

Creating Engaging Environments in English Language Classrooms through Formative Assessment Strategies

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Abstract: The current study aims at investigating formative assessment strategies which are used by secondary school English language teachers at Khartoum State to engage their students in learning and keep classroom discipline. This study is significant because it might provide a sort of formative assessment strategies which help both teachers and students to attain the objective of the course. The participant were 100 secondary schools English Language teachers who were asked to show how often do they use formative assessment strategies to engage their students in learning and manage their classes. All the participants' responses were taken into account, here are some of the significant findings: Secondary school teachers do not use formative assessment strategies (FAS) to probe students learning style so as to engage them in English language learning. They do not keep discipline and engage students in learning through differentiated instruction (DI), so as to plan actively for and direct their attention to student differences in the classroom. Secondary school teachers do not invite the students to write short bits of mini-writing to check what they know so as to retrieve their prior knowledge about certain topic. The findings also show that teachers don't use formative assessment strategies (i.e. rubric) to allow students assess themselves or peers and track their or their peers progress in learning English language. Formative Assessment Strategies (FAS) such as 'portfolios' are not used to keep students' file containing samples of their work to help them determine their strengths and weaknesses and give a reflection for their best work. Secondary school teachers at Khartoum State do not use proximity strategy by walking around the classroom and observe students as they work to check for learning. Formative assessment strategies such as identifying/explaining image or graph, and justifying answers are not used to develop metacognitive strategies such critical thinking, questioning, discussion, collaboration...etc. The teachers do not use formative assessment strategies such short quizzes to assess students for factual information, concepts and discrete skill

Keywords: FAS: Formative Assessment Strategies, DI: Differentiated Instruction, CD: Classroom Discipline, CM: Classroom Management.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main task of the teachers in English language classes is to maintain classroom discipline and engage students with learning through increasing their attention and focus, However most of the teachers deal with the former rather than later or both. The teachers mostly over use of classroom management techniques to keep the classroom discipline that leads to disassociation of the students from learning. To solve this problem, teachers can create effective learning environment using formative assessment strategies which will allow them to keep classroom discipline (CD) and engage students with learning through interactive, challenged, and interesting formative assessment strategies which can develop students metacognitive strategies such critical thinking, questioning, discussion, reflection, collaboration...etc., and allow them to attain the course objectives. Thus, formative assessment can be considered as an appropriate tool to engage students with learning through monitoring and tracking the objectives and the goals with the help of interactive feedback from both teachers and peers and the feed forward from the teachers. Another reason to use formative assessment in classroom management (CM) is that students are more engaged. They are not sitting and listening to their teacher, and the teacher isn't trying to keep them quiet. Instead, the classroom is filled with activity, engagement, inquiry, and learning.

The Purpose of the Study:

The current study is intended to clarify the formative assessment strategies which could be used as a tool to maintain classroom discipline and engage students with learning to achieve the course objectives.

Questions of the Study:

The current study addressed the following questions:

1. What formative assessment strategies do teachers often use to engage students with learning and keep classroom discipline (CD)?
2. How often do teachers use formative assessment strategies to engage students with learning and keep classroom discipline (CD) in English language classes?

II. THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

Definitions of Formative Assessment:

Cowie and Bell (1999, p. 101) defined formative assessment as a kind of assessment used for the purpose of enhancing teaching and learning. In their earlier work, Cowie and Bell suggest that this kind of assessment is “the process used by teachers and students to recognize and respond to student learning in order to enhance that learning, during the learning” Carless (2011) has recently asserted that current conceptions of formative assessment do not solely refer to a formal assessment, but also refer to the everyday classroom interactions for and during the learning process which will be carried out in a systematic way to engage students in learning. He further concludes that “formative assessment is to do with eliciting and interpreting evidence, so as to enhance instruction and improve student learning” (p. 7).

Formative Assessment Cycle:

According to (Sadler, 1989; Black & Wiliam, 1998), there are four levels of formative assessment circle which are (1) identifying the gap, (2) feedback, (3), learning progressions, and (4) student involvement. Firstly, identifying the gap is the process of defining the difference (the “gap”) between what students know and what they need to know; it includes collaboration between teacher and learner to identify learning goals and outcomes and criteria for achieving these. Secondly, feedback (i.e., rich conversations between the teacher and student) gives the teacher information needed to identify the current status of a student’s learning as well as the specific next steps that students can take to improve. Teacher feedback to students must be both constructive and timely to enable students to advance their learning. It must include description of how their response differed from that reflected in the desired learning goal and how they can move forward. Student feedback and reflection can alert the teacher of the need to modify instructional approaches. Thirdly, learning progressions are used by the teacher to break a learning goal into smaller, more manageable sub-goals. The teacher identifies a student’s location on the learning continuum and works collaboratively with the student to set series of smaller goals. Finally, involving students in decisions about their own learning and in self-assessment helps students to engage in reflection and build their metacognitive skills. . There is a profound influence on student motivation and self-esteem when students are involved in self-assessments and understand how to improve.

Formative Assessment Strategies:

The main task of the teacher is to engage students in learning behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively (Fredricks, 2014). According, it is recommended to consider the following interrelated elements when designing and implementing formative assessment activities to increase student engagement behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively, thereby positively affecting student learning and achievement. The following are some recommended formative assessment strategies:

1. One Minute Paper:

It is a quick, short bits of mini-writing can check what students know. The purpose of this activity is to give each student a voice, facilitate discussion, focus attention on a particular point, provide quick access to student understanding and concise feedback. Teachers can use this activity. At the beginning of class to provide transition between classes; e.g., ask what the main ideas of the last class were, after discussion or explanation of a concept to check understanding, at any point in the class to draw attention to an idea, to check attendance, and to reinforce understanding.

2. Graphic Organizers:

These include items such as Venn diagrams, word/idea webs or concept maps, cause/effect charts, flowcharts, and sequence charts. Graphic organizers can be used to assess prior knowledge, record learning during a lecture or class reading, or organize knowledge after learning.

3. Think-Pair-Share:

Students share and compare possible answers to a question with a partner before addressing the larger class. Helpful with shy students. The purpose of this activity is to focus attention on a particular point, provide quick access to student understanding, allow shy students to gain confidence, encourage problem solving individually and in groups, provide forum for auditory and kinesthetic learning and increases the body of material for student response. Teachers can use this activity when they want the students to share what they know and to think through a problem by themselves, then share and develop the idea. They can also use it at any time during a class to break routine or at times where students need to talk through a problem.

4. Hand Signals:

Teachers can ask students to display a designated hand signal to indicate their understanding of a specific concept, principal, or process: - I understand _____ and can explain it (e.g., thumbs up). - I do not yet understand _____ (e.g., thumbs down). - I'm not completely sure about _____ (e.g., wave hand). The purpose of this procedures is to keep ongoing evaluation and to main class discipline.

5. Peer Reviews:

Peers provide feedback on each other's performance. The purpose of this activity is to provide multiple reviews of performance, provides feedback from those who are sharing the learning process, and to demonstrate to students they are not alone in the learning. Students can review their peers' work providing feedback on written assignments prior to submission to instructor and feedback on oral presentations or role play exercises. Teachers provides motivation for students to maintain focus while peers are performing

6. Self-Assessment of Ways of Learning:

Teachers can prepare a questionnaire for students that probes what kind of learning style they use, so the course can match visual/aural/tactile learning styles. The purpose of this strategy is to maintain differentiated learning instruction and to main classroom discipline whereby, all the students are engaged in learning.

7. Role-Playing:

Teachers assign roles for a concept, students research their parts at home, and they act it out in class. Observers critique and ask questions.

8. Role Reversal:

Teacher role-plays as the student, asking questions about the content. The students are collectively the teacher, and must answer the questions. Works well as test review/prep.

The Strategies are Adapted from: (Thomas A. Angelo/K. Patricia , 1993).

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants:

In the present study, a sample of 100 English language teachers at Khartoum State were selected. They were asked to respond for a questionnaire to show the frequency of using formative assessment strategies to engage students in learning and maintain classroom discipline. All the results of the questionnaire are taking into account. The teachers have different qualifications (B.A, High Diploma and Masters).

Instrument:

To answer the research questions, the researcher used a questionnaire as instrument to collect data about using formative assessment strategies as a tool to create engaging learning environments in English language classrooms and keep discipline in class, the questionnaire is based on 4-Frequency scale from 'always' to 'never', It contains 20 items that cope in the research hypothesis. **(Appendix A).**

Procedures:

The following procedures were followed in order to attain the purpose of the study. First, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the researcher familiarize the respondents with different aspects of formative assessment

strategies. Then the participants were given the questionnaire to respond. The answered questionnaire papers were collected and subjected for analysis to answer the research questions.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis centered on the questionnaire which answered the research questions, Q1 What formative assessment strategies do teachers often use to engage students with learning and keep classroom discipline ? and Q2 How often do teachers use formative assessment strategies to engage students with learning and keep classroom discipline in English language classes ? (See appendix A). The data were analyzed by the use of SPSS program. The results were presented on the following tables to show the frequencies, percentage and the mean of each item in the questionnaire.

Table 4.1 Formative Assessment Strategies that keep discipline in English language Classes and Create Engaging Environments

Items	Types of help	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Keeping lessons engaging and relevant by setting clear, specific learning goals	67	67	33	33	0	00	0	0
4	Preparing a questionnaire for students that probes what kind of learning style they use	0	0	11	11	7	7	82	82
5	Inviting the students to write short bits of mini-writing to check what they know	0	0	10	10	10	10	80	80
6	Inviting the students to share answers to a question (Building classroom community)	0	0	22	22	34	34	44	44
8	Asking students to discuss their thinking about a question or topic in pairs or small groups.	0	0	27	27	31	31	42	42
11	Checking class understanding by asking Students to show their thumbs (hand signal)	0	0	5	5	18	18	77	77
13	giving insights to differentiated instruction	0	0	15	15	2	2	83	83
14	Walking around the classroom and observe students as they work to check for learning.	0	0	12	12	9	9	79	79

The teachers were asked to show how frequency do they use formative assessment strategies to keep discipline in English language classroom and engage their students in learning. The aim was to investigate how teachers manage their and engage their students in learning.

The analysis of table 4.1 shows how secondary school teachers use formative assessment strategies to manage English language classroom and engage their students in learning. Students often cause problems in the classroom because they are not engaged, therefore formative assessment strategies can play a role in classroom management. When the teachers were asked to show how frequently do they set clear, specific learning goals to keep lessons engaging and relevant(item 1), (100%) of them ‘always or sometimes’ follow the same strategy. Teacher need to be clear about their objectives and how they plan to achieve them. When students know what they will be expected to do and why, they are more likely to engage in the lesson. Teachers need to explain the day’s plan and how the activities will help them achieve the course goals or their own personal goals. On the other hand, regarding teachers giving insights to differentiated instructions (DI) (item 13) and identification of students’ different learning styles (item 4), the results show that (80% - 83%) of them ‘never’ use these strategies. Only a few number of them (18) ho ‘sometimes or rarely’ use these strategies.. Using individual differences strategies can allow each learner to make progress in his or her own way, building needed skills, lesson should offers a variety of approaches to learning i.e. text, graphics, audiosetc. to suit students different learning styles. Another large advantage of DI is that it can help the teacher keep the whole class engaged and motivated to learn. Concerning formative assessment strategies that build classroom community such as inviting the students to share answers to a question (item 6), and asking students to discuss their thinking about a question or topic in pairs or small groups (item 8). The results indicate that (42% - 44%)of the respondents ‘never’ use strategies that build classroom community. While a respected number of them (58%) either ‘sometimes or rarely’ use the same strategies. In many cases, group work can help teachers manage their classroom successfully regardless of class size or content. Group work creates an atmosphere that encourages successful behaviors. Working in groups engages students with others who may have different sets of language and social skills. Using smaller groups to meet classroom goals allows students to develop skills that are valuable in life and work, such as: talking about ideas, justifying opinions, collaborating with others, building consensus, handling conflict and disagreeing politely. In (item 5), (80%) of the teachers ‘never’ invite the students to

write short bits of mini-writing to check what they know. Only (20%) of the teachers either ‘sometimes or rarely’ use this strategy. Teachers can use this activity. At the beginning of class to provide transition between classes to give each student a voice, facilitate discussion, provide quick access to student understanding and concise feedback. to draw attention to an idea, to check attendance, and to reinforce understanding. Classroom routines maintain classroom discipline and also encourage students to take responsibility for how their classroom functions. The result depicts that (77%) of the teachers do not use classroom routine strategies such as ‘hand signal’ (item 11) to know students level of understanding. Finally, regarding a proximity strategy to keep the whole class engaged in learning and to deal with disruptive behavior. The results show that (79%) of the respondents ‘never’ walk around the classroom and observe students as they work to check for learning (item 14).

Generally, the overall result, indicates that the teachers ‘never’ use formative assessment strategies to keep classroom disciplines and engage students in learning except of a few items. From the result obtained in the above table, it seems that secondary school teachers ‘never’ use formative assessment strategies such as hand signal, differentiated instructions, proximity, one-minute paper (item 5) for classroom management and engaging their students in English language learning. However, it seems that teachers state clear learning goals to keep lessons engaging and relevant and they partially use some formative assessment strategies, such as building classroom community and pair and group work. Therefore, it is possible to say that the teachers were inclined towards the teachers’ centered approach they do not tend to activate the role of the students in their classes, in the way that they perfectly keep class discipline and engage the students in learning.

Table 4.2: Formative Assessment Strategies that Create Engaging Environments in English language Classes

Items	Types of help	Always		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
2	Identifying the student’s current knowledge /skills to bridge the gap	0	0	10	10	25	25	65	65
3	Inviting the students to organize keywords graphically and spot connections between ideas.	0	0	0	0	8	8	92	92
7	Assigning peers to provide feedback on each other’s performance.	0	0	6	6	12	12	82	82
9	Giving learners time to reflect at the end of the lessons.	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	100
10	Asking learners to keep a file containing samples of their work.	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	100
12	providing immediate and descriptive feedback	11	11	48	48	23	23	18	18
15	Providing students with checklist or rubric to assess themselves or peers.	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	100
16	Having students complete a few problems or questions and check answers.	32	32	30	30	30	30	8	8
17	Assigning One on one conversation with students to check their level of understanding.	0	0	13	13	20	20	67	67
18	asking students to identify/explain image or graph, and justify their answers.	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	100
19	Giving quizzes to assess students for factual information, concepts and discrete skill.	0	0	0	0	6	6	94	94
20	Providing students a written feedback to correct errors or misconceptions.	0	0	7	7	15	15	78	78

The teachers were asked to show how frequency do they use formative assessment strategies to engage their students in learning. The aim was to investigate types of help that the students received in the classroom to be engaged in learning.

The above table 4.2 displays the results about teachers practice of formative assessment strategies to engage their students in learning. As can be seen from the table, teachers do not use formative assessment strategies frequently to engage their students in learning except of a few items. The results reveal that 100% of the teachers ‘never’ use the formative assessment strategies in items,(9, 10, 15, 18) to engage students in learning. They ‘never’ give learners time to reflect at the end of the lessons (item 9) . All of the teachers said that they never ask learners to keep a file containing samples of their work (item 10). And they reported that they ‘never’ provide students with checklist or rubric to assess themselves or peers(item 15). Moreover, It is found that teachers ‘never’ ask students to identify/explain image or graph. The majority

of the teachers i.e. (82% - 94 %) of them also revealed that they 'never' invite the students to organize keywords graphically and spot connections between ideas (item 3), or assign peers to provide feedback on each other's performance (item 7), or give quizzes to assess students for factual information, concepts and discrete skill (item 19). Regarding items (2 and 17), (65 - 67%) of the teachers responded that they 'never' identify the student's current knowledge/skills to bridge the gap (item 2), or assign One on One conversation with students to check their level of understanding (item 17). Whereas, about (35%) of them reported that they 'sometimes or rarely' engage students in learning through the same strategies.

On the other hand, about (60%) of them said that they 'always or sometimes' follow the strategies of providing immediate and descriptive feedback (item 12) and having students complete a few problems or questions at the end of instruction and check answers (item 16). Only a few number of them (8 -18) 'never' use these strategies.

Generally, the overall result, indicates that the teachers 'never' use formative assessment strategies to engage students in learning except of a few items. From the result obtained in the above table, it seems that secondary school teachers do not use strategies such as graphic organizers, rubrics, scaffolds, graphs and quizzes to engage students in learning. In addition to this, it seems that the teachers focused more on questioning and giving immediate feedback. They seem more likely inclined towards the teachers centered rather than learner centered approach.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper aims at investigating formative assessment strategies which are used by secondary school English language teachers at Khartoum State to engage their students in learning and keep classroom discipline. The results show that the formative assessment strategies are not used by the teachers to activate the role of their students and engage them in learning. After analyzing and interpreting the compiled data the researcher found that: Secondary school teachers do not use formative assessment strategies (FAS) to probe students learning style so as to engage them in English language learning. They do not keep discipline and engage students in learning through differentiated instruction (DI), so as to plan actively for and direct their attention to student differences in the classroom. Secondary school teachers do not invite the students to write short bits of mini-writing to check what they know so as to retrieve their prior knowledge about certain topic. The findings also show that teachers don't use formative assessment strategies (i.e. rubric) to allow students assess themselves or peers and track their or their peers progress in learning English language. Formative Assessment Strategies (FAS) such as 'portfolios' are not used to keep students' file containing samples of their work to help them determine their strengths and weaknesses and give a reflection for their best work. Secondary school teachers at Khartoum State do not use proximity strategy by walking around the classroom and observe students as they work to check for learning. Formative assessment strategies such as identifying/explaining image or graph, and justifying answers are not used to develop metacognitive strategies such critical thinking, questioning, discussion, collaboration...etc. The teachers do not use formative assessment strategies such short quizzes to assess students for factual information, concepts and discrete skill

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