

ASSESSMENT AS LEARNING: THE NEXT STEP IN FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Debra Jones

ABSTRACT

The value of formative assessment or Assessment for learning (AfL) in improving student performance is widely accepted and practised in L2 classrooms. However, its potential for developing learner autonomy is not always realised. This article presents an overview of Assessment as Learning (AaL), a recent development which promotes autonomous learning by shifting responsibility from teachers to students. The principles of AaL and how it works in practice will be introduced, followed by a discussion of some benefits and potential problems in implementing it. The article concludes that AaL should be incorporated into both formative and summative assessment processes and presents some ideas for achieving this.

摘要

形成性评估或“以评促学”(AfL)的方法旨在提高学生的学习表现,其价值已为第二语言课堂广泛接受和采用。然而,这些方法对提高学习者自主学习能力的潜在作用并非总是得以发挥。本文概述了一种新的方法——“评估作为学习”(AaL)。该方法强调通过将学习责任从教师转到学生来促进学生自主学习能力的提高。文章首先介绍了AaL的原则及其在实践中的应用,然后对其益处及实际应用中潜在的问题进行了讨论,最后指出AaL应与形成性评估和总结性评估相结合,并对如何结合提出了一些设想。

Assessment in English language teaching, as in other fields, has traditionally focused on summative evaluation of a finished product, or Assessment of Learning (AoL). Since the 1990s, following the work of Black and Wiliam (1998), there has been increasing interest in formative assessment, or Assessment for Learning (AfL), where feedback is given during the process of learning to help students improve their performance and provide diagnostic information for teachers (Lee & Coniam, 2013). Arguably, however, AfL is still teacher-centred. Even where an element of peer review is included, students are primarily responding to comments and advice from their teachers on how to improve. As Earl and Katz (2006) point out:

If all feedback does is provide direction for what students need to do – that is, if the feedback doesn't refer to students own role in moving forward to the next stage of learning – they will be perpetually asking questions like 'is this right?' 'Is this what you want?' (p. 48)

In other words, although formative feedback improves performance, it does not necessarily develop learner autonomy. Learners are not making decisions for themselves; they are simply following the direction of the teacher. More importantly, formative feedback tends to be product focused rather than contributing to the process of learning since feedback is primarily used to improve a piece of work with the aim of achieving a higher grade. Although teachers hope that formative feedback will be carried forward to future assignments, studies have shown that students believe the purpose of formative feedback is to improve the finished product rather than enhance future learning (Duncan, 2007; Wallis, Jones, & Xu, 2014).

More recently, the idea of Assessment as Learning (AaL), has emerged as a sub-category of formative assessment (Volante & Beckett, 2011, p. 247), exploiting the potential of

formative feedback to develop autonomy by transferring responsibility for learning from teacher to student (Lafave, Katz, & Vaughan, 2013). AaL is student-focused, “emphasizing assessment as a process of metacognition (knowledge of one’s own thought processes) for students” (Earl & Katz, 2006, p. 41). AaL enhances metacognitive skills by making students think about what they are learning and how successful they have been through reflection, monitoring and self-assessment activities (Lee, 2014). As such, AaL adopts a constructivist approach, whereby learning is an active process of constructing meaning rather than a transfer of knowledge from teacher to student (Earl & Katz, 2006).

This article presents an overview of AaL, outlines how it can be implemented in the classroom and discusses its benefits and possible problems, with particular reference to the Chinese context.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN IN PRACTICE?

Assessment as Learning acknowledges the role of students in the assessment process (Lee & Coniam, 2013, p. 35). Students engage in a variety of tasks to monitor their own progress and make adjustments based on their understanding of their own learning needs. In other words, students “learn to learn” through active involvement in their own assessment (Earl & Katz, 2006). Three stages can be identified:

[1] Planning or goal setting. This can take the form of independent learning plans (ILPs), where students identify their strengths and weaknesses at the start of the course, set goals for addressing their perceived needs, and propose steps they will take to achieve their goals. It could also involve setting goals for future improvement based on peer or teacher feedback on an assignment, a process generally referred to as “feeding-forward”, where students engage with and act on feedback in future assignments

(Duncan, 2007; Jones, 2011).

[2] Regulation or reflection, which involves monitoring progress. After setting goals, learners regularly evaluate their progress through continuous review of their ILPs or by assessing how successful they have been at feeding-forward. Reflective journals, either handwritten or online, or e-portfolios also provide an opportunity for monitoring learning by allowing students to look back at previous work and reflect on their progress (see Kim, 2013; Yastibas & Yastibas, 2015). These monitoring activities should be built into the course and, ideally, done during class time to allow teachers to check that students understand the concepts of reflection and goal-setting. Once students cultivate the habit of monitoring their learning, it can form part of their independent learning activities outside class.

[3] Evaluation, where students themselves participate in evaluating the product of their learning. This allows for the possibility of student involvement in the summative assessment process. Teachers can facilitate this by providing models or checklists for students to assess their performance. Checklists can be based on the course learning outcomes or task descriptors. However, Brindley (1984, as cited in Nunan, 2013, p. 57) has argued that adult learners should have a say in how they are assessed. Thus, having acquired the skill of self-evaluation, students should be encouraged to assess their work using their own assessment criteria based on their individual needs.

The ultimate goal of AaL is developing independent learners capable of assessing their own strengths and weaknesses and taking responsibility for their future learning. However, guidance from teachers is needed, at least in the initial stages, since students are often unfamiliar with reflective tasks, particularly those used to a more passive-learning, ▶



teacher-centred education (Lucenta, 2011; Kim, 2013). The teacher's role is to help students acquire the skills they need to perform these reflective tasks and develop the habit of self-monitoring and assessment. This can be done by creating opportunities for students to practise the skills and by giving feedback. Unlike traditional formative feedback, in AaL feedback should focus not simply on what students have produced and how they can improve it, but on their degree of understanding of why they have done it and what they have learned from it (Kim, 2013).

BENEFITS OF AN AAL APPROACH DEVELOPING HIGHER-ORDER COGNITIVE SKILLS

Evaluation and critical reflection are identified as key higher-order thinking skills according to Bloom's taxonomy (Ramsden, 2003, as cited in Kim, 2013) and necessary requirements in the development of a skilled workforce and informed citizenry in the rapidly changing world of the 21st century (Wall, 2015). Despite the stated aims of the Guidelines for

Basic Education Curriculum Reform, issued in 2001, which emphasize "cultivating higher-order skills and broadening students' learning experience" (Zhong, 2005 cited in Yan, 2015, p. 6), top-down, teacher-centred pedagogical practices have remained unchanged in most Chinese high schools, largely as a result of negative washback from the university entrance exam or Gaokao (Yan, 2015). Consequently, Chinese students often graduate high school without acquiring, or even being aware of, these higher-order thinking skills. AaL can foster metacognitive awareness, which helps students develop the skills of evaluation and reflection they will need in the future.

ENHANCING MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING

In addition, due to the intensive experience of studying for the Gaokao, Chinese students often emerge from high school with a lack of interest in learning (Lucenta, 2011). Studies suggest that reflection and self-assessment activities can be motivating for students (Finch & Taeduck, 1998; Yastibas

& Yastibas, 2015) as they personalize and individualize learning and give learners a measure of control. Motivated students are more likely to develop a positive attitude to learning and embrace the life-long learning ethos necessary in the "rapidly changing, complex, information overloaded world" (Wall, 2015, p. 233).

TRANSFERRING SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Adapting knowledge to other contexts has been seen as one of the main goals of education (Perkins et al., 2000, as cited in Allan & Driscoll, 2014), but transferring knowledge and skills from one course to another is something students seem to find difficult, to the despair of their teachers. The experience of Chinese high school students is dominated by the Gaokao, which encourages teaching to the test and over-emphasis on passing exams in order to progress to the next stage of their academic careers (Lucenta, 2011; Lee & Coniam, 2013; Yan, 2015). When these students progress to university, they are likely to retain this focus on final assessment,

so achieving a high grade in a coursework essay takes priority over the learning that takes place during the process of writing the essay. In fact, as a result of their previous educational experience, "learning" is often equated with a high grade (Lee & Coniam, 2013, p. 36). Although this issue of transferability is not unique to Chinese students, the exam-driven education system accentuates the problem (Yan, 2015), making it hard for students to understand the need to transfer skills. After all, if skills learned in one class or during one semester are perceived to be useful only in terms of passing the final summative assessment, then students will not see the need to retain them to facilitate future learning.

Reflecting on learning, one of the cornerstones of AaL, aids skills transfer by helping students think about past, present and future learning, and thus understand learning as a continuum (Allan & Driscoll, 2014). If students understand the process of learning and focus on the skills they are acquiring during the process, they will be better equipped to transfer these skills to future courses. In this way, AaL promotes skills transfer by focussing students on the process, as opposed to the product-centred approach inherent in conventional assessment methods (Earl & Katz, 2006; Yancey, 1998, as cited in Allan & Driscoll, 2014).

SOME PROBLEMS

For teachers, there is often a tension between formative and summative assessment (Harlen, 2005, as cited in Volante & Beckett, 2011; Lee & Coniam, 2013). Teachers are under pressure to be accountable to stakeholders through standardized testing, particularly in the high-stakes context of higher education (Cross & O' Loughlin, 2013). Students and parents tend to be grade-focused, valuing end results over formative assessment, while institutions are often valued and financed based on their results rather

than on how much learning has taken place. Despite this, there has been a move away from a "teach, test and hope for the best" approach (Volante & Beckett, 2011, p. 240), and formative assessment techniques such as feedback on first drafts of essays are now common in L2 writing classes. The importance of formative assessment has also been acknowledged at the institutional level and, as Cross and O' Loughlin (2013) point out, many universities have policies requiring students to be given formative feedback on assignments (see University of Liverpool, 2014). Assessment as learning strategies such as self-assessment checklists, ILPs and reflective journals are also practised, but usually at the discretion of individual teachers rather than integrated into the curriculum. Even if such activities are incorporated into the syllabus, an emphasis on summative assessment criteria feeds into student focus on grades, and producing a product that matches descriptors in order to pass, rather than on learning (Kohn, 2011, as cited in Glenn & Morton, 2015).

Related to this, Lee & Coniam (2013) have highlighted the problems of formative assessment in an exam-driven culture such as China, where students may not value tasks that are not graded. Learning styles and perceptions of effective teaching and learning are determined by previous education experience (Brindley, 1984, as cited in Finch & Taeduck, 1998), so students unfamiliar with reflective or self-assessment tasks may reject an AaL approach (Finch & Taeduck, 1998). It has been reported that Chinese students, for example, seem to struggle with tasks such as reflective journals, failing to understand their value and being uncertain of what they are meant to do (Kim, 2013).

SOME SUGGESTIONS

Students' reluctance to engage with anything not directly being assessed is a common frustration of teachers, as is their seeming reluctance to

transfer skills and knowledge to a new context. To change this mentality, students need help to see learning as an ongoing process and to understand what they are learning, how they are learning it and why, rather than perceiving learning as something that ends when the exam is over or the coursework is submitted. Simply telling them is not enough. Incorporating some AaL skills such as reflection into assessment practices would emphasise process as well as product and encourage students to understand the value of these reflective activities.

One suggestion is to ease the tension between often rigid, summative assessment frameworks and the potential of formative assessment to improve learning (Cross & O' Loughlin, 2013, p. 593) by reducing the number of summative assessments. This would allow more time for formative assessment and AaL activities in the classroom and give both teachers and students time to reflect and act on feedback.

Another possibility would be to investigate ways of summatively assessing tasks such as reflective journals (see Kim, 2013). Grading these tasks would ensure students took them seriously and through doing the tasks, develop the habit of self-evaluation and reflection. Eventually, they may come to understand the value of these activities for their own sake, not just as a means of improving their grades. It has been suggested that acquiring the habit of using skills, not simply learning them, is more likely to transfer to a new context (Wall, 2015), so cultivating the habit of self-reflection should be an important learning outcome on any course. One difficulty with this approach would be devising criteria to evaluate self-assessment activities. Kim (2013, p. 258) has emphasized the importance of ipsative feedback, which compares current performance with previous work, emphasizing improvement over time (process) rather than measuring ▶

the gap between performance and the required standard laid down in the descriptors (product). Such criteria would be difficult to develop, as it is relative rather than absolute, and may cause problems with standardisation. While standardised testing is important and necessary in a high-stakes environment such as higher education, there is a danger that testing, based on measuring performance against standardised criteria, is done at the expense of learning. As Costa (1991) puts it, "What was educationally significant and hard to measure has been replaced by what is insignificant and easy to measure", so there is a danger of measuring "how well we have taught what is not worth learning" (p. 38). If higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation and reflection are worth learning, then it must be worthwhile finding a way to assess them, however challenging this may prove to be.

A third suggestion is to change who assesses the product by making assessment a collaborative process involving learners and teachers working together (Volante & Beckett, 2011) rather than something teachers do to students. Including an element of student self-assessment as part of their final grade, in addition to the objective criteria applied by the teacher, would motivate students to engage with reflective activities. One objection here could be the validity and reliability of the assessment if self-evaluation is included. However, it has been suggested that assessments should be considered valid if they "inform subsequent phases of teaching and learning" (Moss, 2003, as cited in Cross & Loughlin, 2013, p. 593). Self-assessment activities certainly qualify as valid by this definition.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to introduce a different approach to assessment, present some of its advantages and problems and suggest ways to include it in current assessment practices. Adopting an AaL

approach is undoubtedly challenging for teachers and students alike, due to its unfamiliarity and the need to re-think conventional approaches to assessment. However, the potential benefits of AaL are such that incorporating some of its elements into assessment practices is necessary to ensure students gain the higher-order thinking and life-long learning skills required in the 21st century. ○

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Author Biography

Debra Jones taught English and Academic Skills in Japan and China for 12 years before taking up her current post as In-session Course Leader in the Academic Skills Centre at Bath University. Her research interests are in feedback and autonomous learning.

Email:

daje17@yahoo.co.uk

