EVALUATION OF SOCIAL STUDIES STUDENTS' LEARNING USING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN SELECTED COLLEGES OF EDUCATION IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *Evaluation of students is an integral part of teaching and learning in Social Studies in the Colleges of Education in Ghana and is beneficial to both students and tutors if use formatively. This could be achieved if, tutors follow the laid down procedures in administering formative assessment in their colleges. This study adopted a case study research design. The study was carried out in three Colleges of Education in the Central Region of Ghana. The data were used together to form one case. Both the Tutors and the Colleges were purposively and conveniently selected for the study. Interviews and classroom observation were used. The semi-structured interview guide and the structured classroom observation setting checklists were administered to nine (9) Social Studies tutors. It was found that evaluation in the classroom motivates tutor-student relationship in formative assessment but it was observed that most of the tutors were not using concrete evaluation feedbacks. Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success foster effective classroom discussions and learning tasks in formative assessment. Tutors agreed that the use of Formative Assessment Classroom Techniques (FACTs) is an integral part of teaching and learning.*

KEYWORDS: Assessment. Social Studies. Formative assessment. Evaluation. Students. Learning.

INTRODUCTION

According to Bekoe, Eshun and Bordoh (2013:28) "knowledge is constructed during the learning process and that a student discovers knowledge for him/herself, rather than receiving knowledge, and this inspires the notion of performance-based assessment." It is becoming more and more evident that formative assessment is an integral component of the teaching and learning process. Bordoh, Bassaw and Eshun (2013:9) assert that "formative assessment is used to provide information on the likely performance of students; to describe strength or weakness and feedback given to students, telling them which items they got correct or wrong. Formative assessment enhances the efficacy of instructional strategies of Social Studies tutors." There is all indication that formative assessment informs the teacher about what students think and about how they think. Ampiah, Hart, Nkhata and Nyirend (2003) contend that a teacher need to know what children are able to do or not if he or she is to plan

effectively. This, however, little evidence exist that teachers actually use formative assessment to inform planning and teaching, hence, evaluation of Social Studies students' learning using formative assessment would be considered reasonable, given the fact that teachers' knowledge base might influence the way students proceed with learning and the way they are tested. Eshun (2013:17) posits that "teaching Social Studies is stressed to be done in student-centred techniques and strategies. Brainstorming, role-playing, simulation, discussion and debate were the major techniques stressed by both Colleges of Education curriculum and the JHS Social Studies syllabus." This according to Bekoe, Eshun and Bordoh (2013:28) "… in formulating formative assessment and scoring, tutors rather laid emphasis on cognitive domain to the neglect of affective and psychomotor domains which are also of paramount importance… Tutors were not using scoring rubrics, concept mapping, scaffolding and portfolio as tools in formative assessment for teaching and learning of Social Studies in Colleges of Education." The seriousness of the matter is that there are thirty-eight public colleges of education in Ghana, all of which turn out about 9,000 teachers annually. This will increase little above 15,000 based on the recent trainee intake in the 2013/2014 academic year. These teachers are expected to teach various subjects including Social Studies at the basic level of education. Products of the Colleges of Education, thus, have an onerous responsibility of laying a firm and sound foundation in the educational career of the young ones entrusted into their care. This implies that the system of assessment at the colleges of education need not be taken for granted if qualities trained teachers are to be produced from the colleges.

The practice of assessment in Colleges of Education is supposed to cover knowledge, skills and attitude of the students. However, as noted by Bekoe et al., (2013:28-29) "content knowledge of some College of Education Social Studies tutors on formative assessment was found not to be adequate to handle some of the topics in the Social Studies curriculum effectively… As a result of this, they teach with the formative assessment tools they are used to thereby neglecting those that help build and change corrupted attitudes of students. The inability of some teachers to properly assess all the domains of learning in students, has led to many people doubting the genuineness of internal classroom assessment marks. The purpose of this study was to evaluate students' learning using formative assessment. The research is meant to answer the question: To what extent do tutors use formative assessment to evaluate students' learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW ON EVALUATION OF STUDENTS' LEARNING USING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

According to Bordoh, Bassaw and Eshun (2013:9) "Formative assessment is the hands on deck process of information on the students' academic achievements in the classroom. It is the type of assessment which is ongoing or goes on in the course of instructional delivery." It is in this light that, evaluation of students' learning in Social Studies needs to be taken seriously. Quashigah, Eshun and Mensah (2013:84) assert that "the pedagogical content knowledge of Social Studies teachers do influence the way they assess their lessons." This assertion is supported by Eshun and Bordoh (2013:173) that "the background knowledge of Social Studies teachers is built from their training institutions and this goes to influence the way they teach (i.e. selection of content, unit or topic, formulation of objective(s), mode of teaching, and

assessment tool used)." As a result of this, implementers of Social Studies curriculum need to be abreast with how the subject is assessed formatively. This however, Bordoh and Eshun (2013:107) stressed that "due to hasty nature in formulating formative assessment and scoring, tutors laid emphasis on cognitive domain to the neglect of affective and psychomotor domains which are also of paramount importance." With this, much is needed to assist Social Studies teachers to be abreast with the nature and the content of Social Studies in a harmonized subject matter required to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Bekoe & Eshun, 2013: 43-44).

Formative assessment is an essential element in the learning process as it provides information on learners' strengths and weakness in relation to their progression. Thus, teachers can use it in planning what to do next in order to enhance learning as well as teaching… As the main purpose of formative assessment is to provide feedback from teachers and students, and to both of them in the learning process, information can be drawn for summative purposes (Black, 1993).

A student needs to know where s/he is and understand not only where s/he wants to be, but also how to "fill the gap" between the current knowledge and the desired level. In order to fill the gap, the teacher and the student should be involved in a process of continual reflection and review about progress (The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, http://www.qca.org.ukl296.html). Thus, formative assessment focuses on dialogue with students, collecting feedback from them and providing feedback to them.

Self-assessment is a valuable tool for formative purpose and this can be boosted by peer assessment as it is believed to enable learners to assess one another for formative purposes (Bekoe et al., 2013:28). In this learning process, feedback should operate both from teacher to students, from students to teacher and from students to students. The mere presence of feedback is insufficient for judging the guidance of learning (Deci & Ryan, 1994). Implementing formative assessment must go with some good quality characteristics. Atkin, Black and Coffey (2001) proposed that for a learning endeavour to be successful, the learner must have answers to basic questions: *Where am I going? Where am I now? and How can I close the gap?* When students better understand their learning goals, recognize their own skill level in relation to the goals, and take responsibility for reaching the goals, they become active partners in improving their learning. In view of such questions, it is requisite to establish principles that will guide assessment implementation designed to promote learning. Towards this end, the Assessment Reform Group (1999:4) proposed that improving learning through assessment depends on five, deceptively simple, key factors, all underpinned by action: providing effective feedback to pupils; actively involving pupils in their learning; adjusting teaching to take account of the results of assessment; recognizing the profound influence assessment has on the motivation and self-esteem of pupils, both of which are crucial influences on learning; and the ability for pupils to be able to assess themselves and understand how to improve.

Peer and self-assessment are critical components of formative assessment. According to Black, Lee, Harrison and William (2004) students will achieve more if they are fully engaged in their own learning process, aware of what they need to learn and why, and what they need to do to reach it. While this is undisputable, Black et al.,

(2004) cautioned teachers that peer and self-assessment can only be meaningful in the classroom if it is used to assist students, especially low achievers, to develop the knowledge and skills of assessment (e.g. goals, criteria and interpretation).

Peer assessment, as complementary to self-assessment (Black et al., 2004), is generally recognized as an integral component of formative assessment (Noonan & Duncan, 2005). Although the definition for peer assessment varies, evaluators generally agree that peer-assessment involves "one student's assessment of the performance or success of another student" (Noonan & Duncan, 2005:2). This process may involve various types of activities such as peer feedback and peer learning. Peer assessment, a formative strategy, is critical to students' interaction, understanding and learning gains (Anthony & Lewis, 2008). It enables students to take control over their own learning and to gain insight into their own performance (Heywood, 2000).

This really shows that "formative assessment provides the teacher with a bridge between assessment and teaching as it is an essential way of creating independent, reflective learners who can plan and assess their own progress" (Bordoh et al., 2013:9). This gives students time to process new information, guide their own learning, with the teacher providing help where necessary or appropriate.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a case study research design. The study was carried out in three Colleges of Education in the Central Region of Ghana. As this case study focused is on the views of the tutors surrounding evaluation of Social Studies students' learning using formative assessment in selected Colleges of Education, it was a bounded study and particularistic (Lunn, 2006). It was particular to the specific context of the tutors in three Colleges of Education. The researchers used the tutors' self reports and classroom observation to gather information regarding their understanding and use of formative assessment. This formed the boundary of this case study. Triangulation was used to test the consistency of findings obtained through different instruments used.

The population in this study consisted of all Social Studies tutors in the three Colleges of Education in the Central Region of Ghana. The target population therefore was the nine (9) Social Studies tutors in all the three colleges of education: Komenda, Ola and Fosu, in the Central Region of Ghana.

The tutors and the Colleges were purposively and conveniently used for the study. The purposively sampling procedure was adopted because the tutors were the only ones involved in the teaching of Social Studies in the three Colleges of Education in the Central Region of Ghana. The three Colleges of Education were conveniently sampled because they were the available or nearest units within the reach of the researcher. This implies that researchers are supposed to obtain a convenient sample by selecting whatever sampling units are conveniently available (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2000).

The researchers used the following in gathering the data: Interview guide made up of fifteen (15) semi-structured guide; and observation guide made up of twenty (20)

structured classroom setting checklists with different option adopted from Formative Assessment Classroom Observation and Lesson Planning Tool created by: Margaret Heritage (AACC), Susan Janssen (NYCC), Adam Tanney (NYCC), and Nancy Zarach (Syracuse City School District).

Data analysis was done by the use of both descriptive and interpretative techniques based on the themes arrived at in the data collection. This was based on questions on the semi-structured interviews and classroom observation of College of Education Social Studies tutors' while they teach the subject in a classroom setting.

USING FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT TO EVALUATE STUDENTS' LEARNING

Assessment techniques Colleges of Education Social Studies tutors use to assess students learning in the classroom are presented under this section. Item 1 of the interview checklist reads *what interactive formative assessment is and why is it important?* In response to this, Kojo (not his real name) said it is the all round assessment during the course of teaching and learning and this promote better learning outcomes. Fiifi (not his real name) said it is the form of assessment which helps the tutor to find out what students have assimilated during the course of teaching in the classroom. With the observation checklist which read *Tutor used formative assessment strategies during lesson in an interactive way*. With this tutors were seen using questions and answers to introduce their lesson. Students were called to summarize what they learnt after the lesson. This shows that interactive formative assessments promote learning outcomes.

Item 2 of the interview checklist reads *how can formative assessments be used to examine and improve teaching practice?* With this question, Ato (not his real name) said it helps one to find out the level of students understanding before moving onto the next topic. Also, Kwamena (not his real name) said it helps one to check whether his students are doing well in academically or not and ways to use in checking their performances. In the observational checklist item on *Tutors use of formative assessment techniques to improve teaching practice,* the researchers observed that few of the tutors made used of assessment techniques to improve teaching practice.

Item 3 of interview checklist reads *how can questioning be used to promote classroom dialogue*? One of the nine respondents said that questioning can be used to promote dialogue; introducing a lesson, during the course of teaching and during the culminating stage of the lesson. The rest added to this and agreed that questioning can be used to promote classroom dialogue. With the observation checklist which read *Tutor used formative assessment strategies during lesson in an interactive way*. Tutors observed were seen using questions and answers to introduce the lesson. Tutor posed questions to the students and paused for while, for students to answer. This is an indication that FA is used in lesson presentation at the Colleges of Education. Teacher asking a planned sequence of questions might find out that students had not understood the concept to be learned in a particular lesson, and as a result the teacher might use that information to modify the subsequent lesson to reinforce the prior learning goal.

Item 4 of the interview checklist reads *why is the interaction between the teacher and the students important feature in formative assessment?* Kweku (not his real name) said "it is like the bridge that holds two roads together and that when there is lack of interaction in class it is the student that suffers and reveals the weakness of the teacher". With the observation checklist which read *Tutor used formative assessment strategies during lesson in an interactive way*. Most of the tutors observed were seen using discussion in the lesson development and during the course of the lesson they pursed to listen to students views as their lessons were not tutor centred. The implication is that students will understand lessons better when they are brought on board during teaching and learning process. Therefore, teachers should spend more effort in framing questions to explore issues that are critical to students' development of understanding of the subject matter.

Item 5 of the interview checklist reads *is the presence of mere feedback sufficient for judging the guidance of learning in formative assessment? Give reasons for your answer.* Most of the respondents agreed that the presence of mere feedback is insufficient for judging the guidance of learning and that feedback help learners to assess themselves whether they are doing well or not. Therefore, the teacher needs to understand the way students think and the way they take in new messages, both at the general and the specific level.

Item 6 of the interview checklist reads *what makes a tutor a good formative assessor and is it important at all?* Esi (not her real name) said "effective formative assessor requires someone who has the necessary depth of content knowledge of the subject he/she is teaching...this motivate teacher-student relationship in formative assessment...as he/she will always set realistic questions covered in class". This implies that teachers must act on the interpreted information in order to enhance the learning of students.

Item 7 of the interview checklist read *why is clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria important in formative assessment?* With this most of the respondents agreed that it is of paramount importance to bring on board the sharing of learning intentions and success criteria with learners. To them this will engineer effective classroom discussions and learning tasks to be achieved in formative assessment. However the classroom observations negate what was said as most of the respondents were seen not doing as such based on the observation checklist which read *Teacher shared criteria for success with students*. Few of the tutors observed were seen using relevant activities as students were involved from the beginning of the lesson to the end, making lesson delivery unique. This shows that lesson delivery is a two way affair. This implies that for lesson delivery to be a success then tutors must consider and involve students in lesson presentation.

Item 8 of the interview checklist reads *must emphasis be laid on descriptive than evaluative feedback and why?* Most of the respondents agreed that in formative assessment emphasis should be placed on descriptive than evaluative feedback. Araba (not her real name) said "the manner in which feedback is communicated to students is essential, since the application of an evaluative statement, such as "you are right" which implies the existence of correct or incorrect criteria can defeat the purpose of the continuum...comments may be lacking in specificity, like saying "yes" students may not be expected to make progress if their teachers are providing them

with evaluative or nonspecific feedback on the basis of looking at their work". However, the classroom situation observed on the above theme was not the ideal based on what most of the respondents said. This implies that when more specific comments are provided to the students, it should be based on a clear description of what the underlying criteria are; for example, a student needs to know what "clarity" means in terms of their own work. This shows that the effectiveness of feedback depends on the quality of the feedback rather than existence or absence. This includes the quality and saliency of the information gathered in the first place and the appropriateness and relevance of subsequent actions.

Item 9 of the interview checklist reads *is the use of Formative Assessment Classroom Techniques (FACTs) an integral part of teaching and learning in formative assessment and why?* Most of respondents commented that the use of Formative Assessment Classroom Techniques (FACTs) is an integral part of teaching and learning in formative assessment. Three of the respondents however said although it is an ideal situation but at times they do not go strictly to it if one is to complete his or course outline within a semester. To them it is the final examination conducted by the University of Cape Coast (UCC) and passing of their students that will determine whether they had taught them well and not about going strictly to lay procedures in formative assessment. This was witnessed in the classroom observation on checklist item on *Tutor used FA techniques during lesson*. Most of the tutors observe were not seen using assessment techniques that will involve their students in teaching and learning process. With this there were having in mind that they will be delayed in completing their course outline given them when they tend to involve their students often in lesson delivery.

Item 10 of the interview checklist reads *what is self-formative assessments and is it important at all?* Most of the respondents said it is important as it assist students to become self-regulated in learning. One of the tutors said "self-assessment is concerned with learners valuing their own learning and achievements on the basis of evidence from themselves and from others and being encouraged to take responsibility... When they are involved in considering criteria which are meaningful to them". This means that it is the procedure by which students take responsibility over their own learning.

Item 11 of the interview checklist reads *can classroom methods improve formative assessment? Explain your answer.* Most of respondents commented that classroom methods improve formative assessment. To them, formative assessment plays a significant role in informing the teacher about students' progress as well as about the effectiveness of teachers' classroom instructions, and the effectiveness of the curriculum materials being used in the classroom. However, the classroom observations on the above theme negate what was said by the respondents in the sense that most of them used teacher-centred method in teaching. This indicates that incorporating varied classroom techniques of teaching and learning process will result in students to become responsive during the learning process.

Item 12 of the interview checklist reads *how do classroom rewards improve learning in formative assessment?* Respondent said classroom rewards improve learning in formative assessment in the sense that it motivates learners to participate in the

teaching and learning process. This implies that, when tutors effectively use rewards in formative classroom it motivate students to take part in classroom activities.

Item 13 of the interview checklist reads *do the use of peer and self-assessment enhance formative assessment and why?* With this most of the respondents said that the use of peer and self-assessment enhance formative assessment. With the observation checklist on items which read *evidence of self-assessment; teacher supported students in process of self-assessment; Teacher provided opportunity for peer-assessment; teacher supported students in process of peer-assessment; and teacher made use of either student self-or peer-assessment during instruction.* With this 3 out of the 9 tutors observed used peer and self-assessment in enhancing formative assessment. This helps students to guide their own learning, with the teacher providing help where necessary or appropriate.

Item 14 of the interview checklist read *does activating students as the owners of their own learning promote effective formative assessment and how?* All of the respondents indicated it is very important to activate students as the owners of their own learning promote effective formative assessment. However, with the classroom observation checklist which read *teacher encourage students to assess their own learning.* With this it was observed that few of the tutors were giving them good remarks when rights responses are given to questions. Others were also giving immediate feedback. Appropriate feedback made the class observed very lively. This implies that students will always get on board in lesson delivery when they are motivated with good remarks when they respond to questions correctly.

Item 15 of the interview checklist reads *do providing feedback to learners in the learning process enhances formative assessment? Explain your answer.* Most of the tutors said it is important to provide feedback to learners in the learning process and this enhances formative assessment. However, there were differences in what they said and the situation observed in the classroom. This was done using observation checklist which read *when in the lesson did teacher offer feedback to students; and teacher provided feedback to the students (e.g., individual or class).* With this it was observed that few of the tutors were seen giving feedback at the beginning, during and at the end of the lesson. It is suggested that classroom teachers should put more emphasis on descriptive than evaluative feedback.

CONCLUSIONS

Effective formative assessor requires someone who has the necessary depth of content knowledge of the subject s/he is teaching. Evaluation in the classroom motivates tutor-student relationship in formative assessment but it was observed that most teachers were not using concrete evaluation feedbacks. Effective use of rewards in formative classroom motivates students to take part in classroom activities. Students get on board in lesson delivery when they are motivated with good remarks.

The presence of mere feedback is insufficient for judging the guidance of learning and that feedback help learners to assess themselves whether they are doing well or not. Emphasis should be placed on descriptive than evaluative feedback in formative assessment. Effectiveness of feedback depends on the quality of the feedback rather than existence or absence. Interactive formative assessments promote learning

outcomes; students suffer when there is lack of interaction in class, this reveals the weakness of the teacher.

Formative assessment plays a major role in informing the teacher whether the objective of the lesson has been achieved and if the students are improving on what is taught. Formative assessment is those activities that are used to improve student learning, shows the efficacy of teachers' classroom instructions, and the usefulness of the curriculum materials being used in the teaching and learning process.

Sharing learning intentions and criteria for success foster effective classroom discussions and learning tasks in formative assessment. Lesson delivery is seen to be a two way affair only if teachers share achievable success criteria with student in lesson presentation; using relevant activities from the beginning of the lesson to the end make lessons delivery unique.

Formative Assessment Classroom Techniques (FACTs) is an integral part of teaching and learning; for teaching and learning to be worthwhile there is the need to incorporate FACTs. However, most of the teachers observed were not using assessment techniques that involve students in teaching and learning process. With this there were having in mind that they will be delayed in completing their course outline given them when they tend to involve their students often in lesson delivery. Making good use of formative strategies in assessing students helps them to examine their strength and weakness and this result in improving teaching practice. Students understand lessons better when they are brought on board during teaching and learning process.

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