The Hong Kong Institute of Education

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Question 5
As a prospective teacher in primary/secondary schools, how would you go about establishing an “assessment for learning” culture in your classroom?

Introduction
Teaching and learning has long been described as an organic process which involves multidimensional and ongoing interactions between teachers and students. Thus, it has never been an easy task because many aspects are taken into account in every single lesson, from the physical setting of the classroom to the conceptual theories of teachers’ teaching. Therefore, it is important for teachers to reflect on themselves so as to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

In this essay, the focus is put on examining the “assessment for learning” (AfL), which is promoted by the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) in a Report “Learning to Learn – The Way Forward in Curriculum Development” (CDC, 2001). Since its promotion by CDC, the awareness of “assessment for learning” instead of “assessment of learning” (AoL) is raised among educators and the frontline teachers. However, there is always a significant difference between the curriculum document and the reality in school. In regard to this, the essay is divided into three parts to study AfL in school step by step. The first part examines the conceptual basis of AfL, with a comparison to AoL, and discusses the extent that AfL was successful in the literature. After that, the second part moves on to my own responses toward AfL based on the literature, my personal observation during the School Attachment and my experience as a private tutor. Lastly, the third part puts the paper’s emphasis into the malpractice and mistaken views of people based on my observation and the literature before recommendations are made at the end.
**Main argument**

First and foremost, one of the important aspects for learning to occur is the presence of assessment which gives information about one’s learning. To move away from the dominance of summative tests and examinations, a balance is in need to fulfill the functions of schooling with both learning processes as well as products being emphasized. (CDC, 2001, pp. 80–83). It is believed that AfL can enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning in educating students through the use of formative assessment tasks. Truly, AfL needs to be supported to strike a balance since school are very often used to assessing learners’ performances solely with raw scores, grades and class ranking, which is merely AoL. Berry (2008) proved that this kind of traditional testing and marking practice lead to a demotivation of students’ learning. Assessment has long been primarily used only for selection purpose that a balance is now in need to use assessment to support students’ learning. Biggs (1998) also urged schools to “discriminate between students for selection purposes, and to change students by educating them” (p.1). After all, assessment should not be treated solely as a product of learning but also a process for learning. Therefore, AfL is the way to go.

Accordingly, the method of assessing students depends greatly on whether teachers are selecting students, or evaluating the effects of teaching and diagnosing students’ strengths and weaknesses. In the course of the Report in “Learning to Learn – The Way Forward in Curriculum Development” (CDC, 2001), their relative importance varies since the aim of the reform document aims to enable students to attain all-round development and learn to learn independently. Practically, according to Berry (2008), the center of AfL depends on “classroom teachers’ assessment practices and their uses of formative assessment tasks to gather information on student learning” (p.13). Formative assessment supports learning through diagnosing and
pinpointing learners’ strengths and weaknesses, as stated in a Facilitator’s Guide printed by Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) in 2004. In regard to learners’ difference, teachers then give specific feedback to students for their ongoing improvement in learning. Equally importantly, the assessment result gives teachers new insight in reviewing their expectations to students, curriculum design and content as well as the teaching strategies (EMB, 2004). In return, both the teaching and learning are enhanced with adjustment made by teachers and students. Ideally, this is a win-win situation that all parties are looking for.

After examining the conceptual basis of “assessment for learning”, the essay now continues to investigate the extent that AfL was successful in the literature. In fact, whatever the explanation for the AfL practices, teachers are a key factor in turning assessment information into real processes. Thus, there are always notable and unavoidable differences between the information in document and the reality in classroom. According to a conclusion made by Lee (2007) based on her observation, it is indicated by local research on curriculum reform that there is often a mismatch between curriculum intentions and school realities. Moreover, she moved a step further to argue that though the limited research for AfL, its implementation was not very successful because “[it] presents great challenges to local teachers, especially given the exam-oriented culture in Hong Kong schools” (p.184). In addition, Careless (2007) also described the implementation of AfL in Hong Kong as “failing to fulfill its potential” (p. 57). In short, it can be seen that the implementation of AfL was not successful and it will not come to a success unless the hurdles faced by teachers are overcome, including the deep-rooted culture of high-stakes examinations among parents and teachers.

There are in fact many unforeseeable and yet devastating challenges faced by the front-line teachers when it comes to implement formative assessment to
facilitate AfL. Feedback is considered as fundament to the learning process. Unfortunately, it is observed by Carless (2005) that teachers are not well supported with knowledge, skills and time to give meaningful feedbacks to students even though formative assessment was adopted. The feedback practice is also accused of being ineffective and impracticable because it comes too late for students to use it productively (Carless, 2006). Under this circumstance, no meaningful actions that improve learning and teaching are ignited. As a result, it is very likely that teachers will turn up finding themselves implementing formative assessment but without an encouraging reward of enhanced pupil learning. This forms a vicious circle that teachers will be eventually discouraged from adopting formative assessment in their classrooms, which means AfL is not promoted. After all, the beneficial purposes are seldom, if not never, achieved in igniting positive effect to processes of teaching and learning.

**Discussion**

In this part, the focus is put on my own responses toward formative assessment promoting AfL based on the literature review as well as my personal observation during the School Attachment and experience as a private tutor. In the following, there are two points to note. Firstly, the formative assessment is beneficial to students’ learning inside an English room according to my experience as a private tutor. Nevertheless, its extent and degree of implementing varies greatly from schools to schools from my observation during School Attachment. Details and reasons about this observation are discussed more precisely in the following.

To begin with, formative assessment has a positive impact on the learning independence of learners through their greater involvement into their own learning. I have been delivering private tutoring classes to my student for one year. Through my
interview with him and observation, I found that his school adopted a number of initiatives to facilitate AfL. In the English lessons, there are learning portfolios, feedback sheets or checklists for writing, and sometimes conferencing. Process writing was also proposed and became their routine in English writing. I found that my student has to write a first draft. His writing are self-assessed, peer-assessed with the aid of checklists and then assessed by the English teacher. Feedbacks are given for improvement. The checklist states clearly the criteria students have to meet in writing the essay in terms of the quality of ideas, correct spelling and grammar. My student initially showed a reluctance to use the checklist seriously for self-assessment. But as time passes, he treats the checklists more seriously, which surprises me that he actually benefits a lot from it. Now, he has learnt to self-monitor himself by double checking the writing to spot out his own mistakes according to the criteria. In addition, he is more aware of the grammatical accuracy of his homework. In this way, I found that formative assessment succeeds in engaging students in their learning and getting them to bear the responsibility for their own learning. In another word, the aim of “learning to learn” is achieved.

Despite the success of formative assessment in one school, situations can be totally different in another school. The school I visited during School Attachment is a case in point. The situation was quite complex as English teachers did not show a clear consistency in their ways of teaching and assessment methods. Notwithstanding, only a minority of teachers showed a notable willingness to changes. Many of them still hold a belief that summative assessment in terms of tests and examination is the primary mechanism to assess teaching and learning. Therefore, it seems to me that the classrooms are still very teacher-centered that students have little room to review and adjust their own learning styles and strategies, lest the sense of involvement and responsibility for their own learning.
As Biggs (1998) pointed out, “good teachers not only need to know their subject matter, they need to know how students learn it” (p.323). I agree to a very large extent to this statement. I think a good teacher is someone who can not only apply teaching theories, but also are keen to review him/herself on the progress to assist the teaching and learning. In regard to this belief, I see a great necessity in promoting AfL in school to assist teachers’ teaching and students’ learning for the sake of students. I also note the vital role of feedback. Practically, to prepare myself for formative assessment, I have to first learn more in writing up quality and descriptive feedbacks. A simple step for a prospective teacher is to first avoid negative feedback while use more welcoming and positive to motivate students’ learning in a friendly way.

**Recommendation**

Even though AfL is praised for its positive impact on improving teaching and learning, there are only “pockets of success” (p. 49) as observed by Carless (2005). Many factors and parties are taken into account for the failure of it. Some of the significant will be discussed in the following due to the length of this essay. After that, recommendations are made accordingly.

To begin with, cultural background of Hong Kong and the old assessment practice is a hurdle to AfL. The assessment practice in Hong Kong curriculum has long been accused as high stake assessments. It is demonstrated by Brown, Kennedy, Fok et al. (2009) that “high expectations for success and social improvement through examinations play a very significant role in the lives of Chinese families” (p. 358), indicating that teachers’ practice of assessment is under a great influence of the Chinese conceptions of learning. Furthermore, it is perhaps for the reason that, in Hong Kong, a good examination result is an essential ticket to earn a place in the
limited university places. Therefore, traditional view of assessment as merely summative assessment through tests and examinations are deeply embedded. Lastly, the discussed beliefs lead to a ripple effect that discourages AfL. By reason of the traditional view discussed above, a lack of support and understanding from parents and colleagues are triggered. Parents generally show a preference in using scores, grades and numbers to indicate one’s learning, according to an analysis by Careless (2005). Changing teachers are not understood, lest supported, by colleagues. Unsurprisingly, changing teachers are discouraged to AfL due to the criticisms and a lack of support. Thus, structural and conceptual changes of teacher to AfL are not that easy down the classroom level.

Lastly, to make AfL achievable down the classroom level, it is essential, if not fundamental, to gain the support from parents while, at the same time, ensuring the quality of this assessment practice. Teachers and school can join hands to hold parent talks to explain the advantages of AfL before a new school year starts. Aside from that, teachers can also seek every opportunity to explain to parents what AfL is about and why it needs to be adopted. Teachers can particularly speak to those parents who collect children at the end of the school day. While gaining support from other parties, the quality of assessment practice needs to be ensured. First, the criteria of assessment need to be addressed to students in class publicly. Moreover, when it comes to progress writing, it is better that the content of checklist can focus equally on both the grammatical accuracy and ideas to ensure higher order thinking of students to attain an all-round development. Above all, it is the determination for quality learning and teaching that drive changes to be initiated and implemented.
Conclusion

In summary, this essay has examined the conceptual theory and the reality of implementation of AfL. Recommendations are also made at the end to improve some current educational practice so that it is more likely that AfL is put into effect in the classroom. As a final point, it is undoubtedly that curriculum changes are challenging that it takes a very long time to be effective due to the traditional practice and cultural belief of different parties. Realistically, more effort needs to be invested to move forward AfL to the reality of classrooms.

(2097 words)
Reference


Education and Manpower Bureau (2004). *Promoting Assessment for learning in English Language Education at Primary Level*. Hong Kong, China: Education and Manpower Bureau.