



Assessment for learning research in East Asian countries

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ABSTRACT

Educational agencies in East Asia have heeded the advice of research findings and therefore acknowledge the value of assessment for learning (AFL) practices through various policy initiatives. At definitional level, the evolving conceptions and theories of AFL have consistently streamed in from overwhelmingly European and Anglophone-based research. We present a review of mainly peer-reviewed journal articles on selected AFL research in East Asian countries. The findings show that the current implicit and atheoretical approach towards defining and implementing AFL suggests opportunities for further deliberation and theorisation about what constitutes AFL in East Asian countries. It is conceivable that teachers who understand the principles and frequently prepare students for summative assessment in the East Asian classroom are concurrently practising a particular process and practice of AFL. We conclude that the practices of AFL can therefore not just be variable; they will also be very situated and contested.

1. Introduction

Drawing further on developments in the fields of sociocultural learning theory, as well as metacognitive and self-regulation theory, a number of researchers (e.g. Black & Wiliam, 1998; Torrance & Pryor, 1998) have argued for even more support of formative assessment in past two decades, particularly regarding how student learning benefits from, rather than being deterred by, classroom assessment. The term ‘assessment for learning’, or AFL, first used by Black (1986), became part of classroom assessment discourse (Black & Wiliam, 2018; Gardner, 2010; Wiliam, 2011). The term AFL was further made popular through many publications by the Assessment Reform Group (ARG) in the UK as a follow-up to Black and Wiliam (1998) seminal work. Since then, both formative assessment and AFL, as a distinct purpose and practice of classroom assessment of supporting learning and teaching, have been widely quoted, interchangeably, in education policy documents and research papers in several regions, including North America, Europe and Asia-Pacific, as an important educational innovation (Gardner, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development, 2005). More recently, and very notably, Black and Wiliam (2018) attempted to situate formative assessment within the context of a theory of pedagogy. We use the term ‘AFL’ in this review to include all versions of assessment initiative that privileges the purpose and practice of supporting learning, rather than aggregating or

summarising performances.

In East Asia educational agencies have heeded the advice of such research findings and therefore acknowledge the value of formative assessment and AFL practices through policy initiatives. Countries with an explicit mention of formative assessment or AFL in their publicly accessed policy documents, suggesting an attempt to deepen systemic changes in assessment policy within the curriculum, include Hong Kong, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore.

In Hong Kong assessment is viewed as an integral part of the learning and teaching cycle and systemic measures were introduced to ensure that assessment is valuable to learners (Curriculum Development Council Hong Kong, 2001). Brunei’s curriculum emphasises the importance of feedback and the need to diversify pedagogical techniques tailored to student understanding (Ministry of Education Brunei Darussalam, 2013). The Philippines Department of Education has also defined formative assessment as part of the policy guidelines on classroom assessment that should be implemented in schools (Republic of the Philippines Department of Education, 2015). In Malaysia and Singapore reforms include placing greater emphasis on formative assessments, and a move towards more learner-centred approaches (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; Ministry of Education Singapore, 2017).

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1.1. The AfL debate

In the *Third International Conference on Assessment for Learning*, held in Dunedin, New Zealand (2009), a position paper on AfL representing the views of 31 assessment experts from Asian-Pacific, North American and European countries (interestingly, excluding all East Asian countries) articulated a ‘second-generation’ definition of AfL that also attempted to capture the day-to-day continual teaching and learning practices of students and teachers:

Assessment for learning is 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; italics added by author in closing)

Such re-articulation of AfL was seen as necessary, as the experts noted that the ways in which AfL is interpreted and made manifest in educational policy and practice reveal a ‘misunderstanding of the principles, and distortion of the practices, that the original ideals sought to promote’ (p. 264).

Swaffield (2011) also highlighted how an erroneous interpretation and misrepresentation of AfL in English schools through the National Assessment for Learning Strategy severely undermined what had been reported about an authentic version of AfL to support students’ learning and eventually contribute to school improvement. She drew a sharp distinction between AfL that can support important principles such as making learning explicit, promoting learning autonomy and focusing on learning, as opposed to a performance-oriented version that has a ‘procedural, ritualistic manner that belies their pedagogical essence’ (p. 438). The latter version of AfL is not expected to deliver its full potential effect, based on the underlying principles of the family of practices. Researchers such as Stiggins (2005) and Swaffield (2011) suggested that formative assessment and AfL are not synonymous and that conflating their meanings could lead to difficulties of misappropriation and inefficacious measuring of impacts of either practice.

In reviewing the development of formative assessment and AfL in recent years, we note the following emphasis: the recognition that formative assessment (and subsequently AfL) needs a separate technology within classrooms that has so far not been well understood and is under-developed; such a distinction is necessary and possible, as different inferences need to be drawn from different assessment data. Since the seminal publication of Black & Wiliam, 1998, there has been considerable investment in ‘practical implementations’ of various formative assessment practices (Black & Wiliam, 2018, p. 1); moreover, the basis of such developments of formative assessment was built on pragmatic classroom practices of ‘what works’ (Baird, Andrich, Hopfenbeck, & Stobart, 2017) and not a ‘pre-defined theoretical base’ (Black & Wiliam, 2018, p. 2). The last point, in particular, is critical, as it suggests that there is unfinished work when it comes to even the conceptualisation of formative assessment and AfL.

Indeed, other researchers have raised questions about the validity of current conceptualisations of AfL and formative assessment on the grounds of inconsistencies in the many claims about the principles and vagueness of its definition, impacts and effects (Bennett, 2011; Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009; Maxwell, 2004). The difficulties inherent in realising the principles and strategies of formative assessment in the particular context of schools and classrooms have prompted researchers such as Taras (2005); Taras, 2009; Carless (2011) and McMillan (2010) to theorise on different possible versions of formative assessment that should be studied closely. Taras (2005) highlighted that formative assessment should not be seen as ‘a magic formula’ that is separate from, and incompatible with, summative assessment. Citing from Scriven (1967) earlier conceptualisation of assessment as a single process, she argued that the separation of formative and summative assessment, based on its differing functions, was ‘self-destructive and self-defeating’, and unfairly demonising the centrality of the summative assessment process in a teacher’s day-to-day classroom activities. Her view then is

that the same assessment data can potentially serve different functions, as long as the *process* of assessment has been clearly thought through. Controversially, she emphasised the need to appreciate the importance of summative assessment as the missing link in formative assessment (Taras, 2009). Carless and McMillan suggested that formative assessment could not be thought of as a single entity in the classroom but as a *family of practices* that differed in some characteristics or levels of formative-ness. McMillan (2010) and Carless (2011) identified the presence or absence of characteristics for different levels of formative assessment, which could straddle between ‘low-level’ and ‘high-level’ (McMillan, 2010) or ‘limited’ and ‘extended’ (Carless, 2011).

The evolving standards of attending to different purposes, principles, practices and processes of classroom assessment may be useful for further deliberation and theorisation about what constitutes effective AfL that is supportive of students’ learning. However, such a distinction of decision-making, including the difference between AfL and formative assessment, may be excessively convoluted and widen what teachers ‘need to’ and ‘are actually’ conceptualising and practising. Furthermore, the underpinning theories of any particular version of AfL are not necessarily easily generalisable across different classroom contexts, as they are value-laden and contestable. The over-simplification of categorising a particular practice into just formative versus summative, or AfL versus AoL, has already been noted by researchers (Bennett, 2011).

1.2. The East Asian context

Indeed, despite the recognition that formative assessment and AfL have received at policy level, concerns about the adoption of such policy in East Asian countries have been raised. Such concerns are particularly salient in examination-driven societies, where the historical valuing of examinations as a means of upward social and economic mobility poses challenges to certain initiatives. For example, the importance of college entrance examinations, perceived as a ‘fair’ way of selecting students, has caused teachers to resist new ways of teaching ELT in Japanese schools when traditional teaching approaches were deemed more practical to prepare students for the written exams (Hadley, 1997). In Malaysia high-stakes examinations continue to dominate, undermining other functions of assessment not related to selection and certification (Ong, 2010). Similarly, in Hong Kong, in spite of policy that explicitly recognises that a reliance on written tests and examinations as major methods of assessment could have a narrowing effect on learning, ‘assessment for selection’ practices are a key feature in the curriculum (Curriculum Development Council Hong Kong, 2001).

The implementation of AfL in East Asian classrooms may encounter further barriers such as deeply rooted learning traditions (Thanh Pham & Renshaw, 2015). For instance, East Asian countries are known to be hierarchical with high power distance indexes (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). People in these societies accept that there is a social order that they must follow, with some holding more power and authority than others. Within the classroom, this would mean a hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, where the teacher is respected and treated with deference, sometimes even fear (Hofstede et al., 2010). This respect accorded to teachers may be explained by the belief that teachers are responsible for acquiring knowledge from authoritative sources and delivering that knowledge to their students. Thus, students regard teachers as definitive sources of knowledge and easily accept their role as passive listeners, rarely challenging their teachers (Thanh, 2014). Such classrooms also tend to be teacher-centred. For instance, Dang (2016) study on noticing-based collaborative feedback showed that, although many students in the study preferred collaborative feedback, their beliefs about its effectiveness were split, with a large number still trusting their teachers’ corrections more than those of their peers. Dang (2016) suggested that one reason for this is the nature of Vietnamese classrooms, where the teacher’s authority is still highly regarded. In Thailand itself the idea of student-centred

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