

THE PLACE OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' PROFICIENCY IN THE USE OF ENGLISH IN COLLEGES OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

ADELEYE Ibukun Adedoyin

Department of General Studies Education, Emmanuel Alayande College of Education, Oyo

Abstract

The Use of English is a compulsory course at Colleges of Education and success in it is a pre-requisite for graduation. However, literature search has shown that proficiency level of pre-service teachers in the Use of English at Colleges of Education in Nigeria is very low. Although researchers have devised various strategies of teaching the course for improvement, the place of formative assessment in enhancing pre-service teachers' proficiency in the course has not been given much focus. Therefore, this paper x-rays the place of formative assessment in enhancing students' proficiency in Use of English in Nigeria's colleges of education. The writer reasons that in colleges of education, summative assessment is given more attention in assessing learning outcomes in the Use of English than formative as a result of large population of students taking the course, limited time allotted for lectures, work load, lack of electronic teaching among other factors. Various techniques of combating these challenges were suggested and some recommendations were made. It was concluded that formative assessment should be used to ensure that Use of English learners grasp the concepts taught, use them and internalize them for future usage.

Introduction

General English also known as the Use of English is usually taught in almost all tertiary institutions in Nigeria, colleges of education inclusive. It is a compulsory course for every student in colleges of education to pass before becoming a graduate, irrespective of the student's discipline. It is not strange that out of so many other courses, Use of English has been placed in such a position. English language is Nigeria's official language and the medium of instruction in schools. Teaching and learning of Use of English in tertiary institutions is to ensure that students gain mastery of English language. The curricula of Use of English in various colleges are prepared to cover the reading, listening, speaking and writing language skills.

Proficiency in English is of great value in Nigeria. It is important in a knowledge based world also because English is the major language of science and technology, which drive development (Yen, 2008). Being able to communicate effectively in English language is a crucial factor to academic excellence and performance of students, since the language is a medium through which almost all other subjects are being taught and the language in which most textbooks are written. A graduate that fails to be proficient in English language finds it difficult to communicate in the world of intellectuals; such graduate finds it difficult to convince people that he/she passed through a higher institution. Hence, competence in different aspects of English like phonetics, phonology, syntax,

semantics and morphology are instilled in a student right from the elementary level to the tertiary level. Having at least a SSCE credit in English language has been adopted as one of the requirements for admission into higher institutions. Furthermore, various entrance examinations into the tertiary institutions-UTME, POST UTME, IJMB-all give the Use of English a pride of place in assessing candidates for admission. Of course prospective students seeking admission into foreign institutions are often subjected to special English language tests (TOFFLE, SAT).

The Use of English programme in Colleges of Education in Nigeria is expected to empower learners with communication skills for higher education. This is supported by Lawal (1995), in Foyewa (2011), who averred that General English in College of Education is hinged on a model that assumes a wide range of communicative competence on which specialized knowledge of reading and writing related to academic and professional pursuits can be built. For Oderinde (1979), English language is taught in Nigeria so that learners could use the language as second language and as an international language. Also, the study of Use of English in tertiary institutions assists students in performing well in other courses. This can be seen in several studies that have evaluated the ability of English language tests to predict future academic success in colleges (Burgess&Greis, 1970; Light, Xu, &Mossop, 1987).It has however been observed that a lot of students in higher institutions still lack mastery of the language. Hence, they perform poorly in the Use of English and some other courses they offer in school.

Some students in senior secondary schools study English language only for the purpose of passing external examinations

such as West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO). They do not offer the subject to develop proficiency in the language. Therefore, after the examinations have been conducted, they manage to have a credit that is needed to enable them gain admission to a tertiary institution, and they forget everything about the language. Students who do this can hardly communicate in English language. Jadie, Sonya, Laura and Natasha (2012) claimed that low proficiency in English language has been considered a hindrance to learning and academic success at the post-secondary level and this is because English learners often lack the language proficiency necessary to understand the test content and academic work. According to Aina, Ogundele and Olanipekun (2013), students' academic performance in General English in Nigeria Colleges of Education is an obvious picture of shameful deteriorating performance. Poor vocabulary knowledge of learners is one out of many other problems the graduates of higher institutions in Nigeria face. With English being the second language of Nigerian students and the students having to learn almost all English words, many of them lack adequate vocabulary. Words, when learnt but not used often become latent. Also, some students have difficulty with being proficient users of the language due to the mother tongue interference. There is a need to look into the presentation of English language in our schools. As Babatunde (2001) claimed, the context of the presentation of the language is considered to be ineffective. Petty and Petty (1977) opined that students should be helped to examine their competence in all of communication activities in order to discover those skills and abilities that need development,

followed by opportunities to practice them in meaningful ways. These can be achieved where there is proper assessment mechanism. Past efforts at addressing the problem focused largely on effective teaching strategies that could improve performance with little emphasis on the place of formative assessment. This paper, therefore, x-rays the place of formative assessment in enhancing students' proficiency in the use of English in Colleges of Education.

Concept of Assessment

Assessment is a means through which the teacher obtains information about knowledge gains, behavioral changes and other aspects of the development of learners (Oguneye, 2002). Assessment provides a means for discussion of the collective departmental mission, goals, and objectives; a technique for systematically collecting data to determine the extent of success in achieving the objectives; and a forum for consideration of curricular changes that would strengthen student learning (Ellis & Jeffrey 1993; Howery. 1992; 1995).

According to Bauer and Garcia (2002), based on the information gathered by scholars, assessment can help teachers to: identify students' areas of strengths and weaknesses; help teachers monitor each student and their progress in learning; organize and plan lessons/ lectures and know how well students have mastered required skills. It can help students to: be motivated; improve their performances and want to do better.

From various definitions of assessment by scholars it can be concluded that for learning to be complete, assessments have to be carried out and properly done. Despite this, in Nigerian schools some teachers do not assess their students

properly to produce positive results. Some are victim of this out of ignorance and others out of negligence. Angelo (1999) argues that most assessment efforts have resulted in little learning improvement because they have been implemented without a clear vision of what "higher" or "deeper" learning is and without an understanding of how assessment can promote such learning. Palomba and Banta (1999) charge that although most institutions are now involved in assessment, their actions constitute little more than "a thin veneer of compliance".

Basic Forms of Assessments

Researchers have identified basically two forms of assessments; formative assessment and summative assessment. Summative assessment is one which is designed and practiced primarily for the purposes of accountability, awarding grades or determining how competent a person is. Assessment for summative purposes helps determine whether a student has achieved a certain level of competency after a particular phase of education, for example a unit of study, a year of schooling, or 12 years of schooling (NRC, 2001) while formative assessment is any assessment which is designed primarily to serve the purpose of promoting students' learning. Formative assessment refers to constant, interactive assessments of students' improvement and understanding to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately (Looney, 2005).

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is 'the process used by teachers and students to recognize and respond to student learning in order to enhance that learning, during the learning' (Cowie & Bell, 1999). Also, Kahl (2005) defined formative assessment as a tool that

teachers use to measure students' grasp of specific topics and skills they are teaching. It's a 'midstream' tool to identify specific student misconceptions and mistakes while the material is being taught. Since this study is concerned with enhancing students' proficiency in English, formative assessment is seen as a right mechanism to be used.

Formative assessment must be instructionally tractable so that teachers can use the data to 'inform' learners (Shepard, 2005). Black and Wiliam (1998) also support this as they opine that an assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet students' needs. These researchers further noted that for assessment to function formatively, the feedback information had to be used. This goes in line with almost all the definitions by other scholars. Therefore, formative assessment is performed during a lesson and works best with the use of feedbacks to improve learning. Also, formative assessment, from various definitions is seen to promote the learning of students; it reveals whether learning has occurred or not through various tasks; makes students to be fully involved in the learning process; gives feedbacks and makes adjustments to cater for the needs of the learners; helps students to develop their self-efficacy as well as makes them autonomous. Ruiz-Primo and Furtak (2004) measured the effect of three formative assessment strategies in evaluating, recognizing and using information in science lessons. They found that the quality of the teacher's formative assessment practice was positively linked to the students' level of learning. This corroborates what has been earlier mentioned that formative assessment aids learning.

Challenges of Using Formative Assessment in Use of English Classes in Colleges of Education

According to Derrick and Ecclestone (2008), many teachers, students and designers of qualifications and summative tests equate formative assessment with continuous or modular assessment which merely comprises summative tasks broken up into interim ones. This reveals that many teachers do not use formative assessment appropriately. Teachers in Colleges of Education use summative assessment to promote students and determine the grade of students, determine and elicit what students have learnt at the end of a particular period; probably at the end of the segment, semester and so on when the course must have ended making summative assessment more popular than formative assessment. Some of the limiting factors that make teachers avoid formative assessment during Use of English classes in Colleges of Education in Nigeria are large class size, limited time, work load, lack of electronic teaching and so on.

Teachers with large population of students complain of not being able to attend to students as individuals since the students they need to attend to are many. In a situation where there is limited time allotted to lessons, it is difficult to check the work of the students, mark scripts and also give high quality feedback to individuals within the allotted time. Nesa (2014) noted that some teachers often complain about sacrificing time to assess during the lesson with the fear that they may not even finish the lesson.

Lack of use of computer and the internet prevents students from accessing and receiving timely, sufficient and accurate information. Also, there is difficulty obtaining immediate feedback

and there is little a teacher can do in the aspect of monitoring individual student's progress.

Research also suggests that teachers struggle with how best to use formative assessment data to revise their instruction (Dunn&Mulvenon, 2009; Kingston &Nash, 2012; Shepard, 2005). Because of all these challenges, many teachers feel contented using the usual summative assessment strategy.

Enhancing Students' Proficiency in the Use of English Using Formative Assessment

All challenges previously mentioned can be avoided; in fact some techniques can cater for a large Use of English language class and even ensure that formative assessment is productive. Some possible ways of using formative assessment to enhance students' proficiency in the use of English are:

Breaking the class into groups: Teachers should check the class size and break students into groups that can easily be managed. This can make aspects like essay writing, comprehension and summary very easy to understand and also very interesting. Each group formed should be made to represent different answers to questions asked or different ways of addressing an issue. When this is done, the teacher is able to encourage students to think and come up with their own ideas or answers, not just to sit expecting to be 'spoon fed' by the teacher. Students in one group should be made to interact with students in another group. When the students do this, they are able to compare notes, share ideas and criticize one another's work. The teacher then has the responsibility of going round the various groups to give necessary feedbacks. By doing this, members in each group get

feedbacks from other groups and the teacher.

Think-pair-share method: Here, a teacher can pose a question and allow students to write their answers down then, get seat partners to discuss with. After reasoning together with their partners, such students can then share with the rest of the class.

Keep the questions going: This can be applied in any aspect of Use of English. In this case, a teacher can ask a student a question and then ask another student if the answer the first student gave is correct. Another student is then asked to explain why the answer the first student gave is the correct answer or not. This catches the attention of all students because the teacher could call any of them to provide answers to questions.

Peer assessment: in this case the teacher allows students study the errors/mistakes made by other students in particular assessment tasks and ensure that as the students study the errors, attempts are made to correct them. Students could also be asked to anchor / coordinate discussions. According to *Marshall and Wiliam (2006)*, *peer assessment is one of the main vehicles to promote self-assessment. Seeing how someone else has tackled the same assignment helps pupils reflect on their own performance.*

Self-assessment: The teacher should allow students to assess themselves in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses. **Klenowski (1995, 1996)** focuses on self-assessment as a critical component of effective learning. Her research was based on the assumptions that students' motivation is strengthened when they are given more

responsibility for monitoring their own progress and are able to devise their own strategies for improvement. The students learn by being active rather than passive.

Organizing quizzes: Quizzes assess students' understanding of the course material. Examples of quizzes are multi-choice, true/false, matching and short-answer questions. Students could sometimes be allowed to use their notes in answering questions and when this is done, they are given a limited time to complete each question asked. Instructors have noted that conducting of quizzes where students do not have much at stake decrease testing anxiety and improve retention of course content (Cherem, 2011). This could help a language teacher to assess what the students already know, clear misconceptions and drive home the point of how much they will learn.

Interview: Interview is an important way to assess students. It is an assessment tool that allows participants to share their experiences, attitudes and beliefs in their own words. When students are interviewed, the teacher becomes aware of the students' attitude, ways of thinking, level of understanding and ability either to communicate or apply concepts (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Fakeye (2006) opines that interview as an instrument of language testing may be constructed in such a way that language skills may be tested at discrete point level or at integrative level. This implies that interview could be used to assess either students' knowledge of vocabulary, grammar or lexis separately and on the other hand, all the aspects could be tested together at the integrative level. Also, Agbesanwa (2014), in Fakeye (2016), identified some assessment strategies that

could be employed by the teacher in the English language task as paper and pencil test, quiz, portfolio, anecdotal record, interview, group work performance task, language instruction depending on the domain in which it is used.

Conclusion

Formative assessment is concerned with how students receive knowledge, understand it and make use of it in practical sense. Formative assessment when applied, makes a teacher's effort worthwhile and ensures that proper learning is done since such a teacher monitors the student's performance at each lesson and makes necessary corrections to improve learning even before a major examination is done. Thus, formative assessment helps to reduce failure in the Use of English. English language teachers are able to consider students' learning needs in various aspects of English language; adapt instruction as necessary and eventually, ensure that students become proficient in the use of English. All these make students gain mastery of English language and if properly utilized in colleges of education, students will be more proficient users of English language.

Recommendations

Based on the position of this paper, It is suggested that:

Necessary feedback and instruction should be given to students as soon as the teacher is able to recognize learners' strengths and weaknesses in different aspects of the course, why they are weak and the remedial measures to take. Since formative assessment makes the teachers aware of how individual student is making progress, teachers should make necessary adjustments during the course of their

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teaching and teaching should be tailored to meet the needs of the students.

Teachers should not focus on just completing the syllabus but should ensure that each topic in the syllabus is well understood by individual student. Technology should be used to make the teacher's work less stressful and cumbersome. For instance, use of computer based test and marking. Also, use of technology would make individual student to be reached and addressed.

Teachers should always allow their Use of English lessons to be student-oriented. Teachers should also study their class and use various formative assessment strategies that best suit it as the need arises. For instance, when teaching descriptive essay, a teacher could help students improve their vocabulary knowledge and descriptive skills by asking students to mention words

that are used to describe (for example a building). The words mentioned by the students reveal to the teacher whether the students have sufficient words needed for the descriptive essay or not. The teacher can then move on to group the students in the class and ask each group to describe the largest lecture theatre in their college. The students discuss as groups then from each group, a representative is chosen to present what had been discussed. When all these are done, new words are learnt by the students, they are able to learn from one another, the teacher is able to know the students' strengths and weaknesses and where students need to be help.

Finally, teachers should serve as mentors to students. They should prompt students to ask reasonable questions, think constructively and answer questions intelligently.

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