INTERACTIVE APPROACH TO FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN THE CLASSROOM FOR 21ST-CENTURY LEARNERS

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Abstract

Classroom interaction is a fertile ground for formative instruction and assessment, and knowing when and how to embed assessment in day-to-day student-teacher interactions is considered essential. Adapting the initiation–response–evaluation (IRE) model, the study looked into how teachers utilized formative assessment in their regular classes. Conducted among the selected Higher Education Institutions – State and Local Universities and Colleges – in Cebu City, this study used Colaizzi's method of data analysis which resulted in the identification of emerging assessment practices and provided insights on the use of formative assessment in the classroom. A series of recorded classroom sessions were segmented and analyzed according to the variables under investigation. Data showed that teachers initiated formative interaction by maximizing learners' viewpoints, activating prior knowledge, and using a well-prepared instructional activity. They engaged students in active and collaborative learning interaction with teacher and peers through facilitated and active learning, small group management activity, and low affective filter learning environment; and they evaluated students' engagement in learning through evaluative, discoursal, and descriptive feedback. These formative assessment activities can be readily tailored to fit online learning, especially if teachers design learning to consider the four elements of the teaching and learning process, plus the assessment element. Finally, the methods utilized by teachers in implementing formative assessment in the classroom develop the student's cognitive abilities, and such processes can be readily tailored-fit for application to online or flexible learning modalities.

Keywords: formative assessment, assessment practices, descriptive study, Philippines

Introduction

One of the hallmarks of the new science of learning is the importance of helping people take control of their own learning. With knowledge and information at their fingertips, students are empowered to become responsible and independent learners while teachers are designated with the challenge of assessing learning that goes beyond numerical equivalents. Properly integrated into the teaching-learning process, assessment complements the instructional process (Witte, 2012), empowers students to ask reflective questions, influences classroom interactions (Earl, 2013), and shapes student understanding about what to learn and what learning is (Williamson, 2010).

Generally, the importance of formative assessment to student learning is acknowledged; yet, assessment remains to be predominantly summative (Yorke, 2003). Teachers, for example, recognized the advantages of formative assessment; however, assessment implementation in the classroom remains to be highly summative in nature (Yükselii & Gündü, 2017) and that the most frequently used assessment activities are quizzes and final tests (Alt, 2018).
The underlying idea of formative assessment is to use minute-to-minute and day-by-day evidence to adjust instruction (Burke, 2010). This includes informal techniques like conversations, class interactions, questioning, daily work, observation, interviews, and conferences as well as formal techniques like quizzes, performance assessments, and portfolio assessment to monitor student progress and modify instruction accordingly. They are not graded; instead, they are used as methods of feedback to help students improve their work before the final summative evaluation (Burke, 2010).

As the mode of learning increasingly shifts to online and flexible learning due to the rapid advancement in technology, online learning and assessment have become areas of concern especially to the stakeholders of various educational institutions. In the context of COVID-19 pandemic, flexible learning is characterized by the physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-

student communication. The use of technology for instructional delivery, however, may vary according to the availability of devices and internet connectivity (CMO 04, s. 2020). The following studies present some of the results of online learning and assessment to the student learning.

According to Hughes, et.al. (2007), online classes provide alternative learning opportunities for students while maintaining academic standards and achievement levels similar to classes held in traditional classrooms. Data showed that students in online classes performed better in academics than those in traditional set-up and that online students attributed their academic performance to the quality of feedback and academic follow-up that teachers provide online. The same findings were revealed by ASadi, Khodabandeh, & Yekta (2019) where participants in the virtual class performed better than their peers in the traditional one, and that more interactions between the participants and teacher were observed in the virtual class than in traditional classes.

Similarly, Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman (2007) revealed that threaded discussions initiated more in-depth and diverse responses among the students; feedback could be skillfully embedded during class interactions; and that peer assessments during asynchronous activities were more authentic than those taking place during synchronous meetings. Moreover, teachers and students have identified the following online assessment activities effective: a wide variety of clearly explained assignments on a regular basis; meaningful and timely feedback through online chats, threaded discussions and discussion board; and peer and self-assessment. The same study revealed that advantages of online assessment include flexibility, immediate feedback, and reflective thinking (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007).

Finally, the differences between traditional courses and online courses have narrowed due to advancement in technology and educational research. Rapid advancement in technology has made real time interactions between teachers and students possible. Video conferencing software and applications are now available and accessible. On the other hand, various educational research has developed more and more active teaching and learning strategies which are applicable regardless of the learning mode or environment (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Hence, this paper looked into the utilization and implementation of formative assessment in the instructional process and forwarded some formative assessment activities that can be integrated to online learning instruction.

Framework of the study

The three-part sequential classroom interaction of Mehan (1997) which includes initiation, reply, and evaluation was adapted and used as framework of the study. In a capsule, the teacher asks a question; the student replies; and, the reply gets evaluated.

Translating this classroom interaction pattern into a formative assessment activity, the initiation-reply structure of interaction is done through a series of information exchange between the teacher and the student in the form of simple conversations, informal conferences, clarificatory questions, observations, and the like. When the learner is actively engaged in this interaction, the teacher directs the initiation-reply pattern into a process of gathering learning evidences that will enable him/her to identify learning gaps, provide appropriate scaffold, and eventually, help the learner achieve the learning target. Along this information-exchange-process turned into a gathering-of-learning-evidences-process is the evaluation of student responses, which is also known as feedback.

Feedback is the information about the gap between the learner's actual level and the reference level which is used to alter the gap. The information on the gap between the actual level and the reference level is feedback only when it is used to alter the gap, preferably to decrease the gap (Ramaprasad, 1983). Relating feedback to Mehan's (1997) classroom interaction structure, evaluation of student responses should be based on a clearly identified focus of feedback, conditions for feedback, and gap information. In other words, feedback or evaluation information is not only used to describe the gap between the current and the desired level of performance, but more importantly, it is used to decrease the gap by affecting positively future performance.

Related Literature

Studies revealed that formative assessment improved student academic performance especially the low achievers, or learners who are struggling in their studies (Owen, 2016; Black and William, 1998; and Pla-Campas, et al., 2016). The increased in academic performance was attributed to the facilitative role of the teacher and the value of constructive feedback in promoting meaningful learning experiences for the learners, and to the applicability and

transferability of the learning outcomes that learners have gained in the process. As Brookhart's (2001) study revealed, successful students see assessment and its role in the formation of their own knowledge and skills as a process where students analyze and interpret feedback, and on their own initiative, self-assess and link their current accomplishments with broader capabilities, goals or applications. Formative assessment activities used in the aforementioned studies include progressive, low-stakes assignments where students could practice and hone their skills; teacher, peer, and self-evaluation guided by rubrics and pre-identified set of criteria; and, independent task time learners where learners interact with teacher/peer evaluator and discuss ways to improve their work (Owen, 2016; Black and William, 1998; and Pla-Campas, et al., 2016).

Other literature shows that formative assessment is most effective when it is transformed into powerful tools for learning where students are engaged in the assessment process; specific and timely feedback on errors and suggestions for improvement are provided; and, students understand the teaching objectives and assessment criteria (Rae & Cockrane, 2008). Moreover, formative assessment is beneficial to the teaching-learning process because it encourages learners to self-evaluate; develops critical thinking, promotes motivation and self-esteem, and encourages self-regulation; fosters meaningful interactions among learners and teacher (Sorensen & Takle, 2005); leads students to deeper and elaborate processing; fosters learning and enhances learner's engagement; and allows learners to explore a variety of learning strategies which promote deeper information processing and greater sense of autonomy over learning (Gikandi, Morrow & Davis, 2011).

Methods

The study was a descriptive qualitative research as it investigated the participants' behavior as they occurred in natural and spontaneous situations without manipulating or influencing certain conditions. The study relied heavily on the first-hand experiences of the participants in establishing answers to the "hows" of formative assessment in developing the cognitive abilities of the learners.

The locale of the study was the selected Higher Education Institutions – State and Local Universities and Colleges – in Cebu City. The inclusion/exclusion criteria included participants who have taken assessment courses in the baccalaureate or master's degree program, at least 10 years in the teaching profession, uses English as medium of instruction, is teaching major subjects, and most importantly, is recommended by the Dean of the College to participate in the study. Four participants were initially considered for the study, but only three signed and returned the consent form. The consent form clearly indicated that the participants have the right to "withdraw" from the study at any time. Similarly, the study protocol was submitted to and was granted clearance by the ethics research committee prior to the conduct of the study.

The data were gathered by video recording participants' classroom instructions. Video recording equipment was set up in the classroom before the start of class. It was set up strategically in the classroom and was left there for the entire duration of the class. The researcher stayed outside of the classroom so that the class would not be distracted and the recorded classroom instruction would be as natural and authentic as possible. This data gathering process was repeated three times with each research participant teaching the same class and students but covering different topics. The same group of students was observed because the camaraderie between the teachers and the students as well as the teachers' knowledge of the learning needs and styles of the students were considered. A good working rapport between the teacher and students makes the latter more receptive to learning input while knowledge of the learning needs and styles of the students allows the teacher to choose appropriate instructional activities that could facilitate learning better.

A total of three recorded sessions for each participant were considered as primary data source, segmented into episodes according to the variables under study, and analyzed using only the five steps of the Colaizzi's descriptive method which includes familiarization, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and developing an exhaustive description of the themes. Producing the fundamental structure and seeking verification of the fundamental structure were not done in the study. Conscientious review of the recorded interview was similarly observed to make certain that information relevant to the study is noted as teachers integrated formative assessment in day to day classroom activities.

Results and discussions

The following section describes the various learning activities used by teachers in integrating formative assessment in the classroom in terms of initiation, engagement, and evaluation (IEE) model.

Initiation

Initiation refers to the teacher's elicitation strategies which help motivate and engage learners into active learning interaction and collaboration with the teacher and peers during the teaching-learning process. These strategies include maximizing learners' personal viewpoint, activating prior knowledge, and a well-prepared instructional activity,
Maximizing Learners' personal viewpoint. Personal viewpoint is the way the individual thinks and sees the world. A person's world view is influenced by his life's experiences and by his understanding of them, which in the end, governs one's attitude towards certain aspects in life.
In this study, the teacher has successfully initiated interactions by utilizing students' varied viewpoints on the topic as springboard for engagement. Because viewpoints are product of one's analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of information from various sources, teacher and peers may accept or challenge them defending on their stand on the issue or topic.

The following are extracts from the different segmented video recordings:

> Extract 1: "What can you say about this activity?" (RP1and RP2)
>
> Extract 2: "Do you think there can be an approach to understand the language?" (RP1)
>
> Extract 3: "What are your realizations now after knowing the bilingual education policy after listening what other countries are doing?" (RP1)

It can be noted that the teacher's initiation does not have one definite answer. Because of the nature of the questions, the students were challenged to formulate their own views on the topic which ignited active exchange of ideas among the students. Prior to asking these questions, however, there was a small group management activity where groups of facilitators were tasked to discuss an assigned topic. The questions were aimed at enriching learning by initiating students to participate and engage in an active discussion with the class.

This observation implies that the teacher needs to have a comprehensive knowledge on the topic so that varied views forwarded by the students can be considered for discussion. The teacher's facilitative role in this learning process is very crucial because the flow and nature of interaction and engagement that would follow rely on how the teacher directs the flow of ideas toward the learning target.

Moreover, the observation implies that asking for what students think on the topic sets the students' learning attitude that they do not only passively listen to the presentations but they have to actively participate and analyze information presented to them as well.

Activating Prior knowledge. The recall of information from students' long-term memory provides students with an opportunity to engage into active interaction with teacher and peers.

> Extract 3: "You still remember you child and adolescent subject? (RP1)
>
> Extract 4: Was there a discussion about...?" (RP2)

Students' underlying knowledge of the concept is a rich resource of information which has accelerated the formative assessment engagement initiation process. As students connect old and new information, and as they make meaning out of this connection, their understanding of the concept is deepened and enriched by sharing, interacting, and exchanging meaningful experiences and ideas. In the process, cognitive processes are utilized which result to the development of students' higher cognitive skills and abilities.

Well-prepared instructional activity. Instructional materials enhance teaching and learning process. They facilitate the acquisition of information necessary to the development of the knowledge and skills to be learned through a coherent and logical delivery of instruction. Careful planning keeps instructional activities aligned and in consonance with the learning target. It also provides teachers with clear direction in the delivery of instruction. Moreover, planning and designing instructional materials that focus on the target outcomes is essential in teaching and learning. They result not only to meaning and interesting learning tasks and activities but also to the development of higher cognitive abilities and the most anticipated supportive learning environment (Rance-Roney, 2010). Likewise, learning activities which encourage the exchange of differing viewpoints among students through a nonthreatening learning environment facilitate educational outcomes that students appreciate as useful for success in a multicultural society (Theall et.al., 2020).

As demonstrated in the study, the class played a word charade where a group representative "acts out" a word or phrase without speaking, with the rest of the group members trying to guess what the word or phrase is. In another activity, the task included assigning one facilitator for each group, allocating 10 minutes for topic discussion, and another five minutes for the presentation of the output. Likewise, distributing worksheets beforehand allowed students to get familiar with the topic before it was discussed in class. Working on the worksheets in advance, students already permitted learning engagement among themselves. Thus, initiating interaction with them during the actual classroom instruction required less effort on the part of the teacher.

All of the aforementioned instructional activities utilized to initiate engagement were carefully planned and designed as evident in the clarity of instruction. Because of the clear and detailed instructions, students were able to perform the activity which provided them with opportunities to engage into a collaborative learning experience in class. In addition, explaining the instruction to the students before they perform the activity is essential to the success of the initiation process because how the activity is carried out in class affects the quality of students' engagement to learning.

Engagement

Engagement refers to the student's active involvement in the learning process characterized by active and collaborative interaction and exchange of information with teacher and peers leading the learner closer to the achievement of the learning target.

The following are the formative assessment tasks and activities utilized by teachers in engaging students into active and collaborative learning interaction with teacher and peers.

Facilitated and Active Learning. Facilitated learning encourages learners to take ownership and control of their own learning while the teacher provides the needed learning resources and support to the learners. In facilitated learning, the teacher creates and manages collaborative learning experiences that promote active interaction between students and teacher and among learners. Active learning, on the other hand, focuses more on developing students' skills rather than on transmitting information. Learners construct knowledge while teachers provide learning opportunities; learners take responsibility for learning while teachers enable and activate learning.

It can be observed from the teacher's initiations that learning targets have been identified and discussed in the previous meeting. The process of the group presentations has been discussed and agreed upon such that on the day of the presentation, the teacher assumes his/her facilitative role which is formative in nature by reminding the students/different groups of the rules and mechanics of the activity.

In response to the facilitative and formative roles of the teacher, the students designed their respective presentations, brainstormed for different activities needed for the presentation, conceptualized outputs, and shared comments and reactions on their own outputs. It can be observed that as students take charged of the different activities, they also take control of the learning process and take responsibility for their own learning.

Extract 6: "Do you think such conversations exist now?" (RP1)

Extract 7: "What do you think are the relevance of our topic for today?" (RP3)

Extract 8: "Will there be an approach to address the pressing problem?" (RP1)

These questions promote an interactive discourse between teacher and student as well as between and among the students because the questions have referential functions which do not have answers that are predetermined by the teacher. Instead, the questions provide the students with opportunities to analyze, interpret and evaluate information forwarded by the class which can broaden their thinking perspectives leading the students beyond the text information. Questions raised by both teacher and group facilitators picked up students' thoughts and ideas and incorporated them into the flow of interaction which develop to a higher level of dialogue between the teacher and the class (Cullen, 2002).

Facilitated and active learning as a formative assessment activity have provided students with opportunity to actively engaged in learning while taking ownership of and responsibility for their own learning.

Small Group Management Activity. It can be observed that while group facilitators take control of the learning activities for the day, they are in constant consultation with the teacher. All groups have been advised on the process and the mechanics of the presentation and they are required to submit the plan of activities the day before the presentation. This gives the teacher the opportunity to examine the content and form of every group before the actual presentation. This also allows the teacher to give a formative assessment on the students' work. The teacher may have provided the groups with content and may have instructed the groups to observe the same form but the activities and the process of implementation are all designed by the groups. This means that the learning activities that the students undertake go beyond the actual classroom presentations. Group interactions have already taken place as students design their presentation, brainstorm for the activities that would illustrate the concepts, conceptualize instructional materials, and as they share comments, observations, and insights on their work.

The small group management has demonstrated a comprehensive interactive learning activity where students are in complete control of their own learning. Moreover, the activities students undertake during the preparation of the presentation are characterized by critical and creative thinking skills; cognitive processes that would make them independent and lifelong learners. The teacher's facilitative role is highlighted in the type of questions she asked during the actual presentation.

> Extract 9: "Have you given the instructions already?", "What are the things to be done? Can you give first the instructions", "How many minutes are they going to make the presentation?", "How many minutes are they going to arrange themselves?", The facilitator may not give that direction/instruction in the group?" and "Facilitator, any additional inputs especially on . . .? (RP1)

Divergent Questions. Classroom interactions are commonly initiated by questions whose role in the teaching and learning process are proven to be effective. Corley and Rauscher (2013) emphasized that asking good questions is more important than getting the right answers while Elder and Paul (2005) forwarded that the quality of one's thinking is given in the quality of his questions. Implied in this statement is the idea that the quality of questions that teachers asked establishes the nature of interaction and learning engagement that transpire in the classroom.

Exemplified in the following extracts are divergent questions asked by the teacher. These are questions which are open-ended and which require no specific correct answer.

> Extract 10: "Do you think we took the idea of mother tongue-based curriculum from...?"
> "Do you think there can be an approach to understand the language? (RP1)

> Extract 11: "Do you think there can be a better approach? Or there will be an approach to address the pressing problem? What do you think?" (RP1)

Because divergent questions require no specific correct answer, they encourage students to express ideas from their individual perspectives. Individual perspectives mean different ideas grounded on individual backgrounds, experiences, and prior knowledge. It makes classroom interactions and learning engagement even more meaningful because students express not only what they think but also how they feel. And the more the students participate, the more they become at ease and spontaneous with the process making learning more collaborative and engaging. Finally, the learning process allows students to take ownership of the ideas they bring and share in the discussion and makes them more responsible for their own learning.

Low Affective Filter Learning Environment. The teacher's attitude toward the students and toward learning is another factor which encourages students to actively engage and participate in the learning process. They need to be established and be made evident to the students in order to allow the students to feel comfortable and be assured that giving both the right and wrong responses is a big part of the learning process. This belief results to students lowering their affective filter which enables them to interact with teacher and with classmates and make the learning process enjoyable and meaningful.

Evaluation

Evaluation, as defined in the study, is the teacher's assessment of the student's responses to learning. It expresses the learning and instructional adjustments that students and teachers will undertake in order to achieve the target learning outcomes. The following are the different types of feedback used by teachers in evaluating students' responses.
Evaluative Feedback. Evaluative feedback aims to confirm, disconfirm and modify students' responses based on the teacher's predetermined response to the question. It may be expressed explicitly or implicitly (Cullen, 2002).
In the study, evaluative feedback is demonstrated through immediate correction or error, words of praises, and confirmation. The following are examples extracted from the data source:

Episodes of immediate corrections:
Extract 12: "National test" to mean "standardized test" (RP1)
Extract 13: "ministry of education" to mean "department of education" (RP1)

Words of praises:
Extract 14: "very good" and "very nice" (RP3)

Confirmation of correct responses:
Extract 15: "I'm expecting that also" (RP1)
Extract 16: "so it's also happening in the classroom" (RP1)

Implicit evaluation
Extract 17: "So the problem now is if the facilitators never have the idea of what to discuss because they did not study..." (RP1)

Discoursal Feedback. Discoursal feedback aims to solicit students' ideas and insights which are incorporated into learning interaction to engage students into meaningful exchange of ideas. It gives emphasis on content such that errors in grammar and structure do not necessarily receive immediate correction, although they may be addressed by reformulating them into acceptable form. Discoursal feedback occurs with referential questions where there are no predetermined correct responses (Cullen, 2002).

In the study, discoursal feedback is demonstrated through the yes/no question which is followed either by example, elaboration or explanation. For example, when the facilitator asked the class on the relevance of the activity to the topic, the teacher asked "Is it relevant to ask that question?" before anyone could answer. Although the question did not require the student to support his/her answer, the student followed the "yes/no" response with an explanation which provides support to the answer and convinces the teacher of its relevance. Had the explanation not convinced the teacher, the student's response would have engaged the teacher and the student, or even the class, into an exchange of reasons to prove the relevance or irrelevance of the question. The relevance or irrelevance would not be established by any predetermined correct answer but by substance of reason. In like manner, if the question ends with a simple yes or no response, the question would have become an evaluative one.

Reflective Toss Questioning. Another discoursal feedback observed in the study is the reflective toss questioning. This was illustrated when one question was raised by the students:

Extract 18: "Are code switching and pidgin the same?" (student)

The question was addressed to the teacher after the class could not agree whether or not code switching and pidgin are the same. Instead of answering it, the teacher addressed the question back to the whole class in order for the conflicting sides to come to a definite answer to the question. Instead of answering the question, the addressee tosses

the question to another student or to the whole class to reflect on the question (Chin, 2007). At first glance, the question appears to be close-ended, an evaluative one. It is discoursal, however, because the response requires the students to compare and contrast the two concepts either by describing or by giving examples, or by doing both. Moreover, the question may have a predetermined correct response but the process in giving the response involves higher cognitive processing.

Descriptive Feedback. Descriptive feedback was also observed to be utilized in the study. Examples of this were observed after the presentation of a group output.

> Extract 19: "…the argument in an expanded paragraph form or one sentence..." (RP2)
> Extract 20: "Now in your case, you already cited the illustrative examples of Lisa Turner." (RP2)

It can be noted that the descriptive feedback sound positive, neither implying correctness nor incorrectness of the answer. Instead, they simply describe how the answer is formed and what the answer contains. They are task-focused, describing what students are able to do, and informs students of their performance in relation to the target. They are also consistent with the teacher's initiation activity in the study.

Likewise noted in the study is that the teacher who demonstrated the aforementioned descriptive feedback was the same teacher who initiated learning engagement by setting performance goals to define to the students the result they desire to achieve. This means that the three components of formative assessment namely, learning target, monitoring of learning, and feedback are constantly aligned throughout the learning process. This also means that formative assessment is an effective instructional tool. Finally, this means that the teacher has successfully utilized formative assessment for instruction.

One can never tell how learning evaluation activities affect students in the process. What works well with some groups may not work well with others. What works well with others may be otherwise to others. Knowing where the students are in their learning, their skills and abilities, and their learning style and preferences may have made the evaluative feedback an effective tool in assessing students' learning.

Conclusion

Various formative assessment activities can be readily tailored-fit to online learning most especially if learning is designed in consideration of the four elements to teaching and learning process, namely: learner, teacher/mentor, content, and environment, plus the assessment element. Cliché sounding it may be, but designing instructional materials and activities to address students' diversity in learning entails preparations that are characterized by teachers' diligence and dedication to teaching; many of which extend beyond the interactions that are observed during the actual teaching and learning process.

Finally, teachers' knowledge of formative assessment may significantly influence the integration of formative assessment in the overall instructional process, but the teachers' unparallel commitment to the teaching profession has a significantly impact on students' engagement to learning.

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