The Application of Formative Assessment in the Cultivation of College Students' English Autonomous Learning Ability

-- Based on China's Standards of English Language Ability

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Abstract

Teaching evaluation is an indispensable part in English teaching. Formative assessment is a processing evaluation in teaching. A large number of studies have shown that formative evaluation can promote learners' autonomous learning. *China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE)* is the first English proficiency assessment standard covering the whole learning period in China. It is divided into three stages and nine levels, providing a guiding standard for English autonomous learning for college students growing up in the Internet information age. The scale enables formative assessment and behavioral testing for the purpose of language use. In view of the communicative and practical nature of language learning, the pluralistic evaluation system of college English should focus on formative evaluation of process learning and reduce the proportion of summative evaluation. Based on the requirements of China's Standards of English Ability, this paper discusses the positive effects of formative assessment on the improvement of college students' English competence and the cultivation of their English Autonomous Learning Ability.

Keywords

China's Standards of English Language Ability; Formative Assessment; English Language Teaching; Autonomous Learning Ability.

1. Introduction

Due to the gradual improvement of the information environment, today's college students can access the rich learning resources provided by the intelligent environment anytime and anywhere in their favorite way. The integration of online and offline education will become the main form of English learning for students. Personalized learning resources and learning paths pushed on the basis of big data will enable college students to further develop their autonomous learning ability. Selecting courses according to their needs, using learning means according to their personalities, and evaluating the learning effect according to the actual process will become mainstream learning methods. Therefore, improving students' autonomous learning ability is the direction of college English teaching reform in recent years. The "Requirements for College English Teaching" issued by the Ministry of Education clearly points out that the acquisition and improvement of college students' autonomous learning ability should be regarded as one of the indicators of the success of college English teaching reform. No matter how the contents and methods of college English teaching are reformed, the goal is to effectively improve students' autonomous learning ability, acquire more knowledge through autonomous learning, and improve their language application ability.

In the practice of college students' English autonomous learning, scientific and effective evaluation of English autonomous learning ability is an essential link. However, China's English

evaluation system lacks consistency from elementary to advanced level, and evaluation standards lack uniformity due to different requirements on English ability, which causes many problems. For example, students are busy taking various English tests to prove their English ability, which is time-consuming and laborious. English teaching at different levels cannot be connected effectively, and the teaching content and difficulties cannot be planned scientifically. Students cannot intuitively carry out self-assessment and their learning objectives are not strong. Therefore, English teaching is in urgent need of a set of English ability evaluation system that can serve all levels of English teaching. Therefore, how to scientifically evaluate the effect of students' self-regulated learning, to promote constructive lifelong learning, makes people regard formative assessment as a new fulcrum of college English teaching and assessment. And the introduction of *"China's Standards of English Language Ability"* provides a feasible, comprehensive and scientific evaluation standard for the accurate evaluation of the independent learning effect of college students.

2. China's Standards of English Language Ability

"China's Standards of English Language Ability" (CSE) launched on June 1, 2018, is the first English proficiency assessment standard specifically tailored for Chinese English learners. The *Scale* pays more attention to the application of language in real life and guides language learners to improve their language ability and application ability. According to the different requirements of English learners at different levels in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation, the *Scale* divides English proficiency into three stages: "Foundation stage", "Improvement stage" and "Proficiency stage". Each stage has three levels, and there are nine levels in total, consisting of 86 ability tables.[1] It provides authoritative reference standards for each stage of English learning, teaching and assessment, and then realizes the organic integration of English learning, teaching and assessment.

Foundation stage (Elementary) 1-3 requires students to understand simple language material in everyday life, to obtain specific or key information, and to grasp key points. They are expected to be able to communicate with others in simple language in everyday life, and be able to explain reasons, express opinions, etc. Improvement stage (Intermediate) 4-6, students are required to understand language material on a variety of topics, including academic material in their field of study, and accurately grasp the main idea and gist. They are expected to be able to conduct in-depth communication and discussion on a variety of academic and social topics. Proficiency stage (Advanced) 7-9, which requires students to understand and grasp various language materials accurately and thoroughly. They can easily use a variety of expressions on a variety of topics for in-depth communication and exchange. They are required to express precise, natural, pure, and reflect a certain language style.[2]

The last item of the *Scale* is the "Self-assessment Scale", which is used to judge or diagnose the English proficiency level of language users and learners, it includes self-evaluation on the application of constituent knowledge, listening, reading comprehension, oral expression, written expression, pragmatics, interpretation and translation. Learners can make self-evaluation and diagnosis of their English level with the help of the *Scale*, which provides evidence for such evaluation. In this way, students can make clear learning objectives and methods according to their own actual situation, choose suitable English learning materials, and use learning methods suitable for their own characteristics to gradually improve the level of Comprehensive English ability, to stimulate the internal motivation and turn passive learning into active learning. All the descriptors of the "Self-evaluation Scale" are "I can..." Such sentence patterns reflect learner-centered English learning and encourage learners to pay attention to themselves instead of being teacher-directed. Furthermore, the intervention of formative

assessment in the English teaching process will greatly enhance the responsibility of learning responsibility bearers.

3. Formative Assessment

Neo-constructivism holds that language learning is an active construction process. This is consistent with the description of language ability assessment in the *Scale*. The Neo-constructivism emphasizes the initiative, situation and sociality of learning. The construction of knowledge is a process, and the corresponding evaluation should also be formative. "Formative assessment is a low-anxiety and sustainable assessment conducted in an open, relaxed, friendly and informal environment, which focuses on the learning process of students. The content of evaluation not only includes knowledge, skills and other aspects, but also includes students' learning interest, learning strategy, learning attitude, participation consciousness, cooperation spirit, cultural awareness and other aspects that are not easy to quantify. It is conducive to cultivating and stimulating students' learning interest, enhancing their learning motivation and learning confidence. Moreover, it is beneficial to the formation of autonomous learning ability and the development of students' main personality." [3] College English emphasizes the instrumentality and humanity of English. It encourages students to collect, process and output information in a multicultural context using comprehensive language skills. Formative evaluation focuses on recording the learning process. It not only pays attention to the "formation" process of students' knowledge, skills and attitudes, and makes dynamic evaluation by continuous observation, recording and reflection of the whole process of students' learning, but also attaches importance to the innovation factor of students everywhere, and monitors and guides students' learning to the maximum extent.

From the functional distinction of evaluation, we can divide evaluation into summative evaluation and formative evaluation, but they are not mutually exclusive and opposite. In an effective evaluation system, we usually use both kinds of evaluation simultaneously. Both are major sources of information in a health evaluation system. From the evaluation subject, we can divide the formative evaluation into self-evaluation, peer evaluation, teacher evaluation and cooperative evaluation. The formative evaluation breaks through the evaluation method of language learning which only involves examination papers and tests, and records the entire learning process of students. On the one hand, it can effectively urge students to improve their own learning strategies and enhance their learning motivation through real-time evaluation and feedback of students' learning. On the other hand, according to the timely presentation of students' learning effects, teachers can constantly revise and improve the teaching plan and content, and truly teach students according to their aptitude.

Formative evaluation runs through the whole process of teaching, which can monitor students' learning status in time and give them feedback on learning. Therefore, formative evaluation focuses on the process of students' knowledge learning, skill development and attitude formation. The application of formative assessment in college English teaching not only provides real-time information feedback for teaching, but also provides a reference basis for students' autonomous learning. Thus, English teachers can constantly adjust and optimize teaching content, implement targeted teaching guidance for students, and realize teaching and learning in a real sense.[4]

4. The Relationship between Formative Assessment and Autonomous Learning

Autonomous learning, which adheres to the student-centered teaching concept and emphasizes students' active exploration and active thinking of knowledge, is an important basis for students to construct knowledge system. The so-called autonomous learning also belongs to

students' self-regulation in learning, which can be roughly divided into reactive autonomous learning and original autonomous learning. Among them, original autonomous learning focuses on the establishment, adjustment and improvement of students' learning goals and directions. Reactive autonomous learning emphasizes a series of learning strategies adopted by students in order to achieve learning goals.

Therefore, the effective combination of autonomous learning and formative assessment provides students with more learning opportunities, better exercises their English language ability, and fully demonstrates the purpose of personalized education. First, students constitute the main body of formative evaluation, which is conducive to making students take the initiative to learn, and lays a good foundation for the smooth development of college English teaching. Secondly, formative evaluation can maximize meet the needs of students' autonomous learning, effectively improve the shortcomings of traditional teaching and make up for the shortcomings, and is also the best means to enhance the quality of teaching. Thus, formative assessment can build a good learning atmosphere for students, cultivate students' autonomous ability and consciousness, improve their English learning efficiency and improve their comprehensive quality.

Formative evaluation not only considers students' English knowledge and skills, but also cultivates students' autonomous learning, discovers learning strategies suitable for their own characteristics, evaluates their periodic scores and sets learning goals of different levels through evaluation. These internalized growth and self-discipline are often more important than a score. Formative assessment can proceed smoothly and effectively if students can organize their own learning and take responsibility for it. Formative assessment, in turn, emphasizes the dominant position of students in their own learning and changes their learning style -- from passively accepting knowledge and evaluation to actively recognizing, discovering and exploring in the learning process, and in the learning process, they learn to discover, analyze and solve problems. By participating in formative assessment, students understand their responsibilities in English learning, thus reducing their dependence on teachers. More importantly, formative assessment can help students improve their autonomous learning ability in the three stages of autonomous learning (planning stage, behavioral or volitional control stage and self-reflection stage).[5] There are profound related reasons why formative evaluation should be applied to the cultivation of students' autonomous learning ability. First of all, formative evaluation highlights the subject status of students and makes them the subjects and participants of evaluation. It has outstanding effects on stimulating students' learning initiative, which is the premise and foundation of effective college English teaching. Secondly, formative assessment can maximize the needs of students' autonomous learning and make them the master of the learning process, which is an important means to change the situation of college English teaching in the past. Finally, formative evaluation can create a good atmosphere for autonomous learning, which is of great help to stimulate students' awareness of autonomous learning and cultivate their autonomous learning ability.

5. The Problems of Current Evaluation in College English Teaching

5.1. Weak Evaluation Content

Generally speaking, English teachers usually adopt the summative evaluation in the form of results, which makes the concept of evaluation narrow. In traditional English teaching, the evaluation of students' learning is mainly based on the final exam result, which results in students completely ignoring the importance of the learning process. In fact, a test result is unable to reflect students' comprehensive ability and language situation.[6] Such one-sidedness of teaching evaluation pays too much attention to students' basic knowledge and

skills and does not pay enough attention to students' actual learning ability, which is detrimental to the formation of students' independent learning ability to a large extent.

5.2. Single Evaluation Method

As for the current college English teaching, students are mainly evaluated by written papers, and the single evaluation method cannot timely feedback the actual learning effect of students. Moreover, most of such teaching evaluation subjects are teachers. Some teachers fail to attach importance to the status of students and fail to integrate them into the teaching evaluation process, so students' initiative is not strong and their enthusiasm is difficult to mobilize. In addition, in the context of the development of the information society, many teachers do not use the digital platform in the internet era to evaluate students and do not realize the advantages of the participation of the network platform in the evaluation of classroom teaching.

6. The Application of Formative Assessment in the Cultivation of College Students' English Autonomous Learning Ability

Based on "*China's Standards of English Language Ability*", this paper discusses how to dynamically combine the *Scale* with formative assessment to help students establish an autonomous learning model in line with their own learning characteristics. The ultimate purpose of formative evaluation is not simply to use a number to evaluate what students have learned. It focuses on the persistent learning spirit, the eagerness to contact new knowledge, the ability to apply technological learning methods and the learning literacy of objective self-assessment. The autonomous learning enthusiasm, personalized learning materials and effective learning strategies constructed by students in formative evaluation will benefit them for a lifetime and make them become lifelong learners.

6.1. Incentive Function and the Planning Stage

In the planning stage, formative assessment can help students determine their learning objectives, select tasks and strategies, thus enhancing students' self-confidence, self-awareness, and motivation to study independently. By analyzing their interests, learning styles and strategies, students have specific goals, determination to achieve this goal and strong self-efficacy, that is, students want to achieve it by setting higher goals and making great efforts, thus affirming their ability to learn independently. Through formative evaluations with other students and teachers, students gain confidence and self-esteem and actively pursue their goals. The "Self-evaluation Scale" in the *Scale* has three functions: language assessment, language learning and language feedback, which can accurately detect the English level, defects and direction of efforts of independent English learners and users. It is a process in which students' autonomous learning behavior is determined by adopting accurate language according to scientific standards. The dynamic combination of the *Scale* and formative assessment can stimulate students' motivation and interest in language learning, monitor students' autonomous learning process, supervise the adjustment of learning objectives and pace, create a good ecological environment for autonomous learning, and thus cultivate students' autonomous learning ability. For example, teachers can set up a class performance evaluation table based on the grade requirements of the *Scale*, which covers textbook preview, word recitation, cultural comparison, class notes, in-class exercises, group discussion, etc. At first, students evaluate themselves, and then group members evaluate each other. At the end of each week, class representatives count the scores, and teachers evaluate each student according to their classroom performance. To stimulate students to speak in class and participate enthusiastically in activities.

6.2.   Adjustment Function and the Behavioral or Volitional Control Stage

Unlike simple test, formative evaluation not just give a final score. It enables teachers and students to think and adjust the feedback formed by evaluation in the evaluation process. Formative assessment can help students comprehensively understand the knowledge and skills they have learned during a period. It can also help students to have a correct attitude and evaluation of their academic performance, to be aware of the gap between their current level of knowledge and what they want to achieve, to guide them to constantly improve their learning, slowly figure out what works for them until they reach their goal. The adjustment function is especially helpful for those who are lagging behind, because it gives students the opportunity to revise their study plan, change their study method, understand the gap with others and catch up, whereas traditional final exams can only give them a less than ideal result. When teachers understand students' learning troubles through formative assessment, they can make necessary teaching adjustments, which embodies student-centered teaching. The adjustment function can also be applied to all aspects of teaching, including the comparison and adjustment of teaching objectives, plans, practices and achievements.

During the control stage, all learning activities and mental processes are carefully tracked. Formative assessment guides students through systematic feedback and encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning. Through self-observation, students can be aware of their strengths and weaknesses, the effectiveness of using study strategies, and the time allocation for each unit. By recording and comparing their actions, students gain valuable learning experiences. Besides, the "Self-evaluation Scale" in the *Scale* is based on the standardized evaluation standard, which has the same evaluation basis and evaluation results. The test results are comparable and fair. Such assessment is conducive to self-seeking, self-evaluation, self-adjustment, self-recognition and self-improvement of autonomous learners. If they find anything that interferes with achieving their goals, they should enter the third stage: the self-reflection stage.

6.3.   Adjustment Function and the Self-Reflection Stage

One of the major problems of autonomic learning is that learners often do not have a clear understanding of what they should learn and what results they should achieve, so it is difficult for them to obtain effective internal feedback reflection. The internal feedback plays a crucial role in college students' English autonomic learning. It enables students to improve learning methods, adjust learning resources, screen learning platforms and promote the achievement of learning goals. Autonomic learning students can understand the characteristics and requirements of target tasks by the guidance, correction and evaluation of self-evaluation scale. Through the *Scale*, they can clarify their learning objectives, choose the corresponding learning methods, monitor their psychological reactions and learning behaviors, and timely correct and remedy the language description at all levels to promote the efficiency of autonomous learning. In the self-reflection stage, formative assessment provides students and teachers with the opportunity to analyze the causes of those interfering factors, diagnose the problems in time, and analyze and solve them. Through feedback, teachers and students revise their goals until they are satisfied. For example, teachers can guide and help students build autonomic learning profiles. The profiles include all aspects of students' learning, such as learning attitude, method, process, etc., which can help teachers timely discover students' progress and deficiencies during a period of time. At the same time, in the profiles, students also need to incorporate some of their own proposed schedules, the completion of the assignment, and the scores on the stage tests. Besides, it includes some activity records and mutual evaluation, as well as teachers' evaluation and students' self-evaluation. Only in this way can a complete learning profile be formed.[7] In addition, English teachers should guide students to conduct regular self-evaluation of their profiles, so that students can learn to reflect, correct their learning attitude,

optimize their learning methods, and gradually find a more suitable way to learn, so as to achieve the best learning effect and improve their autonomic learning ability.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the dynamic combination of formative assessment and *China's Standards of English Language Ability* can effectively increase students' autonomous learning ability in college English teaching. English teachers can guide students to make reasonable and scientific formative evaluation based on the *Scale*. The evaluation content involves all aspects, including learning attitude, method and behavior, so that students become the subject of evaluation. In terms of the establishment of learning objectives, the use of learning methods, the selection of learning resources, the correction of learning progress, and the identification of achieving goals, students can determine them in a scientific, clear, accurate and unified way. Therefore, their combination is beneficial to motivate students to learn more actively, to maximize the satisfaction of students' autonomous learning needs, so that students can realize the shortcomings and advantages of learning, adjust learning methods in time, and gradually explore a more suitable way for their own learning, to achieve the best effect of autonomous learning. Moreover, it is helpful for autonomous learning students to cultivate good learning behavior, shape critical thinking ability, improve humanistic quality and to gradually grow into high-quality and innovative international talents needed by the future development of the country under the correct incentive mechanism.

Acknowledgments

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