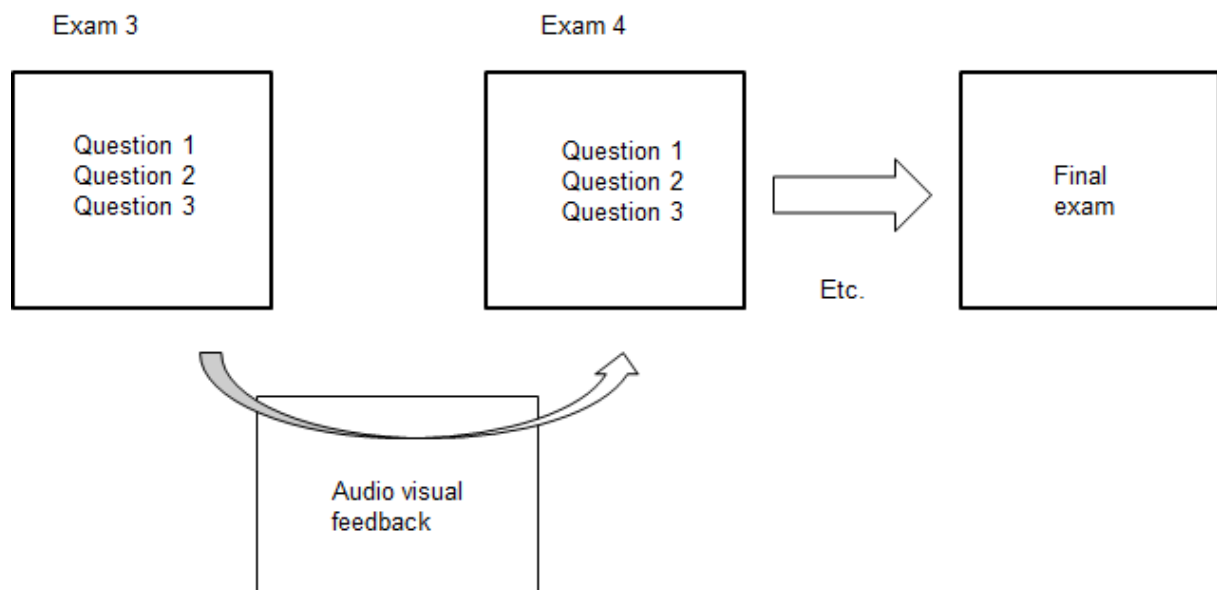
Picture 2: Illustration of the modification of the learning path.

In the audio-visual feedback, it was explained that option C cannot be considered accurate because it is ill formulated. This option was constructed with only school genres in mind. When teachers train students in detecting and using genre specific features in writing within different school texts it is fruitful to give students explicit feedback so that they stay within the genre specific norms and standards for text structure and choice of words. It is first when students master these norms that they can go one step further and stretch these norms in order to challenge the reader and still write a good text. The intention behind option C was that the teacher´s primary task is to convey the norms and standards of different genres. And this is especially true when teaching younger children or under achieving students. It is first when students learn to identify and use the features of genres that you can challenge them to create an effect.

After watching the audio-visual feedback on exam number three, several students contacted me to say that after seeing this recording the idea behind genre pedagogy was much clearer to them. When evaluating the final exams, it was clear that this part of the course content had made a difference for

the students. The final exam consisted of six open argument questions and students were instructed to choose four and write essay answers comprising no more than 2000 words. Students were clearly prone to select question related to the content of the ill-conceived question and these answers were more elaborate compared to other questions in the final exam. After course completion, students filled out a course evaluation for the whole semester. Several students made comments about how their understanding was more profound because of the audio-visual feedback which remodeled the learning path.

This paper is based on one single teaching observation, and cannot be accounted for as a study, or an investigation. Therefore it is impossible to say what details about this observation that caused the impact of an audio-visual feedback in formative assessment instead of a written comment. Several explanations are possible, or in fact a combination of them. It could be the fact that a mistake was made and this drew more attention to this area of the course content. It could also be the amount of feedback given to this question, since more is said in eight minutes of recording than in a few written lines, this question was given a larger amount of feedback and the topic thus received more attention. It could also be the fact that the feedback was multidimensional, thus listening to the teacher´s explanation would have a larger impact on learning compared to a few written lines.

And of course, the question is what to learn from this experience. It is not certain that students will perform with best results if feedback to all questions would be audio-visual. It might very well be the fact that the effect is largest when there is one or a small amount of feedback which differ from the majority in quality and modality. More research is required in online teaching and formative assessment. Generally, there is still very little research investigating how different features impact student performance [8].

References

[1] Giota, Joanna (2006). Självbedöma, bedöma eller döma?: Om elevers motivation, kompetens och prestationer i skolan. Pedagogisk forskning i Sverige, 11(2), 94–115.

[2] Scrivfen, M. (1967) The methodology of evaluation. In R. Tyler, R. Gagne and M. Schriven, Perspectives on Curriculum Evaluation (Aera Monograph Series – Curriculum Evaluation) (Chicago, Rand McNally and Co)..

[3] Taras, M. (2005). Assessment – summative and formative – some theoretical reflections. British Journal of Educational Studies, 53:4 (pp. 466-478

[4] Yorke, M. (2001). Formative Assessment and its Relevance to Retention. Higher Education of Research and Development Vol 20:2 pp. 115-126

[5] Shute, V. J. (2008). Focus on formative feedback. Rev. Educ. Res. 2008: 78

[6] Schwartz, F., & White, K. (2000). Making sense of it all: Giving and getting online course feedback. In K. W. White & B. H. Weight (Eds.), The online teaching guide: A handbook of attitudes, strategies, and techniques for the virtual classroom (pp. 57–72). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

[7] Bloom, B. (1956). Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook I: The Cognitive Domain. New York: David McKay.

[8] Hattie, J. & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. Review of Educational Research, March 2007 vol. 77, no. 1 pp. 81-112.