

The Roles of Formative Assessment in English Language Classroom

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Abstract— This paper aims to explore the roles of formative assessment in the classroom which involved the tertiary level's students at one of the technical universities. Formative assessment is crucial to enhance the students' performance in the classroom. Nevertheless, the instructors need to know the types of assessment which are appropriate to be incorporated to their students effectively. They should monitor the students' level of proficiency prior to provide feedback to the students in order to ensure that the students are able to maximize the feedback given. This qualitative study was drawn from interviews and observation students' report writing. The results revealed that incorporating formative assessment gave a powerful impact on students' achievement especially in writing task. The fruitful feedback provided by the instructors on the using the Transitional words had helped the students a lot in term of their writing.

Keywords: *formative assessment, writing, feedback*

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning is a process where the students gain the experience and knowledge through study. It is crucial for the educators to determine the students' comprehension in learning instead of assuming that the students able to absorb and apply the knowledge taught independently. Hence, the educators need to know exactly what is the best approach to gauge the students' learning? The students' achievement usually will be evaluated by the educators after a period of teaching in their respective classroom.

Assessment is one of the methods which is effective to be employed in the teaching and learning. Assessment can be classified into three types namely diagnostic, formative, and summative. For this study, a primary focus has been emphasized on the formative assessment and its role in pedagogy. Nickel (2013) defined formative assessment in his article as guidance or scaffolding to improve the quality of work prior to summative assessment. It can be concluded that the formative assessment is a tool for the students to enhance their own learning continuously with the educators' guidance.

Meanwhile, Popham (2011) defines formative assessments as an assessment that is used for ongoing improvement while teaching and learning is occurring meanwhile summative assessments is an assessment that occurs at the end of a structured learning experience to evaluate the level of learning that has occurred. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that there are authors who combined both formative and summative assessments in their research. One of them is Wininger (2005) who called it formative summative assessment as he applied a summative assessment as a formative assessment by providing both quantitative and qualitative feedback about the results of the exam.

When applying the formative assessment in the teaching and learning process, it is necessitate for the educators to know the vital facets underlying in it. One of the elements that authors implemented in this study was providing the feedback to the students which its function was to guide the students to understand the information and skills during the lesson. Getzlaf et al. (2009) wrote feedback as information provided from the instructors to the students about course activities in which students were engaged including writing assignments. Heritage, Kim, Vendlinski and Herman (2009) had also mentioned that feedback provides critical information that the teacher needs to determine the current state of a students' learning and informs the next steps in the learning process. Moreover, Wolf (2011) in his current study stated that one of the three essential principles of formative assessment are feedback. He also added that the feedback provided using formative assessment lets the teacher know immediately if a lesson is reaching the student in the intended manner or if it needs adjusting for better understanding.

Therefore, formative assessment is a crucial approach in pedagogy as it can enhance the students' performance in writing and assists them to achieve the learning goals. This assessment is a reciprocal relationship since the instructor and students working out together while learning is taking place. Dunn and Mulvenon (2009) highlighted that a common method advocated to improve student achievement is the use of formative assessment both for pedagogical practices and

students' performance. The essential aspect in formative assessment is the role of the instructors in providing the feedback to elicit information about students' current state of learning. The active participation from the instructors can benefit to the students in enhancing the students' learning. They must possess the skills in providing the feedback by identifying the students' strengths and weaknesses as it will be the indicators to determine whether the students' ability to cope with the lesson or vice versa. Hence, this paper addresses the question namely what is the roles of formative assessment in English language classroom?

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed the feedback strategy in language class which involved a total of 25 undergraduates students enrolled in an Engineering courses at a public university. The instructors conducted the classroom observation and interview to the participants to obtain the response towards the formative assessment implemented in the learning process. The instructors spent half an hour or one hour after the lectures consistently for two months to observe and provide the feedback to the students while they were completing the tasks given. In addition, interviews were held with five participants who were responsible or being appointed as a leader in their respective groups. They were asked to obtain their perspectives of the feedback being incorporated in the lesson and how they coped with it.

III. FINDINGS

1) *Enhancing students' ability to be more independent in their own learning*

In the initial stage of learning, the instructors were not incorporating feedback to the students as they wanted to observe the students' understanding specifically on their writing task. Randomly, it has been discovered that the students were confused and failed to spot the common errors in their writing when the instructors required them to analyze the sentences. Technically, they mastered the writing convention well yet they were weak in grammatical aspect (transitional words). Hence, the instructors were only focused to provide the feedback on this facet in the students' writing in order to ensure that they acquire the necessary understanding.

From instructors' observation in the class, the students have indicated a massive progress in their learning after receiving the feedback from the instructors. It is impressive to observe that they managed to take responsibility on their own by analyzing and identifying the errors in the sentences or paragraphs provided to them during the lectures and corrected them independently without any guidance from the instructors anymore. Plus, they tended to be more watchful when constructing the sentences when completing the

exercises such as summary writing in the class. When they were not really clear on the usage of new terms, they would refer and consult the instructors to comment and provide the constructive feedback pertaining on it.

2) *Students' acquire necessary knowledge and understanding*

Apart from that, the instructors also encountered from the students' writing which revealed that they obtained sufficient knowledge and understanding after receiving the feedback. From the interview with the participants, they admitted that the feedback given by the instructors during the lesson helped them to comprehend the concepts more in grammatical aspect specifically in transitional words. They also figured out that with the explanation, they could convey more ideas in their piece of writing by using the transitional words without having any difficulties. Due to lack of experiences in using transitional words, they tended to use the similar word to join the sentences or paragraphs in their writing beforehand. After the instructors provided them with the feedback, then they understood on how to utilize the other transitional words in their writing. From the formal observation, the instructors could see how the students were progressing and improved their performance specifically in writing.

Hence, it could be concluded that the instructors' feedback is really helpful to improve the students' performance as it developed the students' knowledge and comprehension on the topic and they could apply them in order to produce the better quality of writing in their assignment. Nickel (2013) shared the same thought by stating that if knowledge is seen as constructed, then learners may use deep learning to shape the knowledge into something that is personally meaningful. Yorke (2003) also added that the formative assessment is effective to contribute to student learning through the provision of information to enhance their performance.

3) *Empower the pedagogical practice*

Formative assessment is very practical not merely for the students to boost up their own learning but also for the instructors to empower the method in teaching. In this study, the instructors corrected and provided the feedback to the participants in each group for the first month. While providing the feedback, the instructors also posed the questions to the participants to probe the students' thinking and gauge their comprehension towards the topic being taught in the lesson. Thus, they would know the current state of students' learning during the instructional conversations. Shepard (2000) also claimed that instructional conversations can be powerful ways to check their prior knowledge, build on what students already know which move learning forward.

From the interview, the students claimed that the instructions given by the instructors were quite difficult to be comprehended by them because of the language barrier. Thus,

they could not figure out the task or exercise being assigned to them effectively.

Furthermore, the participants also voiced out in the interview that sometimes the activities or exercises provided by the instructors were quite challenging which made them could not able to complete it. Then, the instructors realized that the students' learning level in the class were not similar as expected. Therefore, the instructors took the action by dividing the students into groups and appointed a competent participant among them to become a leader to manage the group if they faced any difficulties in learning. Plus, the instructors also changed the method of their teaching to suit with the students' language proficiency. For instance, the tasks being assigned to the students were based on their proficiency level so that the students could complete the activities successfully.

In addition, the instructors found out that incorporating feedback was the most time consuming activities yet it gave the greatest benefits to the students as they could interact and obtain the explanation pertaining on the grammatical aspect from the instructors in face-to-face interaction.

Moreover, the researchers discovered that when they were providing the feedback, they managed to identify the patterns of error that the students always committed. Instead of explaining it to each student, the instructors decided to elaborate the most common errors that the students' made in their writing during the formal lecture and provide the extra tasks for the students in order to enhance their understanding on that topic.

IV. DISCUSSION

Findings from this study indicated that the students' performances in writing had improved as the grammatical errors reduced since the instructors incorporating feedback in the class. From the instructors' observation, the students illustrated the better understanding of the transitional words topic and able to apply it effectively in their writing. Wolf (2011) in the study also indicated that teachers incorporated formative assessment into their daily lessons by including time for students to practice skills they have learnt will demonstrate their understanding of a concept presented in the lesson. It has been proved in this study that after the students received the continuous and detailed feedback every week, they managed to develop the sentences lucidly by using the transitional words to connect the ideas to ensure the logical flows in their writing. Previously, they were quite confused to employ the transitional words as they found that transitional word consists of variety of words and it was difficult for them to choose the most appropriate one. Thus, they ended up in their writing with no coherence and continuity for one paragraph to another as they did not master the usage of transitional words. Nevertheless, after receiving the feedback in their weekly lessons, they could comprehend the functions of transitional words by organizing the paragraphs well and produce the excellent writing. Hence, it is important to note that the formative assessment is crucial to be incorporated in the

lesson for students' developments which can lead them to perform well in their writing. It is because, while providing the feedback, the instructors could facilitate the students by sharing and explaining explicitly on that particular topic. In a related study, Heritage, Kim, Vedlinski ad Herman (2009) also highlighted that the collaboration between the teacher and students can happen best through implementing the formative assessment as it develops the students' knowledge and what they need to do to progress. Hence, it can provide the information to the instructors on the students' current learning status on that topic.

In addition, implementing the formative assessment in the pedagogy also offers the opportunity and benefits to the instructors to modify their method of teaching in terms of giving instructions and class activities. The instructors needed to be aware with the students' learning level in order to optimize the teaching and learning process. While conducting this research, the instructors figured out that some of the low proficiency students misinterpreted from the instructions provided in the class by completing the exercises erroneously. It was due to the bombastic words that the instructors utilized in the class. Then, the instructors realized that they should adjust the instructions to suit with the students' level and state of learning so that the teaching and learning would be more effective. Harris and Muoneke (2012) stated that the formative assessment method allows the teacher to adjust instruction to meet the need of individual students. Similarly, Clark (2011) also asserted that formative assessment was being used to make adjustments to instruction to enhance the learning. Heritage (2007) highlighted in her research by saying that teacher needs to take steps to know the students' current learning and the goal by modifying instruction, assessing again to give further information about learning, modifying instruction again and so on. Therefore, in terms of class activity, the instructors had revisited the tasks that have been provided to the students. Then they modified and prepared the different activity for the students in order to accommodate the students' different styles of learning. Thus, formative assessment is an effective method in the pedagogy as the instructors are able to evaluate the students' comprehension in learning deeply as it would contribute to the better achievement in their performance.

On the contrary, the instructors figured out that the formative assessment has its own limitation which was time consuming. Thus, to overcome this limitation, the instructors employed the peer-review approach during teaching and learning process by appointing the competent students as peer assessors to scaffold their friends in writing. The findings proved that they were able to scrutinize the errors made and explained to their friends pertaining on the mistakes committed on their paper. The comments and feedback from the peer would be more helpful and fruitful as the approach tended to be informal.

V. CONCLUSION

Formative assessment is integral for both instructors and students as it contributes the powerful impact to boost up the students' performance in language and empower instructors' pedagogy. The instructors need to have the knowledge and skills in employing this assessment since they have to provide the worthwhile feedback to the students with the aim that they can develop their performance sufficiently in writing. Hence, this study concluded that formative assessment is believed can enhance the students' performance in writing in higher education institutions with the greater attention provided by the instructors endlessly.

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