

Formative Assessment in Chinese College English Classroom

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Abstract: This paper aims at exploring how to use formative classroom assessment to improve College English teaching and learning outcomes in China. The assessment of college English as a heated research has grabbed much attention these days. Researches concerning college English assessment share quite a large number at home and abroad. Many of the studies together with the successful experience of Finland show that classroom formative assessment makes a great difference in improving teaching and learning outcomes. Under such condition, college English teachers are expected to take more responsibility for assessing students in class. However, investigations show that the majority of college English teachers are incapable of conducting proper classroom assessment. Through literature study, this paper first makes in-depth analyses of value orientation and practice strategy of formative assessment in Finland classroom and then analyses Chinese current policy orientation for formative classroom assessment and status quo of classroom assessment to find the existing gap. On basis of the finding, this paper puts forward suggestions from ARCS perspective for effective practice of formative assessment in Chinese College English classroom.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Finland has received the wide attention from all over the world for its students' outstanding performance in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). According to Kupiainen, Hau-Tamäki & Karjalainen (2009), "high scores of Finnish students in PISA are due to the lack of high-stakes testing within the country".

By contrast, Chinese College English has been criticized from all walks of life for a long time, mainly for its existing problems, such as test-oriented teaching practice, wide-spread lack of motivation and interest for learning, and time-consuming but inefficient.

Studies show that at least 1/3 of the time for classroom activity is used for assessment activities, and the quality of classroom assessment greatly affects teaching quality and students' learning outcomes. As far as China is concerned, College English classroom assessment has become the bottleneck in College English teaching reform. Therefore, it is of great significance to learn from Finland's successful assessment experience and take into account of local college English teaching practice to explore proper college English classroom assessment strategies suitable for China's present conditions.

2. How is Formative Assessment Practiced in Finland?

2.1 Orientation of Formative Assessment in Finland

In Finland, assessment is mainly used to improve learning outcomes, which is "encouraging and supportive by nature" (Finnish National Board of Education 2010). Existing research has proved that formative assessment or assessment for learning can significantly improve learning outcomes of students (Black et al. 2003).

Formative assessment practices in Finland, such as immediate intervention, teacher feedback, and student self-assessment, to a certain extent, improves learning outcome of students. One of the purposes of formative assessment in Finland is to create an adaptive learning and developing environment for students. Formative assessment can help teachers understand students' ideas better, intervene or correct some misconceptions, and then extend students' thinking.

2.2 Practices of Formative Assessment in Finland

First of all, in Finnish classroom, teachers often use formative assessment to identify those students with problems in particular concepts and then provide immediate intervention (Grubb 2007). This kind of intervention is provided by one-to-one help in during-class or after-class guidance. Through timely assistance, teachers can help those students with learning difficulties adapt their learning environment, and then improve their learning.

Secondly, formative assessment can not only provide informal information for teachers to use in assessment, but also provide feedback for students. In Finland, feedback is used to guide student learning in class. The role of assessment within courses is to describe how well the students have met the learning and growth objectives (Finnish National Board of Education). Students' progress and learning achievement in the whole learning process of a course are assessed. Expectantly, formative assessment of students should be continuous, supportive and positive. In Finland, teachers provide written verbal analysis more often than grades, and student end-of-year assessment consists of formative feedback and suggestions instead of only a single grade. According to Black & William (1998), this kind of school performance reporting practice has positive impact on student learning and self-efficacy.

Thirdly, formative assessment in classroom promotes student self-assessment. The Finnish National Board of Education (2004) stressed importance of self-assessment and urged teachers to help students develop self-assessment skills. This is because, besides helping students gain more awareness of their progress through whole course, feedback for self-assessment can also help students understand their own thinking. Kulm (1994) suggests that grades should be provided to students in a way that students can understand and students should be informed of strategies to improve their performance. These two kinds of information will also help students develop skills in assessing their work in the future. Although it is time-consuming to teach students self-assessment skills at the beginning, and students may encounter many difficulties, development of student self-assessment skills is worth time and effort in the long run. Through self-assessment training, students will be more independent and confident in personal goal setting and assessment, which is beneficial for their whole lives.

3. Is it Feasible to Carry out Formative Assessment in Chinese College English Classroom?

3.1 Theoretical Grounding

As a new type of educational assessment approach, formative assessment undergoes gradual formation and improvement with development of humanistic education thought, constructivist linguistics and multiple intelligence theory. Formative assessment aims at encouraging students to learn, to regulate their own learning process, to improve their ability of independent learning, and then enhance their confidence and sense of achievement.

Formative assessment is characteristic of student-orientation, focuses on students' all-round development, and assesses students' learning activity, learning attitude, cooperation, and learning competence through diversified assessment methods through whole learning process. Different from traditional summative assessment, process of formative assessment carries functions of giving feedback, providing incentive, enabling reflection, facilitating summative assessment, and recording progress. Humanism, constructivism and multiple intelligence theory are exerted to full play in the whole process of formative assessment.

3.2 Policy Guidance

Outline of National Medium-and-long-Term Program for Education Reform and Development of China states: "To reform education quality assessment and talent assessment system. To improve education and teaching assessment. To establish scientific and diverse assessment criteria according to talent cultivation objective and philosophy. To carry out government-, school-, parent-, and society- involved education quality assessment activities. To make a comprehensive record of students' growth. To perfect comprehensive quality assessment, and to explore various assessment methods to promote students' development and encourage students to be optimistic, independent and hard-working. "

In addition, on June 1st, 2018, China Standards of English (CSE) was officially implemented nationwide. Language-competence-oriented as China Standards of English is, CSE is based on communicative language ability model, and integrates actual needs of language ability description with current situation of English learning and teaching in China. CSE constructs the theoretical framework for Chinese native English learning and teaching assessment. As national education quality standard and essential reference for talent cultivation of College English, CSE is bound to play an important role in College English teaching assessment.

With implementation of *Outline of National Medium-and-long-Term Program for Education Reform and Development and China Standards of English*, the humanistic orientation of College English education is more clarified, which means that College English education should pay more attention to "all-round" development of students in process of improving quality and outcomes of College English teaching.

In line with policy guidance, College English assessment is expected to pay attention to assessment of learning process, focus on for-learning and for-development nature of assessment, highlight development-facilitating purpose of assessment, and advocate use of formative assessment in teaching process and outcome.

3.3 Reality Call

In practice of College English assessment, most universities in China have not made specific requirements for formative assessment. As for "what to assess", "how to assess", and "when to assess", they are usually based on teachers' personal understanding and practice, which results in a void of formal and standardized records of students' English learning. In addition, although diversified assessment methods are also expected and required by College English syllabus, in many colleges and universities, a single form of written test with fixed types of questions is often adopted. Thus, formative assessment in College English teaching is only confined to form and slogan in many colleges and universities, which leads to undesirable result of teachers' "teaching for test" and students' "learning for test".

Status quo in China calls for systematic study of formative assessment of College English classroom, which will promote construction of a new, sustainable and diversified College English classroom assessment system.

4. Suggestions for Formative Assessment Practices in College English Classroom from ARCS Perspective

ARCS model was originally put forward as an instructional design model by Professor John M. Keller of Florida State University in the 1980s. The model focuses on how to motivate and maintain students' enthusiasm through instructional design. ARCS is acronym of the four English words, attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction, which stand for the four related criteria through all stages of instructional process with consideration of student affective factors during learning.

With insight from ARCS model and successful formative assessment experience in Finland, this paper tries to construct strategies of how to practice formative assessment in College English

classroom in China.

4.1 Attention

To draw student attention to formative assessment in college English classroom, teachers should grasp the "essence" of formative assessment accurately, update assessment conception, raise awareness for assessment practice, actively participate in exploration of assessment methods, and generate assessment changes.

In China, college English classroom teaching is expected to integrate social needs and individual needs. It not only undertakes function of improving student language competence, but also cultivating student humanistic quality, in order to achieve the ultimate education objective of "whole person" and eventually realize transformation from teaching to education.

Gaining insight from Finland's formative assessment orientation, Chinese College English teachers should renew their assessment conception, grasp core of formative assessment with consideration of Chinese context, pay attention to social construction of classroom learning, take into account of individual differences and dynamic learning outcomes of students.

In college English classroom formative assessment, teachers should pay attention to joint efforts of teachers and students, strengthen self-discovery and learner-centeredness, encourage student active participation, promote interplay between formative assessment and students' cognition during whole learning process, provide concrete and specific evidence recording students' continuous progress and individual growth, so as to ensure realization of college English classroom teaching and education objective.

4.2 Relevance

Through scientific positioning of formative assessment structure, college English teachers should be able to locate student learning objectives accurately and then select appropriate assessment methods.

Theory of multiple intelligences and the practice of formative assessment in Finland shed light on how to carry out formative assessment in Chinese College English classroom. Prior learning of students is the most fundamental basis for teachers to design formative assessment and then carry out formative assessment activities. However, formative assessment in college English classroom cannot only be limited to students' cognitive domain of language knowledge and skills. Attitude toward learning, learning strategies and cultural awareness are also the areas that formative assessment in College English classroom should cover.

When carrying out formative assessment in College English classroom, teachers should pay attention to transforming abstract language knowledge into situational knowledge and facilitate student to better experience of contextual application. In order to choose proper assessment methods to ensure assessment fairness, it is necessary to locate achievement goal of students accurately, which should match their learning motivation, and then find out the proximal development zone of students.

Various and flexible assessment methods are suggested, such as classroom observation, after-class interview, student self-assessment, peer assessment, questionnaire survey, portfolio, learning reflection, project demonstration, etc., which can help teachers to collect accurate assessment information, achieve consistency between what has been taught and learned with what is assessed, and hence improve validity of assessment.

4.3 Confidence

To help students enhance confidence from college English classroom learning experience and maintain their motivation for successful learning, teachers should improve their own assessment literacy continuously, explore appropriate formative assessment methods, use open, constructive and developmental assessment language.

Assessment literacy is defined as the basic concept, basic knowledge and basic skills of assessment that teachers should have when they are engaged in academic assessment activities in daily professional practice. Studies show that at present the majority of College English teachers in China have relatively low assessment literacy, which mainly lies in incompetency for feedback, communication, and application of assessment result. In addition, the prevailing large class teaching model more or less leads to weakening of students' motivation for learning and amplification of classroom anxiety, which is manifested as "communication panic leads to avoidance or withdrawal of language communication; fear of negative assessment leads to lack of enthusiasm in trying to practice new language skills; test anxiety leads to underachievement of learning outcome and test results" (Zhang Lili, Jiang Zhanhao 2010).

College English teachers should constantly improve their assessment literacy, recognize and take into account of the existing differences of students originating from differences of family, environment, intelligence and other reasons while carrying out formative assessment of College English classroom. Qualitative assessment is preferred, which enables description of assessment result to be more constructive and beneficial, through which students can obtain more objective knowledge of themselves.

By highlighting learners' affective factors emphasized by humanism in assessment language, students are encouraged in learning process, and then generate a sense of self-confidence and achievement, thus form a driving force for continuous learning and progress, and at length help each student at every level establish confidence in self-development.

4.4 Satisfaction

College English teachers should help students learn how to do effective self-assessment and then have awareness of meaningful learning, experience learning happiness and achieve learning satisfaction.

Proximal development zone theory by Vygotsky suggested that learning occurs at internal and external psychological levels (Vygotsky 1978). According to Vygotsky, learning and development is a kind of social cooperative activity, and knowledge can never be "taught" to someone. In other words, "the process of teaching and learning is gradually transformed into students' own learning under teachers' suggestions and guidance. In this process, internalization and interaction are the keys to teaching and learning "(Zhang Lili, 2007).

After accurately locating student proximal development zone, teachers should act as "consultants", and "facilitators" to help students improve their assessment literacy. Through self-reflection and action plan, students are encouraged to think continuously, conduct timely and effective self-assessment and peer assessment. In the meantime, teachers should help students by building a "scaffold" for College English learning, realizing "internalization and transformation of external knowledge into consciousness control" (Vygotsky 1978), and then finally help students achieve meaningful learning.

5. Conclusion

Chinese College English teachers can gain enlightenment from Finland's successful experience in formative assessment. By attracting students' attention, shortening the gap between learning and practice, improving students' learning confidence, and realizing students' learning satisfaction, students' learning objectives can be better achieved and realized, so as to countermeasure the current problems existing in college English teaching reform and facilitate realization and implementation of the teaching and education goals of College English in China.

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