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Enhancing Learning of Students through Formative Feedback in Higher Education

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Abstract

Feedback plays an important role in the process of assessment. The importance of feedback has been seen over the years in improving student's learning through various studies. Therefore, it is considered an important tool for formative assessment. The present research discusses the focus of the study on formative feedback to enhance students learning in a B.Ed. classroom. The study aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of formative feedback and its impact on students' learning. This study employed qualitative thematic analysis as its methodology. There were two stages to the data analysis. Teacher-researcher conversations about creating lesson plans that fit the needs of the classroom are part of phase one. In the second phase, the teacher implemented the lesson plan with embedded feedback strategies in the classroom. The researcher then observed the impact of the strategies on the students' learning by analyzing them after they were implemented and providing immediate feedback. It has been noted that peer, teacher, and self-feedback all have an effect on students' learning. The research findings include the understanding formed throughout the study on Teaching-Learning process, formative assessment, formative feedback, and its different forms and enhancements in the learning of students, which was clearly seen among the students with the application of feedback mechanisms.

Keywords: feedback, formative assessment, learning, teaching

Introduction

Teaching and learning are an integrated process which goes hand in hand, learning includes not only gaining the new knowledge but also assimilating new knowledge to the previous knowledge. Promoting the learning of students in higher education has become a prior concern.

The student's learning has been analyzed from both the teacher's and the learner's perspectives. Teaching taking place in a classroom doesn't ensure learning. Learning is very subjective, and it depends on the learner's approach. The concept of assessment has been around for centuries (Earl, 2003). However, it is only relatively recently that the notion of assessment being used beyond ranking or grading a student's work or performance to improve their learning has been a strong focus of research and professional learning. Since Black and William's (1998a & 1998b) research on the academic gains of assessment practices used to improve student learning, there has been a greater emphasis on the purposes and practical implementation of assessment. This study has focused on how teachers and students can use formative assessment to improve student learning on a daily basis using the feedback they receive from one another.

National Education Policy 2020 and Assessment

The country is witnessing such policy reforms in education after 25 years, the last being the New Education Policy of 1986. This policy has made significant recommendations in many aspects of education. In chapter 4 of NEP, a section runs from 4.34 to 4.42 entitled "Transforming Assessment for Student Development.". The Section 4.34 particularly recommends shifting the aim of assessment in the culture of the schooling system primarily

based on rote memorization and summative form to that of a kind that is continuous, formative, and competency and that promotes learning and holistic development of the students. This form of assessment that tests their higher order skills, such as concept clarity, analytical power, and critical thinking, has been strongly recommended. The idea of formative assessment is not new and has already been implemented under the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) mandated under the Right to Education Act 2009 in Chapter V:29(2h). The CCE hinged on certain assumptions. One such objective was stated (CBSE 2010:15):

When evaluation is seen as the end of the learning exercise, both teachers and learners will tend to keep it outside the teaching-learning process, rendering assessment broadly irrelevant and alien to the curriculum. Further, such a perception associates' anxiety and stress with evaluation for learners. On the contrary, if evaluation is seen as an integral part built into the teaching-learning process, learners will not perceive tests and administration with fear.

The overemphasis on examination and marks through the SA form of assessment had left the students with learning and forget syndrome. It does not mean the form of assessment, which is summative, is worthless and of no use. Instead, the importance of summative learning lies with students at the end of the semester against certain specific learning outcomes. But such a form of assessment fails to provide scope for the improvement of students, and hence their need for an assessment demands a form of assessment that ensures learning and improvement in our students. This was where the need for a formative and continuous form of assessment was looked at with the hope of improving the teaching and learning process. Therefore, under CCE, a formative form of assessment was proposed, but the policy proved to be a failure. The reason being that CCE was not evolved from our ground. Rather, it was an imposed policy, not fully

developed according to the diverse Indian needs.

Now that the formative form of assessment has been once again recommended by NEP 2020, it is required that an understanding of its effectiveness require teachers training for its implementation and desirable results.

Formative Assessment and Feedback

Formative assessment is a continuous process and a part of everyday practice by teacher, pupils, and peers. According to William and Thompson (2008), there is a clear distinction between assessment for learning and formative assessment needs to be given before you begin formative assessment. Formative assessment could be conceived as involving three main processes:

- Where are the learners in the process?
- Where are they going?
- How to get there?

And this process is exercised by three main actors: teacher, learner and peer.

“Educational assessment is the systematic process of documenting and using empirical data on knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs to refine programmes and improve students' learning” (Irons, A.). In education, the term assessment refers to the wide variety of tools used by the educator to measure, evaluate, or document the academic readiness, learning progress, skill acquisition, or educational needs of students. This helps in finding out the progress or problem of students so that it can be improved, and it is not only to improve the student's learning but to enhance their learning experience. According to Alastair Irons, one experiences different types of

feedback in our day to day lives. For example: parenting (talking to Kids), working (appraisals from colleagues or boss), coaching (analyzing student's performance and indicating the scope of improvements). According to him, the skills and techniques employed in these situations have many parallels in the learning environment in higher education. Providing feedback to students is considered to be an essential aspect of the teacher's role in higher education.

The motive behind giving Feedback is to help learners in achieving their set learning goals. Feedback can be very powerful if executed well. However, feedback can be bad also if it does not produce the desired result/outcome. Now, the question whirling in mind is how it can be a good or constructive feedback, perhaps the feedback that contributes to enriching learning. It was identified that it is easy for teachers to provide their students with positive reinforcing feedback, but it is difficult to provide them with constructive feedback (positive criticism). Providing students with critical feedback can be challenging but it is also very important to give feedback not only based on commonalities but specifically on the areas to be worked out and the areas that are excel areas. Feedback should be given not only on the previous work done by the student because once the assignment would be assessed the student is not going to do it again. So feedback should be given in a way so that one would be able to make improvement in his next assignment by incorporating the themes given. To understand formative assessment, it is important for learners as well as teachers to be active and take initiative in understanding this process, so that together they can improve learning. The teacher needs to understand the problems and progress of the students to help him further improve learning. It is not an overnight process; it takes place slowly with effort and practice.

There are different forms of feedback, such as scaffolding feedback, timeliness,

descriptive feedback, oral and written feedback, quality feedback, peer feedback, dialogue or discussion, and feedback to self.

Research Methodology

To get a thorough understanding of the beliefs and practices in a classroom, The qualitative method of data analysis is used to draw themes and conclusions from the data. Observing a classroom gives you the finest of the details, such as focusing on minute things like students understanding, students' active participation in a classroom, their counter questions, which helped to understand their different perspectives and different points of view about one thing, their way of answering or asking questions, their problem areas, and also their improved understanding, their way of planning, and their way of doing work with a variety of ideas and execution.

Thematic analysis is used to have an in-depth analysis of classroom learning through formative feedback. Observation and informal discussion provided rich information regarding the research.

Thematic Analysis

The data for the study was collected through classroom observation of a B.Ed. classroom. Formative assessment and feedback beliefs and strategies were interpreted through Dylan Wiliam's theoretical framework (2011).

This study is further divided into two phases. Phase one includes teacher and researcher discussions on designing lesson plans according to classroom needs. In the second phase, the

lesson plan with embedded feedback strategies was executed by the teacher in the classroom, and analysis of the strategies implanted in the classroom, followed by immediate feedback to see their effect on the students' learning through observation, was executed by the researcher.

The students enjoyed their participation through the classroom activities, discussion, and questioning methods. They showed their willingness in the classroom to participate in the teaching-learning process. The teacher, at the same time, continuously assessed students through questioning and encouraged them to participate in discussions through questioning methods. Scaffolding feedback and descriptive feedback methods were used in the classroom. Along with the teacher's feedback for students, peer feedback and self-reflection (self-feedback) were also given for a better learning process in the classroom.

Thematic analysis through classroom observation was used to explore how feedback in formative assessment improves students' learning in higher education.

Research Findings and Suggestions

After exploration of various facets of the feedback, it was observed that it has the potential to improve classroom teaching -learning. It was observed that it motivated students to understand and learn in an interactive classroom environment.

The type and quality of feedback play a vital role in forming and deforming the student's understanding. In this study, the strategies of feedback used were scaffolded feedback and descriptive feedback. Scaffolded feedback engaged the students in thinking, and descriptive feedback provided them with helpful information where they could identify their strengths and weaknesses.

The impact of peer- feedback and self-feedback was also observed. They were clearly found to have contributed to clarity and understanding about the concepts discussed in the classroom, thus improving their learning. This was observed through their increased participation and incorporation of feedback in write-ups. The teacher, too, reported a better relationship with her students.

The teacher seemed to be identifying the loopholes in student's learning and helping students improve their learning by modifying instruction according to their needs. According to McMillan (2011), as cited in Carlo Magno (2015), "assessment when it becomes part of instruction is positioned in every key part of the teaching and learning process, such as before instruction, during instruction, and after instruction."

Formative assessment plays an important role in enhancing learning, but it cannot be taken as the end of the assessment process; it is considered complementary to summative assessment. Whereas summative assessment identifies the scope of correction in students' learning and assesses students' performances, formative assessment helps in identifying learning gaps and improving them on a regular basis. Thus, formative assessment and summative assessment go hand in hand.

In this study, the process of feedback was valued positively from students. They acknowledged the efforts of the teacher and her engagement throughout the interactive teaching-learning process.

The present research opens avenues for revisiting feedback as a powerful tool in the classroom teaching- learning process. In this study, enhancements in the learning of students were clearly seen with the application of feedback mechanisms. Hence, a good understanding of

feedback mechanisms is desirable among teachers. Administrators and policymakers need to acknowledge the importance of feedback embedded in formative assessment. More research can be done on the effectiveness of formative assessment so that not only learning outcomes but also classroom processes are given importance among policymakers. This study has seen formative assessment in a short span of time, so more time can be given to the understanding of formative assessment in future research. In further studies, more work could be done on a well-designed feedback system and increased teaching strategies that focus more on experiential learning. More methods of feedback can be devised to integrate in the classroom.

Conclusion

Formative assessment is a good complimentary to summative assessment and it can be applied in our education system taking care that our teachers are trained to implement formative assessment in a classroom. It is such powerful tool that it can raise the classroom teaching learning-standard. On the whole, it has the potential to raise the quality of education system. Therefore, formative assessment policy is of key importance to the teachers, administrators and policy makers.

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