Defining Assessment for Learning: A proposed definition from a sociocultural perspective

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Abstract: Assessment for Learning (AfL) has recently attracted the attention of researchers and educators and has become a buzz-word in the field of education. Research suggests that formative assessment can improve students' learning. However, the concept of formative assessment does not still represent a well-defined set of practices and this issue might affectitssuccessful implementationin different contexts. Studies show thatthere is still no consensus on the definition of formative assessment.Nevertheless, without an agreed upon definition it would be difficult to provide a summary of related research on AfL. In this article,the researchersexplainthe concept of AfL, discussthe most widely used definitions of AfL and proposea new definition from a sociocultural perspective.The proposed definition helps teachers better understand how to implement AfL in a way that enhances students' learning experience.

Keywords: Assessment for Learning, definition, sociocultural perspective, AfL practices

1. Introduction

Assessment for Learning (AfL) requires teachers and learners to use assessment to improve instruction and learning. It is about assessing learners' progress, providing them with feedback and deciding on the next step in the teaching and learning process. AfL is not about certifying learning, but rather concentrates on improving learning. Using AfL in the classroom can help teachers fulfill other components of learning such as thinking skills and personal abilities, lifelong learning and mutual understanding (Bennett, 2011; Black &Wiliam 1998ab).

AfL and its effectiveness in students' learning seem to be of interest to the current educational setting. It is based on extensive research carried out by Black and Wiliam in 1998. In their paper 'Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment', Black and William (1998a) redefined the term 'formative assessment' by stressing that assessment is only formative when it is an integrated part of learning and teaching and provides teachers with information to adjust instruction to fulfill students' learning needs.

Research suggests that formative assessment can improve students' learning. However, the concept of formative assessment does not still represent a well-defined set of practices and this issue might affect itssuccessful implementationin different contexts. In this article, the researchersaim to explain the concept of AfL, discussthe most widely used definitions of AfL and proposea new definition from a sociocultural perspective.

2. The Enlarged Conception of Formative Assessment

Michael Scriven (1967) suggested the terms summative and formative evaluation and clarified two different roles that evaluation have in the field of curriculum evaluation. He maintained that the primary focus of formative evaluation is to improve a person or program during an activity. As opposed to formative evaluation, summative evaluation aims to assess if students or programs have met the stated goals. Later, Bloom and his students (1969, 1971) suggested that similar differentiation is applicable to the evaluationof students' learning- that is called assessment (Wiliam, 2006).

Formative and summative assessments are essential terms to understand educational assessment. Summative assessment centers on students' level of achievement (Bloom, Hastings, & Madaus, 1971; Sadler, 1989; Shavelson, 2006). In addition, formative assessment emphasizes the importance of providing students with feedback to help them improve their learning (Black & Wiliam, 2004; Sadler, 1989; Shavelson, 2006).

Bloom et al. (1971) integrated the term 'formative assessment' into mastery learning techniques. According to mastery learning techniques, students advance to the next learning goal when they have mastered the current goal. In mastery learning practices, teachers design teaching and learning activities based on the learning goals. At the end of every unit of instruction, teachers administer a formative assessment that is usually a paper-pencil test. Information from formative assessment provides teachers and students with feedback to specify correctives for those who have not mastered the learning goals. Correctives can be in the form of a group discussion, computer-based task, verbal or

visual presentation, one-to-one instruction and so forth. The aim of correctives is to solve students' learning difficulties diagnosed by formative assessment. Teachers manage all these teaching, testing and remediation phases to assure that all students have mastered the learning goals.

However, the power of formative assessment received little attention until Black and Wiliam published their paper entitled "Assessment and Classroom Learning" in 1988. Black and Wiliam began by reviewing two critical articles (Crooks, 1988; Natriello, 1987) to serve as a baseline for their study. They subsequently reviewed over 160 journals from several countries during a nine-year period. The analysis led them to conclude that formative assessment is clearly a means to improve students' achievement.

They enlarged the conception of formative assessment and mentioned that frequently testing students at the end of each unit might be helpful but it does not take into account the importance of formative thinking. Instead, teachers should use different assessment methods other than paper-pencil tests, to provide continuous evidence of students' progress in mastering knowledge and skills required to achieve learning goals. This new conception is called 'assessment for learning' (AfL) (Gipps & Stobart, 1997).

AfL focuses on the purpose of formative assessment and is aimed at providing evidence of students' learning progress (Wiliam, 2011). In an AfL classroom, teachers define and share the learning intentions and criteria for success with students at the very beginning of their learning. Learners not only learn about the learning intentions but they also learn about scaffolding they receive in order to achieve the stated learning intentions.

Learners play an active role in monitoring their progress. They constantly collaborate with their teacher to monitor their achievement level relative to the learning intentions. During the learning process, students actively communicate their learning evidence to their teacher and peers. Thus, students have a key role in assessing their own learning. They monitor their learning progress, control their success, and believe that they can achieve success if they try their best.

The enlarged conception does not consider formative assessment as a test that occurs at the end of every instruction period, but rather an integrated component of an instructional activity. So, the new conception requires various assessment methods other than quizzes and paper-pencil tests. Teachers assess students through classroom interaction and group discussions so that students show different ways of understanding and completing a task or activity (Wiliam, 2011).

In the initial conception of formative assessment, teachers and curriculum developers were responsible for planning and interpreting formative assessment and providing students with correctives. However, in the new conception students play an important role in their assessment process through self- and peer-assessment as well as teacher-student interaction. Moreover, teacher, test or material regulation is presented as scaffoldings that help students improve their learning. Thus, the main difference between the old and new conceptions of formative assessment is that the former provides teachers with information about students' overall achievement, whilst the new conception gives students information about their learning (Bennett, 2011).

According to Stiggins and Chappius (2005), in an AfL classroom teacher considers students as decision makers in the learning and instruction process. The other difference is that the old conception of formative assessment focuses on frequent testing of students' mastery of stated standards, but AfL takes into account students' learning progress as they move forward to achieve the learning intentions.

In sum, students' achievement and success does not only depend on frequent assessment or teachers' and principals' interpretation of assessment data. Rather, students' success depends more importantly on what students do with assessment information. AfL gives students a clear picture of learning intentions so that they know what teachers expect from them. Teachers give students formative feedback to help them bridge their learning gap. Therefore, they learn to assess their own learning to find out where they are relative to the learning goals. AfL guides students to close their learning gap by instructing them to monitor their learning progress and helps them improve their learning. In the next part, we will discuss the definition of AfL.

3. Definitions of AfL

The term 'assessment for learning' was first used by Mary James in a conference in 1992. Then Gipps (1994) used this term to explain a shift from traditional assessment model that included "checking whether the information had been received" to a more holistic assessment of "the structure and quality of students' learning and understanding".

As Stiggins (2002) explains, the basic tenet of AfL is that assessment can improve students' learning. Perhaps, among the first generation definitions of formative assessment, the definition by Black and Wiliam (1998a) is the most widely cited. Black and Wiliam (1998a, p. 2) consider AfL as "all

activities teachers and their students undertake in assessing themselves, to get information that can be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged". In the same way, other authors have proposed narrower definitions. For instance, the Assessment Reform Group (2002) explains AfL as "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there" (p. 2). To explain their definition further, The Assessment Reform Group (2002, p. 2) identified 10 principles that are as follows. They mentioned that AfL:

1. Is part of effective planning
2. Focuses on how students learn
3. Is central to classroom practice
4. Is a key professional skill
5. Has an emotional impact
6. Affects learner motivation
7. Promotes commitment to learning goals and assessment criteria
8. Helps learners know how to improve
9. Encourages self-assessment
10. Recognizes all achievements.

The above mentioned definitions show the most important components of AfL, such as teacher and students' collaboration in classroom discussion and questioning; defining and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success; formative feedback; as well as peer- and self-assessment. These strategies reduce the distance between students' current level and the desired goals and also help students monitor their own learning process (Sadler, 1989).

Works in this area have shown that if it is used efficiently, AfL significantly improves learning and instruction. However, the potential of AfL is not fulfilled yet. Teachers are not completely familiar with formative assessment and they might only implement some elements ofit non-systematically (Bennett, 2011). AsMarshall and Drummond (2006) describe, the name of formative assessment might be prevalent but teachers do not conform to the spirit of AfL. Moreover, many teachers and policy makers regard formative assessment as a tool and describe it as frequently testing students to monitor their progress. Even so, Popham (2008) considers formative assessment as a process, not simply frequently testing students at the end of each instruction period.

According to Broadfoot et al. (2002) different researchers might interpret the concept of formative assessment differently and more often it means frequently testing students to keep track of their learning. So, researchers prefer to use the term 'assessment for learning' that emphasizes the process of learning and helps students fill their learning gap (ibid). Stiggins (2002) states that:

> Assessment for learning is about far more than testing more frequently or providing teachers with evidence so that they can revise instruction, although these steps are part of it. In addition, we now understand assessment for learning must involve students in the process (p. 761).

Disputably, Bennett (2011) mentions that considering AfL as merely a process or an instrument is oversimplification due to the fact that both process and product are important. On the other hand, these two should work together to provide students with useful feedback. Bennett (2011) explains that a well-developed formative assessment should help teachers identify what their learners know and adapt their instruction to meet learners' needs. Thus, Bennett considers formative assessment as integration of process and instrumentation. He also notes that renaming formative assessment is problematic and does not offer a solution to the issue of formative assessment definition.

These ideas as well as the issue of superficial implementation of AfL strategies, led to the next generation definitions of formative assessment, such as the definition by the international conference on AfL in New Zealand in 2009. They explain that "assessment for learning is a part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning" (Klenowski, 2009, p. 264). Based on this definition AfL consists of all formal and informal classroom practices that teachers, students and their peers perform systematically to monitor and promote students' learning and to help them become the owners of their learning.

The second generation definitions of AfL highlight the importance of interaction between teacher and students and imply a sociocultural approach to learning (Bennett, 2011).However, these present-day definitions are not well suited for the learning process especially if issues such as contextual perspectives and one-size-fits-all perspective are not taken into account. The sociocultural perspective proposes a more universal definition that can be useful for the learning and teaching process.

4. Defining AfL from a sociocultural perspective

In high stakes environments, AfL might be conceptualized from a constructivist perspective (Carless, 2007) to help teachers adapt instruction to meet students' needs (Popham, 2008). AfL in these

contexts is viewed as giving students cognitive scaffolds to make them expert learners. This view is challenged by sociocultural perspective. According to Moss and Brookhart (2009)"high quality formative assessment blurs the artificial barriers between teaching, learning and assessment to forge a culture of collaborative inquiry and improvement in the classroom" (p. 12). Therefore, there areno clear cut activities that can be implemented in the classroom if the present-day definitionsare adopted. According to the sociocultural perspective, AfL is more than an individual's cognitive activityand is viewed as a shared interaction between students and teachers in a simplistic way (Sfard, 1998).

Looking at AfL through the lens of sociocultural theory, AfL practices are positioned within the broader social and cultural context of each classroom. "The social structure of the practice, its power relations and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Therefore, the quality of teacher-student relationship in a social and cultural context to develop autonomy is of utmost importance. Autonomous learner is central participant within the community of practice and AfL practices help learners to monitor and adjust their learning to achieve the desired goals and become the owners of their own learning.

The importance of sociocultural context, while implied, is neglected and remained unexamined. Therefore, in this paper the authors propose a definition of AfL from a sociocultural perspective; AfL practices include all practices during the teaching and learning process that aim to improve teaching and learning and help students become the owners of their own learning. Therefore, the quality of teacher-students interaction in social and cultural context is highlighted in this definition. AfL is conceptualized more than a set of strategies that are used to assess students at the end of each instruction period and is considered as an integral part of cultural and dialectical process of enhancing students' control of their own learning process. Students are involved in the assessment process so that they can assess their own learning and develop autonomy. AfL practices in a social constructivist classroom include strategies such as classroom discussion, classroom questioning and formative feedback. In a sociocultural view of AfL, understanding the complexities of the implementation of these AfL strategies in a specific context is important.

5. Conclusion

Definition is important because without an agreed upon definition, it is difficult to substantiate the effectiveness of AfL and provide a summary of related researches on AfL. In sum, to have a clear definition of AfL we need a theory of action. On the other hand, we should identify what are the components of AfL and how these components work together.

According tothe sociocultural definition of AfLproposed in this study, assessment practices are situated within the social and cultural classroom interaction with the aim of informing and improving students' learning to enhance autonomy. This is in line with the second generation definitions of formative assessment. Therefore, AfL is not merelyconsidered as a set of techniques, but part of a cultural and dialectical process that is controlled by the learners themselves.

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