



How to handle the challenges prevailing through formative assessment

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Abstract

The article explores the challenges of the formative assessment and suggests ways to address them on the grounds of students' surveys, emphasizes the necessity of formative assessment in the teaching and learning process, as it produces substantial benefits alongside productive and incessant feedback used by teachers or lecturers. The paper provides benefits associated with comment-oriented formative assessment. Students' achievement largely derives from the productive and straightforward assessment. The problem of evaluating the learning process remains controversial and is still continuously being discussed as a burning issue. Thus, challenges are seemingly unavoidable. The article aims to discuss arising challenges as triggering factors of poor academic performance and attempts to offer some solutions. Typically, prevailing obstacles hinders students from performing appropriately. The article attaches the importance to formative assessment and provides steps how mildly and leniently the framework of formative assessment could be completed without complications and impact on students' psyche. These psychological issues are beyond our sight. The paper is an endeavor to decipher students' fears and anxieties that predominate within the course of teaching in the respect of formative assessment. Thus, in addition to analyzing formative assessment and its challenges, the given article carries psychological features as well.

Key words: framework, feedback, psychology, productive teaching, survey.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, large-scale reforms are actively being incorporated in almost all fields, including education. Education is a necessary prerequisite for the success of any country. It makes the pivotal contribution to the development of progressive societies, and it goes beyond dispute that traditional assessment approaches no longer meet modern challenges and demands. Hence, progressive reforms occur at an exponential pace. As assessment system is the most remarkable tool for students' achievement, it must be objective and effective for further development and improvement of the learning process. There are two types of criterion-based

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undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in the teaching process, as assessment is a key to students' accomplishments. Numerous scientific researches are dedicated to exploring and analyzing modern assessment systems.

2. Materials

Wiliam (2010) in his article *the role of formative assessment in effective learning environments*, describes assessment as the bridge between teaching and learning. He denotes that the concept of formative assessment emerged with the recognition of the importance of feedback and application of navigational metaphors about staying on course through corrective steering. "There is substantial evidence on how feedback improves learning, but most studies suffer from weak conceptualisation and neglect of longer-term impacts. The definition here emphasizes the role of assessment in improving the quality of instructional decisions. It can be seen as entailing five "key strategies":

1. Clarifying, sharing and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success.
2. Engineering classroom activities that elicit evidence of learning.
3. Providing feedback that moves learners forward.
4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another.
5. Activating students as owners of their own learning.

Formative assessment is proposed as a process of capitalising on, "moments of contingency" for the purpose of regulating learning processes". (p.136). We are in favor of Wiliam's idea and assert the opinion that understanding learning purposes, giving clarity and sharing these objectives will contribute to fulfilling teaching and learning goals. According to Sadler (1989) formative assessment is concerned with how judgments about the quality of student responses (performances, pieces, or works) can be used to shape and improve student's competence by short-circuiting the randomness and inefficiency of trial-and-error learning (p.120). In *advancing formative assessment*, which is a guide for instructional leaders, Moss & Brookhart (2009) use the windmill metaphor to portray the deep insight into formative assessment. "We can use the metaphor of a windmill to visualize the formative assessment process and its effects. Just as a windmill intentionally harnesses the power of moving air to generate energy, the formative assessment process helps students intentionally harness the workings of their own minds to generate motivation to learn. Propelled by the formative assessment process, students understand and use learning targets, set their own learning goals, select effective learning strategies, and assess their own learning progress. And as students develop into more confident and competent learners, they become motivated (energized) to learn, increasingly able to persist during demanding tasks and to regulate their own effort and actions when they tackle new learning challenges. when a windmill whirls into action, its individual blades seem to disappear. The same thing happens to the six elements of the formative assessment process. These interrelated elements are the following:

- Shared learning targets and criteria for success
- Feedback that feeds forward
- Student goal setting
- Student self-assessment
- Strategic teacher questioning
- Student engagement in asking effective questions.

As teachers and students actively and intentionally engage in learning, the individual elements unite in a flurry of cognitive activity, working together and depending on each other. Their power comes from their combined effort.” (pp.5,6).

It is also crucial to underline the importance of appropriate feedback and the role of a teacher in the learning process. As Black and William (1998) state in their well-known research studies *Assessment and Classroom Learning*, when national or local assessment policies are changed, teachers become confused.

- Formative assessment is not well understood by teachers and is weak in practice.
- The context of national and local requirements for certification and accountability will exert a powerful influence on its practice and its implementation calls for rather deep changes both in teachers’ perception of their own role in relation to their students and in their classroom practice. (pp. 14,15).

Black & Wiliam (2009) also emphasize teachers’ immense role in the process and define that in formulating effective feedback the teacher has to make decisions on numerous occasions, often with little time for reflective analysis before making a commitment. The two steps involved, the diagnostic in interpreting the student contribution in terms of what it reveals about the student’s thinking and motivation, and the prognostic in choosing the optimum response: both involve complex decisions, often to be taken with only a few seconds available. (pp.17,18) As Dilaverova et al. (2024) explore in their study- *formative assessment as a superior tool for the teachers to avail the students to have deeper insights in their learning preferences and to enhance their overall academic performance* – “the most essential benefit of formative assessment is giving feedback to the learners and feedback is inevitably a key to avail a student understand his/her flaws, problems to eradicate and to help him devise better plans for further learning. Along the learning road, the students meet different roadblocks that they have to overcome in order to advance toward their goals/objectives. These obstacles might reside within the learning activities themselves – harder topics, difficult exercises – or/and in the students’ mind – such as “I cannot solve it”, “I do not have what it takes to learn math”, “I am not a language learner kind of person” and so on. Constructive feedback has to identify not only the difficulties met by the student when dealing with learning topics and exercises, homework, but also with those hardships met when approaching a learning task: type of self-talk, self-criticism, self-image as a student, pessimism or optimism, confidence in his own learning success, etc. All these aspects are usually harder to be noticed, as they reside in the back of the students’ minds, lurking. They can have either a positive or a negative contribution to the student’s learning, depending on how are dealt with by the students themselves.” (p. 4191).

3. Methods

Research was conducted at Bahcesehir International University (BAU) Batumi, using direct observation, written comments (comment-oriented approach), and a final step engaging students’ verbal surveys, interactions and discussions. Bahcesehir International University Batumi provides medical education to international students, and learning process is delivered in English. Our course is Georgian as a foreign language. Hence, the complexity and intricacy of the Georgian language can significantly influence students’ academic performance. Georgian is characterized by myriads of peculiarities and exceptions, making its acquisition seem like an insurmountable obstacle for majority of foreigners. Moreover, living and studying in a foreign country and environment is another barrier for students, especially for new ones.

Consequently, the process of emerging cultural barriers is quite common. Due to human nature, encountering barriers leads some individuals to give up, reduces curiosity—a crucial component of the learning process and intensifies frustration. After anticipating these challenges and difficulties, we came up with the following plan:

At the beginning of the year, two groups were chosen: the first group was incessantly given comment-oriented formative assessment with detailed written feedback throughout the term, while the second group received traditional formative assessment without explanatory notes.

The comment-oriented approach was arranged as follows:

- At the beginning of the lectures, we introduced written explanatory notes (based on previous performance.)
- The first part of the notes put an emphasis on their strengths and included accolades. Written feedback was distributed individually. For example, if students had to prepare an essay, we highlighted their strengths with comments such as: “Your body part is brilliant with clear supporting sentences,” “your conclusion honestly deserves appreciation,” “your introduction is gripping and well-structured,” “writing is your strength,” “The choice of vocabulary is excellent,” “you have grown remarkably,” “your diligence is noticeable,” “hard work always pays off,” “keep going ahead,” “The use of vocabulary is fantastic.” Each note’s comment was tailored to their needs. Commencing the lecture with praise significantly enhanced students’ self-esteem.
- The next part of our comment-oriented approach covered students’ areas for improvement with constructive feedback in a mild and friendly fashion, for example: “you should add more supporting sentences to your body paragraphs,” “Your topic sentence needs more clarity,” “Try to include more arguments in your essay,” “Consider using relevant vocabulary,” “ You should take into account the spelling of highlighted words,” “your introduction is somewhat vague and needs clarity,” “extend the second argument,” “punctuation needs improvement,” ”strengthen your arguments,” “revise present tenses,” “Follow the instructions carefully”, “Read instructions closely,” “analyze the given title before writing the essay,” ”reinforce your essay with solid arguments,” ”employ more synonyms,” ”summerize your essay with main points,” ”outline main points before writing.” This part of the research exceeded the expectations, as students had fewer questions and a desire to compare their works with others totally vanished.
- Verbal discussions/interactions allowed students to ask further questions and engage in discussions. They felt at ease putting questions and expressing dissatisfaction, which was very rare. If any obscurity prevailed, there was no reluctance from the students’ side to express their attitudes, emotions and give the questions to satisfy their curiosity. Students were open to embracing their strengths and weaknesses. Time management was crucial in this part, with a maximum 5-7 minutes.
- The process was transparent, meaning students could listen to feedback given to their groupmates. Privacy was not violated as comments were carried out gently and utterly carefully.

4. Results

Within the first 3 weeks, changes were conspicuous. The academic performance of the first group remarkably improved. Students were more eager to attend and participate in the teaching process, due to their interest in and expectancy of the assessment results. These results were given through explanatory notes, including their strengths and areas for improvement. Students felt important and free to express themselves. Their anxiety level decreased, while their

motivation and readiness increased. The students' incentive demonstrated how impatiently they were waiting individual feedback on their daily performance. Students exhibited a strong will for continuous involvement in this engaging process. In contrast, the second group did not experience any changes, since they were already accustomed to the previous assessment system and no new developments occurred during their studies. After completing the research, we conducted a verbal survey where students expressed and shared their attitudes towards comment-oriented assessment. According to the survey, the majority of students felt relieved and confident about being assessed on the grounds of detailed analysis of their strengths and weaknesses. They cherished the possibility to obtain objective and transparent assessment on their learning outcomes based on assessment criteria. We attempted to extend and apply this approach to all students for further improvement of the educational process. One of the most important aspects underlined in this research process was managing students' psychological needs. By the end of the research, we received a well-balanced mental state among students without any annoyance and irritation. On the basis of our research and results, we can firmly agree with the authors of *advancing formative assessment*, (Moss and Brookhart, 2009) who claim that- "high-quality formative assessment blurs the artificial barriers between teaching, learning, and assessment to forge a culture of collaborative inquiry and improvement in the classroom. As this learning partnership grows stronger, conversations about learning become the rule of thumb rather than the exception to the rule. Teachers and students work together to gather information about the strengths and weaknesses of their performances in ways that inform *all* learners and *all* learning in the classroom. They do this by talking with one another, planning with one another, comparing evidence of learning, and setting shared learning goals that establish the parameters of what counts as evidence that learning has indeed occurred. The bottom line is that formative assessment fundamentally changes the quality and quantity of teacher-student interactions. And every day, throughout the day, what happens in the classroom focuses squarely on student achievement". (pp.5,6). It is also noteworthy to mention that our university professors conducted the research on formative assessment, and as their article findings claim formative assessment also leads to self-explorations and self-improvement. It helps the students to become autonomous learners and learning autonomy itself fosters the skill of life-long learning, that seems to be a crucial skill for the contemporary individual. In accordance with Dilaverova et al (20024) "equipping students with detailed feedback about their strengths and weaknesses, about their evolutions in their studies, about the things they excel at, availed students to constantly scrutinize their flaws and dedicate themselves to transferring these flaws into strengths". (p. 4193).

5. Discussion

Our findings correspond to the results of previous studies reported by Black & Wiliam (1998), who similarly highlight the importance of formative assessment and underline a crucial role of feedback. Our research is consistent with their findings by suggesting individual feedback that underline both strengths and weaknesses. Thus, consistent and comprehensive feedback is ensured. Black & Wiliam (2009) also emphasize the role of formative assessment in improving learning, recommending its integration into the teaching process rather than using it as an end-of-term evaluation. Our comment-oriented approach involves feedback on a daily basis, strengthening students' understanding and allowing them to know the assessment criteria thoroughly. Wiliam (2010) mentions the role of formative assessment in establishing engaging and effective learning environments. He denotes the role of supportive atmosphere that inspires student involvement and self-reflection. It is evident that this type of amicable and constructive environment reduces anxiety, stress and accentuates students' overall mood. Their anxiety alleviates due to individual comment-oriented feedback that reflects their performance. Sadler

(1989) confirms that students need to know criteria by which their work is assessed. With a help of our method students gain a clear understanding of assessment criteria and become more engaged in the learning environment. Constant commenting and written explanatory notes contribute to fostering their self-assessment skills and encourage passion of knowledge. Comment-oriented formative assessment hones students' critical thinking skills and brings out positive traits.

To adhere rigidly to formative assessment without deviations and modifications in a framework is accompanied by plethora of shortcomings:

- Increased tension among students, hindering their ability to express themselves appropriately.
- A high rise to prevalence of inferiority complex.
- The necessity to compare one's achievements to others.
- Main emphasis on assessment may divert students from acquiring the knowledge.
- The usage of the same, repetitive assessment can lead to boredom and annoyance, resulting in losing the interest in attending lectures.

On the contrary, comment-oriented formative assessment allows students to:

- Avoid comparing themselves with peers, as they gradually cease to compare their achievements with other group members.
- Maintain self-esteem, motivation and self-confidence.
- Be fully involved in the learning environment and participate in tasks or presentations with eagerness.

Based on our research the following conclusions might be conceived:

- A flexible and straightforward assessing system improves productivity. Hence, formative assessment with these characteristics increases objectivity, efficiency, and reliability. Applying formative assessment through written explanatory notes and constant, constructive feedback proves the positive outcomes.
- Employing formative assessment with these features, allows teachers to modify the framework of formative assessment mildly and generate immediate benefits with a profound improvement in terms of psychological issue, i.e. students with a lack of motivation and reluctance experience huge changes.
- The balance between strengths and weaknesses steadily remains and apparently notes with comments give a rise to this stability.
- Students with primarily low academic performance show remarkable growth with many completing the course with flying colors.
- Perseverance and tenacity that seemed lurked and hidden in students become fairly apparent.
- A straightforward and easily understandable assessment framework is essential, offering a myriad of useful benefits including: concentration enhancement, precision and perspicuity. Additionally, the framework is simple and there is less confusion among the students.

Our research indicates that this type of assessment can be smoothly integrated into the teaching process to avoid worries and stress in students' life. Thus, our study suggests practical recommendations for researchers searching for enhancing teaching practice. It must be noted, that the research was conducted in a relatively small size environment, a wider exploration could offer more comprehensibility. Future research and focus on the long-term effects could explore various sources. Our paper examined short-term effects of comment-oriented formative

assessment and did not address its extended impact on the learning outcomes. Accordingly, extensive studies could benefit a deeper awareness of how these assessment approaches influence student performance over prolonged periods.

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