

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM: HOW SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL (SHS) TEACHERS IN GHANA ACTUALISE IT

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ABSTRACT: *Formative assessment of students' learning is said to have a positive impact on students' learning, and thus the call on teachers to employ this mode of assessment in their classroom practices. There is however little indication that teachers in Ghana have heeded to this call. This study therefore sought to examine the formative assessment practices of six Senior High School (SHS) Social Studies teachers; conveniently drawn from the Northern and Central regions of Ghana. The study adapted the 'Formative Assessment Classroom Observation and Lesson Planning Tool' (FACOLPT) for data collection. Data collected were thematically analysed. The study reveals that the assessment practices of these teachers are not in congruence with contemporary established practices. It is therefore being recommended that teachers are given enough pre-service and in-service training in formative assessment so as to increase their understanding of the concept and also help reorient their beliefs. It is believed that teachers, when adequately trained in this direction, will begin to see assessment more positively and use it not only to improve students' performance but also to improve their own instructional practices.*

KEYWORDS: Formative Assessment, Feedback, Learner Needs, Learning Goals, Criterion-Referenced, Norm-Referenced

INTRODUCTION

The use of assessment in this 21st century has changed to improve the process of instruction, in addition to purposes of accountability (Gordon, 2008). Gordon (2008) also maintained educational research recommends that students' fears about performance after assessment are allayed when teachers make pragmatic efforts to enhance learning and understanding among students through the improvement of their instructional techniques. This is possible when teachers create a classroom culture where learners are evoked and challenged to discover knowledge by themselves with little or no support (Vygotsky, 1978 as cited in Harlen, 2005). As a problem-solving subject, Social Studies stresses that teachers encourage learners to become risk-takers in the teaching and learning process. This gives students the opportunity to refrain from rote learning: do away with misconceptions they hold about other people and their culture and wrong answers treated as a part of learning. Stipek, Salmon, Givvin, Kzemi, Saxe and MacGyvers (1998) supported by Myres (2004) recommend that teachers in the process of assessment should emphasise process and motivate students to identify diverse solutions instead of identifying a single correct solution. The argument of Stipek, Salmon, Givvin, Kzemi, Saxe and MacGyvers (1998) and Myres (2004) clearly shows that formative assessment per se has a crucial role to play in students' learning and, accordingly, refines meaningfully the teaching methods (Brown, Rust & Gibbs, 1994; Gibbs, 1999), techniques, strategies and skills Social Studies just like teachers in other subject areas choose to actualise.

Nonetheless, the potential benefits of assessment in instruction are much wider and have impact on all stages of the teaching and learning process. This justifies that assessment is indeed an

integral part of teaching and learning (Segers, Dochy & Cascallar, 2003). To this effect, authors such as Shepard (2005) and Pellegrino and Goldman (2008) in confirmation of Gordon's (2008) view suggest that the teacher selects and uses several ways to make classroom assessment potent to impact positively on learning by the teacher. Shepard's (2005) and Pellegrino and Goldman's (2008) postulation, among others could be the reason why the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) (1994) standards confirmed by Shelwyn (2010) suggests that the teaching of Social Studies need to be made dynamic and interactive; and should be taught as a dynamic tool for thought. It should not be seen as a memorisation of facts and concepts.

The nature of change in the teacher's instructional practices with regard to the use of formative assessment matters most in a problem-solving subject like Social Studies. Since most of what the teacher does in the classroom is assessment related, it is imperative to better comprehend as educators and researchers classroom assessment practices that teachers use during instruction. Stiggins (2002) for instance, bemoans that teachers rarely use or have the opportunity to learn how to use formative assessment as a teaching and learning tool. This he suggests could be that teacher preparation programs have taken little note of competence in formative assessment. Many programs also fail to give assessment literacy needed to empower teachers to engage in formative assessment for all this while.

Relating this to the situation in Ghana, it can be said that as a nation that seeks to reap the utmost benefits of education for national development, our educational system faces the danger that student progress may be misconstrued, day-to-day across schools and classrooms in Ghana. This implies that all the vital critically day-to-day instructional decisions that are made by teachers, students and parents are or may be based on misinformation of learner success. The outcome of this is what is seen as the misdiagnosis of learner needs, students misunderstanding of their ability to grasp concepts, ideas, skills, attitudes and values that are expected to be learnt during instruction. Added to these is the miscommunication to parents (Stiggins, 2002; Harlen, 2005 and Heritage, 2011), the Ghana Education Service, the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders of education about student progress and virtually the absence of formative assessment in the classroom. Obviously, an extreme consequence of all these is the inability to meet our educational targets as a country that sees to attain full middle income status.

Notwithstanding all the enormous benefits associated with the use of formative assessment, its use in the Social Studies classroom still remains a bigger challenge to many teachers. It would appear that undertaking any research into teachers' formative assessment practices is fraught with difficulty and uncertainty. However, it is vital to researching into such an issue in a discipline such as Social Studies, especially at the SHS level, a transit point to tertiary or post-secondary education. The SHS level is a point in the Ghanaian educational system where change and reform in the student are fraught with constant challenges. An understanding of teacher formative assessment practices in the context of Social Studies can inform policy by exploring compatibility, anticipating challenges, and managing change effectively. The objectives of the study were therefore to identify the formative assessment practices SHS Social Studies teachers in Ghana use in their classrooms and examine these practices of the teachers in relation with the norm as established by Myers (2004) and Harlen (2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW ON TEACHERS' FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Contemporary models of teaching and learning include formative assessment as a crucial element of effective and relevant instruction (Shepard, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Rust, Snowden, Gordon, Gutierrez & Pacheco, 2005). More particularly, the process of formative assessment involves the exercise in which a teacher asks the questions; where are you/am I trying to go? Where are you/am I now? How can you/I get there? (Heritage, 2010). The teacher learns about students' conceptual understandings at particular points in time and becomes better equipped to help students progress further in their understandings with recourse to the set objectives that are articulated in this process. This exercise the teacher engages in also benefits students to determine their current state of learning. Formative assessment is commonly presented in teacher preparation programs as the process of goal identification, assessment, and feedback and is (formative assessment) however, evidently little or even non-existing to practicing teachers (Atkin, Black & Coffey, 2001) cited in Otero (2006).

Formative assessment process is insufficient for training effective teachers to practice formative assessment or preparing student-teachers to use formative assessment if it is decontextualised from the theory that drives it (Harlen, 2005). Formative assessment is thus underpinned by the constructivist view of learning that learners construct their own understanding of their experiences, and that these ideas may contradict the widely held views about events (Black & Lucas, 1993) cited in Harlen (2005). It is further argued by Harlen and Johnson (2014) that the way learners come to revise and reconstruct their own understanding to be in consonance with widely agreed ideas is by interaction with their environment and the ideas of others. This is elaborated by socio-cultural theories of learning. It is thus argued that while learning is owned by students, since no one else can learn for them, others can engage them through social and interactive processes that support the learning which is their property (Heritage, 2010; Reveles, Kelly & Duran, 2007; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996 and Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

From a socio-cultural point of view, formative assessment includes the role of interaction between and among teacher- student(s) and students-students as well as joint collective action in the learning process. Assessment is not unidirectional, but eclectic in nature that rather involves both teachers and students in reciprocal activity to take learning forward and meet the desired goal within a community of practice. This reciprocal activity is characterized by teachers and students engaged together in responding to evidence about learning, minute-by-minute, day-by-day (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam, 2005). Hearne (2004), Darling-Hammond (1996) opines that teachers find themselves adjusting and transforming their teaching as formative assessment reveals how students approach tasks, what helps them to work effectively most, and what strategies aid their learning. In view of this, it can be stated that the more teachers have an understanding of what students know and how they think and reflect, the more capacity teachers have to reform their pedagogy, and the more avenues they simultaneously create for the success of their learners.

In the view of Young and Kim (2010), which is similarly shared by Heritage (2010), using formative assessment in the classroom is not a beginner's skill but takes an array of foundational knowledge, pedagogical understanding, instructional skills and classroom management to effectively use formative assessment. Pinchok and Brandt (2009) confirm this and maintain that those skills border on mastery-level teaching, but in many ways, these are expectations of quality formative assessment practices. Apart from this, Leahy et al. (2005);

Harlen (2006) established that if we really want teachers to transform what they do in classrooms, then we really have to focus on their actions need to be directly. Contextualising this in the area of Social Studies, then SHS Social Studies teachers' formative assessment practices need to be supported formally in the teaching and learning process. To tap the full potentials of formative assessment therefore, SHS Social Studies teachers and policy makers or educational administrators alike, need to really see it as a process that happens at frequent intervals (minute-by-minute, day-by-day) (Leahy et al., 2005). In other words, it happens as a cycle (Harlen, 2005) as illustrated in the following diagram (figure 1):

Students' Activities

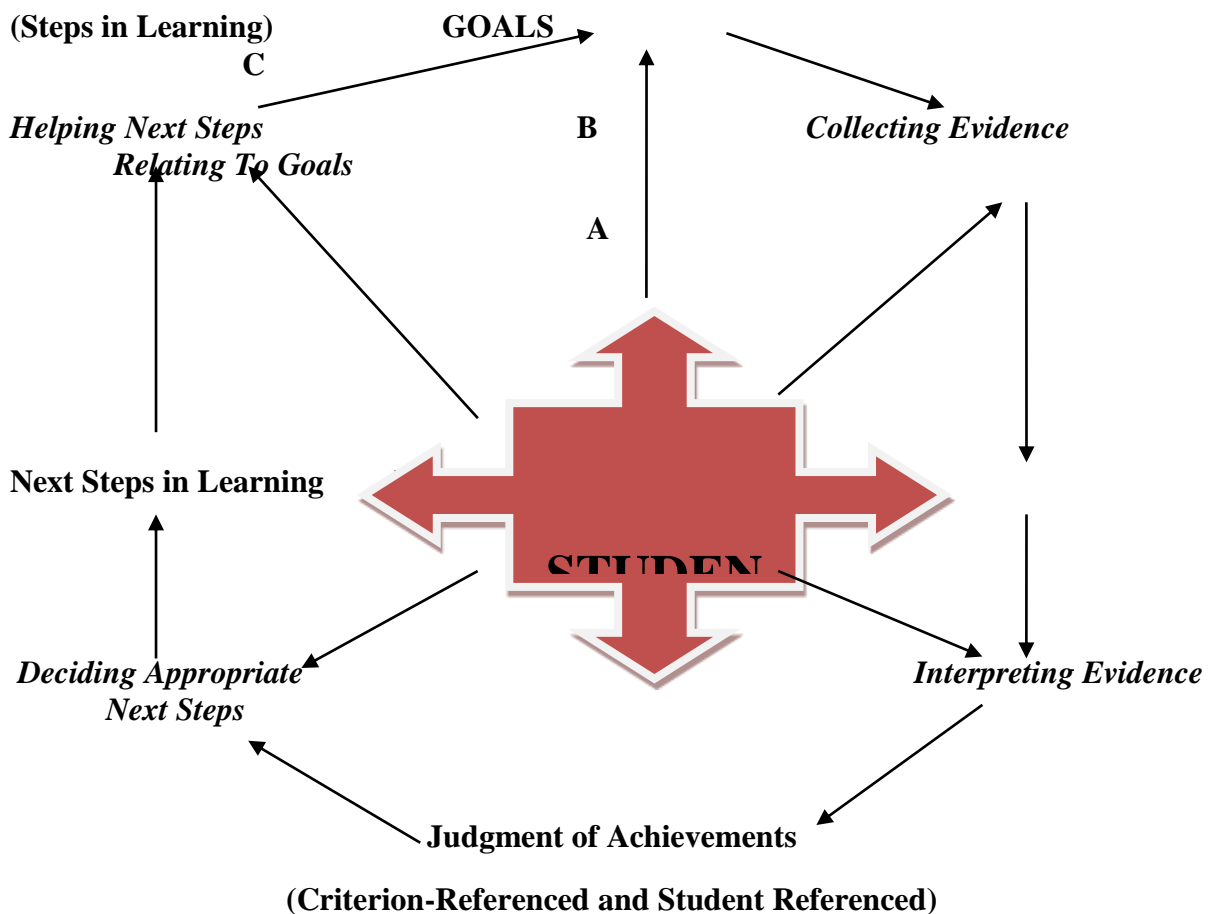


Figure 1: Formative assessment cycle of events (Adapted and modified after Harlen, 2005).

In Figure 1, the letters **A**, **B** and **C** are the activities that students are supposed to undertake under careful guidance of the teacher. These activities ought to be related appropriately to a clear learning goal. For instance, the stages in the cycle start with activity **A**, which is related to an overt learning goal. Illustrating this with the topic '*self identity*' as in the SHS Social Studies syllabus (SHS 1), it can be seen in the syllabus that, the first activity regarding this topic states that students *describe people they know very well and compare the differences among these people in terms of dressing, speaking, profession etc. and give reasons why people are different*' (CRDD, 2007). The appropriate goal of learning to this activity in the

syllabus is that student will be able to ‘explain “self” and the individual in relation to his or her capabilities’.

As the cycle depicts, sharing the learning goals and using them as a guide, the Social Studies teacher gets the opportunity to gather evidence about the learners’ current understanding, skills, attitudes and values with recourse to the goal. Evidence can be gathered through numerous ways, like questioning, discussion, asking students to write down what they know about the concepts in question and several other methods that are designed to have access to the students’ existing understanding (Ash & Levitt, 2003; Harlen, 2005). After this, the teacher then interpret the evidence collected in terms of the goals of the activity, but cognizance of the recent progress as well as the effort of the student. This gives the indication that the evidence is both student-referenced and criterion-referenced.

The next part of the cycle is the point of decision made from the judgment of where students have reached. Making such a decision is contingent on the teachers’ clear understanding of the goals of the activity and of the course of progress towards them. Harlen (2005) explains that both this and the interpretation of evidence are aided by the instructor having access to indicators of progression. As soon as the next steps have been identified the teacher decides how to guide students to take them. The result or outcome of the process is the next learning experience, activity step B in figure 1 that takes learners again towards the attainment of the other goals. This process then continues in a cycle, heading to activity C and so on. These processes in the diagram as practitioners should note often run together though explained as distinct actions. At each stage, there is an opportunity for variation in practice.

Myers (2004) believes that using assessment as the cycle depicts is very critical to improving the Social Studies’ teacher’s teaching strategies, his/her ways of monitoring students’ understanding of concepts in the subject and ways of building in his/her students the necessary tools (relevant knowledge, positive attitudes, values and skills. Hence, Social Studies teachers should have that knowledge in that they will be able to organise and promote active participation that will give students the freedom to explore ideas and seek solutions by themselves to perplexing issues. It is important for teachers to use different methods to monitor students’ progress in that regard. Methods such as journal writing, students’ peer and self-assessment, probing questions, observation, clinical interviews, and debates may help teachers to understand the mental processes that students engage in as they try to solve problems pose to them and effectively adjust the instruction where necessary (Myers, 2004). Heritage, (2007/2013b) however argues that, in a profession that already feels burdened by the quantity of assessment, the looming danger is that teachers will see the practice of formative assessment as yet another extra requirement that draws time away from teaching.

With any pedagogical approach, it is important as a teacher to align learning goals or objectives, teaching and learning activities and assessment tasks, particularly where the intention is to encourage deep, rather than surface, approaches to learning (Biggs, 2003; Barrett, Mac Labhainn & Fallon, 2005). The essential feature of a teaching system designed to emulate professional practice is that crucial assessments should be “performance-based, holistic, allowing plenty of scope for students to input their own decisions and solutions” (Biggs, 2003: 237). Biggs argues from this perspective that, it requires criterion, rather than norm, referenced assessment, adopting a much more holistic and divergent approach, involving significant peer and self-assessment, all features which enquiry and problem-based curricula increasingly reflect. Leahy et al., (2005); OECD (2005); James and Pedder (2006); Wiliam (2007/2008) and Looney (2011) all maintain that there must be a transformation or change in classroom culture

among teachers and their students. Following this, is the acquisition and implementation of novel attitudes and behaviours and practices of teaching and learning; well-defined by clear, detailed and unambiguous as well as critically reflective mode of participation by both teachers and students.

In sum, it can be reemphasised that Formative assessments are embedded within instructional activities and are linked directly to current teaching and learning activities in the classroom (Pinchok and Brandt, 2009) cited in FCPS (2012). The foregoing thus implies that Social Studies instruction is more powerful when assessment is understood and perceived by the instructor to be integrative in the teaching and learning process as well as it being employed by the instructor.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study that employed the exploratory research design, since it gives researchers the opportunity to become familiar with the basic facts, people and concerns in their study; formulate questions, make suggestions and refine issues for future research (Creswell, 2008). The choice of the approach and design of the study was also premised on the view that a qualitative exploratory design is used when little is written on an issue that is studied (Trochim, 2006). Six (6) SHS Social Studies teachers were conveniently selected based on their consent by the researchers from two different regions. The study adapted Heritage, Janssen, Tanney and Zarach's (2008) 'Formative Assessment Classroom Observation and Lesson Planning Tool' (FACOLPT) for systematic data collection on the six (6) SHS Social Studies teachers.. The instructional sessions (how many for each teacher?) of these teachers were observed and the results recorded with the FACOLPT and reflections made using the last part of the protocol. This tool was particularly adapted because it has the greatest potential to represent all aspects of formative assessment practices that can help not only teachers see the connections between all parts of the formative assessment cycle, and serve as a reflection of teachers' increased understanding of these connections, but also the researchers. The tool also provides a useful bridge between theory and practice by laying out a series of prompts that reflect the entire formative assessment cycle. The observation focused on the teaching and learning activities that went on during the teaching and learning process (e.g. grouping of students for instruction, assessment during the course of the lesson, the content of lesson and independent work, evidence from classroom discussion and interaction, etc.). Data collected were thematically analysed.

Findings and Discussion on SHS Social Studies Teachers' Formative Assessment Practices

Findings on how the teachers implement formative assessment was looked in two main categories and for that matter thematised under: (A) declaration of learning goals and sharing success criteria and (A) integrating assessment in instruction, thus, eliciting and using evidence to adapt teaching strategies.

A. Declaration of learning goals and sharing success criteria

To effectively assess learning in Social Studies, it is incumbent on Social Studies teachers to relate the rationale, general aims, and the instructional objectives of each lesson to appropriate and effective methods of formatively assessing student progress as well as their own teaching

strategies (NCSS, 2010). The profile dimension of the Social Studies (knowledge and understanding, application of knowledge as well as attitudes and values as the underlying behaviours) and the rationale for teaching the subject at the SHS level are evidence of how learners should be made to recognise their active role during instruction as bonafide owners of instruction and thus lie at the heart of constructivism (NCSS, 2010).

Results from the study relevant to this them however, indicate that formative assessment was seldom practised in the classroom apart from the declaration of learning outcomes. The sharing of learning goals was a common practice among the teachers observed except in the case of Ms. Awaafu (a 32 year old female teacher in one of the SHS in the Northern Region of Ghana) who did not identify or share learning outcomes with students. Even though success criteria sharing was not a common practice among the teachers, it can be said that the teachers' met the first "active" element in the cycle of formative assessment which is the declaration of learning intentions (Clarke, 2006). The findings, described, generally are a reflection of deficiency in the teachers' practices, since what were observed were inconsistent with effective ways of implementing formative assessment in classrooms; as suggested by Leahy, et al (2005); Harlen (2005); Wiliam (2007/2008) and Heritage (2011). This situation can be explained by Stiggins' (2002) postulation that teachers rarely have the opportunity to learn how to use formative assessment as a teaching and learning tool and for that matter hardly use it when teaching. Stiggins (2002); Harlen (2005) and Heritage (2011) explain further that, the outcome of teachers' failure to lead their students through the process of success criteria sharing during instruction is the misdiagnosis of the learner needs. This also results in students misunderstanding of their ability to grasp concepts, ideas, skills, attitudes and values that they are expected to learn during instruction. Added to these concerns is the miscommunication to parents.

B. Integrating assessment in instruction- eliciting and using evidence to adapt teaching strategies

Even though formative assessment is said to be inseparable from teaching and learning (Harlen, 2013), it was evident from this study that teachers hardly integrate assessment in their instructional practices. The teachers' inability to integrate formative assessment in their lessons thus implies the inadequate knowledge they have about formative assessment. It also presupposes that the teachers may not be able to use assessment to improve their teaching strategies, monitor students' understanding of Social Studies' concepts and inculcate in their students the relevant knowledge, attitudes, values and skills they need to solve problems (in line with the subject's goal). This is why Harlen (2013) opines that lack of clarity in meaning and consistency in usage of formative assessment is a serious barrier to good and effective teaching and learning.

This finding also deviates from the potency of assessment when effectively used as in the words of Myers (2004), which is the teacher's ability to observe instructional proceedings and elicit evidence about students' learning, interpreting and using such evidence to determine where to go next in the process of instruction. Hence Social Studies teachers should possess the knowledge in that they will be able to organise and promote active participation that will give students the freedom to explore ideas and seek solutions by themselves to perplexing issues instead of being fed with such solutions. It is based on situations like these that Harlen (2005) maintains that if the formative assessment process is decontextualised from the very theory that drives it, then it becomes insufficient for training effective teachers who reflect and change their teaching strategies to meet learner difficulties.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

It was evident from the study that formative assessment is seldom employed by the participants except for the sharing of learning outcomes. It can therefore be concluded that the assessment practices of many SHS Social Studies teachers do not align with contemporary theories and practices in the field. Therefore if SHS Social Studies teachers are to use formative assessment to positively affect their teaching, they must have a clear understanding of the theories and conditions that underpin the formative assessment cycle and the five non-negotiable steps involved in its practice as put up by Leahy et al., (2005) and Wiliam (2007/2008). Otherwise, formative assessment will be rarely used and teachers will continue to play passive role in performing assessment tasks.

We therefore are of the firm belief that the formative assessment beliefs and practices of SHS Social Studies teachers can only be enhanced if their knowledge, understanding and practices of same also become the focus of efforts to bring improvement to bear on their classroom practices. Until educational policy makers, the Ghana Education Service (GES), schools heads, teachers and parents alike come to realise and acknowledge the impact of well-implemented formative assessment in enhancing the quality of learning and teaching, it will continue to be neglected, seen as different from instruction and an extra work by teachers. In that case, formative assessment will not be valued and therefore be misconstrued and used or not used at all.

The findings have policy implications; not being oblivious of the sample limitation of the study, the researchers still believe in the significance of the research. The researchers therefore, think that improvement needs to be considered for SHS Social Studies teachers' formative assessment practices for the benefit of both teaching and learning and if possible extended to all teachers in other subject areas. Based on the study therefore, we recommend in respect of the research questions that Social Studies teachers ought to be given enough preparatory and in-service education to have adequate understanding of the concept of formative assessment which will help reorient their beliefs. Consequently, the teachers will be able to rethink and conduct assessment in line with curriculum goals/objectives and use it not only for improving students' performance but also to improve their own instructional practices. In other words, Social Studies teachers need to reflect on their teaching as adult learners during teaching and learning and employ all necessary formative assessment techniques in the process to gather evidence on pupils' learning. This will help inform not only their teaching practices but will also help optimise students' learning.

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