Establishing an "Assessment for Learning" culture in Hong Kong classroom

Introduction

As proposed in the *Learning to Learn: the way forward in the curriculum development* (2000) published by the Curriculum Development Council, assessment for learning is a major aspect in the current assessment reform. Torrance and Pryor (1998) stated that formative assessment is generally defined as taking place during a course with the express purpose of improving pupil learning. Given this change from summative assessment to formative assessment, this article aims at giving feasible ways to establish an "assessment for learning" culture in a junior secondary class. The suggestions given in this article are based on my own experience of both studying and teaching in Hong Kong context.

Critical review of literature

According to Lam and Phillipson (2011), well-designed formative assessment tasks should support high-order thinking, provide variety, be interesting, authentic and close to students' life experience, motivating, accommodate learner diversity and different learning styles, encourage different forms of expressions and enhance the general ability of students. Project learning in formative assessment is highlighted to illustrate how assessment tasks can be designed to interest students in the subject matter, train students' generic skills and enhance their learning abilities. Stiggins & Chappuis (2012) agree that assessment needs to be clearly specified to students so that they know it is achievable. Assessment criteria need to be diversified so that students can be informed of their abilities more comprehensively and assessment should be designed and implemented for improving students' learning, not grading their performance for selection. Therefore, for assessment to be more beneficial for students' learning, teachers need to divide the assessment planning into parts, allocate the tasks for the good of observing students' learning progress, informing them of how they can improve their learning and contributing to the teacher's own improvement in teaching planning.

Formative assessment is also about how the teachers interact with students in learning and teaching. Torrance and Pryor (1998) stated the process could be largely controlled by teachers, who provided feedbacks to pupils on how well they have achieved particular objectives at a particular point in time, and how they can improve their learning. Berry mentioned in 2008 the example of

portfolios, where students may be required to design slogans, posters, discussion and oral presentations. All these tasks involve collaboration among peers and demonstration of students' learning progress, both as a group and individuals. Continuous assessment, therefore, is an important approach to assess and reflect the diverse strengths and weaknesses of individual students and facilitate the identification of the most suitable ways of learning for more self-motivated, interactive and effective learning. Peer assessment is another example of the approach of formative assessment, as suggested by Carless in 2005, both useful for maintaining students' attention to the subject of learning, observing students' perception of their own learning, encouraging students to consider their own learning more thoroughly and learn from each other's mistakes and success. In one word, continuous assessment can be realized in many forms. While it is still largely held by the teacher in the classroom, more time and room has to be spared for the students to present, communicate and reflect their understanding to create a more dynamic learning environment.

Discussion

As a prospective teacher, I support the idea of assessment for learning in enhancing the learning and teaching in Hong Kong secondary classrooms. Assessment for learning allows teacher to make use of diverse assessment instrument to assess students' knowledge and guide them improve with timely feedback.

I would like to illustrate my views on assessment for learning with a pedagogic design entitled "Pollution Problems" for learning English across the curriculum in junior forms, in which English, Integrated Science, Geography and Design & Technology teachers would work together to help the students complete the project. The students would learn the present situations and consequences about different pollution problems in Geography and the reasons in Integrated Science. After lessons in these two subjects, students would be asked to do a presentation during English lessons. The presentation would be about a model illustrating some causes and consequences of a particular kind of pollution problem, such as red tide and water pollution, that they built in the Design & Technology lesson for the exhibition on the Earth Day. This project would assess students' learning from multiple perspectives and in different stages. At the start of the project, they would be asked to submit a design draft of the model and the relevant concepts they want to explain to assess their understanding of the concepts taught in both Integrated Science and Geography. Then they would be assessed about their skills in making the model during Design & Technology lessons. Also, their

scripts of presentation and their presentation skills will be assessed by the English teacher.

This example on project learning shows that assessment of learning can take different forms to assess students' different skills and abilities. The flexibility in the assessment mode enables teachers to have an all-round understanding of the students' learning outcome. In contrast to the tradition examination, project learning, as the above example illustrates, allows teachers to assess students' generic skills, such as communication skill and collaboration skill, subject knowledge, which is knowledge about the consequences of the pollution problems in the above example, and language accuracy at the same time or at different stages. This kind of assessment provides more information about students' individual strengths and weaknesses.

In contrast to summative assessment which mainly features written tests and examinations with only grades given after completion, formative assessment informs both teachers and students the learning outcomes throughout the learning process. When a person's achievement and abilities are assessed progressively at different stages of the task rather than once-and-for-all, teachers can monitor students' progress and improvement in a more comprehensive manner. Also, it is commonly agreed that generic skills increasingly need concern in formal education, therefore, continuous assessment enables teachers to have different foci in different stages and a number of different generic skills can be addressed after the whole learning activity. Furthermore, some students should find it rewarding to see that academic performance is no longer solely dependent on memorization or certain examination skills, while more attention is placed on generic skills. In addition, teachers can use feedback as a means of building relationship with students, having a better understanding about their needs, addressing students' diversity and motivating them to work hard for teachers' recognition.

Feedback is not only helpful for checking students' understanding of their learning, strengthening interaction between the teacher and students and recording the effectiveness of learning and teaching within a certain period of time, but also one of the elements of effective communication with students about the teacher's expectations. If feedback is given throughout the whole course of assessment, both students and teachers can be totally informed of the effectiveness of learning and teaching, and in which area it should be adjusted for better result. Inevitably, teachers need to come up with more cost-efficient ways to give feedback for the sake of time management.

The above example also shows that the tasks for assessment for learning can be contextualised to foster the learning process. Contextualised learning and teaching is a well-recognized way to motivate students to consistently participate in language learning as learners always want to be informed of the purpose of their learning. Nevertheless, contextualized teaching demands much preparation on the part of teachers, takes time for teachers to design the appropriate materials for students in terms of difficulty and takes time for teachers to generalize the materials for more flexible use. As a result, it is highly recommended contextualized teaching is supported by teachers of other subjects, such as Liberal Studies, Physical Education, etc, so that more teachers can coordinate in working out a theme for students at a certain level throughout several subjects to inspire students to relate their learning in different subjects and express their finding in English.

Students often need more feedback of their own learning – not only from their teachers, but their peers. Peer assessment gives students a stronger sense of responsibility in lesson as they are the assessor rather than bystanders when someone else is presenting. It strengthens students' observation of each other's progress and their critical thinking if they learn both as individuals and as a class. In other words, peer assessment gives students opportunities to reflect on their performance by observing others' performance and engage them in the lesson.

Recommendation

For the above pedagogic design to work, there are a few things teachers should bear in mind. It is essential to establish a supportive and caring learning atmosphere for students. To begin with, teachers should show to the students the positive ideas of assessment, and hence students feel more comfortable and less stressed when facing assessment tasks in class. Also, to help boosting students' positive sense of self-efficacy, teacher may consider introducing small or relatively easy tasks so that most students can earn their sense of success (Fautley & Savage, 2008). Once they have more confidence, they become more motivated to learn and try. Teachers should also try to develop some models for students to look up to in a class or in a form. It is understandable that many students find learning from peers is more practical and they will become more confident about new tasks if their peers can manage the tasks. Teachers can, therefore, raise a few models especially for students who are searching for their own aspirations. Logically, teachers should avoid giving negative comments on students' learning. It is very important because many people tend to take comments personally, it

takes more time for them to understand and appreciate criticism than compliments. Thereafter, teachers should pay attention to not giving negative comments to minimize students' negative feelings of themselves (Spendlove, 2009).

Conclusion

Formative assessment can be done in such ways as project learning, regular feedback-giving, contextualised English teaching and learning. Although all this practice might be introduced at one time, more often than not, more resources, especially time, are highly needed for changing the culture of a school to the extent that formative assessment is totally accepted. In the future, I hope I can learn more about assessment for learning, via watching videos, being a tutor and reading the official document to be a competent English teacher.

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