

The Effect of Formative Assessment on English Learning of Higher Vocational College Students

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Abstract

The paper makes an empirical research on the effect of formative assessment on English learning of higher vocational college students. It finds that: formative assessment attaches importance to the learning process, which is conducive to the development of good English learning habits; formative assessment can enhance students' confidence in English learning, improve the atmosphere of team cooperative learning and autonomous learning, but cannot change the learning motivation of students. Overall, formative assessment has a greater impact on students with lower English proficiency.

Keywords: Formative assessment; English learning; Higher vocational college students; Effect.



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1. Introduction

As one of the most effective teaching methods and practices, formative assessment is a concept and method in developmental stages. According to the article, *A Brief History of Formative Assessment*, Philosopher Socrates is the early practitioner. In modern history, the contemporary use of formative assessment is often traced to a famous American evaluation expert [Scriven \(1996\)](#), who used “formative” and “summative” to indicate collecting evaluation information. Soon after, this concept appeared in other country. According to CNKI, [\(Yan, 1996\)](#) firstly published an article involved formative assessment, titled “*College English Test, Band Four & Six and Learning Evaluation*” in 1996 in China [\(Yan, 1996\)](#). So far, the research on formative assessment have always been based on independent sample, which means the sample of experimental group and that of the control group are not same. Researchers such as [Jinghua \(2006\)](#) with his report of *Experimental Research on the Impact of Formative Assessment on English Learning Strategies* and [Jurong \(2014\)](#) with his report of *Experimental Research on the Impact of Formative Assessment on College Students' English Learning Attitudes* all adopt this kind of research method. The results show that the students in the experimental class with self - evaluation, mutual evaluation and teacher evaluation method are better than those in the control class. Although, the two groups are set under the same teaching objectives and teaching contents, the results have not gotten rid of the influence of different individuals' personality learning methods, etc. Therefore, this article will further discuss the effect of formative assessment on English learning of higher vocational college students with the same students as the research object.

2. Critical Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

Evaluation is an indispensable part of teaching. Scientific evaluation results can not only provide useful feedback for teaching, helping to improve teaching quality, but also help students to understand their own learning situation. Evaluation includes not only the summative evaluation represented by standardized examination, but also the formative evaluation which focuses on learning process. In this essay, author will discuss the impact of formative evaluation on students' English learning compared with summative evaluation.

2.2. Development

Ralph Tyler, the founder of modern education assessment, put forward in 1930 that the core of assessment is to evaluate the completion of teaching objectives. However, his standpoint is based on teacher, and the evaluation is still a result-oriented summative evaluation with formative evaluation as a supplement. Then, some scholars began to concern learning evaluation. In the 1980s, many scholars, such as [Bachman and Palmer \(1981\)](#), [Jarvis and Adams \(1979\)](#), [Long \(1984\)](#), [Richards \(1984\)](#), [Brown \(1989\)](#). In 1998, the famous evaluation magazine *Assessment in Education* discussed evaluation and classroom learning in the first issue.

2.3. The Standard of Grading

[Shepard \(2000\)](#) summed it up well when she quoted this observation by [Graue \(1993\)](#): “Assessment and instruction are often conceived as curiously separate in both time and purpose” (p. 4). She mentioned that the combination of rules makes assessment formative. She has set a general flow of formative assessment principles. I totally agree with her idea about the cycle of instruction with formative assessment, since it facilitates teachers with a certain set of procedure. However, I reckon that standard of specific item may be a limitation. Different items or

projects possess adverse and various evaluation standard, which cannot be determined by only a certain cycle. However, this weakness is solved by [Brown \(2004\)](#) who has discussed large-scale standardized tests, the standard of grading, and overall evaluation of student performance. This is really useful for the virtual operation.

2.4. Application of Formative Assessment

In Shepard's another article, *Formative assessment: Caveat Emptor*, she proposes solutions for test developers in ensuring the integrity and efficacy of products, which is the reasonable application of formative assessment from my perspective. ([Shepard, 2005](#)) Furthermore, Alderson, J. C has proved that formative assessment can be used in various fields ([Alderson et al., 2015](#)).

In Bachman's opinion, formative assessment can check the level of students' achievements, providing teachers with feedback to make the plan of next step ([Bachman and Palmer, 1996](#)). He claimed that besides tests, participation in the class, pair works, and self-study are also methods of judging students' performance. Just according to his opinion, I have set the evaluation form of this research, which is shown in Chapter III. Accurately, Alderson, J.C. has defined formative assessment as the interface between learning and assessment ([Alderson, 2005](#)). I totally agree with his idea.

In the book of *Testing: friend or foe? Theory and practice of assessment and testing*, [Black \(1998\)](#) provides a comprehensive introduction of the practice of assessment. But it is little confused when he talking about assessment in Britain and reference to assessment in the USA. With great respect, I don't agree with his opinion that excellent practice of assessment should be constantly searched for a comparable assessment in the USA. This can interfere with the actual learning.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study include a total 51 college students from the same class with relatively poor grades English classes. In the first semester, their English learning achievement were assessed by the mixed evaluation method, that is, the score of final examination accounted for 70 % of the final grade, regular scores for 30 % (mainly composed by the average of a few classroom quiz). The study also includes the participation of the teachers of the said classes. Purposive sampling will be used due to the limited number of participants for the study.

3.2. Evaluation Method & Research Method

In order to enhance their English grades, the second semester will implement the blend of final evaluation and formative evaluation method to assess their achievement. The specific composition is shown in [table 1](#).

Table-1. Evaluation form of students' English learning performance during the semester of 2017

Test (50 %)	Teacher evaluation (20 %)	Student mutual evaluation (15 %)	Student self-assessment (15 %)
The first time	Classroom performance	Group activities or homework(in-curricular)	Autonomous learning goal plan
The second time	Regular test	Group activities or homework(extra-curricular)	Execution records (including works)
The third time	Homework after class	Separate homework	Separate operation

Classroom performance includes attendance, speech (performance), discussion, etc. The evaluation of group activities or homework is set on the basis of students' participation and contribution, etc. The standard of mutual evaluation of students comprises of A, B and C. Autonomous learning plan can be divided in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation for students to choose.

When conducting research, Observation Method, Questionnaire Survey and Individual Interviews as well as Small-Scale Discussions will be adopted.

3.3. Instruments

The instruments that will be used in this study include the report cards of the mutual evaluation of students. These will be used to determine the final average grade of the students.

3.4. Validity and Reliability of the Evaluation Method & Data

In order to refine the data collecting form, when developing a scoring standard, each teacher will consider the following elements: feasibility, the effect on motivation, operability to increase the reliability of the data. Furthermore, teachers will periodically communicate with students, to facilitate the utility of formative assessment in English teaching.

3.5. Procedure

i . At the beginning of the second semester, a questionnaire survey was conducted on the students' learning habits in the first semester.

ii. During the experiment, author will observe the different performance of 51 students, specially the performance of female A with good English scores, male B with middle grade and 5 students failing in the first semester.

iii. At the end of the second semester, a questionnaire survey was conducted on the students' learning habits, self - recognition and changes in English learning strategies after the experiment. Self - recognition mainly includes students' learning motivation, learning attitude, learning status and autonomous learning and other aspects.

3.6. Limitations

- i. The volume of sample is relatively small, the result may lack universality.
- ii. The experiment may not get rid of the influence of other factors appeared during the vocation between the first term and the second term, such as after-school curriculum in vocation, preparation on TOEFL, IELTS, SAT during vacation, etc.
- iii. The experiment doesn't consider the gender disparity on English learning.

4. Results & Discussion

The results are based on the questionnaire survey on the students' learning habits, self - recognition and changes in English learning strategies.

4.1. Learning Habits

Adopting the Likert-Scale five-point measure questionnaire, the standards of students' learning habits are set from "completely untrue" to "completely true". (Laibing, 2006) One point is set for completely untrue, 2 points for basically untrue, 3 points for sometimes true, 4 points for basically true and 5 points for completely true. The statistical results are shown in table 2.

Table-2. Questionnaire on Students' English Learning Habits

Survey Content	Score For The First Semester	Score For The Second Semester	Rising Score
a. Preview & Review	3.2	3.93	0.73
b. Arrive at the classroom ahead of time to study	2.42	3.35	0.93
c. Listen attentively in class	3.54	4.46	0.92
d. Speak actively	2.78	4.43	1.65
e. Find solutions when running into a problem	2.91	3.77	0.86
f. Participate actively in group activities	3.16	4.02	0.86
g. Have interest in English activities on and off campus	2.67	4.52	1.85
h. Participate in English activities of the college	2.22	4.76	2.54
i. Schedule one's own English learning plan	2.13	4.92	2.79
j. Periodically have reflection on English learning	2.03	3.78	1.75
General (average) score	2.71	4.19	1.48

In the first semester, the overall score is 2.71, which indicates that students of higher vocational college have not cultivated good learning habits. Their enthusiasm towards English learning is not as fierce as university students. There exists comparatively huge rise space.

The overall score of the second term is 4.19 with a 55% increase. The score of 10 items all increases. It is concluded that students' English learning habits have been greatly improved. The awareness of scheduling one's own learning plan has gone up mostly with an increase of 2.79. It indicates that higher vocational students' autonomous learning awareness and time awareness have been improved greatly through the application of formative assessment, which may arise from the implement of the standard of autonomous learning in evaluation form. Furthermore, the score of the 8th item also increases greatly, indicating that students have learned to broaden their horizon from some extra activities. Therefore, the conclusion that formative assessment has conducted a positive impact on vocational college students' English learning habits can be put forward to.

4.2. Self-Recognition

Students are required to fill in the form with "√" or "×" to show whether the conditions in the form are true or not in the second semester, compared with the first semester. The data comes from students' own feeling in interview. The results are shown in table 3.

Table-3. Questionnaire on students' self – recognition

Survey content	The percent of true condition	Remark
The motivation English learning has been changed.	13.7% 7 students	Most of the students are still based on tool-based motivation
The confidence and motivation in learning has improved.	66.7% 34 students	Especially those who failed in the first semester
The interest in English learning has increased	78.4% 40 students	Normally due to colorful teaching method and content
The learning enthusiasm is higher.	74.5% 38 students	Prepare for the semester evaluation every minute
The learning fun has increased.	80.4% 41 students	Experience the joy of success with good grades and praise
The initiative in group cooperative learning is more active.	60.8% 31 students	For the collective honor and vital interests
Plans are often scheduled to make study organized.	86.3% 44 students	Students have learned to manage and allocate time
The awareness of autonomous learning has increased.	82.4% 42 students	Naturally
The self-study ability has improved.	56.8% 29 students	
The fear of communicating in English has reduced.	74.5% 38 students	Speak actively in class
Test anxiety has reduced.	52.9% 27 students	Because they final grade is not determined by a single test
More time is spent on English learning.	90.2% 46 students	
Satisfied with the study in this semester	72.5% 37 students	Students think they could have been better with higher expectations

According to the data above, it is apparent that the effectiveness of formative assessment is obvious in general. Vast majority of students think they have more confidence and motivation in English learning, which may developed into an internal motivation in the further. Every item has increased over 50%, except the first item. The main purpose of learning is still getting good grades, job-seeking needs and so on, which still belong to instrumental motivation. According to the book, *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, Gardner and LAN Bert firstly divided the motivation of foreign language learning into instrumental motivation and integrative motivation from the perspective of sociolinguistics. (Brown, 2007) According to Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert's theory, learners with "instrumental motivation" want to achieve their goals by using a second language, focusing on "the practical value and benefits of learning a new language" (Gardner and Lambert, 1972) This indicates that although the motivation of learning does not change due to the application of formative assessment, the learning productivity is also guaranteed.

Due to the application of formative assessment in one semester, the pressure has eased, learning fun and enthusiasm has enhanced. Everyone in class has poured special attention because they are afraid to miss the opportunity to add points---speaking actively. The atmosphere of team work is very good. In the process of learning, teachers and students are more concerned about the learning process instead of merely the learning result. All the situations above will create a virtuous circle.

4.3. English Learning Strategies

Before sending out the questionnaire on strategies to students, teachers will explain the meaning of various learning strategies. Students are required to mark the scores by comparing whether the strategy is used more in the second semester than in the first semester. The answers range from "completely 5 points" to "completely not 1 point".

The results are showed in table 4.

Table-4. Questionnaire on students' English learning strategies

Strategies	Score
Metacognitive strategy	4.16
Cognitive strategy	1.96
Compensation strategy	3.94
Affective strategy	3.62
Social strategy	3.01
Memory strategy	2.01

According to the data above, the metacognitive strategy has been used most frequently. Metacognitive strategy is the awareness of setting reasonable process and plans before learning. According to Wendy Y.K. Lam, metacognitive strategy will enhance students' autonomous learning spirit since students will set goals, evaluate by them-selves instead of memorizing mechanically before the exam (Lam, 2009). Therefore, the conclusion that formative assessment has made students to use Metacognitive strategy to self-study can be put forward to.

5. Conclusion

The application of formative assessment to English teaching in higher vocational colleges reflects the principle of people-oriented teaching. Empirical research finds:

- i . Formative assessment attaches importance to the learning process, which is conducive to the development of good English learning habits
- ii . Formative assessment can enhance students' confidence in English learning, improve the atmosphere of team cooperative learning and autonomous learning, but cannot change the learning motivation of students.
- iii . Formation assessment has different effects on the application of various learning strategies with the greatest impact on metacognitive strategies and the least effect on n cognitive strategy.

Overall, formative assessment has a greater impact on students with lower English proficiency.

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