

Language Teaching from the View of Formative Assessment

Li Ruan

School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science & Technology, Qingdao, China

Abstract—As a two-way activity, formative assessment collects feedbacks from students to help teachers better the teaching methods. At the same time, it makes students have a clear understanding about their performance on the in-class and after-class participation. Traditional ways of evaluation prevent students from active and creative learning. Even though there are so many problems existing, formative assessment makes remarkable contributions to collect teaching feedbacks, increase teaching efficiency and improve learners' learning performance. For college English teaching, the task is to break the traditional test grading assessment pattern, and set up a completely new system to give effective evaluation on both the learning process and result.

Index Terms—formative assessment, language teaching, evaluation

I. INTRODUCTION

Formative assessment was put forward by M. Scriven, and B. S. Bloom introduced it into the teaching field (Xie Na, 2007). Generally speaking, based on teaching objectives, it evaluates students' academic performance by using various assessment methods and forms. In open, relaxed, friendly and informal environment, it evaluates students' interest, attitude, strategy, team spirit and etc to study.

Teachers can collect information in the way of observing, interviewing, questionnaires, assignments, tests and so on, to improve teaching methods and students' academic performance.

For many years, college English teaching in China relies too much on CET (College English Test), which is often viewed as the only way to measure the effectiveness of teaching methods and students' language competence. It puts great emphasis on the result but seldom on the learning process, and prevents the students from active and creative learning. Now more and more educators realize the importance of combining the process and result assessment, and try to explore more ways to assess not just the scores but also students' feeling, attitude and strategies on study.

As a two-way activity, on one side, it collects feedbacks from students to help teachers better the teaching methods. On the other side, students and their parents can have a clear understanding about their performance on the in-class and after-class participation (Guo Qian & Yang Zhi-qiang, 2003). So the three sides will be enhanced to cooperate better.

II. WAYS AND PRINCIPLES FOR FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE TEACHING

By observing, many college educators find students learn English in a very passive way, with less interests and passion. What is the root of the problem?

In fact, the traditional testing system usually tests students to answer some simple factual or multiple-choice questions, but seldom challenge them with open and creative questions which can encourage critical and insightful thinking. For passing the CET smoothly, students are forced to do a lot of memorizing tasks which are usually considered boring and uninteresting in their eyes. Passive learning and lost interest are the side-effect of the too much emphasis on test results and scores. Several standard tests a year are not enough to collect information for educators to have a deep understanding on students' performance and requirements. Other channels need to be explored to find what difficulties students are facing, and what they really need on study. Then, teachers will serve as the helper and guide to lead them and suggest them. The students will know about themselves better, and accordingly design some constructive plans to make more progress. Clear assessment on themselves will encourage them to be more active learners.

Besides testing, more ways to assess need to be designed, such as the observation of students' in-class participation, the face-to-face talk between teachers and their students, group discussion among students, diaries, keeping records for assignments (Genesee & Johna, 2001). Discussions and high-quality questions can also help students to accumulate knowledge and encourage them to get involved in deep thinking (Black, p. & William, D, 1998). The assessing ways are not limited. Teachers and students can talk over the ways to updated it.

Through observation, teachers can find out students' progress, problems, special requirements, and evaluate their attitude, interests on the learning materials and teaching methods. Information collected will help teachers make correct judgment and take appropriate actions to praise the progress they made, solve their problems, offer special training to fulfill their special requirement on study (Genesee, Fred & Johna A. Upshur, 1998).

By questionnaires and interviews, it is helpful for teachers to have a great insight into students' real ideas on learning. Questionnaires may collect information from students to detect their interests, hobbies, attitudes, habits on language

learning, which also reflect students' evaluation on teaching methods, teaching structures, textbooks and teaching materials. The way to ask questions can be true-false questions, multiple-choice questions or open questions. Even though the questions can offer effective information, the disadvantage is that it is not suitable for more complicated surveys. In order to cover various levels of those polled, questions to be asked usually are designed easy to be answered. So for further complex research, other forms of methods need to be adopted at the same time. Interviews are a direct way to communicate with students. By face-to-face talk, it is easy to observe the interviewees' external performance and inner feeling. Information to be collected through observation and questionnaires can be tested again by interviews. So interviews can compensate for the weaknesses of questionnaires.

Diaries are considered as a kind of written form of communication, which may keep students to think deeply about their strengths and weaknesses, and keep teachers to learn about their students' progress and problems. No matter the ways are discussions, face-to-face talk or diaries, the key is to communicate frankly, honestly and openly.

Keeping records and files for students' daily assignments, and updating them regularly will also be a good way to follow students' study pace. Some files (such as a tape, an essay or a report which are usually considered their best works), keep the records to show students' growth and development. Some files will show the process of a certain task, that is, how the work is going on. Therefore, for a project, it will include not only the final report, but also the drafts during the whole process. Other kinds of files are evidence to show students' progress and success, which take the function to make comparison between a student's first work and final work. Keeping files is a way to offer rich information to teachers, parents and students, and encourage students' to give correct evaluation themselves.

Today, Internet becomes a new way and tool for making formative assessment. With the widespread use of multimedia network teaching, it is possible to discuss and talk about academic performance online. New communicating channels, like E-mail, BBS, QQ, bring great convenience for teachers and students to ask and answer questions, give group discussions, and give evaluation to each other through the network. With the help of internet, Students can set their academic goals, control the flow of online study, and complete required tasks. Teachers are supervising the whole learning process and giving students appropriate help and guidance (Zhang Gui-ying & Hu Ji-yue, 2004). Tests can be made after each unit, and topics are arranged for discussion online. Two-way communication online is also convenient for students to get help from each other and their teachers, and remove the problems they have met in their study.

For the academic evaluation, no matter which way to follow, the key principles are as follows:

◇ Students play a very important role in the formative assessment. They are not only the targets under the research, but also the main body to give assessment. That means, students' classroom performance can not only be analyzed by teachers, but also by their classmates. All the students can get actively involved in the assessment to evaluate each other.

◇ Encouragement always goes with assessment. Through evaluation, students find the progress they have made, and try to feel and enjoy each step of success. Finding out their improvement, and giving encouragement on time will stimulate their motivation to learn.

◇ The evaluation is going through the whole teaching process. It is closely connected with the teaching and learning. What is evaluated not just the result of the tests and exams, but also factors like attitude, efforts, performance and etc.

◇ Various ways are adopted to make assessment, and various people can make the assessment, like teachers, parents, and students themselves. Students are always the main body in the learning process, so it is very necessary for them to grasp a complete set of skills to give appropriate self-evaluation, and reasonable assessment to their classmates. Peer assessment may improve students' communicative, cooperative abilities, and they get to know how to give a sound and reasonable judgment on others. Teachers' duties are offering guidance at the right time, and set up proper standards for their assessment.

◇ Make the evaluation process open and growing. In order to make it grow and improve better, updating it regularly is necessary. In order to make it more reliable, the evaluating process and the result is open to all the teachers, parents and students.

◇ The assessment will help students to set clear feasible goals, which is challenging but within their reach. If the goal is too demanding and difficult, learners will be more likely to feel frustrated and give up easily. So assessment will make them know better about their present performance and problems, and reasonable goals will build up their confidence and encourage them to go ahead further.

◇ Set clear standards for the assessment to make effective measurements. For instance, the degree of involvement for discussion, the accuracy of the assignment, the fluency of speaking, the richness of thoughts in diaries, the honesty and openness of the answers to questions, the frequency of practice and participation, etc, all of them will be precisely measured and scored.

◇ When teachers find problems in the assessment, quick feedback and measurement will be given to correct it (Black, P. & William, D, 1998). Giving feedback rapidly is very important to students. Since new information stored in our mind will decline and fade away, if learners don't reinforce them regularly, what they have learned will slip out of their mind soon. So when the memories are still fresh in the mind, correcting them on time and giving them proper scores will enhance learner to remember the correct information.

◇ Students' deep thinking of their learning process, learning habits, strong and weak points will help make full use of their potential, and build up their confidence (Black, P. & William, D, 1998). Clear and complete assessment will show

not only the progress but also the problems in the learning process. Insightful thinking will follow and actions will be taken to make them better.

III. TRADITIONAL AND NEW METHODS FOR EVALUATING STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

Setting up a new evaluating system for improving students' academic performance is one of the main tasks of the teaching reform in China. The adopted methods tend to be both quantitative and qualitative, such as: tests, the records of behavior by observation, analysis of works, demonstration of certain skills, experimental reports, findings of surveys, case study, and etc.

Frequently used methods in college language teaching are after-class or in-class assignments, daily tests, unit tests, mid-exams and final exams, which are mainly considered as traditional. Assessment in the form of tests and exams are the typical ways to assess students' efforts on study. The types of questions in the tests and exams are usually divided into objective and subjective ones. The scores of objective questions are easy to be measured, and the given points are hard influenced by teachers' personal ideas. Even the people who are unfamiliar with the tests can give scores, and the grades can also be measured by machines. Multiple-choice questions, true-false questions, matching questions, and fill-in questions are the usual forms. Subjective questions give students more freedom when answering questions. It is hard for teachers to give completely objective and accurate assessment, since more or less teachers personal ideas, values, experience will unconsciously influence their judgment. Open answers are the main feature of this type of questions. Tasks like writing, translation, and essay questions belong to this group. The whole testing system does help teachers have a better understanding about students' development and problems in their study.

However, nowadays as a new way of evaluation, the assessment of performance is increasingly becoming popular. When students are taking certain tasks, their attitude, efforts, the ability of problem-solving, decision-making, communication and cooperation, will be graded, which usually are hard to be assessed with tests. This pattern requires teachers to observe and analyze the behavior of their students.

The assessment of performance is closely connected with particular academic tasks which can be both in the written or non-written form. Tasks in written form, for instance: to design a graph, to create a poem, to write a short story can measure not only obtained knowledge, but also the ability of creation and imagination. To make it more specific, we demonstrate it in this way: some students are asked to design a graph for the schedule of a day, and other students have to analyze it, find a problem, solve the problem, and describe the way to remove the problem, and finally make a story based on the given information and their reasoning. The tasks in written form here is different from the traditional paper tests. They create a simulated environment to make use of knowledge and skills, and become tools to make assessment for students' performance. Tasks of non-written forms refer to other ways of measurements except paper and pens. A case in point is to ask students to make a call to talk about a job and ask for the chance to be interviewed.

Oral presentations and group discussion can also be good ways of evaluating performance, which to some degree can reflect the capacity of self-expression, logical reasoning and summarizing, and can show their thinking process and insightful understanding.

Simulated situational contexts are designed for getting ready for future real life. Role-play of the real social context, like court trials, city council, job interviews will offer an opportunity for students to show their abilities and skills, and at the same time to get familiar with and pave the way for their future.

Case study or surveys can help students to perceive and experience natural and social things, enhance their overall development and improve the problem-solving abilities. A case on studying and finding solutions to water loss and soil erosion, or research on the relationship between color and attention can be good ways for teachers to observe and find students' efforts and improvement, and make more accurate judgment on their performance.

Works like a poem, an article or anything created can be used as the specific forms for being evaluated.

Projects for single persons and groups can also help to evaluate student's performance. Projects carried out by individuals will focus on the assessment on the capacity of collecting, choosing and analyzing information, the skills to organize and design a report, the technique to express in written words. The result of the project is required to be creative, original, scientific, logical and artistic. Projects carried out by two or more students are usually ones to be completed relatively in a long period. Everyone in the group need to prepare a report to describe how the project is going to, and how the result is explained in their own way, so not only the group is assessed, but also the individual members in the group will be graded.

Integrated and comprehensive tasks will be assessed from several aspects, which combine the abilities to make academic research, to think critically, to communicate skillfully and etc. For instance, the thesis for graduation and final degree, will require students to get involved in the following activities like: choosing the subject, planning the schedule, collecting information, analyzing data, making surveys, evaluating the finding, completing the report, making oral presentation and answering questions. From the beginning to the end, the whole process emphasizes the skills to analyze, to reason, to draw conclusions, to communicate, to do research independently.

The above forms for evaluating students' performance will not only assess the result of their work, but also put great emphasis on the working process. In the whole process, mental, cognitive, emotional activities will be shown and analyzed, and at the same time, the difficulties, problems, and obstacles will appear and be dealt with. When making assessment, teachers will make full use of their personal experience to understand the students, and not just evaluate

their performance from the surface, but try to understand the deeper meaning behind their behaviors.

Formative assessment for performance is usually done from two aspects. For one of them, the evaluation is given based on the general impression, and details are not considered much. Each task or work will be granted a level or grade. For the other, each important detail will be analyzed and graded item by item, such as writing can be graded from the aspects of structure, view points, vocabulary and so on. How to make full use of the two types of assessment depends on the difference of tasks and requirements on students.

We take a 5-point grading standard as an example. For a certain task on study, usually 5 points are given for excellently completed tasks, having the ability to explain the questions in several effective ways, and showing skillfully used strategies and deep understanding of the requirements. 4 points are given for completing the task satisfyingly, making clear planning, using appropriate strategies and methods. 3 points are given for clear understanding of related knowledge, concepts and skills, but some key concepts are confused and made mistakes. 2 points are given for limited learned key concepts, unskillful application of the related knowledge, and concepts, fewer effectively used strategies and skills. 1 point is given for ineffective strategies, hardly grasped knowledge and skills, confused concepts and incorrect understanding of the requirements.

IV. PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS IN THE PROCESS OF ASSESSMENT

Many factors may affect the reliability of the formative evaluation. In the process of evaluation, different teachers and students will give their assessment based on different standards, because of their various belief, value, social and family background, educational level, and culture. Even though the same teacher, his or her judgment will be influenced by some unrelated factors, such as students' appearance, communicative ability, intimacy, family background (Chen Ji-zhuang & Xu Zhi-min, 2010). Nobody can deny the fact that to some degree, they have prejudice on something, and sometimes they even couldn't realize that when they do so. One of the solutions for teachers is to increase the frequency of observation within a certain period of time. In order to deal with the collected information more conveniently, it is suggested to keep a record or file for what is observed, and take it as a reference for making assessment. For making more objective evaluation, each educator needs to work hard on trying to be influenced less by unrelated factors, searching for suitable evaluating pattern, improving the grading and assessing system, and making the result more reliable.

Dealing with the relationship between the teaching and evaluating is another issue that is concerned about. The ultimate purpose of formative assessment is to serve the teaching process. However, too much evaluation will occupy the time and attention, and indirectly bring negative effect to teaching and learning. What's more, since much time is consumed when evaluating, the number of people to be assessed will be limited, too. So how to balance the two sides, and make valid assessment is still a great concern. On one hand, deficient assessment will prevent teachers and students to know about the truth and problems. On the other hand, too much assessment will make them feel exhausted and bored. The amount of time and energy put into the evaluation needs to be carefully arranged in order to make it have the most positive effect.

A big problem for students is that sometimes they are unwilling to cooperate with the teacher to give assessment, since they usually are the passive side in the traditional class. They get used to the form to be evaluated, and feel puzzled on how to give judgment on themselves and on each other. Another reason is that too much stress from the middle exams, final exams, CET-4, and CET-6 make them feel their final goal is just to go through all the tests, and they don't care about why and how to evaluate themselves. Some even think the complicated process for evaluation is a waste of time, and teachers should save their time on teaching knowledge. So clearly explaining the purpose and importance of evaluations to them and guiding them to use appropriate method and standard to make correct judgment on each other will help them actively get involved in the whole process. It is also important for them to understand that satisfying test result is not the only thing in their lives. Progress made in the learning progress should not be ignored, but highly valued.

Problems for assessment itself are about the validity and reliability of the process and the result. Compared with students' acquired knowledge and skills, their emotion, attitude, strategies and habits on learning are even harder to be measured with numbers. Furthermore, assessment for students is often set in certain given contexts, but not in the dynamic real social contexts, so it is even harder to check and measure their obtained knowledge and ability to apply it. Therefore, there is still a long way to go to look for better assessment tools and methods.

Even though there are so many problems existing, on the whole, formative assessment makes remarkable contributions to collect teaching feedbacks, increase teaching efficiency, correct learning habits, and improve learners' learning performance.

In order to form a complete assessment for students, more channels and sources of information will be discovered to collect reliable information from students. For college language teaching, the task is to break the traditional test grading pattern, and set up a completely new system to give effective evaluation on both the learning process and result. Tests and exams are no longer to be the only way to evaluate learning ability and teaching quality, and those ways of assessment will not be the only purposes for teaching and learning any more. The parts to be graded go beyond the traditional knowledge and skills, emotions and attitude factors will be added to it. How to give scientific evaluation and realize the teaching goals effectively will always be the target of college English teachers. The theories, patterns, and

specific skills for formative assessment are still on the way of improvement.

REFERENCES

- [1] Black, P. & William, D. (1998). Assessment and Classroom Learning. *Assessment in Education*, 5(1), 7-74.
- [2] Black, p. & William, D. (1998). Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80 (2): 139-148.
- [3] Chen Ji-zhuang & Xu Zhi-min. (2010). Formative Assessment and Its Application in College English Teaching. *A Journal of Research & Education*, 10, 31-35.
- [4] Genesee, Fred & Johna A. Upshur. (1998). Classroom-based Evaluation in Second Language Education. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 82.
- [5] Genesee, Fred & Johna A. Upshur. (2001). Classroom-based Evaluation in Second Language Education. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [6] Guo Qian & Yang Zhi-qiang. (2003). Formative Assessment and College English Teaching and Testing. *Tsing Hua Journal of Education*, 24(5), 103-108.
- [7] Xie Na. (2007). Brief Introduction Formative Assessment in College English Teaching and Learning. *Journal of Fuyang Teachers College (Social Science Edition)*, 6, 120-122.
- [8] Zhang Gui-ying & HuJi-yue. (2004) Study on Learning Evaluation Strategies in Web Environment. *Computer-Assisted Foreign Language Education*, 96, 26-29.

Li Ruan was born in Jilin, China in 1976. She received her M.A. degree in linguistics from the Ocean University of China in 2005.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China. Her research interest is applied linguistics.