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Formative Assessment in Language Teaching

Аннотация

Статья посвящена проблеме формирующего оценивания в обучении иностранному языку. Объясняется термин «формирующее оценивание», описаны преимущества данного вида оценки для обучения и преподавания. Приведены примеры техник, используемых для формирующей оценки. В статье делается заключение о том, что формирующее оценивание является средством развития метапредметных навыков, вносит разнообразие в учебный процесс, способствует повышению интереса и автономии учащихся.

Abstract

The article concentrates on the use of formative assessment in foreign language teaching. The term “formative assessment” is explained, its benefits for learning and teaching are described. Examples of formative assessment techniques and activities are given. It is concluded that formative assessment is a powerful tool that helps develop learners' metacognitive skills, brings variety in the classroom, engages and motivates learners, raises their autonomy and interest.

Ключевые слова: формирующее оценивание, обратная связь, метапредметные навыки, взаимооценка, самооценка.

Key words: formative assessment, feedback, metacognitive skills, peer-assessment, self-

assessment.

1. Introduction

According to the latest educational standards, Russian primary and secondary students are to acquire such learning (metacognitive, not subject-specific) skills as the ability to set and achieve goals, plan activities accordingly, adjust behaviour when necessary, develop self-regulation and self-control, self-assessment and peer-assessment skills. University graduates are to be competent in goal-setting, planning, evaluation, and reflection. Assessment being a highly powerful tool in education, it can be used for the purpose of development of metacognitive skills and life-long competences. But it is hardly feasible that traditional assessment tools such as tests can do the task. The tool that helps the teacher and the students track if the desired skills are being developed and to what extent is *formative assessment*.

2. Coming to terms with terms

According to Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, *assessment* is “a systematic approach to collecting information and making inferences about the ability of a student or a quality or success of a teaching course on the basis of various sources of evidence” (Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, p. 35). It is a wider notion than *testing*, which is applying a *test*, “a procedure for measuring ability, knowledge or performance” (Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, p. 546).

Michael Scrivener introduced the terms *formative* and *summative evaluation* in 1967. Today the terms *summative* and *formative assessment* are preferred (e.g. Ur, 2012). Summative and formative assessment are considered two opposite ends of a continuum. Firstly, they have different purposes: the purpose of summative assessment is to measure achievement at the end of a period of learning, while formative assessment aims at enhancing learning by providing feedback. Secondly, summative assessment is carried out at the end of a period of study, while formative assessment is an ongoing process that penetrates learning. Finally, it is believed that summative assessment is for

demonstrating learning results to the outside audience, whereas formative assessment is for “in-class” use, that is, it gives information to the students and the teacher. The result of the former is a grade, the main outcome of the latter are suggestions for further improvement. Some scholars claim that summative assessment is assessment *of* learning, while formative assessment is assessment *for* learning (e.g. Greenstein, 2010).

End-of-year tests, international examinations and school-leaving exams are all examples of summative assessment. Formative assessment involves a wide range of techniques, which are carried out before, while and after actual teaching, the examples of which will be provided later in this article.

Traditional Russian pedagogy distinguishes between preliminary, continuous and summative assessment. There is no notion of formative assessment, but the importance of *feedback* when continuous assessment is carried out is also emphasized (Талызина, 1998). *Feedback* is information on the previous performance that can be used to modify future performance (William, 2011). Feedback is an essential part of formative assessment.

Fishman and Golub (Фишман, Голуб, 2007) compare education to growing plants. Summative assessment is just measuring the growth, which doesn't affect the process of growing, while formative assessment is like feeding and watering, that directly influence growth. The more effort one makes when taking care of plants, the more fruit they will collect. The more feedback students get on their actions, the better their learning will be.

3. How and why?

The Cycle of Formative Assessment involves several steps. Initially, the teacher and the class identify learning objectives according to set standards. Then, targeted instruction is carried out. After that, data on how successful the instruction was is gathered and analyzed, what is important, by both the instructor and the learners. Finally, learning strategies are modified in order to better correspond to the desired goal.

For example, the objective of a lesson is to raise students' awareness on the difference of use

between Past Indefinite and Past Continuous. At the beginning of the lesson the teacher asks her students to complete a short quiz where the knowledge of form and use is checked. It is found out that students are not sure about the form, and the class decides they need to discuss the matter. After the discussion and clarification, a short practice activity is carried out. Now the class is ready to go on to study the difference in meaning.

Therefore, formative assessment makes the learning process more effective by adjusting it to learners' needs, providing feedback both for teachers and for students, enabling instructors and learners to identify learning gaps and to bridge them.

Other benefits of formative assessment for the learner are the following:

- increased motivation and effort, as students understand the assessment criteria and can apply it to their work;
- increased autonomy, as students are part of the learning process and feel responsible for their learning;
- students acquire such important skills as planning, goal-setting, self-evaluation, reflection;
- students become aware of their mistakes and are able to correct them.

Thus, we can conclude that formative assessment allows to make education more learner oriented.

Wiliam (Wiliam, 2011), having studied a large body of research on formative assessment, comes to the conclusion that “there is now a strong body of theoretical and empirical work that suggests that integrating assessment with instruction may well have unprecedented power to increase student engagement and to improve learning outcomes”. That is why formative assessment, or assessment for learning, is now introduced into education worldwide.

4. Activities for classroom use

In this section, a number of formative assessment techniques the author uses in her secondary and university classrooms are described.

Formative assessment before actual teaching and learning helps identify the knowledge on the

topic learners have when they step in the classroom, and scaffold learning accordingly. It is hardly possible to plan the route to the main objective and track the progress if the starting point is unknown. Moreover, according to cognitive linguistics, new material is better processed when previous knowledge has been activated.

Entrance Slips: when a topic is introduced, each student has a piece of paper, on which they write their associations with it, or answers to questions on the topic, or true/false statements. Then the slips are stuck to the board and the contents discussed. In case of associations, students can also work in groups to analyse them and create mind-maps on the topic. With true/false statements, students can exchange the paper slips, read out each other's statements and decide if their peers' suggestions are true or false.

Corners: The teacher posits a question, and there are possible answers to it in the corners of the room. Learners choose the answer they think correct, and in groups work to support their decision.

Sorting: Learners sort a vocabulary list according to the criteria given (topic, part of speech, etc.)

Learning is a non-linear process, that is why monitoring is its essential part. Formative assessment enables instructors adjust the learning process to the learning goals and students' need. Wiliam (Wiliam, 2011) claims that teaching and assessment are interwoven, and often its difficult to distinguish one from the other.

Quick Pulse: At any moment of the lesson the teacher makes a pause to ask a concept-checking question, that is a question aimed at checking understanding.

Voting: The teacher asks a yes/no question. The students vote for “yes” or “no” using cards of different colours or agreed movements.

Graphics: The learners use graphic organisers such as mind-maps, Vienne diagrammes, tables to illustrate the information they have learnt.

The advantages of formative assessment after learning are a chance to identify and mend learning gaps, an opportunity for reflection and development of thinking skills.

Short Quiz: A series of open-ended tasks, completed by students in the written form, aimed at checking understanding, immediate feedback on the part of the teacher or peers follows.

Ball Toss: The teacher throws a ball and asks a question. The student to catch the ball answers it and poses his. If unable to answer, the students passes the ball to another learner. This game-like activity allows the teacher identify the students who may need further instruction, and the learners, who have internalized the material enough to use it.

Grab Bag: Students write an appropriate question/ utterance for paraphrase/ definition on a slip of paper, and put it in a bag. One by one they take the slips out of the bag and do the task. The ones that caused difficulty are discussed.

The technique that can be used throughout a lesson is the *Know-Want to Know-Learn* table. At the start of an instructive period students fill in the first column of the table, writing what they know on the topic introduced. In the second column they write what they would like to learn, and in last one – the information they actually learned (at the end of the lesson). Then the class discusses how they can find the information that is missing and present it at the next lesson.

The technique that helps to keep students engaged during a lesson is *Observation Diary*. After every activity the teacher evaluates the effort and productivity of each student. At the end, the summative judgment is passed on each students' participation, which can be graded.

5. Assessing self and others

Though students may prefer to be assessed by the teacher (Harmer, 2007), it is necessary to make them aware of the benefits that peer-assessment and self-assessment bring into the classroom. These types of assessment develop critical thinking skills and learner autonomy. They raise students' awareness on how assessment is carried out. The ability to evaluate self and others is an important lifelong skill.

A traditional technique used for developing speaking skills is text retelling. If done in the one-by-one mode and assessed by the teacher, it takes much time. If practiced in pairs, with students assessing each other, the activity engages all students at the same time. But it has to be mentioned,

that, when peer- and self-assessment are practiced, students need to have clear *evaluation criteria* to rely upon. When listening to each other retelling a text, my students have an evaluation list, where they note down the active vocabulary used in speech, and mistakes of different types made. Then peer feedback is provided. The teacher's role is to monitor the activity, noting down common mistakes, which are later discussed as whole class. The same techniques can also be used to pass judgment on reading skills, written dictations, using the criteria designed by the teacher or the whole class.

Tests, normally used for the purposes of summative assessment, can be also used formatively. For instance, students complete a test individually, exchange it and check the peer's work, give feedback, that is explain the corrections to each other. Afterwards, the test is discussed as whole class.

Evaluation criteria is also highly important when *self-assessment* is practiced. For example, at the end of a lesson I may ask my students to evaluate their participation by ticking the box next to the statements that are true for them and completing open-ended tasks; then learners make conclusions about what has to be done in future. The following statements are suggested:

1. I answered the teacher's questions more than three times.
2. I actively participated in pair and group work.
3. I prepared the home assignment for this lesson.
4. I was attentive and did not distract my classmates.
5. What I learned at the lesson is that ...
6. What I did very well is ...
7. What I have to do differently next time is ...

Such reflection and self-evaluation can be done at the end of any period of study, for instance, at the end of a semester. The self-assessment table for university students may look like this:

1. My participation in class was excellent/good/satisfactory/unsatisfactory
2. My effort on home assignments was excellent/good/satisfactory/unsatisfactory

3. My attendance was excellent/good/satisfactory/unsatisfactory
4. My test results were excellent/good/satisfactory/unsatisfactory (adapted from Shepard, 2005)

Students underline the score which holds true for them and decide on their future activity.

6. Conclusion

Formative assessment is a powerful tool that can be used to develop learners' metacognitive skills. Besides, it allows teachers to bring variety in the classroom, engage and motivate learners, raise their autonomy and interest. However, there are rules that help to make the use of formative assessment more effective. Firstly, students need to practice formative assessment techniques regularly. Secondly, they have to be explained what the benefits are. Thirdly, students need to be given clear instructions. Lastly, immediate feedback is necessary.

There are many other formative assessment techniques that the author of the article is to try out in her classroom. They are student portfolios, reflection diaries and blogs, case studies. Formative assessment is widely used for project work (see the [Intel](#) site (Intel Education. Оценивание проектов, 2012: электронный ресурс)). The use of technology for the purposes of formative assessment is also a promising perspective.

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