

Application of Formative Assessment to Promote Online Learning in Business English Class

Li Yu

Guangzhou City University of Technology Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, 510,0000

Abstract: Recent years have witnessed an increasing popularity in online education in China. Nevertheless, despite its flexibility and convenience provided by technology, online learning is facing a difficult time in establishing itself as an equal counterpart of traditional class teaching. . The author of this paper therefore presents a qualitative case study to explore the effectiveness of enhancing student motivation and learning outcome by means of integration of formative assessment in online learning. The results illustrate that formative assessment, if used appropriately, contributed greatly to the enhancement of student engagement and motivation, improvement of learning outcome as well as online teaching quality.

Keywords: Formative assessment; Online education; Cambridge Business English; Student motivation and learning outcome

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Recent time has witnessed an unprecedented upsurge in the use of online teaching at the university level in China .In spite of its numerous merits, both the teachers and students are still facing great challenges and obstacles as online education is still relatively new in China. One of the major problems is the difficulty for the teachers to monitor students' performance in class and progress in their studies. Another problem of online education, as stated by many researchers, is the higher dropout rates compared to traditional classes (Frankola, 2001; Jun, 2005; Meister, 2002, as cited in Tsai, Tsai and Lin, 2015).

Formative assessment is conducive to maximizing students' full potential in an online learning environment. However, how to effectively utilize it remains a crucial issue for the success of online course.

1.2 Objective and Significance

The objective of the paper is to study how to integrate formative assessment into the teaching and learning cycle to facilitate learning.

2. Methodology

This paper will adopt the qualitative case study approach to explore the three questions that this paper aims to investigate: (1) Why should formative assessment be applied to online English teaching? (2) How is formative assessment applied to enhance online English learning? (3) To what extent does formative assessment help to improve online English learning?

The participants of the study are a total of 93 third-year undergraduate students majoring in International Economy and Trade in Guangzhou College of South China University of Technology (Now the university has changed its name into Guangzhou City University of Technology). Formative assessment, as the key tool and core thread of the course, consists of 3 modules, namely the pre-class assessment module, the in-class assessment module and the after-class assessment module. Formative assessment is undertaken through the teacher's questioning and feedback, with a rewarding scheme to mobilize student motivation.

2.1 Pre-class assessment

According to the sociocultural perspective, learning is thought to arise when learners are engaged in interaction with others. (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Black (2010. P. 360) further summarized the Principles of effective learning as follows:

2.1.1 Starting from a learner's existing understanding

2.1.2 Developing the learner's understanding of the aims and criteria for effective learning

2.1.3 Promoting social learning. i.e. learning through discussion.

Hence it is essential for the teacher to create an assessment where students are provided with the opportunity to communicate among each other, with appropriate assistance and support from the teacher to stimulate active involvement in discussions.

In the Cambridge Business English Class, related reading materials and videos are uploaded to the platform online prior to each new lesson as a tool to help students construct a general idea on which their further discussion is based. This corresponds to Principle 1 of Effective learning. To promote active participation in the learning process, which is in alignment with Principle 2, a specific question is posted on the online forum for discussion after students have read the materials or watched the videos. In this stage, peer assessment will be employed as a stimulator of motivation that requires students to comment, question or even retort arguments of their classmates. In addition, criteria of the assessment will also be clarified so that the discussion will not be deviated from the lesson topic.

The criteria creates an interactive environment where students are supposed to form their own viewpoint, evaluate on other people's ideas and receive feedback from their peers. This step is in line with Principle 4 of effective learning where social learning is called for.

2.2 In-Class Formative Assessment

According to the above discussion, the pre-class online formative assessment serves as the initial step to increase student attendance of the online class as it significantly arouses their interest in the new lesson. Another major challenge faced by the teacher, which also plays a crucial role in effective online learning, is how to keep students actively engaged during the whole process of the online class.

In order to achieve the goal of effective learning, formative assessment can take place in the form of questions and feedback. (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & William, 2003a; Black& William, 2012, as cited in Tran, 2015), which are the two main methods adopted in the Cambridge Business English Online Class Therefore, in this specific case, the key element to the success throughout the whole online learning process lies in the effective application of questions and feedback by the teacher. To ensure the formative power, the teacher's feedback should provide gradual support leading students to master the new knowledge through discovery, rather than solely inform them of the correct answer. (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, as cited in Tran, 2015).

Another problem arising from the online class is the challenge of maintaining student engagement in response to the formative feedback and other learning activities. It is evident that most students do not persist with learning if they perceive there are no direct benefits to be gained for their summative scores. (Lawrie, 2014). In the Business English Course, students participation in class will be rewarded, which will be calculated to their final score. It turns out that the rewarding scheme has successfully facilitated students' participation in the online learning activities during class, transferring the dominating role from the teacher to the students themselves.

2.3 After-class Formative Assessment

In this stage, as students demonstrate increased competence as a result of their learning in the previous stages, the teacher's assistance should be gradually removed (Corden, 2000, as cited in Tran, 2015). To foster students' learning autonomy, formative assessment is formulated from controlled practice in the first and second stage to half-controlled or free practice in the third stage known as after-class formative assessment. The assessment consists of two parts: online multiple choice grammar tests and speaking or writing activity. Feedback of the grammar tests comes in the form of diagnostic scores together with an explanation of the correct answers in an effort of providing students with information about their strengths and weaknesses. The second part of the assessment is either a speaking task (in the form of role plays or oral presentations via video-conferencing) or a writing task subjected to the learning objective of the lesson. These tasks free students to be somewhat creative in their linguistic outputs. With regard to the writing task, descriptive and detailed feedback will notably improve the quality of students' work.

3. Results

3.1 Student Attendance

Students' attendance is one essential indicator of student engagement in online learning. Statistics in Table 1 reveal that students' attendance rate remained very high throughout the semester.

Table 1 Student Attendance Rate from Week 1 to Week 16

Time	Rate
week 1	94.8%
week 2	97.9%
week 3	97.9%
week 4	95.8%

week 5	96.7%
week 6	95.9%
week 7	95.8%
week 8	96.8%
week 9	95.8%
week 10	97.9%
week 11	95.8%
week 12	95.8%
week 13	97.9%
week 14	95.8%
week 15	96.8%
week 16	95.8%

3.2 Student Satisfaction

Another significant yardstick in evaluating the effectiveness of online formative assessment is the students' opinions on the course, since the degree of motivation enhancement is a subjective concept that requires judgment from the students' perspective. Therefore, a survey has been conducted by the 93 students after the completion of the online course. According to statistics of the survey, the majority of students believe that formative assessment is effective in mobilizing and improving their online study. All students agree that the teacher's feedback is helpful. Over 90% students think that they have made progress in English after the online course, with approximately 65% holding a positive attitude towards online class.

To conclude, the data demonstrate that the online discussion, the teacher feedback, the rewarding scheme as well as the online test have successfully stimulated learning from the students' point of view.

3.3 Students' Achievements

As a substantial evidence of the learning outcome, students' scores in the final exam also play an important role in judging the contribution that formative assessment has made in online learning. Students' scores in the final exam indicate that over 40% students have achieved a satisfactory score, while only a very small percentage of students have failed to grasp the knowledge in this course. The student attainments exhibit that the application of formative assessment has greatly enhanced learning, serving as an effective substitute to replace face-to-face interaction and direct supervision from the teacher.

4. Discussion

This paper may provide the readers with some insights on how to apply formative assessment to promote the four skills all together in Business English in an online learning context. Additionally, the approaches adopted in my study will also inspire other language teachers to effectively stimulate student motivation, enhance student-student and teacher-student interaction, as well as forming positive attitude towards online learning.

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