Formative Evaluation and Formative Feedback: An Effective Practice to Promote Student Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Formative Assessment plays a highly important practice in the teaching and learning process where English is taught as a second language (ESL) and as a foreign language (EFL). However, Formative Assessment has not been paid major attention as Summative Assessment has in the Ecuadorian Education System. The purpose of the study is to describe the perception that English students and English teachers have about Formative Assessment and Formative Feedback in their every day practice. A total of 70 students majoring in different engineering and 10 English teachers participated in this study. We used data collected from class observation, questionnaires, and interviews in these cases, with a qualitative ethnographic approach, the sources were english teachers and students from Pre-intermediate and Intermediate levels of Higher Education. The findings show that in both Language Centers students appreciated that their teachers use Formative Assessment and Formative Feedback in their classes. In the Language Center of the Technical University of Ambato, Interviews were used to give feedback or correct common mistakes. We did Interviews in English with the Pre-Intermediate Level of the Open modality. On the other hand, we used Interviews in Spanish with the Intermediate Level of the Army Polytechnic School, Campus Latacunga. Students found Formative Feedback fruitful to develop language and promote meaningful learning. We can also say that Spanish Interviews were more useful that English interviews. However, there was a slight difference among English teachers. Three from ten teachers who had large classes of 30 or 35 students, said that Formative Feedback was somewhat challenging because it involved lots of class observation and provide permanent feedback to low achievers' performance during Instruction. This paper concludes with the authors' reflection and it highlights the benefits of applying Formative Assessment and Formative Feedback in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Keywords: Formative Assessment, Formative Feedback, Instruction, low achievers, meaningful learning.

Evaluación Formativa y Retroalimentación Formativa: Una práctica efectiva para promover el aprendizaje de los estudiantes en la Educación Superior

RESUMEN

La Evaluación Formativa juega una práctica muy importante en el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje donde el inglés se enseña como Segunda Lengua (ESL) y como Lengua Extranjera (EFL). Sin embargo, la Evaluación Formativa no ha recibido mayor atención como la Evaluación Sumativa en el Sistema Educativo Ecuatoriano. El propósito del presente estudio es describir la percepción que los estudiantes y profesores de inglés tienen sobre la Evaluación Formativa y la retroalimentación Formativa en su práctica diaria. Participaron en este estudio un total de 70 estudiantes que se especializaron en diferentes ingenierías y 10 profesores de inglés. Utilizamos datos recogidos de la observación de clase, cuestionarios, y entrevistas en estos casos, con un enfoque etnográfico cualitativo, las fuentes fueron los profesores y estudiantes de inglés de los niveles pre-intermedio e intermedio de la Educación Superior. Los resultados indican que en los dos Centros de Idiomas los estudiantes apreciaron que sus maestros usen la Evaluación Formativa y la retroalimentación formativa en sus clases. En el Centro de Idiomas de la Universidad Técnica de Ambato, se utilizaron entrevistas para dar retroalimentación o corregir errores comunes. Hicimos entrevistas en inglés con el nivel pre-intermedio de la modalidad abierta. Por otro lado, se utilizaron entrevistas en español con el nivel intermedio de la modalidad regular de la Escuela Politécnica del Ejército, Campus Latacunga. Los estudiantes encontraron a la retroalimentación formativa fructífera para desarrollar el lenguaje y promover el aprendizaje significativo. También podemos decir que las entrevistas en español fueron más útiles que las entrevistas en inglés. Sin embargo, hubo una ligera diferencia entre los profesores de inglés. Tres de los diez profesores que tenían clases numerosas de 30 o 35 estudiantes, dijeron que la retroalimentación Formativa era un poco ardua porque esta significaba mucha observación de clase y retroalimentación permanente al rendimiento de los estudiantes de bajo rendimiento durante la instrucción. Este artículo concluye con la reflexión de los autores y resalta los beneficios del empleo de la Evaluación Formativa y retroalimentación formativa dentro de la Enseñanza del Idioma inglés como Lengua extranjera (EFL).

Palabras claves: Evaluación Formativa, Retroalimentación Formativa, Instrucción, estudiantes de bajo rendimiento, aprendizaje significativo.

1. Introduction

Formative Assessment is a teaching practice of major concern in the classes of English, specially in Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). English has long been taught in Ecuador as a foreign language (EFL) in different education levels such as: Elementary, High School and Higher Education. It is hard to believe that in the EFL classroom of Higher Education, there are low achievers who struggle learning English. Due to the latest Ecuadorian English Curriculum modification which demands children, teenagers and young learners to get a B2 English level according to the Common European Framework, there has been a slight increase of interest for taking EFL courses in our country and especially in the Language Center of the Technical University of Ambato. There has been also a large number of high school students who have not got A2 starter English Level at the end of their high school. Then, English Instruction at Higher Education turns to be demanding for both language teachers and students since students have to show the ability to speak the a foreign language in this case, English. In this context, it is teacher´s responsibility to promote meaningful learning in the EFL classroom. It is possible through the use of Formative Assessment and Formative Feedback. There are university students who feel afraid or uncomfortable to interact in English. What´s more, students are in panic the moment they take a Formal Test or Quiz every term, or semester since the Ministry of Education gives more attention to the use of Summative assessment where student´s knowledge is measured to see their learning progress during a course. (Ur, 2009). Summative assessment is used in the Ecuadorian Evaluation System since it is visible and permits schools to promote students to the next school years. Our Educational System is Quantitative rather than Qualitative. However, in the French_speaking Europen countries, students and teachers like better having qualitative assessment (Allal, 1997).

The challenge for language teachers is to combine both Summative and Formative assessment. In regard to Formative Assessment applying   Formative Feedback in the EFL classroom seems to receive little attention. The original motive for this study came from my interest as an English teacher on *How* to scaffold low achievers or students with learning difficulties to succeed and become autonomous learners. The objective of this study was to examine low achiever´s perceptions with regard to Formative Feedback in

EFL courses in the Language Center of the Technical University of Ambato and the Language Center in the Army Polytechnic school, campus Latacunga. It aimed to suggest directions for improvements related to Formative feedback in teaching and learning process in Language Center in the Technical University of Ambato. As a basis for this study into Formative Feedback, the following research questions were formulated:

1) What are the low achievers' perceptions of the importance of Formative Feedback in the teaching and learning process?

2) What are the English teachers' perceptions of the importance of Formative Feedback in the EFL class?

3) Does Formative Feedback receive any attention in these two universities?

If it does, how is Formative feedback carried out in the EFL classes? Does the process work effectively?

To find answers to these questions, we used data collected from class observations where we used observation checklist and interviews for both students and English teachers with a qualitative ethnographic approach which allows for description, theory-building and comparison. (Chaudron, 1988)

2. Background to the study

The term "Formative Assessment" first appeared in 1967 by Michael Scriven, who cited " it may have a role in the on-going improvement of the curriculum" (Scriven, 1967) a year later , (Bloom B. S., 1969) remarks the use of formative evaluation to promote student learning in the classroom by providing feedback and correctiveness during instruction. Then, the author concludes that evaluation is formative when it has the purpose of teaching and not for the grading process. (Audibert, 1980) adds that formative assessment occurs permanently in the classroom and both students and teacher are able to reflect in the teaching and learning process as well as to make and adapt to changes in the Instruction. Formative Assessment should be applied to verify students' learning progress, their achievement in the learning process and then, use the information obtained in the classroom to adjust future class instruction (Hughes, 2003).

(Allal, L., & Lopez, L. M., 2005) point out that formative assessment has been studied in France in different programs such as: curriculum development, teaching education and school reform movements, however, formative assessment has not been studied or analyzed on student learning. They also highlight in their Review of Publications that the

term assessment has been replaced "evaluation" in reference to the students who actually are generating meaningful learning in the classroom.

(Bloom B. , 1969) distinguishes between "Formative Evaluations", commenting that there is evidence of formative assessment when students´ learning is shaped during Instruction, there is Curriculum development if it is shaped by formative assessment.

(Sadler, 1989) and (Chappuis, 2005) say that if students are exposed to formative feedback, they know where they are and what language problems they have, students self-evaluate and make their own effort to succeed, then, language learners see the importance of receiving feedback from their language teacher.

In Addition, (Brookhart, 2008) states that students do better during the teaching and learning process because Formative assessment is *for* learning whereas summative assessment is *about* the learning.

(Kathleen, C. M & McMillan. J. H, 2010) note that Formative Assessment allows language teachers get important information from students, they can detect learning difficulties and importantly they can make the necessary changes to promote meaningful learning.

Several researchers have pointed out the benefits of applying Formative Assessment in the EFL classroom, however, (Butler, 1988) says that giving more attention to marks or grades in the learning process, promotes competition among students and obviously, the grading system does not allow students receive or appreciate any formative feedback to improve learning.

Assessment for Learning *(AfL)*

Assessment for Learning definitely identifies what students know and are able to do. AfL pretends students learn and succeed in the learning process through feedback (Sambell, K., McDowell, L., & Montgomery, C., 2012). They also mention the following principles of Assessment for Learning *(AfL)*

1 Authentic assessment

It emphasizes in authenticity and complexity

2 Balancing Summative and Formative Assessment

Permit students to have both summative and formative learning since they are seen as sources of learning

3 Creating opportunities for practice and rehearsal

Formative assessment offers students' opportunities where they can practice, improve and build competence and confidence on learning before they take a summative assessment

4 Designing formal feedback to improve learning

Students should get formal feedback at early stages so they can use in the future, it does not have to be just on written way and not just given by the teacher, and students can receive feedback from their peers and self-reflection on daily practices.

5 Designing opportunities for informal feedback

Teachers should provide opportunities where students can work, activate and collaborate in one to another learning by giving feedback among them

6 Developing students as effective lifelong learners

If students become autonomous learners they will not have any problems in the future because they are aware *How* they learn.

(Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B. & Wiliam, D, 2003) state that Assessment for Learning(AfL) looks for constructive criticism in order to improve and help students to succeed in higher level.

Giving Feedback

(Ur, 2009) defines feedback as the information given by the teacher to the student about his or her learning progress in order to encourage improvement on learning. The author also remarks that when giving feedback there should be judgment which promote learning as well as student´s acceptance on making mistakes in the learning process.

(Bailey, R., & Garner, M., 2010) explain that giving feedback in a written form is teacher´s favorite one, however, not all university students can figure it out with , they get confused or simply they do not find useful to get a lot of written feedback. As (Potter, A & Lynch, K, (2008)) explain that there is not purpose of proving feedback to students if they are neither able to understand nor ask for what it means, formative feedback has no purpose and students' learning can not be guided. (Nash, G., Liebergreen, M., Crimmins, G., Turley, J., & Bond, R., 2012) suggest using face to face feedback in order

to support students learning as well as teachers' instruction since giving written feedback to university students is not relevant for them.

(Ur, 2009) states that one of the useful correction technique in the classroom is the Interview. It is used to know what kinds of correction actually help them. Ur also points out that students find most useful receiving feedback if teachers have the interview in their first language or mother tongue.

(Strenger, 2014) also points out that giving meaningful feedback has to be very specific, it should address strengths and weaknesses, it should be carefully given at early stages, and it requires students' participation in the teaching and learning process**.**

The study

The present study was carried out at the Language Center in the Technical University of Ambato and the Language Center of Army Polytechnic School, campus Latacunga The sources included various informants, such as students from both Universities whose English levels were Pre-Intermediate level and Intermediate level, ten English teachers and formats such as observation check lists, Anecdote resume format, planning format, weekly learning overview format. At the time, we observed some students from the Technical University of Ambato who registered low grades from the diagnostic test, they were not willing to participate in group or pair work activities. The Formative Feedback process began immediately after three class observations where these low achievers did not interact with the rest of students in different learning environments such as pair or group work. They were quiet, just listened to the others, they were not engaged on learning. Then, the English teachers gave formative feedback in both forms: written and oral feedback using interviews in English and in Spanish. Talking about written feedback, it was clear and warm (nice), with regard to student´s progress and failure, we also had interviews with low achievers and we started telling their big efforts, challenges they had made to reach learning, then, we read the positive things we observed when low achievers tried to interact with the class. We sometimes told jokes or patted on their backs just to make them feel good. We did this over and over until Midterm Evaluation, later we noticed these students were much more motivated in the teaching and learning process. As a result they forgot about their bad grades, they were willing to learn and they asked us to check their work and every time they did something good ,we said something nice, drew a happy face, or gave a sticker to them, they liked it and they paid more attention to

the class and to their mistakes. To one degree or another, these students found Formative feedback useful, they knew they succeeded at the end because during the process there was a teacher who invited them to reflect on their mistakes, self correct , take their own responsibility on learning.

3. Methods

The methods and sources that we used in this study were, (1) Class observations (note taking) (2) Unstructured Interviews for both students and English teachers (3) Questionnaires (given to low achievers)

Sources. (1) three English teachers of Pre-intermediate seven teachers of Intermediate English level, (2) 35 students from Pre-Intermediate level of the Language Center of Technical University of Ambato, and 35 students from Intermediate Level of the Language Center of Army Polytechnic school, campus Latacunga (3) formats (observation check lists, Anecdote resume, planning, weekly learning overview)

Classroom observations basically using check-lists for students oral interaction among students as well as using check lists for students´ written work allowed us to experience firs-hand students´ learning difficulties. It made it possible to confirm or disconfirm some predictions about using or not using Formative Feedback with students who were not high achievers with regard to English language learning.

4. Results

The following results are presented in relation to the research questions and the two groups of students from Technical University of Ambato and The Army Polytechnic School, campus Latacunga. We will mention the low achievers´ perceptions of the importance of Formative Feedback in the teaching and learning process. Then, we explore the English teachers´ perceptions of the importance of Formative Feedback in the EFL class. Following the results of how Formative Feedback was used in both Language Centers.

a) Low achievers' perceptions about Formative Feedback

The results show that students who registered low grading during instruction perceived that Formative Feedback was significantly fruitful. They said the warm teacher´s feedback assisted their learning difficulties. Furthermore, low achievers' were more motivated to learn, self-correct and become autonomous learners.

Students from Pre_Intermediate level appreciated written feedback (words and phrases) such as good, very good, excellent work, You have done an excellent work!, Congratulations, you are writing well!, Excellent, your ideas clear and organized! Beautiful and neat work! on their assignments. Even receiving a happy face made students feel good and motivated. Finally, 85% of the students said that applying Formative Feedback in their classes lead not only to learn, to correct their mistakes, but also make important progress on the learning.

   b) *English Teachers´ perceptions about Formative Feedback*

English teachers from Army Polytechnic School perceived that using Formative Feedback in the class was useful for them because they could identify their students' true learning needs. In Addition, they paid more attention to common mistakes made by students. What is notable is that the English teacher did not perceive that formative feedback required extra effort and attention during Instruction specially with large groups of students. On the other hand, the English teacher from Language Center of Technical University of Ambato perceived the Formative Feedback was not useful for them since they work with large classes and it was impossible for them to give special or personal attention to low achievers in each class, they gave feedback, but to the whole class or groups. Language instruction is highly important for them rather than applying Formative Feedback in their classes.

   c) *How Formative Feedback was applied in the Language Centers*

Once we identified low achievers, we used a checklist (Group work Rating Scale) for the classroom observations, especially when they interacted with their classmates. We used the following criteria:

   - EFFORT (motivated to do well a task)
   - COOPERATION (shared workload, accepted suggestions)
   - ON TASK (stayed focused without reminders)
   - SUPPORTIVE (helped and encouraged other group members)

Evaluation Scale (give each group member a mark out of ten)

(9-10) - always focused; highly motivated; cooperated with everyone

(7-8)   - quite well focused; motivated to do well; cooperated most of the time

(4-6)   - sometimes off task, not overly motivated-trouble cooperating some of the time

(1- 3) - often off-task; very little effort; highly uncooperative with others.

Name	Mark	Comment/Reason

Assessment Suggestions (2000)   Alberta Learning, Alberta, Canada

There was also a small talk between low achiever and the English teacher when the rest of students worked on a writing or Reading task. We interviewed students and gave feedback on oral work or on written work through speech. The feedback we gave was direct, gentle, assertive, and supportive. On the whole we did not use humiliating speech, instead we used warm and tactful feedback on their mistakes, in other occasions, we also showed them the checklist about the classroom observation, we informed them about their process. When we corrected any written work, we also talked to the students, we pointed the mistakes on the paper, but we did not give any answer about the mistakes, we asked and used guided questions so students could self-correct their mistakes, like: What do you think you did right? What do you think you need to improve in the future? Then, we gave sandwich feedback, we started with something positive about his / her performance, then we provided clarification on mistakes and finally we said something else positive about written work or about a presentation. During Instruction, we underlined more frequent mistakes on the written work and we used guided questions to get the mistakes corrected by students. We also used the *Exit card* to get important information about what students were actually learning every day. Students wrote on the exit card what they learned that day, what was confusing for them, what they liked about the class. These exit cards were given at the end of the day. By reading students´ *Can do statements*, we could see what they learned or did not learn about the class. We modified instruction and we gave students more practice on content they made mistakes. When students finished a unit, they answered three questions on their exit cards. These questions summarized content of the unit. We provided feedback before giving a Unit test. Waiting for their answers were also another important way to provide feedback. We did not hurry them up in completing activities, but we assisted them all the time during group or pair work.

5. Conclusions

This paper has shown the great value of using Formative Assessment and Formative Feedback effective practices for the developing of low achievers´ learning in the EFL class. The use of multiple sources during the study helped us to gather important

information about learners and about Instruction. The results show that Formative Feedback really developed student´s learning as well as developed their autonomy when learning. Teachers applied Formative assessment as an important tool in their every day instruction, they learned that in order to succeed in the process both teachers and students must work collaboratively. Teacher must give immediate feedback on student´s progress and problems, In the case of students, they must learn to identify their mistakes and correct them with the teacher´s guide. Formative assessment is fruitful for instruction too, learners become active, they start to generate their knowledge, and they realize that they must do the teaching-learning process not **for** them.

In the case of teachers, they also reflect that our society need professionals who are capable of solving problems, then, they need to search, analyze and propose effective solutions.

Finally, we can conclude that our findings revealed that the *How* we give feedback to our students is really important because it provoked real changes on their learning. In class, teachers can play two roles either be good motivators, learning assistants so students can continue learning or to be a big obstacle for them, when they give lots of red correction on student´s assignments, stop every time they make mistakes, interrupt when they are speaking to correct pronunciation or what is worst, not to give any feedback. Then it is our decision where to be. Lastly, providing individualized feedback is the heart of learner-centered teaching. We experienced how even a little feedback can go a long way. Students are able to build their own knowledge with the teacher´s guide, and mainly support them with the warm valuable feedback. This is the only way students will be motivated to learn and finally succeed.

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