

# Teachers' Views on Conducting Formative Assessment in Chinese Context

Xuefeng Wang

*Abstract* – A new system of curriculum evaluation of formative assessment has been established in secondary education system in China for seven years. Attention has been given to teaching and learning as a meaning making interactive process rather than summative result of assessment. In the English teaching area, instead of using solely summative assessment, teachers are asked to give students formative assessment during the teaching process. In order to further investigate the effectiveness and possible problems of formative assessment in secondary English teaching, a questionnaire survey was conducted to investigate the situation from the teachers' perspectives. Views of the teachers' on positive aspects and potential problems of formative assessment in English teaching are examined in this paper. With the support of some theoretical formative views, this paper then presents some effective suggestions through discussions.

*Key words* – formative assessment, positive aspects, potential problems

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the newly composed education system and aims of education in China, the new curriculum standards for both elementary schools and high schools were developed to meet the need not only of society, science, and technology, but also of students' lives in a changing world. Examination-oriented assessment has been embedded in education in China for thousands of years. Recently it has been questioned and formative assessment has been recommended in teaching and learning in the newly established system of curriculum evaluation. The new evaluation system [5] is oriented towards:

- 1) a developmental evaluation system for assessing learning of learners to promote their universal/general development;
- 2) a developmental evaluation system for assessing teachers and teaching to improve the overall quality of teaching;
- 3) a developmental evaluation system for curriculum products to accelerate curriculum development.

According to the English educational curriculum reform, the combination of formative and summative assessment in English teaching is strongly required as stated in The Chinese National Nine-year Compulsory Education of Full-time Secondary School English Syllabus [6]. Students'

learning evaluation has been changing from what we call examination-centred education to quality-oriented education, whose intention is to develop students' creativity and practical abilities and attention has been given to teaching and learning as a meaning making process.

English teaching curriculum reform challenges traditional views and practices on assessment, such as assessment concepts, content, assessment forms, participants' components and the functions of the participants, as well as assessment tools. However, teachers and students are deeply entrenched in an examination-orientated discourse, the current reform direction requires a change of their conceptions and beliefs about assessment in particular and teaching in general. The new system of curriculum evaluation of formative assessment has been undertaken for seven years in the middle schools in China since its establishment in 2001. It is worth conducting an investigation of teachers' views on the positive aspects and potential problems of carrying out formative assessment in the middle schools in China. This will significantly promote the development of the educational reform in China

This paper examines the teachers' views on the positive aspects and potential problems of conducting formative assessment in the middle schools in China. A questionnaire survey of 100 English teachers from middle schools of rural and urban areas in Shanxi province, China was undertaken to get the views from teachers' perspectives. Discussions followed include some suggestions particularly of teachers' concept and awareness on formative assessment.

## II. THE DESIGN OF THE RESEARCH

In order to obtain the views of teachers of English on formative assessment, a questionnaire survey was conducted among 100 English teachers from junior middle schools from rural and urban areas in Shanxi province in China.

### A. Application of the research method of questionnaire

Questionnaires are popular among educational researchers in general and language teaching research in particular, because they have a number of advantages [7]:

- 1) They are self-administered and can be given to large groups of subjects at the same time. They are therefore less expensive to administer than other procedures such as interviews.
- 2) Anonymity is assured, subjects tend to share information of a sensitive nature more easily.
- 3) Since the same questionnaire is given to all subjects, the data are more uniform and standard.
- 4) Since they are usually given to all subjects of the research at exactly the same time, the data are more accurate.

Questionnaires come in all shapes and sizes. They could be factual questions, multiple-choice, ranked questions,

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X. F. Wang is with the Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Australia. She is an English teacher in the English Department, Taiyuan Normal University, Shanxi Province, China. She is now a PhD student of the University of Tasmania. 0011-61-3-63243792

(e-mails: [xfwang@utas.edu.au](mailto:xfwang@utas.edu.au) / [xuefengwang\\_669@hotmail.com](mailto:xuefengwang_669@hotmail.com))

open-ended questions, scaled questions and so on. No matter which type is used, questionnaires, in language teaching research, can be used to survey study skills, to analyze the needs, to make assessment, for example, on certain curriculum, to investigate language skills and learning strategies of the students, and to evaluate language teaching programs.

Questionnaire data is distinct from that which can be obtained from interviews, observation or documents and the information from questionnaires tends to fall into two broad categories of “facts” and “opinions” [3]. It is very useful and purposeful when questions and instructions asked are simple. Questionnaires that can guarantee confidentiality may elicit more truthful responses than would be obtained with a personal interview.

As one of the major survey methods, questionnaire survey was employed in this study because the researcher attempts to obtain factual responses from teachers regarding their general understanding of and views on formative assessment. The researcher also wanted to examine the teachers’ views on positive aspects and potential problems of formative assessment used in secondary school English teaching because questionnaire can greatly facilitate the summarisation and analysis of the data collected. Regarding the characteristics of the research method of questionnaire survey, it was best suitable to be employed in conducting the research.

#### *B. The design of the questions*

Questions were open-ended because open-ended questions could allow respondents to include more information including their feelings, attitudes and understanding of the subject from which the researcher could better access the respondents’ true feelings on the issue. With open-ended questions, researchers are likely to get answers from the respondents which may contain extra information from the respondents. And these questions could also be used more readily for secondary and future analysis by the researcher or other researchers.

The questions were designed in regard to the positive aspects and possible problems of formative assessment in daily English teaching in the middle schools in relation to forms of activities and formative assessment. The forms of activities include classroom activities, testing, tasked-based projects and the formative assessments are self-assessment, teacher assessment, peer assessment, teacher and student joint assessment, parent-based assessment and the record form of formative assessment.

The class activities such as question and answer, presentation, participation in the games, discussion, role-play etc., are chosen for the purpose of analyzing students’ learning behaviour in class and timely providing feedback the situation to parents and students to develop effective plans for the future learning.

Through the tests, students get opportunities to reflect on their own learning effectiveness thereby promoting their performance improvement.

Tasked-based projects increase students’ interest in learning and allow them to know that they are able to achieve better results as long as they work hard. While they are learning new knowledge, their language ability improves and they gain useful experience and practical application of language ability.

Formative assessment of self-assessment is for the purpose of developing students’ ability to be responsible for their own study, to participate in the assessment activities. It encourages them to develop such skills as reflecting on their own learning experiences, evaluating their own learning situation, seeing their own accomplishments and the things need to be improved. Self-assessment can also help students develop new learning objectives, and gradually become autonomous and self-reliant learners.

Formative assessment of teacher assessment ensures the accuracy of the assessment and makes better recommendations to improve teaching and it also develops teaching strategies for teachers to provide an effective basis for their teaching. Peer assessment

Formative assessment of peer assessment provides opportunities for students to learn from each other and to encourage active participation of the classroom activities, to promote self-expression, cooperation and mutual assistance. Peer assessment can be realized in group activities of making conversation, discussion, debate, role play, story telling and picture description, etc. Then students do assessment among them or mutual assessment to find their weaknesses so as to achieve better in the next assessment.

Formative assessment of teacher and student joint assessment is usually popular with students because this assessment reflects a democratic interaction to promote teacher and students collaborative assessment activities.

Formative assessment of parent-based assessment provides opportunities for parents to know how their children learn at school and it promotes parental involvement in teaching and learning.

Formative assessment of the record form is based on the form of a file record and the file includes: Record form of daily learning situation and the record form of the terminal learning situation. From the file record of daily learning, the participation of the classroom activities and different steps of students’ learning are recorded. And a comprehensive assessment of all classroom activities that students participated during the semester and students’ terminal examination are recorded in the file record form of the terminal learning situation.

#### *C. Selection of the respondents*

The respondents’ selection is based on the following criteria:

- 1) They are English teachers of junior middle schools.
- 2) They have received training of the newly established system of curriculum evaluation.
- 3) They use formative assessment in their normal teaching.
- 4) They are willing to be respondents.
- 5) They have at least three years of junior middle school English teaching experience.

#### *D. Data analysis*

Data analysis focused upon the categories in accordance with the teachers’ views on the positive aspects and potential problems to formative assessment in relation to the forms of activities and formative assessment. Instead of doing detailed statistical analysis, in this paper, the researcher summarized the general opinions of the teachers’ on positive aspects and potential problems to find the general views of the teachers’.

### III. FORMATIVE VIEWS OF TEACHING ASSESSMENT

Formative assessment has been popular and effectively used in education evaluation in western countries in the 1980s. The research projects on formative assessment and educational assessment reform have been undertaken world wide in recent years to improve teaching and learning.

Black and William [2] define assessment broadly to include all activities that teachers and students undertake to get information that can be used diagnostically to alter teaching and learning. In this definition, assessment encompasses teacher observation, classroom discussion, and analysis of student work, including homework and tests. Assessment becomes functional and constructive when the information derived from assessment is used to adapt teaching and learning to meet student needs. Curriculum innovation can be undertaken systematically if there is a continual flow of evaluative information back to the teachers who plan and implement the curriculum.

Formative assessment is essential for providing feedback on a student's progress so that any errors or difficulties can be identified and corrected [4]. The results of such an assessment would be a series of scores for each task in the progression, enabling the teacher to pinpoint problems, to provide students with detailed feedback on their progress, and to make decisions relating to how instruction should best continue.

With formative assessment apparently helping low-achieving students, including students with disabilities, even more than it helped other students [2]. Black [1] concluded based on at least 20 studies that formative assessment helps the 'low attainers' in improving their learning whilst raising the overall level of achievement. He also found a number of common characteristics among the research reports. These include: the involvement of new modes of pedagogy that calls for significant changes in classroom practices; the active involvement of pupils in the assessment process; the results of the assessment practices have to be used in adjustment of teaching and learning strategies; formative assessment can affect the motivation and self-esteem pupils with obvious benefits in engaging pupils in self-assessment.

According to the above discussions, formative assessment is the most important assessment practice which has a powerful impact on students' learning and helps indicate how well a student has learned particular skills/knowledge. It also enables teachers to improve their instructions to enhance teaching. It occurs when teachers/peers provide information to students in ways that enable the student to improve learning through a self-evaluation. It helps low-achieving students or students with disabilities and helps support discouraged students. The aim of formative assessment is to help students learn to 'self assess' so they can move on in order to achieve.

Compared with formative assessment, summative assessment is used to grade students and summarise achievement to provide teachers, students and parents with information on students' levels which may have used for programme evaluation to find out the effectiveness of a curriculum or consequence on students' future.

Regarding the Chinese National Nine-year Compulsory Education of Full-time Secondary School English Syllabus, two major forms of assessments, formative and summative,

have been strongly recommended to teachers of English in secondary schools.

### IV. SUMMARY OF THE TEACHER'S VIEWS ON CONDUCTING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

In order to obtain the views of the teachers of English on formative assessment, questionnaire survey in regard to positive aspects and possible problems of formative assessment in secondary English teaching was undertaken among 100 English teachers of junior middle schools in Shanxi province in China. The questionnaire survey results were summarized as follows:

#### *A. Teacher' views on positive aspects of formative assessment*

- 1) Through formative assessment, teachers of English have changed their traditional ideas of language assessment. Teachers of English have become aware that it is important to make the language situations and language teaching as realistic as possible to provide students with suitable experiences that encourage them to ultimately use language in real-life communication.
- 2) With formative assessment, students have learnt to self-assess and to understand the importance of cooperative learning. They communicate with each other and have more chance to speak English.
- 3) The most important thing is that formative assessment helps low-achieving students become more confident, since they have more chance to express themselves to show their potential talents.
- 4) Students' learning is evaluated not only by teachers, but also by students themselves and their peer students concerning both their achievements and weaknesses.
- 5) Formative assessment arouses students' interest of learning English. Learning English is not just learning text by heart but with authentic language and its social contexts.
- 6) Formative assessment is good for teachers to get feedback from student himself/herself, peer students, parents and teachers themselves to help monitor teaching and learning and encourages children to learn.
- 7) Formative assessment helps students participate in classroom activities and changes students from passive acceptance of the assessment to be the masters of learning.
- 8) Formative assessment adjusts students learning strategies and enhances students' capacity to interact with people and helps stimulate their learning effectiveness.
- 9) Formative assessment provides opportunities for the parents to involve in the school teaching and learning and to know their children's learning better at schools.

#### *B. Teachers views on potential problems of formative assessment*

- 1) Teachers lack comprehensive and profound understanding of the status and role of evaluation in basic education curriculum reform process;
- 2) Teachers of English are weak in basic research of curriculum evaluation, and they do not really know

about the basic education curriculum evaluation system.

- 3) The Ministry of Education in China has not established effective evaluation mechanisms which support curriculum reform and development.
- 4) The evaluation still in the simple forms of assessment, paying more attention to test/ summative assessment whereas paying less attention to non-test/ formative assessment.
- 5) Teachers are under big pressure of finishing the teaching tasks and of getting high proportion of students entering schools of a higher grade. They have limited time to do teaching research and to conduct formative assessment in their teaching.
- 6) The examination- oriented education aggravated to very serious extent. However, teachers, students and parents have all accepted the situation.
- 7) Some teachers think formative assessment is a continuous process which is too complicated to be undertaken.
- 8) Big class problem is still an obstacle which makes it difficult for the teachers to concern about the achievement of each individual student and to organize classroom activities and the proper assessment.
- 9) With the education reform going on, some teachers' ideas or concept of assessment are still very traditional, which fail to follow the rapid development of English teaching reform.
- 10) Most teachers have no research awareness and are not interested in the new forms of assessment.

## V. DISCUSSIONS

According to the above results of the teachers' views on conducting formative assessment in secondary school English teaching, it can be seen that the concept of 'formative assessment' is a 'dilemma' to most English teachers. One the one hand, they can theoretically understand the benefits of formative assessment and it has been strongly strengthened in education curriculum. On the other hand, they still lack comprehensive and profound understanding of the real importance of evaluation in curriculum reform in China because the examination-oriented summative assessment has still been deeply rooted in education evaluation system. Taking the National Entrance Examination as an example, teachers are under great pressure of having higher proportion of students enrolling in the universities and their level of teaching, salary and so on are decided by the proportion. So their teaching focus is on the preparation for the examination rather than the development of students' potential talents. More seriously, teachers, students and parents have all accepted the situation. In addition, The Ministry of Education in China has had no effective evaluation mechanisms to support the curriculum reform. If there are ways in which policy makers and others can provide direct help and support to the everyday classroom task of achieving better learning, then surely these ways ought to be pursued vigorously [2]. Thus it is worth noting that the implementation of formative assessment needs good policy to support and it is also important to set up reasonable evaluation system.

As normal teachers, it is very hard to decide what to do, to carry out the new policy of education reform or to keep

the old methods of teaching to satisfy the requirements of examinations to promote students enrolling in schools of higher grade. As a result, the reform of education or curriculum evaluation is in form rather in real meaning. Therefore, for the purpose of conducting the education reform in real meaning, teachers' roles are crucial in classroom teaching.

Black and William [2] discusses the classroom as a 'black box' which contains inputs from the outside, including students, teachers, other resources, management rules and requirements, parental anxieties, standards, tests with high stakes, and so on. Teachers are the persons who know very well what are happening inside the 'black box' and they are the persons who can control the classroom activities which help produce better outputs. It is interesting to note that the concept 'black box' is still lurking in the minds of some Chinese teachers and could cause some confusion and conflict while dealing with formative assessment. And the idea that assessment is a continuing practice can be a challenge. Teachers have the pressure of managing complicated and demanding situations, channelling the personal, emotional, and social pressures of a group of 60 students in order to help them learn well and become better learners in the future. Standards can be raised only if teachers can tackle this task more effectively. So it is worth considering the ways of developing teachers' awareness of conducting formative assessment in classroom teaching to facilitate teaching and learning and to help teachers raise teaching standards.

Apart from the objective reasons of having pressure of examination-centred teaching and learning and the ineffective education policy, it is necessary for the teachers to find some weaknesses from their own aspects and see if they have the quality or ability to manage or adapt to the new system of curriculum evaluation to follow the steps of education development. So in order to be qualified teachers to satisfy the requirements of the new education system, they should change their traditional ideas of teaching to be teachers who are responsible for planning effective teaching and learning and developing students' learning capacity through classroom activities which is recognized as central to classroom practice during the teaching process. At the same time, they should regard formative assessment as a key professional skill for them. For instance, their feedback must be constructive because any assessment has an emotional impact and learner's motivation should be taken into account such as providing students with more opportunities for self-assessment and giving students constructive feedback and protecting their initiative to develop students' motivation. In addition, they are responsible for promoting students to achieve their learning goals by giving constructive guidance about how to achieve. Moreover, they should be capable of developing students' capacity for self-assessment so that they can become reflective and self-managing and recognize the full range of achievements of all learners. Therefore, formative assessment requires teachers to have the abilities of creation, organization and evaluation. Through formative assessment, teachers should arouse students' learning interest, be aware of their achievements and weaknesses to adjust their teaching which need to pay great effort. When considering how to change teachers traditional ideas to make the formative assessment successfully, training is needed to help them develop good command of English and

linguistic awareness and improve the quality of language assessment. It is also importance for the teachers themselves to be aware that they are crucial in the whole process of teaching and learning.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Educational reform is taking place in China. There are many challenges as teaching and learning in China are traditionally deep rooted in the transmission model in which teachers are the primary source of knowledge and power and students are at the receiving end. Confucianism has deeply permeated various aspects of life in China and it is still an important factor in the educational discourse. Examination-oriented system badly stopped curriculum evaluation reform. While the introduction of formative assessment to education is a positive development, there are still issues and problems facing teachers, students and policy makers. Especially, teachers should change their roles of being slaves of the traditional evaluation of examination-centred system to being pioneers of new curriculum evaluation reform. Being well aware of the real meaning of curriculum evaluation and formative assessment is crucial for teachers to improve teaching and learning and to promote education reform fundamentally. It is hoped that this small study provides some insights to this aspect of reform in China.

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