



FROM TESTING TO PRODUCTIVE STUDENT LEARNING: IMPLEMENTING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN CONFUCIAN-HERITAGE SETTINGS

Author: David Carless

Publisher: Routledge, 2011, pp., 264., \$68.00

ISBN: 978-0-415-88082-4

In formative assessment, teachers and students use the results of assessment to guide future decisions about learning and teaching. This can be as simple as a teacher re-teaching items that students have found difficult, or more in-depth, where students themselves use assessments to guide subsequent learning decisions. Formative assessment focuses on gaining mastery of a subject, whereas summative assessment – the use of assessment to grade and sort students – focuses on performance. This formative-summative distinction first appeared in education studies in the late 1960s; in the past two decades, support for formative assessment has grown dramatically, with education ministries in various countries encouraging its use, albeit with varying degrees of success.

The value of formative assessment in improving learning outcomes has strong empirical backing (See Black and Wiliam, 1998 for an account). It fosters student autonomy, promotes more student-centred pedagogy, and encourages peer collaboration. However, most research has focused on its application in science rather than in humanities education; the less hierarchical nature of second language acquisition presents a greater challenge when using assessment for classroom follow-up. In addition, most research has been conducted in the Anglophone world and Western Europe. In East Asia, where high stakes summative testing and teacher-centred whole class pedagogy have long been defining characteristics of education, any introduction of formative assessment faces challenges. On these two counts alone, Carless' open and honest book, which reports on attempts to introduce formative assessments in Hong Kong EFL primary school classrooms, is a welcome publication.

Carless identifies Hong Kong as a 'Confucian Heritage Culture' (CHC). CHCs are those which have historically been heavily influenced by Chinese culture – China, Korea, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan. In education, they are characterised by a strong emphasis on tests (the Chinese Imperial exams that ran for two millennia are now replicated in highly-competitive university entrance exams), teacher-centred transmission-style pedagogy, high parental investment and

supervision, collectivism, and a high value placed on personal effort and discipline (as opposed to innate ability) as the key to academic success.

The case studies were part of Primary English Assessment for Learning (PEAL), a project Carless was involved in. Together with two assistants, Carless provided training, observation, feedback and support to teachers interested in 'trying to enhance student learning with the broad theme of formative assessment'. Participants were allowed to develop formative assessment strategies of their own, to suit their purposes, circumstances and teaching style. The book focuses on eight teachers in four schools where there was sustained commitment and good data.

In its opening review of assessment theory and practice, the book examines how summative and formative assessments conflict. The former, concerned with labelling, accountability and performance, often incentivises easily-testable material and rote memorisation at the expense of 'higher order' critical and divergent thinking; the latter stresses rounded mastery and student autonomy. The former is demotivating, the latter emancipatory. As Carless notes, many argue that the two forms of assessment are incompatible. For them, summative assessment poisons the well. However, as Carless emphasises throughout the book, change happens locally: we must work within the context of the educational system, rather than maintain ideological purity. As such, we should seek through mutual adaptation to improve assessment by taking the current summative testing regime as a starting point. Implementation of formative assessment should be 'contextually grounded'.

Carless then reviews the history of assessment, particularly in China, and the Hong Kong educational context. He explains how a test-oriented system remains stable even when people are aware it is not optimal. Political pressures on schools and individual teachers to provide transparency, objectivity and accountability encourage testing that can be uncontroversially graded (closed-answer and multiple-choice questions), and discourage the examination of critical thinking. There is great parental pressure for students to do well in tests, such that teachers are reluctant to either experiment with tests or stray from completing the syllabus. Both teachers and students are short of time, and closed summative tests are time-efficient to process. Although in Hong Kong, as in many other education systems, formative assessment has been endorsed in policy statements, little formative assessment is happening in the

classroom.

Carless proposes Formative Use of Summative Testing (FUST) as most appropriate for a CHC-set school. FUST uses test results to guide re-teaching, self-reflection or peer collaboration to improve learning outcomes. He suggests a continuum of formative assessment running from 'restricted' (teacher-centred, behaviourist) to 'extended' (student-controlled, constructivist), with FUST toward the restricted end, at least initially. Carless acknowledges the dangers of FUST: it does not challenge the dominant position of the summative test, nor that these summative tests often exclude critical thinking skills, and it allows grades to maintain a greater importance than improvement or mastery. However, he argues that FUST provides an entry point for teachers in CHC settings to formative assessment practice.

The second half of the book looks at the case studies. In accordance with the principle of contextually-grounded assessment, each teacher developed her own ideas for formative assessment. Innovations included using practice tests with follow-up lessons where students in groups made correction sheets; post-test self-assessment sheets where students gave guided responses about their future study after analysing their results; re-teaching (sometimes through drilling); and providing information to parents on students' weaker areas. Teachers and students generally reported increased motivation, particularly where the students were more in control of the process. Carless also reports the appearance of peer-tutoring in mixed ability and inter-year groups.

If there is a weakness in the book, it is the case studies. There are few respondents, and with potentially interesting data (such as change in student performance) not gathered. Five schools and nine other teachers failed to sustain practice or produce enough data to be included – but the reasons for this, entirely germane to the study, are not investigated. In addition, because teachers were (in line with Carless' well-argued approach) allowed to develop their own versions of formative assessment, the study lacks comparative power. As a result, Carless often needs to speculate without the strong support of data as to why different approaches to formative assessment had such variable success. The voices of the students are also not heard enough. Carless suggests that the case studies shown are not always able to provide data on the impact of achievement of peer tutoring at more than the level of perceptions.

The book is readable, with a gentle rhetorical style soothing the use of academic language.

However, it would have benefited from more aggressive editing: some passages are overwritten, and grammatical inconsistencies with in-text listing, particularly towards the end of the book, sometimes make the meaning unclear.

Overall, the book is strongest when challenging purist orthodoxy on formative assessment, and in pragmatically dealing with the question of assessment reform in East Asia. Although there are issues with the particular case study approach Carless uses, we need more of this kind of data gathered and analysed. Everyone agrees that test-based education system needs reform: Carless is trying to work out how.

References

Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 5 (1), pp.7-27.

Biodata

Cameron Smith is a lecturer at Chubu University. He taught English in Russia in the 1990s and in Japan since 2002. He received his PhD in Russian health reform from Edinburgh University before returning to language teaching. His interests include creativity in learning and fiction writing for foreign language learners.