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Effect of using formative assessment techniques on students' grades

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the results of a broader research project on how formative assessment affects the development of specific and generic competences in teacher training subjects at higher education level. The paper describes and discusses the impact of participatory and non-participatory assessment techniques on the attainment of learning outcomes in four different subjects. The sample was comprised of students ($n=118$) on teacher training bachelor's degrees at the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia. Data were gathered on the lecturers' activities in each subject and on the students' final grades. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to assess the effect of formative assessment on students' final grades for a subject. Statistical analysis shows that students who took subjects that were assessed by participatory techniques had a significantly ($p<0.001$) higher average final grade than those who had not been assessed in this way. The discussion of this paper is based on other researches which argue that the improvement of students' learning outcomes can arise from an improved learning process.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Formative assessment

In the past, assessment was not considered part of the learning process. It was a mechanism that established how much a student had learnt, without contributing to the process that students must follow to gain abilities, knowledge and competences (López-Pastor, 2009). However, in recent times, a trend has emerged in higher education to disassociate assessment from the concept of grading, and instead incorporate it into students' learning process (Brown, 2015).

According to López-Pastor (2009), formative assessment is integrated into the teaching/learning process, and involves continuously gathering information to generate feedback for the student. Feedback helps students to modify, make decisions about, and improve their learning process. However, formative assessment does not just have a direct effect on students. It also provides information for lecturers on the suitability of their strategies. Teaching strategies should be designed to encourage independent learning, that is, to ensure that students assume a degree of control over their learning, which fosters learner autonomy (Rué, 2009) and the development of skills such as learning-to-learn.

1.2. The research project

This paper presents part of a research project funded by the Programme of Improvement and Innovation in Teacher Training (MIF), promoted by the Catalan Agency for Management of University and Research Grants (AGAUR). The aim of the project was to study the effects of formative assessment on the development of students' generic and specific competences. The research was carried out at the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia with a group of seven lecturers, and focused on the generic and specific competences of each subject in the bachelor's degrees Teacher in Primary Education and Teacher in Early Childhood Education (Ramírez, Pla, Arumí, & Señé, 2015).

Various aspects were examined in the research project. This paper focuses on those related to the impact of formative assessment techniques on students' final grade for a subject. Therefore, the specific objective of this paper is to *show the impact of the assessment techniques used in the subjects under study on students' grades, and discuss the effect of these techniques on teaching.*

One of the key processes in the research was to define what formative assessment is and what it entails. This was vital to ensure that the lecturers' teaching had the characteristics required of formative assessment, and for the subjects to be studied in accordance with the aims of the research and with the differences between them. This was achieved by using a *Planning table* to describe the formative assessment means, techniques and instruments that were used in each subject.

The project researchers were also the lecturers, so that this study can be classified as action research. The results presented here are interpreted from this perspective: not as the conclusion of the research, but as a starting point to improve the teaching practices of this group of lecturers.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The sample was comprised of students from four subjects of the bachelor's degrees in Teacher in Primary Education and Teacher in Early Childhood Education at the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia. The initial sample was composed of 143 students enrolled on the four subjects. The final sample was 118 ($n=118$) due to the fact that not all the students completed the subject. It means that they did not participate actively throughout the subject and formative assessment could not be applied appropriately, so they could not get a final mark. Of the 118 students who participated in the study, 88 were female (74.6%) and 30 were male (25.4%).

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