Implementation of Formative Assessment in Teaching Business English Writing in China

Yu-Shan ZHAO\textsuperscript{1,a}, Fei SONG\textsuperscript{1,b,*}

\textsuperscript{1}School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, China
\textsuperscript{a}zhaoyushan@ncepu.edu.cn, \textsuperscript{b}faye0683@gmail.com

*Corresponding author

Keywords: Learning Strategies, Communication Strategies, Oral Communication, Lesson Design.

Abstract. This paper focuses on the understanding and implementation of formative assessment in teaching business English writing in China. After reviewing Dirksen (2011) as an anchor article, a list of activities is classified into a set of categories (i.e., before class, during class and after class) and their features are summarized as core features of formative assessment. Then the class activity “Take and pass” is used as formative assessment in assessing students’ business English writing skills. Also, the strengths and weaknesses of this activity are discussed and evaluated against the developed core features of formative assessment.

Introduction

Nowadays assessment has been more and more prominent in English teaching and learning. Harlen (1994) defines assessment as the process of first gathering evidence, and then interpreting the evidence according to some explicit criteria so as to form a judgement. In terms of language assessment, as a process of getting information about learners’ language knowledge or ability, it is usually described and analysed with the purpose of making various kinds of decisions in language teaching and learning.

Over the past two decades, assessment has gone through a paradigm shift from the psychometric paradigm (also known as norm-referenced testing) to a new paradigm of standard-based assessment (also referred to as educational assessment) in Western countries. The term standards-based assessment (SBA) is most commonly used with a key feature that learners’ performance is assessed by referring to a standard, or level of achievement, which is carefully identified in advance. Under this new paradigm, the traditional method of tests and examinations has been progressively replaced with a broader range of assessment procedures, including informal assessment by teachers, self-assessment by students, peer assessment, observation, conferencing, portfolios, benchmarks, etc. Gipps (1994) indicates that this paradigm shift not only moves beyond testing and its technology, but also involves a deeper set of transformations.

Classification of Class Activities as Formative Assessment

In the article “Hitting the reset button: Using formative assessment to guide instruction”, Dirksen (2011) illustrates a series of activities which can be used for formative assessment in classroom. After reviewing her article, this paper classifies all these activities into a set of categories (i.e. before class,
during class, after class). The majority of the activities belong to the category of during class activities. According to Dirksen’s statement, a number of activities can be used in class. Simple observation such as looking at students’ facial expressions or classroom behaviours, is a handy tool for teachers to gain non-verbal feedback from students. When teachers are giving lectures or presentations, it is an easier way to judge students’ understanding of the knowledge by asking students questions and engaging them in discussion. With the advancement of technology, teachers can also use personal response systems called clickers to gather information on students’ performance during the questioning process. Also, some pair-and-share activities like structured reviews and jigsaw activities can be adopted for formative assessment in class. These collaborative learning activities are effective tools for tracking students’ understanding since they require students to work with partners or in group, report and share what they have learned. Besides, teachers can use short writing assignments to examine students’ achievement. Dirksen (2011) lists some sample activities like “3, 2, 1.” and “Circle, Square, Triangle.” These activities take advantage of quick-write prompts so that teachers can gather information from students’ quick writes on questions or topics. Weekly summary, as a longer writing assignment, is also an effective tool used to reflect students’ learning outcomes from weekly classes. Sometimes in class, using graphic organizers or advanced organizers (e.g. affinity diagram, memory matrix, character mapping) is an efficient way to assess students’ achievement. Teachers can immediately identify whether students are following the flow of information and understanding the relationship between concepts by asking students to fill in some missing information during presentations or lectures. Journaling activity like double-entry journal can check students’ real-time understanding since it enables students to take down their thinking to the material right away. Apart from these in class activities, a variety of activities can be put into the after class category. Some ordinary activities like using rubrics to grade assignments can be regarded as formative assessment if the results are collected to improve instruction and students’ achievement. Performance-based assessment is a great tool since students can redo or revise their performance, or even defend their answers based on rich feedback.

Except the activities mentioned in Dirksen’s (2011) article, this paper lists another six activities used for formative writing assessment. In the category of before class activities, “Writing sample collection” can be used as a tool to check students’ prior knowledge. Before class, teachers can assign a writing task to students and ask them to find a good sample beforehand and make comments on it. Teachers can collect all students’ opinions on these good writing samples and evaluate their prior knowledge before class begins. Also, teachers can use some free digital tools like EDpuzzle and Educanon to assess students’ writing skills. Teachers can upload some pre-teaching materials and ask students to complete some online questions or quizzes related with the teaching content. With these gathered data, teachers can be informed about what students have already know about the writing task and modify their in class instruction. For assessing students’ writing performance during class, teachers can apply a number of activities. “ReQuest” or “Reciprocal questioning” is a direct tool for teachers to check students’ understanding in genre-based writing or task-based writing. Both teachers and students are given opportunities to ask each other questions after learning the writing materials. This activity can carry on until students get enough information about how to start writing. “Take and pass”, as a cooperative group activity, can be used to share and collect information from group members. Students in each group need to write down their comments on each member’s writing performance and pass the sheet to the right-hand member, the next member would add comments on that sheet and this circle continues until all members get their sheet back, at last each group would debrief in class. It’s an effective way to track students’ understanding and identify whether they are on the right track. In the after class phase, except using summative assessment formatively to examine students’ achievement, teachers can employ some interactive activities. Using “Muddiest/clearest point” is an efficient tool to gain feedback and assess students’ overall comprehension in writing class. Teachers can design different types of questions to elicit students’ thinking on the muddiest or clearest part of the presentation or lecture. Teachers can also use the activity “Misconception check” to judge students’ perception on some concepts, principles or
features of different writing genres. The misconception check can be presented in the form of a true-false or multiple-choice quiz.

**Core Features of Formative Assessment**

By looking through all these activities, it can be seen that they share some core features of formative assessment. Firstly, these activities combine both qualitative assessment and quantitative assessment. Unlike summative assessment which merely use grades or marks to indicate how much knowledge students have learned, formative assessment take consideration of many other factors, such as students’ attitude, motivation, progress, learning strategy, etc. Thus teachers could give a more comprehensive and reasonable appraisal to students’ performance, which is significant in language teaching and assessment.

Secondly, there are diverse means of activities taking place throughout the instructional process. Judging from the categorisation of these activities, it is notable that formative assessment is frequently used before, during and after instruction and is carried out in various forms of activities according to different learning objectives. While performing these activities, there are massive positive interactions between teachers and students as well as among students in each group.

Thirdly, these activities are used by both teachers and students and provide assessment-based feedback to both teaching and learning process. Formative assessment involves students to actively participate in their own learning and provide effective feedback to improve their performance. Meanwhile, teachers make use of the gathered information as good feedback to adjust their instruction so as to better meet students’ needs and achieve learning objectives. Feedback, as a key to make formative assessment formative, has received great attention in the field of language assessment. Considerable studies (e.g. Hattie, 1987; Crooks, 1988) provide evidence to show that effective feedback make significant benefits in improving students’ learning and achievement across all levels of education and all knowledge, content areas and skill types (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Therefore, good feedback practice should be implemented by teachers to modify their teaching, and used by students to facilitate their learning.

Apart from the features concluded from these activities, there are a list of other core features of formative assessment. Firstly, it is a student-centered assessment used to promote learners’ motivation, self-esteem and learning efficiency. Students, as the object to be assessed, are supposed to engage themselves actively in activities such as self-assessment and peer assessment, which would exert tremendous influence on their own learning (Wang, 2015). Secondly, the content of formative assessment is based on syllabus and learning objectives, and activities are mainly designed by teachers to apply in small-scale scopes like classes, grades and schools (Torrance & Pryor, 1998). That is to say, formative assessment is regarded as a low-stakes assessment developed and conducted by teachers to gain useful information and adjust teaching.

**Implementation of Formative Assessment in Business English Writing**

In this paper, the activity “Take and pass” is adopted as formative assessment in teaching business letter writing in English. The target learners are a group of Chinese English learners. A 45-minute lesson for teaching business letter writing is designed as part of the whole business writing course. In the beginning of the class, the teacher will give a detailed presentation about the genre of business letter writing, and lead students to think about proper generic structures and linguistic features used to in business letter writing. Then the teacher will assign a writing task in class and ask students to write a short business letter on a sheet. After they finish their writing task, the teacher will divide students into small groups and carry out the class activity “Take and pass” as formative assessment. Each student’s writing sheet will be assessed by the other four group members. Students need to read the composition delivered from the left land and write down their response to the writing. Then students will pass that sheet to their right-hand member, and more responses will be added on that sheet. This
circle continues until all students get their sheet back, and in the end of this activity, each group will
debrief in class.

This activity reflects some core features of formative assessment. Firstly, as a cooperative learning
activity, it emphasises the significance of peer assessment. When peers evaluate and make comments
on others’ writing, they are given more opportunities to get familiar with the criteria used for
assessing business letter writing. Accordingly, the assessed student can make use of peers’ opinions
and make revisions to improve their own writing. Moreover, it helps to develop students’ higher order
reasoning and higher level thinking, and involves them in more interactive and flexible learning
process. Secondly, as a qualitative evaluation, this activity is designed to assess the quality of
students’ own writing so that the evaluating results won’t be affected by other students’ writing
performance, which encourages learners’ positive motivation and self-esteem ((Nicol &
Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Thirdly, the designed sheets and procedures of the activity reveal the feature
that formative assessment is mostly developed by teachers and is more appropriate to carry out in a
small-scale teaching context. Last but not least, this activity collects sufficient information from peer
assessment and the elicited evidence can be used as effective feedback to help learners fully
understand the learning materials and evaluating criteria of the writing task, which can consequently
improve students’ own learning. Meanwhile, by reading the evaluated student’s writing sheets and
group debriefs, teachers can make subjective judgment on students’ learning achievement and their
writing skills. In this way, teachers can adjust instruction (e.g. teaching content, teaching approach,
teaching strategy) to better achieve the learning objectives and meet students’ needs.

Although this activity reflects some core features of formative assessment and benefit both
teachers and students in various perspectives, it inevitably exists some drawbacks. One major
problem is that peers’ feedback might be invalid, unreliable or inaccurate to the assessed student’s
writing performance. Business letter writing, as a genre of English writing, has detailed assessment
scales in aspects of content, communicative achievement, organization, vocabulary, grammar. etc.
Due to students’ lack of knowledge and skills, their response to others’ writing might not be
trustworthy. Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) point out that students in general do not trust peer
assessment as a fair way of interpreting their achievement. Therefore, teachers should work out a
feedback model and guide students to conduct peer response. Another issue is that this activity takes
up too much time in class and causes increased workload for teachers. Since each student has to read
four business letter compositions and write down different comments, it could be very
time-consuming. At the same time, the teacher has to look through all students’ writing sheets to
determine whether they acquire the knowledge of writing a business letter, thus the teacher has more
work to do apart from giving presentations or lectures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper focuses on the understanding of formative assessment and its application
in EFL business letter writing in China. A list of activities is classified into a set of categories and
their features are summarised as core features of formative assessment. Then the activity “Take and
pass” is applied in assessing students’ business letter writing skills, and strengths and weaknesses of
this activity are discussed and evaluated by considering core features of formative assessment.

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by Teaching Reform Project of Beijing No. 2015-ms115.

References


