

Assessment for learning and its implications for changing classrooms in Hong Kong

Introduction

In the curriculum document and reports entitled Learning to Learn: Life-Wide Learning and Whole-person released by the government in 2001, the idea of assessment for learning (AfL) is introduced. It is suggested an assessment reform where assessment should be the practice of collecting evidence of student learning. It is an integral part of the learning and teaching cycle rather than a separate stage at the end of teaching and it helps to provide information for both students and teachers to improve learning and teaching. Unlike the concept of assessment of learning in the past which focuses on the product of learning by involving ranking for the purpose of grading and selection, assessment for learning focuses on the learning process and progress through the use of qualitative feedback in reports, profiles and portfolios as well as peer-assessment. In this essay, the implication of assessment for learning for changing classroom in Hong Kong will be discussed through analyzing the **ways of implementing assessment for learning**, which is highlighting feedback and promotion of peer-assessment, and **the implication and effectiveness of implementation**. The principle, advantages and issue raised during implementation in research projects, my personal observation and experience of implementing it, and recommendation I concluded will be critically reviewed.

Critical review of literature

The reform supports the eradication of the dominance of assessment of learning, which is also known as summative assessment and examinations, in favor of greater integration of assessment of teaching and learning, i.e. AfL, which is also formative assessment focusing on both learning processes and product . There are a number of practices promoted by the government to encourage AfL, including focusing on giving out feedback instead of grading to inform students of their strengths or weaknesses and how to address the weaknesses, and promoting peer assessment. Under the Hong Kong assessment reform, David Carless (2005) conducted **two case studies on assessment for learning** with two primary school

teachers Sue and Winnie who perform feedback-providing and assessment during project learning and peer assessment during writing lessons using checklists respectively. These two case studies are important references for my implementation of assessment for learning as feasibility and challenges of it are covered in details.

Formative assessment refers to assessment that is specifically intended to generate feedback on performance to improve and accelerate learning (Sadler, 1998). The principle AfL is to support learning and enhance the quality and value of evaluative activity (Freeman and Dobbins, 2013). The principle of providing feedback is to select evidence of learning outcomes through setting criteria and make judgment about the extent to which these criteria have been met; while the principle of peer-assessment is to promote learner independence and enhance learning outcome.

In Sue's **prompt feedback-providing case during project learning** about Cyber Zoo, it was found that this strategy support, facilitate and enhance learning outcomes by providing opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance and promote self-assessment and regulation. However, issues including misunderstanding from the parents and the concern of fairness have been raised during the implementation. The teacher was misunderstood as not in control of the class and not hard working enough. There is a lack of support from both the school and parents. Societal assessment culture focuses on fairness also acts as a resistance during the implementation as some students see it as unfair when the teacher gave a second chance to particular students to do a presentation after giving him or her feedback

In Winnie's **peer-assessment case study during writing class**, it was found that this strategy helps foster positive classroom learning atmosphere as it encourages students to interact with each other rather than just with the teachers and pupils found that their role in the assessment process is more active than before and self –regulation is promoted. However, Winnie has encountered three big challenges during the implementation as students were worried about the quality of their own objectivity in assessing other pupil's work(Wong, 2002) and collaborative forms of assessment is relatively time-consuming and is not widely used to facilitate accurate assessment of pupil performance.

Discussion

In the changing classroom in Hong Kong, it is not hard to notice the assessment reform shifting the focus from assessment of learning (summative assessment) to assessment for learning (formative assessment). The application of feedback and peer assessment are prominent nowadays. I have the experience of observing form 4 classes conducting formative assessment through the use of feedback for their school-based assessment (SBA) presentation about short stories; and I personally conducted peer-assessment with my form 3 students in after-class English writing workshop. In this part, a reflection on the implementation of the use of feedback and peer-assessment will be discussed with reference to the two case studies conducted by Carless (2005).

1. Application and implications of feedback

During school attachment, my supporting teacher Miss Chan made use of feedback to help her F.4 students to construct their own stories for SBA presentation. She provided students with a mind map in class providing basic elements that should be included in stories and asked students to brainstorm ideas under these elements. She gave prompt feedback on what students had written to guide them to think more thoroughly and write things on track. Then, she asked students to write the whole story at home and bring it back the next day for individual consultation. The next day in class, she called students out one-by-one to the front desk with their finished work for consultation while assigning the remaining class to finish a grammar task. She gave feedback individually on content, language use and grammar of their draft directly. For example, if they have some serious grammatical mistakes, like misuse of present tense in writing a story, she will circle all the verbs with wrong tense and ask students to change it back to past form immediately, telling them that past tense should be used in story writing. After going through all students' work, she asked students to present their stories one by one in class and she gave feedback on pronunciation, intonation and reading with meaning the presentation of their stories while the rest of the class would be the audience.

The finding is partly coherent to the case study 1 as the products, i.e. both the stories written and the presentation, are relatively better than other classes where summative assessment, that the final grade of the presentation is the only feedback of students' work, was performed. Weaver (2006) states that giving out immediate feedback motivate students to improve because when they receive constructive feedback alerting them to their strengths and weaknesses can provide the means by which they can assess their performance and make improvement to future work. It proved that giving out feedback along the way when students were working on the tasks is an effective scaffolding activity.

However, I found that some individuals who have relatively lower proficiency in English had difficulties understanding the feedback from the teacher and apply it back to their work and thus found this approach not as useful as expected. Some students who were given the direct negative feedback about monotone used throughout the presentation found it hard to demonstrate good intonation in the presentation and therefore their final presentation did not improve much. There is an assumption that when teachers transmit feedback information to student these messages are easily decoded and translated into action. Yet, there is strong evidence that feedback messages are invariably complex and difficult to decipher. (Ivanic *et al.*, 2000; Higgins *et al.*, 2001)

2. Application and implication of peer-assessment

In after-class English writing workshop I conducted about argumentative essay targeting for F.3 students, I incorporated peer-assessment in a similar way as Winnie in case study 2 mentioned above aiming at training students' proof reading skills and sensitivity about grammar mistakes so that they can avoid them during writing and self-correct it. I have shown them how to correct mistakes from others writing using some proof-reading exercise and then I introduced some common grammatical mistakes that I observed before, such as the misuse of present tense when talking about past tense and the misuse of modal verbs 'must' and 'have to' in the argumentative essay. Then, I asked students to exchange their writing which they have finished at home with their neighbors and help their neighbors correct grammatical mistakes as well as grade their students writing according to the rubric featuring the content (How convincing is the argumentative essay), language used (the range of

vocabulary used and grammatical accuracy) and tone of the essay.

The finding echoes with that of the case study 2 as students were more engaged in class and the emphasis is on standards and how peer interaction led to enhanced understandings of different grammatical items and improved learning which was shown in the next few writings they did as there were less and less grammatical mistakes found in their writings.

However, it was found that both of the power relation and learner diversity in class provide resistance to the success of the peer-assessment. Among some students, the power relation led to ‘friendship marking’, resulting in over-marking and ‘decibel marking’, the most dominant getting the highest marks. (Brown & Knight, 1994). Power relations also impact on students because the audience for learners' work is no longer just the teacher, but their peers. In some pairs, the pressure, risk or competition peer assessment engendered. It lowered the reliability and destroyed the meaning behind peer assessment. Another problem, which is also found in the case study 2, evolved from some pairs where those weaker students were not able to identify problem for the other classmates while those high achievers found it meaningless going through writing from low achievers as there were too many obvious avoidable common mistakes and they felt that their partners are not qualified to provide insightful feedback. The activity did not run successfully among these pairs due to the obvious huge gap between some students’ proficiency levels.

Recommendation

Although most of the satisfactory results from the literature were found in my observation and personal experience of implementation of feedback and peer-assessment, some difficulties were raised along with them. This part is about some recommendations that I concluded so as to perfect the implementation of assessment for learning.

In order to solve the difficulty students encountered while decoding teachers’ feedback and putting them into practice, **high quality feedback**, which is defined as information that helps students troubleshoot their own performance and self-correct, should be provided (Nical, 2006). For example, for the problem about the demonstration of monotone during

presentation mentioned above, instead of only mentioning and demonstrating the desired intonation in a presentation, the teacher should ask students to follow her to read the script sentence by sentence to experience the intonation, following by explaining the reason and roles of intonation. Plus, the teacher can introduce some useful websites like Ted which demonstrate good public speaking with transcripts and subtitle. The teacher can ask students to practice at home and follow up their progress during recess or after school. Feedback as a transmission process involving ‘telling’, yet, we should never ignore the active role that the student must play in constructing meaning from feedback messages, and of using this to regulate performance (Chanock, 2000).

To address the problem of power relation caused during implementation of peer assessment, **peer feedback** can be promoted to replace peer assessment. Peer feedback means a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards while peer assessment is defined as students grading the work or performance of their peers using relevant criteria (Falchikov, 2001). So our distinction between the two terms is that peer feedback is primarily about rich detailed comments but without formal grades, whilst peer assessment denotes grading. Orsmond *et al*, (2000) suggested that peer involvement in assessment, conducted in a non-threatening, collaborative atmosphere, enables students to learn better because it prompts them to think more critically. In this way, incidents like ‘friendship marking’ can be avoided and the effect of formative assessment emphasizing the learning process instead of grade can be reinforced. A further strategy for facilitating effective peer involvement in assessment is through **embedding it within regular course processes**, Boud (2000) recommends the creation of a course climate in which the giving and receiving of peer feedback is a normal part of teaching and learning processes. The more involvement in peer feedback processes, the more likely students are to develop the necessary expertise for sound judgements. Cultivating an appropriate atmosphere for peer interaction is clearly a necessary condition for successful peer feedback processes. For the negative effect of the difference of students’ proficiency level on the peer assessment task, **streaming students with the similar ability into one class** can be adopted. Provided that students are with similar proficiency level, the effectiveness of peer-assessment and other teaching methodology can be enhanced.

Conclusion

To conclude, through analyzing the research project and my observation and experience, it was found that the implementation of assessment for learning through feedback and peer-assessment under the assessment reform have benefited students in Hong Kong to a great extent since it supports, facilitates and enhances learning outcomes better than the traditional assessment approach. However, there are still room for improvement to the effectiveness of implementation and practice as issues like the difficulties students encountered when decoding feedback from teachers and problems evolved due to power relation and learner diversity among the class has been raised. It is believed that through continuous effort put in practice and reflection, the effectiveness of implementation of assessment for learning will be enhanced and more and more students can be benefit from it.

Word count: 2,100

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