

Formative Feedback: A Quest For a Fair And Transparent Assessment Tool

البحث عن أداة شفافة وعادلة في التقييم التكويني



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Abstract

Assessment research has known a real evolution from the traditional psychometric tradition which focuses on quantifying the students' performances and certifying their level to the assessment for learning. The shift from traditional psychometric assessment model to assessment for learning leads researchers to explore alternative assessment methods which can ensure the assessors' objectivity such as a rubric. These assessment tools are highly reliable and transparent because they articulate the assessors' expectations or criteria in a clear way. They also decrease the assessors' bias and ensure a fair assessment. These assessment procedures increase students' awareness of the tasks' requirements and they consequently enhance their autonomy. Unlike the assessment of learning which assesses the student knowledge at the end of a learning episode such as end term exams, assessment for learning assesses the learners' knowledge continuously. These alternative methods also replace the traditional grading by a formative feedback which exploits the students' results to plan a remedial work.

Key words: Rubric - Assessment for Learning - Formative Feedback -Transparency

ملخص

عرف البحث في ميدان التقييم تحول من النظرية التقليدية المبنية على تقييم ما تعلمه الطالب في مدة زمنية محددة مثل امتحانات نهاية السنة إلى التقييم من اجل التعليم و الذي يهتم بالتقييم المتواصل , لقد أدى الانتقال من النموذج التقليدي السيكمومتري لتقييم من اجل التعليم إلى البحث عن نماذج بديلة لتقييم على غرار قواعد التقييم. وتمتاز هذه الأدوات بالناجعة و الشفافية بفضل قدراتها على تحديد توقعات ممارسي التقييم وكذا معاييرهم بشكل واضح . و تسمح هذه الطرائق لتقييم برفع مستوى إدراك الطلبة بمتطلبات التمارين وتحفزهم كذلك على الاعتماد على النفس, وتخفف هذه الوسائل البديلة من الصور النمطية عند بعض المقيمين وضمان نزاهة التقييم. وعكس النظرية التقليدية التي تعتمد على القياس الكمي و تصنيف و ترتيب الطلبة حسب نتائجهم فالنظرية الجديدة تعتمد على استغلال هذه النتائج لتشخيص النقائص لتحسين مستواهم الغوي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: قواعد التقييم - تقييم من اجل التعليم - التعليقات التكوينية - الشفافية

Introduction:

The assessment theories have evolved through history and their principles are encapsulated in the feedback format that they adopt. At the beginning, psychometric approach has used standardised tests which present a set of advantages such as reliability and validity. However, standardised tests are incapable to respond to the new challenges in the pedagogical field. Research in the educational domain turns its effort to explore the use of formative assessment models which focus on continuous assessment instead of traditional tests' certification role. Consequently, assessing the students' performances and evaluating their capacity to achieve the syllabus' goals require valid, reliable and transparent assessment instruments. Teachers and policy makers try to give their students the opportunity to show their true potential. The following, then, is an attempt to explain the reasons for adopting a formative feedback in the Algerian classrooms. It is, then, necessary to review the evolution of the different assessment theories and both the type and characteristics of the feedback they use.

Psychometric Tradition and Feedback

Psychometric tradition lays the foundation of feedback practice. In this tradition, assessment is centred on the notion of quantifying the learners' performance. Hence, it is obvious that the feedback delivered shall stick to the goals of such assessment philosophy. This is why; most of the feedback provided is numerical. In other words, practitioners provide grades and marks to quantify and classify the learners' performance.

However, this tradition, which lasted for decades, is finally rejected by both researchers and practitioners because it no longer fits their pedagogical needs. Feedback used is thought to be blurring and confusing, because assessors are obsessed by grading and ranking students and could not provide much of pedagogical interest. Furthermore, Davies (2007) found that, "Any feedback that is [summarised] into grades or marks such as percentages, letter grades or 6/10 as such feedback tends to de-motivate students, particularly those who struggle and need time to learn." (p.172)¹

There are many works which show the incapacity of traditional feedback to help students perform better, one of these studies is Zamel's (1985). In his work on writing assessment, Zamel explains that the traditional summative tests, with their typical numerical feedback provided on the students' final draft, are incompatible with the needs of the process writing requirements. Zamel (1985) declared that: "The marks and comments are often confusing, arbitrary, and inaccessible. . . They need to facilitate revision by responding to writing as work in progress rather than judging it as a finished product." (p.79)²

Nonetheless, with the evolution of the learning theory, assessment practice changes radically. Indeed, learning shifts from quantification to assessment practice that encourages learning success. Assessment, which constitutes a critical component of this revolution, is considered as its important tool. Thus, assessment theory is completely overhauled so as to meet the new challenge needs. Assessment shifts from its traditional quantification role to a more humanistic role of giving learners the

opportunity to progress and evolve. Formative assessment, then, replaces the summative one because it is more compatible with these new requirements (Black and William, 1996).³

This evolution from summative to formative assessment has also a huge impact on the feedback practice. Undoubtedly, formative assessment's core is based on the quality of feedback type and use. The new feedback needs to rise to the new challenges. In the first place, it allows the teachers to detect the learners' strengths and weaknesses. Secondly, it also helps the learners to understand what the teachers expect them to perform.

Assessment for learning and Feedback Issues

Formative assessment, with its focus on bridging the gap that separates the learners' level from the targeted one, presents a set of advantages mainly adopting a feedback that leads to promote the learners' performance by organising a subsequent remedial work. Feedback is, then, the backbone of the formative assessment model because one cannot refer to tests as formative if they do not provide a qualitative feedback which permits the planning of remedial work to improve or help the tests' takers to obtain a better performance.

The term feedback represents the teacher's comments that aim at assisting the students along the instructional process. Such responses try to adjust or comfort the students' decision. Furthermore, teachers obviously may use different tools and feedback formats to transfer such information. While vague feedback can cast a lot of students into a miasma of confusion and doubt, wondering what exactly the teacher is expecting them to do, a good formative feedback may enhance the learners' performance. Furthermore, a good feedback is the one which yields information that can be used by teachers to adjust their teaching practices and scaffold the students' performance. In other words, we use the yielded assessment results in a subsequent remedial effort to fill in the missing gap which separates the students' current level from the targeted one (Black and William, 1996)⁴. However, this missing link requires a clear identification or characterisation before suggesting the remedy. The best manner to put this idea into practice is to use an appropriate feedback that may help to fill in the gap.

According to Shute (2008) the best feedback should also be labelled formative feedback which plays the role of cues or hard signs that help students to situate their position on the road map that constitute their syllabus.⁵ This is why; learners are in a perpetual need to know the necessary information about the programme they embark on. Teachers' feedback is, then, the best channel that may help them to situate themselves on the development process, and participate in managing their own development. Mantz (2003) claimed that, "Learners need to know what they do well, where and how they can improve, and any misconceptions they may have." (p.2)⁶

In addition, teachers' feedback aims at assisting and comforting the learners' decision when they attempt to use a foreign language or a skill. Hence, it should be

provided to help the learners overcome the difficulties. As Davies (2007) claimed, "Providing a structure for feedback that encourages success will increase the usefulness and the positive impact of the feedback given." (p.172)⁷

Yet, like many other variables of the teaching and learning equation, feedback issue has been and still is a central issue in the field education research. Indeed, feedback types and delivery protocols evolve in parallel with the language teaching and learning theories development. Shute (2008) claimed that, "Feedback is essentially linked to the teaching and learning theories that support it. In other words, each philosophical teaching and learning theory has its own perception of the appropriate feedback type and practice." (p.2)⁸ In order to understand the importance of using appropriate feedbacks, we need to review the way teachers deliver their comment on the writers' productions.

Learning theories and Feedback Practices

The main contribution of the constructivist theory is casting light on the importance of involving students in their own learning and assessment practice. Unlike the previous tradition, where the learners are considered as passive recipients who are submissively affected by the learning and assessment practice, learners from the constructivist theory viewpoint effect change in their own learning process. In fact, the learners, who are involved in their own knowledge development, may exhibit better performance compared to those who ignore what their assessors are expecting them to do (Davies, 2007).⁹

This issue is also tackled by the problem solving researchers like Brunner (2000) who believes that feedback implementation is better achieved when the learner is conscious or aware of the source of the error. In this regard, Tynjälä (1998) wrote that, "According to constructivist theory learners are in a perpetual quest to construct and reconstruct their knowledge and this phenomenon can only be achieved when the learners understand the source of errors." (p.211)¹⁰

Which type of feedback should we adopt to evaluate our learners' performance? Answering this question is a very delicate issue. Certainly, appropriate feedback has not been defined yet, but this does not mean that it is an impossible task. Indeed, feedback choice and practice obey to a set of variables among them the teachers' and learners' needs. There are also other parameters such as the ability to exploit feedback outcomes to resume a remedial work that improves the learners' performance. In this respect, Shute's (2008) definition of formative feedback is an exhaustive one. Shute (2008) defined formative feedback as follows: "Formative feedback represents information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify the learner's thinking or [behaviour] for the purpose of improving learning... the teacher may also receive formative feedback and use it as the basis for altering instruction." (p. 1)¹¹

Feedback also performs different functions and according to Black and William feedback may be either directive or facilitative. The former, as Black and William

explain, “tells the student what needs to be fixed or revised.” (As cited in Shute, 2008,p.6)¹² It is more specific than the facilitative feedback. Unlike the former type, facilitative feedback, as Shute (2008) added, “comments and suggestions ... guide students in their own revision and conceptualization.” (p.6)¹³

Moreover, among the main reasons that motivate practitioners to adopt a formative feedback are the following. First, it may increase the learners’ motivation. Indeed, closing the gap that may exist between the current students’ level and the desired goal is a possible source of motivation. According to Shute (2008) formative feedback, “can signal a gap between a current level of performance and some desired level of performance or goal. Resolving this gap can motivate higher levels of effort.” (p.6)¹⁴ Furthermore, Shute (2008) listed a set of works that go in this direction. According to Locke and Latham (1990) and Song and Keller (2001), (cited in Shute, 2008), formative feedback can contribute to lower the learners degree of uncertainty about the task they perform. This uncertainty may trouble the learners’ decision making Shute (2008)¹⁵

The second reason to adopt a formative feedback is its contribution to lessen the cognitive load. Learners, novice ones in particular, may suffer from cognitive load or feel overwhelmed. Learners may feel flooded by some complex tasks and this feeling is generally due to their incapacity to manage and tackle those activities. Therefore, teachers who adopt formative feedback may contribute to diminish the negative effect of such feeling and help students to resolve them (Shute 2008).¹⁶

Last but not least, formative feedback may also reveal students’ inappropriate strategies which are the source of their mistakes and subsequently replace them with more efficient ones Ilgen et al. (1979); Mason and Bruning (2001); Mory, (2004); and Narciss and Huth (2004), (cited in Shute, 2008), confirmed this tendency.¹⁷ As far as writing skill is concerned, many novice writers may ignore the writing process and those who experience it may find it difficult to follow. This difficulty may stem from the novice writers’ incapacity to use the appropriate writing techniques. Zamel (1982) claimed that, “Since students may lack systematic strategies necessary for finding a focus and beginning...they need to be taught how to explore topics, develop ideas, and discover relationships by making use of the kinds of invention techniques.” (p. 204)¹⁸

Teachers may play a critical role in helping the writers to solve such difficulties. Moreover, teachers have to assist the writers at the appropriate moment when the obstacle emerges. This idea is well illustrated by Zamel (1982) when tackling writing skill. Teachers’ feedback is required during the different steps of the writing process as opposed to the traditional practice where the teachers’ feedback is provided on the finalised work. This entails that the teachers may assist their learners during the different steps of producing their piece of discourse and intervenes promptly to help the learners when facing blocks or difficulties. (Hasan and Akhand 2010)¹⁹

In addition to its importance in helping learners to surmount the different obstacles when engaged to construct their own learning process, formative feedback should also be specific. Shute (2008) cited Goodman, Wood and Hendricks (2004) who defined feedback specificity as the level of information presented in feedback. A specific feedback gives comments about students' performance that goes far beyond correctness. According to Shute (2008) such kind of feedback is more likely to be directive than facilitative.²⁰ Shute (2008) also listed a set of research works that tried to test the possible positive effect of specific feedback (elaborated one) versus general feedback. This is confirmed by Shute (2008) who found that, "feedback is significantly more effective when it provides details of how to improve the answer, rather than when it just indicates whether the student's work is correct or not." (p.7)²¹

General comments can lead learners to uncertainty that may lower their performance (Fedor in Shute 2008)); it may even reduce motivation to respond to the feedback.²² Shute (2008) also cited Phye and Sanders (1994) study which measured the efficiency of specific feedback to enhance learning. Unlike general comment, specific responses on students' performance showed a significant superiority compared to general comments. Owing to some variables feedback efficiency may differ from one context to another or from one individual to another. In general, formative feedback specificity may have better impact on the learners' performance than general feedback (Shute, 2008)²³

However, to label a feedback as formative one there is a need to define and identify the characteristics that makes it particularly different from other genres of feedback. To do this task, we will count on both Black and William's (1996) definition of feedback and Shute's (2008) excellent seminal work that described and delimited the contours of such feedback²⁴

Features of Formative Feedback

There is a set of characteristics that make a feedback formative one. These features permit teachers to use the yielded information to design the necessary remedial work or plan a subsequent action that may allow them to guide their learners to a better performance. Lemley (2005) found that: "Instructional feedback can be defined by the type or amount of information it provides to a student. As such, feedback can generally be divided into verification and elaboration feedback with special applications, such as *multiple-try feedback*." (p. 8) In addition to the previous features, verification is another important characteristic of formative feedback.

There are many methods to confirm whether the students' performance is correct or not. Thus, in the literature, Shute (2008) distinguishes two methods an explicit and implicit one. In this vein, Lemley (2005) declared that:

The simplest type of verification feedback is knowledge of results (KR) With [this] feedback, the student is only given an indication of the correctness of a response such as "yes/no" or "right/wrong." Knowledge of correct response ... is the next level

of verification feedback. Here, a student is given a corrective hint or suggestion in addition to a “right” or “wrong” (p. 8)²⁵

Formative feedback should also be elaborative because this kind of feedback does not address the learners’ response correctness, but it goes beyond this aspect to include comments on the topic, comments on specific weaknesses and illustrations with examples Shute (2008). Such kind of feedback is also considered as an appropriate manner to enhance learners’ performance (Shute, 2008).²⁶ Another feature of formative feedback is comments’ complexity and length.

This feature of formative feedback is very controversial because the different research works which dealt with this issue arrive at contrasting results. Indeed, the complexity of the feedback refers to the amount of information provided on the learners’ responses. Lengthy feedback, for instance, may not have a positive effect on learners because the latter may not read it at all. On the other hand, short feedback may have a better effect on the students’ attention. Shute (2008) found that: “if feedback is too long or too complicated, many learners will simply not pay attention to it, rendering it useless. Lengthy feedback can also diffuse or dilute the message.” (p.9)²⁷

Feedback Timing

Feedback delivery timing is considered as a central issue for researchers. Indeed, Shute (2008) cited a set of studies such as Clariana (1999); Jurma and Froelich (1984); Pound and Bailey (1975); Prather and Berry (1973); and Reddy (1969) which tackled the question related to when the teachers should ideally deliver their feedback. However, their findings are contradictory. Researchers are divided into two groups. Some researchers support the immediate delivery of the feedback and others prefer the delayed feedback.

The central idea behind this distinction is the effect of one of the two timings on the retention of information in the learners’ memory. The immediate feedback is believed to prevent learners from memorising errors, while supporters of the delayed feedback are convinced that such feedback allows them to forget the errors and facilitates the memorisation of the right data without running important risks of interference or confusion between the correct and wrong data.

Delay Retention Effect is the main argument presented by the advocates of the delayed feedback delivery. Schroth, (cited in Shute, 2008), conducted a study to investigate the impact of the delayed feedback on data transfer. Schroth divided his research population into four groups. The first group is delivered feedback zero seconds after the accomplishment of the task; the second group received their feedback ten minutes after the work is performed; the third and the fourth groups respectively got it twenty minutes and thirty minutes later. The students who participated in this experiment took the tests after a week of training. The second condition of the experiment concerned the type of feedback delivered by the teacher. The first case is given a verification feedback in a form

piece of work, or "what counts", it also articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent to poor.” (p.1)³⁰

Although rubrics may seem very practical to help teachers and assessors to provide a clear and more articulated feedback to their learners; they are, however, very complex assessment procedures. Indeed, the design of a rubric is a herculean work because rubric designers have to take many variables into consideration.

Rubrics Constituents

Each rubric includes two main aspects, namely criteria and levels respectively. The criteria are the characteristics which reflect the assessors' vision of a good performance quality. For example a rubric designed to assess learners writing may include some criteria such as grammar, cohesion coherence, content, style and so on. These criteria are generally abbreviated into symbols such as **Gr** for grammar or **Sp** for spelling. These abbreviations may allow both assessors and learners to communicate and interpret the feedback messages easily. They are also practical to fit into a table.

The rubric table also includes performance levels which reflect the degree to which student performance meets the established criteria. For example, a rubric may grade learners' performance from excellent to poor. They may also use numbers which may oscillate, for example, from 1 to 4. Furthermore, a rubric may have a mechanism to provide a score that corresponds to the performance level as well. For instance, assessors or practitioners may assign some points to language accuracy, and other points to content and appropriate arguments, and so on. As we will show in the subsequent section, rubrics, also, fall into different types and each type is used for a specific assessment purpose.

Rubric Types

Rubrics are divided into two main types: analytic and holistic respectively. The first type, i.e. analytic rubric, presents a detailed identification of the criteria that represent the assessors' expected level. In other words, the assessor or a rubric designer will, in a detailed manner, represent the elements against which students' performance is judged. Unlike the former rubric type, holistic rubric does not represent each criterion in isolation, but tends to blend a set of criteria into one general or broad level (Wiseman, 2012)³¹

Rubric Use Advantages

Andrade (1997) listed four main advantages that learners and teachers may gain when using a rubric.

1. The first advantage that both teachers and students have when using a rubric, is making teachers' expectations clear. Rubrics may both improve students' performance and monitor their learning process.
2. Rubrics encourage students' reflection on their own progress, and they allow them to become more and more independent. Indeed, students who use rubrics are more aware of their teachers' expectations and the standard of quality that they aim at.
3. Through time and practice, a rubric may become an appropriate means of reducing the amount of time spent by assessors on learners' production. Instead of writing long comments on the learners' exam sheets, assessors have just to circle the criterion which represents a problem to their writers.
4. Rubric flexibility allows assessors to respond to a large range of students' levels and needs. Teachers have the possibility to highlight not only the poor aspects of the students' performance but also their strengths. Using rubric may also contribute to improve students' self-confidence, minimize the assessment bias and reinforce student trust in their teachers' feedback.

Formative Feedback and Instructions' Clarity

One of the obstacles that students, generally, face to understand the feedback is the teachers' confusing and inaccurate comments. One of the reasons behind this problem is the teachers' use of a highly codified academic discourse or concepts which are, sometimes, out of the students' comprehension reach. It is necessary to share and involve students in defining the concepts or evaluation codes which are used to assess their productions. (Pinchok 2009)³²

This involvement may also relieve teachers from additional workload. This can be achieved through giving students more responsibility in self-assessing their written productions. The use of a clear discourse and assessment criteria may also help reinforcing the students' assessors' trust. Indeed, a fair assessment is not easy to achieve because it implies many subjective and biased judgments. Such bias can be attenuated by both providing clear criteria of evaluation such as rubrics and highlighting the importance of assessors training. Rezaei and Lovorn (2010) found that, "using rubrics may not improve the reliability or validity of assessment if raters are not well trained on how to design and employ them effectively." (p.18)³³ Therefore, providing assessors with a professional training may contribute to a skilful use of these demanding assessment procedures and increasing their credibility.

Formative feedback and students' self-confidence

As far as the lack of confidence is concerned, it is clear from the available literature that unreliable and invalid tests can weaken the degree of students' confidence in their teachers' comments. Danielson and McGreal (2000) asserted that: "Evaluations are judgments ... and they must be made as objectively as possible. They must also be made fairly, with no appearance of [favouritism] toward individuals based on... bias grounded in irrelevant matters." (p.9)³⁴

Moreover, students also compare their work to these quality standards introduced by the teacher. It is frequent that students' judgment of their own academic work and that of their peers is clouded by personal, social, and emotional factors. To avoid any risk of misunderstanding of the assessment requirements, teachers should encourage students' self-assessment. Helping students to see assessment as a process of self-improvement, as opposed to a punitive or ranking mechanism, can produce these desired effects. In this vein, Topping (1998) asserted that, "Peer assessment ...can yield gains in the cognitive, social, affective, transferable skill, and systemic domains that are at least as good as those from staff assessment." (p.269)³⁵

One of the most efficient manners to ensure fairness is to involve students in setting the criteria of evaluation. This may allow students to understand the expected level or requirements for the achievement of the written tasks and avoid assessors' abuses of the evaluation codes. As Shepard (2000) put it: "giving students the opportunity to get good at what it is that the standards require speaks to a different and even more fundamental sense of fairness...[by] "making thinking visible" and "making excellence attainable." (pp.11-12)³⁶ Thus, such criteria of evaluation should not stay a mystery to students (Pinchok 2009). In addition, the understanding of the evaluation criteria and their practice or use may increase students' confidence in their teachers' comments. This transparency may also contribute in developing writers' autonomy and as a consequence relieve teachers from a huge workload.

Conclusion

The issue of using a transparent and fair assessment tool is among the challenges facing assessors when evaluating their learners' written productions. Rubric is an example of such formative assessment tools which, if they are appropriately used, may increase students' awareness of the criteria of evaluation and hence become less dependent on their teachers. These assessment procedures decrease the assessors' subjectivity and lead to fair and transparent assessment practices.

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