

Implementing formative assessment: An experience learned from Asian classrooms

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Abstract

Formative assessment has recently become a preferred assessment strategy in educational institutions worldwide. However, it is not easy to achieve this practice in Asian classrooms because there are disparities between the socio-cultural context and the principles of formative assessment practices. This one-semester study aimed to uncover the complexities of the implementation process of formative assessment in Vietnamese higher education classrooms. Participants were two lecturers and 250 students from two college classes in Vietnam. The results showed that there were various structural and cultural obstacles, especially existing rules and norms in Vietnamese classrooms that hindered the implementation of formative assessment practices. To suite the local socio-cultural context, the initiative needed to be modified to become hybrid and transformative types of practices.

Introduction

Although the term ‘formative assessment’ is widely used, there is still ongoing discussion about this term in the literature. Black and Wiliam (1998) note the term ‘formative assessment’ does not have a tightly defined and widely accepted meaning. Black et al. (2003) proposed that the term ‘formative’ should be understood as the functions that assessment serves in supporting students’ learning and as evidence used to adapt teaching to meet learning needs. For this purpose, recently a potentially better term used to describe formative assessment has emerged, ‘Assessment for Learning’ (Gardner 2006, p. 2). Black et al. (2003) acknowledge the broad meaning of formative assessment but note that there are four aspects of formative assessment that were implemented successfully in classrooms and led to learning gains. These aspects were questioning, feedback, peer and self-assessment and the formative use of summative tests.

A large volume of research has documented benefits of these four formative assessment aspects. A meta-analysis of research into classroom assessment practices conducted by Black and Wiliam (1998) found that formative assessment is effective in virtually all educational settings: content areas, knowledge and skill types, and levels of

education. A similar recent large-scale meta-analysis by Hattie (1999) revealed that feedback to students was the single most influential aspect of classroom teaching. The dissemination of these findings led to an emphasis on formative assessment and inspired changes to classroom practice which spread beyond Anglophone contexts to Asia-Pacific regions (Klenowski, 2009; Ross, 2008).

In Vietnam, during the last decade the government has implemented various initiatives to renovate the education system. Importantly, in 2001 the government endorsed a 10-year master plan for educational development. An important element of the plan has been to shift from "passive knowledge transmission" to more active and critical thinking and self-learning (Supalak, 2002). This initial policy was then pushed by a national curriculum reform in 2002. One of the most significant characteristics of the new curriculum is the promotion of "student-centered learning". Unlike the conventional teaching method adopted in Vietnamese schools, where teachers unilaterally impart knowledge to students, the new curriculum states that the learners must be placed in the center of the learning process. Teachers need to encourage students to engage in thinking, class participation, and problem solving. What is required of Vietnamese teachers of today is not only theory (i.e., what is student-centered learning?) but also its application (i.e., how to implement it in lessons) (Hamano, 2008).

Regarding assessment, the government recognized that the conventional summative assessment needed to be reformed and more emphasis on assessment for learning was required from teachers (Alexander 2001; Duong, Nguyen, & Griffin 2011; Moss, Girard, & Haniford 2006; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Therefore, Vietnamese educators and policy-makers are calling for alternative formative assessment practices like portfolios, self-assessment, peer-assessment and weekly reporting (Duong, Nguyen, & Griffin, 2011). The strong call for the utilization of these formative assessment practices has come about because the summative assessment focused on the reproduction of factual and procedural knowledge has predominated (Alexander, 2001; Moss, Girard, & Haniford, 2006; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Summative assessment of low level learning hinders the development of problem-solving capacities, communicative skills and critical thinking strategies that are regarded as essential for success in today's diverse and data-driven globalized environment. However, various researchers have warned that the issue of intended formative assessment policy and its enactment is particularly complex when the policy is borrowed from a sociocultural context which differs from that in which it is being implemented (e.g., Carless, 2011; Zhang & Hu, 2010). Pham (2014) and Phuong-Mai (2008) have found that imported educational practices often face structural and cultural barriers in the local context. The following section will discuss barriers that potentially hinder the implementation of formative assessment in the Vietnamese socio-cultural context.

Local structural factors that potentially impact formative assessment

The most important structural factor that potentially hinders formative assessment practices in Vietnamese classrooms is probably the dominance of the end-of-year summative assessment. Almost all Asian education systems still use end-of-school examinations (summative assessment) as the primary tool to select students for elite schools and a limited number of university places (Brown et al., 2009). Kennedy et al. (2008) claim that teachers within Confucian heritage societies appear to see frequent summative assessment and practice for formal examinations as a means of motivating effort and as a means of guiding instruction. This also means that no matter what types of assessment practices are employed in class, the predominant forms of learning, teaching and assessment practices must support and prepare students to succeed in summative end-of-semester exams. Falchikov (2005), Samuelowicz and Bain (2002) and Sfard (1998) claim that summative assessment in Asian classrooms is perceived as a form of knowledge control, where the outcome of learning is seen as acquired factual knowledge or skills that can either be correct or incorrect. This view is consistent with a structure-and-process based curriculum where there is a strong focus on content (Carraccio et al., 2002).

Besides, Chen et al. (2012) also claim that an important distinction in the function of assessment in Confucian Heritage Culture contexts is that a good person is one who scores well because examination results reflect the quality and worth of the individual. Gow and Kember (1990) add that Asian people usually measure one's success depending on his achievements, a teacher is called good if he/she has many students who obtain high scores on public exams. This leads to teachers tending to advocate teaching and assessment practices that could enable students to perform well on the summative assessment and disregarding how they improve during the learning process. As such, it is clear that this assessment tradition tends to overemphasize the results that students achieve on the end-of-school assessment rather than the progress that they may make during the semester. Therefore, to sustain formative assessment practices that mainly aim to provide feedback to students so that they can improve on the learning process (as defined by Black and Wiliam) in this culture, it is very likely that formative assessment practices need to be modified in a manner that could help students not only make progress but also perform well on the summative assessment.

Cultural factors that potentially impact formative assessment

Cultural barriers hindering formative assessment are also foreseen. Researchers have claimed that there should not be a stereotype about different cultures in the East and West because there are individual differences and much diversity within each cultural group; however, at the same time each cultural group has a set of certain shared views and social practices

(Littlewood, 1999). Therefore, although differences do exist within cultural groups, they are generally referred to as *cultural tendencies* (Kubota, 2001). Vietnam is strongly influenced by the tenets of Confucianism, and is referred to as having a Confucian Heritage Culture (Phuong-Mai, 2008; Pham, 2014); whereas formative assessment is developed based on Western cultural values that have *cultural tendencies* different from Confucian Heritage Culture. Therefore, formative assessment practices potentially face cultural disparities in Vietnamese classrooms. One of the most important local cultural obstacles is teaching beliefs and perceptions.

For Confucius, a good example of teachers must be shaped in the maxim that “to give students a bowl of water, the teacher must have a full bucket of water to dispense” (Hu, 1944, p. 98). Therefore, teachers need to select knowledge from authoritative sources such as books and classics as they are considered the main sources enriching students’ knowledge. Researchers have claimed that Confucian Heritage Culture teachers are very familiar with the concept that teaching is not on how students can create and construct knowledge, but on how extant authoritative knowledge can be transmitted and internalized in a most effective and efficient way (Brick, 1991; Jin & Cortazzi, 1995).

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) also claim that Vietnam is one of the Confucian Heritage Culture nations scoring high on the Power Distance Index (Malaysia scores highest with 104; China: 80; Singapore: 74; Vietnam: 70; Hong Kong: 68; Korea: 60; Taiwan: 58 and Japan: 54). It is generally asserted that nations with such high scores on power distance place greater emphasis on hierarchical relationships. Differing from teacher-equal-student teachings of Socrates, who is thought to be the father of Western philosophy, Confucian teachings instruct learners to respect and obey authority figures (Confucius, 1947) – in the educational realm it means that students should obey and listen to teachers. A teacher is considered to be a *guru* who is supposed to satisfy learners in the search for the *truth* (in knowledge) and *virtues* (in life) (Phuong-Mai, 2008). The exclusive roles of the teacher in delivering knowledge create a situation in which Vietnamese students are not familiar with questioning, evaluating and generating knowledge. They accept teachers as the definitive knowledge source and adopt themselves as passive listeners in the class. They believe that truth is not found primarily in the self, but in exemplars [teachers] (Confucius, 1947). These assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning have been deeply imbedded in the mentality of both Vietnamese teachers and students and they are not easily removed. They are barriers that prevent Vietnamese teachers and students from accepting any pedagogical practice that does not give the teacher opportunity to judge the student's performance. This cultural characteristic potentially challenges formative assessment activities like self-assessment and peer-assessment as they tend to deemphasize the role of the teacher in the evaluation and learning process.

Pham (2014) claims that to overcome local structural and cultural barriers, innovation implementers need to create hybrid practices that could create alignments between the reforms and the local socio-cultural context. The present study aims to examine how the participating teachers reacted to formative assessment practices and how they created these alignments. The study was guided by the following questions.

1. How did the teachers transform formative assessment in the Vietnamese context?
2. What were the changes in student beliefs when they implemented the transformed formative assessment?

Methodology

Participants

In the present study, the participants were two teachers, one from a History class and one from a Law class and 250 students from two of these teachers' classes. The History class had 100 students. The Law class had 150 students. The History teacher had nine years of teaching experience and the Law teacher had seven years of teaching experience. The researchers participated in the study as the main investigator and an adviser. The researcher helped the teachers design formative assessment activities for each lesson and develop strategies to solve problems that emerged in the class.

Procedures

All lessons were designed in the seminar format. During the first section of each class the students were asked to work in small groups to comprehend the readings. They were encouraged to gauge each other's understanding by formulating as many clear questions as possible, including both questions in the text and questions that were related to the text but were not discussed in it. The teachers were also involved in reinforcing the students' understanding by challenging them with difficult questions. Formative assessment consisted of a range of tools including formal and informal tools, ranging from self-assessment, peer-assessment, oral feedback from teachers and peers, and informal classroom conversations. These tools primarily aimed to provide feedback to the students so that they could evaluate their merits and weaknesses, then work out the most effective learning strategy for themselves in the future. The section below describes how these main tools were applied.

- Self-evaluation

After each group discussion on the readings, the students were asked to evaluate their own preparation and performance. Initially, it was planned that the students also needed to evaluate their contributions to their group project as their mid-term assessment. Self-

assessment was applied because it is fundamental to all aspects of learning (Boud, 1990). In this study, self-assessment aimed to provide the students with reflective skills and train them to evaluate their own merits and shortcomings and how to strengthen their weaknesses.

- Peer-assessment

This activity was planned to be applied when the students evaluated each other's effort and capacities in formulating questions to comprehend the readings and evaluate each other's contributions on the mid-term group project. Peer-assessment was incorporated in this study because findings of a review conducted by Topping (1998) showed that peer-assessment brought about students' learning gains including both test performance and skill performance.

- The teachers' feedback-giving

Teachers were asked to give oral and immediate feedback as much as they could. This was because, as Price, Handley and Millar (2011) claim, dialogue is a more effective tool as it provides better opportunities for feedback to become reconstructed, avoiding the misconceptions that may occur when information is only transmitted in one direction from tutor to student. Regarding assessment tasks, at the start of the study the researchers suggested two pieces of assessment. The first assessment was group projects. The students were asked to work in small groups on a project that could be a case study and an issue covered in the course. This type of assessment allowed the students to do both self-assessment (to evaluate their own contributions) and peer-assessment (to evaluate each other's contributions). Black et al. (2003) found these practices helped bring about students' learning gains. The second assessment could be either individual end-of-semester essays or exam papers depending on the teachers' preference.

Data collection

A combination of structured interviews and informal discussions and structured lesson observations was used. The employment of these data collection methods aimed to reveal how the teachers adopted and adapted formative assessment practices. In general, interviews were conducted with the participating teachers to investigate their perceptions toward the strategies deployed and how to improve them. The main function of observations was to examine how the teachers interacted with their students and the language used by the teachers in speaking to those individuals.

Data analysis

The procedures to analyze the data followed those applied in Asghar's study (2013). In brief, the researcher read and re-read the interview transcripts and observation forms. The researcher then focused on asking questions of the data relating to what tools were used as

formative assessment practices, and what rules, norms and historical perspectives of the activity systems were in place influencing how those tools were used. Additionally, the data were explored by questioning how the students were expected to participate and how the teachers attempted to adjust mediating artefacts and tools to fit their teaching practices and students' learning ability and to enable the students to achieve the expected learning outcomes. To ensure the validity and reliability of the results, the researcher and a research assistant held regular discussions and helped check their joint analysis. Whenever the analysis was conducted separately, they compared the findings to check the internal agreement rate. The result reported that the agreement rate on findings of all data sources varied from 85% to 100%.

Results

The following sections document how the two teachers enacted formative assessment practices in their classrooms. The researcher will focus on exploring how *cultural tendencies* and the testing culture in Vietnam influenced the implementation of the formative assessment practices.

Feedback

The interviews with the two teachers disclosed that they were keen on providing individual feedback to the students but there were obstacles preventing them. They both highlighted that the class size was a big obstacle preventing them from providing detailed feedback to individual students. Their comments regarding this were:

To be honest, I have very limited opportunity to talk to individual students about their learning. Imagine I have more than one hundred students in the class, so talking to individuals is impossible. The only verbal feedback I can provide my students in the class is in a group on their group project.

Worse, the teachers also complained about time limit to provide feedback on the students' written essays.

I would love to clarify more points in their essays. However, I am not paid to mark these essays and I have many things to prepare for classes. The university should have a better policy to employ sessional staff to mark students' essays.

Besides, the contents of the lessons were also perceived as a problem hindering the initiative. The Law teacher commented:

I do not have much time to discuss with the students all that I want to share. I need to complete the lessons as planned by the university.

In addition to these interview findings, the observation results disclosed that the two teachers were very busy with answering individual students' questions and solving group conflicts. Many students raised their hand to ask the teachers for help. To respond to all students' inquiries, the teachers often responded to each student very abruptly and quickly by telling them facts or directions but not discussing or challenging them with complicated questions. The teachers rarely provided feedback or discussed weaknesses of individual students.

These results clearly indicated that feedback, the most important component of formative assessment, seemed hard to be implemented due to several structural obstacles in Vietnamese classrooms.

The influence of the traditional examination and learning culture

As the unit progressed the History teacher negotiated with the researcher to change the first assessment – initially planned as a group project – to weekly individual multiple-choice tests. She explained that multiple-choice tests would enable her to more effectively test what she perceived to be important for the students. However, the researcher expressed concern that the multiple-choice tests would not create opportunities for the students to exchange feedback and assess each other's contribution as the group project might do. The teacher reassured the researcher by saying that she could adapt the multiple-choice tests into a formative assessment practice. The procedure she used was as follows: on the day when the multiple-choice tests were returned, the students were grouped in small groups to discuss their choices. The students took turns to explain why they chose their answers. If group members chose different answers for the same question, they needed to explain the reason. The whole group then discussed which answer sounded better. If they could not agree with each other, they then approached the teacher for help. After all groups finished their discussion, the teacher asked those groups that had disagreements to explain their choices. The class then became a dialogue between the students and the teacher characterised by lively exchange and feedback.

When the teacher was interviewed, she explained that there were two reasons why she wanted to implement weekly individual multiple-choice tests. The first was that she received some complaints from the students in the first few weeks that their peers' evaluations were not fair and they did not learn much from their peers' feedback. The students wanted to have the teacher's judgment on what they did as well. The teacher then wanted to implement a type of assessment that allowed not only peers, but also her to judge the students' work and weekly multiple-choice tests met this requirement. The teacher explained:

I understand the advantages of a group project assessment but the students seem to have many issues that they want to clarify so that they can incorporate in following assessment tasks. They do not judge each other completely in

terms of clarifying these points. You see when the students discuss their choices in the class, it is very clear to everyone and I can correct if they explain wrongly.

The teacher further acknowledged that creating opportunities for the students to discuss their choices and challenge each other to explain their choices was really helpful. From her point of view, to explain their choices, the students needed to understand the point deeply and systematically. The teacher perceived this hybrid practice was innovative because it both helped the students improve their knowledge during the learning process and ensured that the students understood all 'knowledge points' correctly so that they could perform on the final summative assessment well. Interestingly, the teacher was indeed interested in and cared about the students making progress. She said:

As a teacher, I am really happy to see how the discussions help the students to clarify their thought. This on-going improvement is truly meaningful to me.

The second reason why the teacher wanted to use weekly multiple-choice tests was that she wanted to see how much content knowledge that the students could remember and understand each week. She commented that she did not encourage the students to memorize the curriculum. However, she emphasized that a large portion of the final assessment required the students to demonstrate their understanding of the conceptual knowledge taught in the unit. If she did not test to check how the students understood these 'knowledge points', she was unsure how the students could perform on the final assignment. She explained:

I cannot change the final assessment. You can see the rubric consists of two out of five criteria that are about conceptual knowledge. The multiple-choice tests allow me to check how much they understand those things.

By contrast, in the Law class the teacher emphasized that it was important for law students to develop their effective communication, pursuing, reasoning, critical and confidence skills. One method the teacher suggested would effectively help train the students with these soft skills was oral presentation. Therefore, instead of letting the students to work on the readings in small groups in the first half of each lesson, before each class the teacher asked the students to form their group to work on the reading. Then, in the class the students participated in a so-called 'interviewer-interviewee game'. This game was: one group was chosen as the interviewee group and the other groups were the interviewer groups. The interviewer groups were responsible for asking as many questions as possible and the members in the interviewee group took turns to answer these questions. If someone got stuck, the other members could jump in to help. To encourage the groups to ask as many questions as possible and for them to be as hard as possible, the teacher suggested that she give scores to each group based on the number and quality of the questions that each group made. The teacher discussed with the researcher that she wanted to use the scores given to each group

during this game as the first assessment. So, there was no need to use the joint project as the mid-term test as planned. As such, the interviewer-interviewee game emerged as a new and useful tool to promote the students' learning and evaluate the groups.

Similar to the History class, the Law teacher explained in the interview that she was happy with oral presentations because she could judge how the students were progressing and could make timely intervention to help clarify any students' misunderstanding. She expressed point of view about this as below:

You can see sometimes the students could not see the hidden message in the text. I am not sure whether they could help each other to pick those hidden points. If we, as teachers, scaffold their logic of thinking, they could understand those points better.

The teacher also expressed her efforts to meet the goals of recent educational reforms as following:

The University is calling for improvement the students' communication skills.

These presentations help them improve this area a lot.

Discussion and conclusion

Webb and Jones (2009) note that the general *object* of teachers' work is the students and their learning. The explicit goal of this study (to increase formative assessment in two Vietnamese classrooms) was based on the rationale that students needed to learn higher-order and critical thinking skills, in-depth conceptual understanding, real-world problem-solving abilities, and communication skills (Darling-Hammond, & Falk, 1997; Newmann, & Associates, 1996; Shepard, 2000). Thus it was expected that introducing formative assessment would create opportunities for the participants to develop such skills more effectively. The *object* cannot be assumed, however, to be understood in a similar fashion by each of the participants. The researcher had the goal of assisting the teachers to adopt formative assessment practices. The teachers agreed to participate with the researcher but their goals were more multileveled and complex. They had to also fulfill their current responsibilities to students and meet the requirements of their superiors and expectations of colleagues. The students' goals are also equally complex and dynamic and depend partly on personal circumstances, their purposes for studying, their motivations and experiences during the courses.

Engestrom (1999) claims that when some activity or practice (e.g., formative assessment in the present study) is brought into a new context or goes international, the implementation process often faces challenges created by cultural diversity, different traditions or perspectives. To make the reform go smoothly, local implementers often have to take into consideration a wide of range of influential factors at various levels (e.g., policies

from the top, rules and norms of the existing system, traditions and perspectives of local implementers and local institutional constraints) in order to subsequently develop new conceptual tools to understand multiple perspectives and design a new form of the practice to fit into the new socio-cultural context. Perrenoud (1998) emphasizes this idea when arguing that on the reformative process there is a need for ongoing regulation and flexibility. These warnings were well reflected in the present study when it showed that when formative assessment practices were brought to Vietnamese classrooms, there were many tensions and contradictions emerging, leading to the fact that the participating teachers and the researcher had to negotiate to change the format of initiatives in a manner that both met the requirement of the reform and aligned with the local teaching and learning culture. The hybrid formative assessment practices created by the teachers in the present study were necessitated as they met key requirements of the innovation and reassured the teachers and students.

The trend for policy makers in Asian countries to adopt and valorise Western practices remains strong despite the fact that many East Asian countries outperform on the Programme for International Student Assessment and other international comparisons of student achievement tests. Recently, Vietnam is showing marked improvement in overall ranking. Globalization ensures that information on Western teaching and learning practices is readily available. To modernize their education systems quickly and avoid the painfully long research stage, educators in these countries are drawn to adopt Western practices without considering their appropriateness for either the different instructional contexts or the impact of these practices on their students' learning. This paper represents one attempt to address this shortfall. As our study demonstrates, the uptake of Western practices requires cultural translation and local adaptation if it is to become an effective part of the education system in Asian societies.

Despite the contributions, the study has limitations to highlight. First, the participating teachers and students had limited professional development in implementing formative assessment practices before entering the intervention. Second, the issue of generalization from this study to other samples and contexts needs to be addressed. For instance, participants were recruited from these classes in a social science university in the south of Vietnam, so the results obtained may not be relevant to teachers and students from different disciplines at other universities. Furthermore, the findings may only be relevant to the southern part of Vietnam rather than all the other parts of the country. This is because Vietnam is characterized by cultural differences between the South, Central and North. These three parts have distinctive cultural characteristics including daily practices, beliefs, languages and ways of working. More studies are required to investigate the extent that findings of this study can be usefully applied in a range of contexts.

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