ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LEARNING THAT UNDERPIN TEACHERS' FEEDBACK PRACTICES

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine models of cognition and of learning and its possible alignment with formative assessment. This, using feedback as an entry point to have access to teachers' actions and interpretations in the intertwining that takes place between teaching, learning, and assessment. Data is informed by doctoral research conducted in three primary schools in England. The empirical work was undertaken by classroom observation and teachers' follow up interviews. The main findings foregrounded different participants' views. For some teachers the strategies used to provide feedback such as modelling skewed towards instruction, which resonates with the idea of making judgments about what is missing within tasks, with the teacher exerting the prime role within interaction by taking responsibility for the pupils' misunderstandings. Another relevant notion was assessment as learning (Torrance, 2007), which consisted of feedback actions focused on specifying what were the necessary features to be completed to meet the objective which resembled a hierarchical sense of how these elements or criteria should be taught and learnt (James, 2006; Marshall & Drummond, 2006). Results also depicted teachers' assumptions regarded to talk and shared learning, which trace some similarities with cognitive and constructivist perspectives of learning. The corresponding actions were enacted by encouraging their pupils to use conceptual and strategic resources in collaboration when discussing on their writing tasks. These practices also involved pupils' suggestions on the criteria already proposed by the teacher. Finally, the study also revealed a teacher's perspective portrayed as Questioning means learning, which reflected how teacher provided their students with evaluative experience when the task was ongoing. In this view, a link could be made with a sociocultural approach as students took ownership of both, the learning and the assessment process.

Keywords: Feedback, learning conceptualizations, formative assessment.

1. Introduction

Formative feedback should be carefully examined, as many contributions have brought to the fore that the main tenet stemming from this perspective seems to be overturned within lessons. That is, many constrains emerge to support pupils to progressively become independent in their learning process (Klenowski, 2009; Mansell et al., 2009; Sadler, 2007; Swaffield, 2011). Research also has proved how different approaches to orchestrate key strategies such as questioning, sharing criteria, providing feedback and self-assessment, inside the classroom, might lead to facilitate or to undermine formative assessment. In other words, they might fail to keep within its spirit (Marshall & Drummond, 2006). According to Black et al., (1998, 2003) any classroom initiative within these four specific areas should not be considered as isolated techniques. These elements must be investigated by taking into account the social construction of classroom talk (Torrance & Pryor, 2001) and the teachers' beliefs about how students learn (Sadler, 2007, 2010; Black et al., 2003; Black & Wiliam, 2012; Elwood, 2006; Hargreaves, 2005; James, 2006; Klenowski, 2009; Marshall & Drummond, 2006; Mansell et al., 2009; Swaffield, 2011). In what follow, different learning outlooks are sketched out from theory as well as its implications for formative assessment.

James (2006) asserts that a behaviourist view of learning triggers feedback practices that emphasize interpreting pupils' performance as correct or incorrect, the criteria are settled out in a hierarchical sense, which entails that a set of skills are measured in order to identify what is still not achieved. Thereby, the teachers exert the role of reinforcing those missing elements by returning to more basic student abilities trying to push them to the next level. This can be understood as giving pupils extra

help to deal with targets or standards (Hargreaves, 2005). This notion reflects that the implementation of more complex view of learning and assessment are reduced.

Cognitive-constructivist theories of learning highlight how previous knowledge have influence over pupils 'capacity to learn new material, so they can understand concepts, the relationship amongst them and to develop a capacity of processing strategies (James, 2006; James & Lewis, 2012). Metacognition and self-assessment become essential features within this perspective and the work of the teachers is meaningful in helping students to retrieve knowledge structures to be applied in novel situations (James, 2006; James & Lewis, 2012). This author asserts that formative assessment, intertwined into teaching, turns out pivotal making possible to elicit pupils 'mental models. These ideas are developed to a greater extent within the sociocultural theories of learning. Vygotsky's work (1978) adds relevant insights for research and practice. Broadly, He advocates that language has a crucial influence on students' capacity to think, learning is conceived as a social and collaborative activity, his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZDP) demands transformations in educational settings. In interpreting his contribution James & Lewis (2012), argues that when learning is acquired within a group of peers, collective knowledge of the group is then grasped by the individual, but in this ongoing an iterative process, the individual is also creating new ideas which are externalized through dialogue and so they can be used again for the group. For James these notions challenge the theorization regarding the structures of grades and attainment levels reached step by step. Instead of that, the nonlinearity would be more appropriate as in the ZPD, a student might move forward or backward and in different directions by considering their individuality and their previous experiences that compose their unique profile. In relation to formative assessment, Vygotsky's contribution requires pupils taking ownership of their learning and of their own assessment. In this way, assessment becomes a process of inquiry, where all who are involved actively reflect on the learning process (Hargreaves, 2005). This also regards with saddler's (2010) notion of scaffolding as a process that gradually should come to an end, to the extent that pupils develop tacit knowledge to interpret feedback and can reach an in-depth understanding of the criteria. Thus, formative assessment should be enacted in a continuous and exploratory process of negotiation. This grounded on self-and peer assessment strategies which would open opportunities for discussion and hence for shared knowledge.

This paper analyses part of the findings stemming from a doctoral research conducted in England (Yáñez-Monje,2017). It reports on the views about learning that hold a group of participant teachers and its potential link with formative assessment. Feedback is used as a lens to explore interrelated classroom strategies such as sharing criteria which serve as a framework, on the one hand, to substantiate comments provided to pupils about the quality of the task being done, and on the other, to allow students to make judgments on their own pieces of work, and so, plan next steps for improvement. This drawing on empirical evidence within the fine grain (Torrance & Pryor, 1998) of classroom interaction followed by the teachers' own reflections on their work (Black et al., 2003; Marshall & Drummond, 2006).

2. Methodology

The research was grounded on a qualitative paradigm (Berg & Lune, 2012, Silverman, 2011) by exploring in depth teacher-students exchanges and then having access to teachers' accounts on their actions. This trying to elucidate what were the notions that drove their pedagogical decisions when providing feedback and from here to explore how they see themselves in this interrelationship between assessment and learning.

2.1. Objectives

The study was driven by the following overarching objectives:
- To examine the extent that assumptions about learning underlie teachers 'feedback practices.
- To explore the specifics notions that teachers recognize as salient within a formative assessment approach and how they explain their meanings.

2.2. Participants

The research project encompassed four participant teachers of Year 5 classes and one of a Year 4 class from three different primary schools in London. The chosen schools were considered real contexts (Berg & Lune, 2012) the first two belonged to the same local authority in north London, the third pertained to a local authority in an area of west London. Thus, sampling selection was purposive or strategic trying to explore complexities and diversity of practices and interpretations, but not implied to reach representativeness (Cohen et al., 2011).

2.3. Data collection and analysis

Data collection was addressed through classroom observation and teachers' interviews. Observation aimed to capture the nuances that might not be verbalized by the teachers through other procedure of data gathering. Thirty-four lessons were observed by focusing on feedback events (Bloome et al., 2005, 2008). A micro ethnographic perspective was used to identify, select and scrutinize classroom episodes (Bloome et al., 2005, 2008). The audio-recorded incidents were listened and played back as necessary as well as looking at the data previously transcribed. Several steps were carried out for analysis. First, lessons were subdivided into phases. Second, the main elements within each phase were organized by determining its foremost purpose, and the organizational context that structure teacher-students exchanges, this based on Alexander's (2008) work, who refers to whole-class teaching, collective group work, and collaborative group work. Third, a closer examination of each phase was undertaken trying to recognize what part of a lesson seemed to have more potential for feedback to be enacted. Then, specific instances across lessons were chosen for further analysis using the theoretical insights from Sadler's (1989, 2007, 2010) contribution on students' exploration of quality and on the feedback content and focus. Likewise, the analysis focused on how teachers engineered questioning and how they appeared to interpret their students' responses (Black & Wiliam, 2012; Torrance & Pryor, 1998, 2001; Black et al., 2003; Alexander, 2008).

Interviews were applied by using a semi structured format in line with a research interview as advocated by Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) with a focus on nuances descriptions that portray qualitative diversity. Meaning coding as conceptualized by Kvale & Brinkmann (2009) was adopted in examining interview data. The coding process was iterative as data were constantly compared (Charmaz, 2006) by contrasting the teachers' descriptions of strategies they implemented and their interpretations of their own actions. This process was carried out within the transcripts, at different points of the interview situation and between the four participant teachers. It is important to note that this research provided a detailed account into verbal feedback and into written forms of feedback. The findings regarding both dimensions have been shared in wider audiences (Yáñez-Monje, 2022; Yáñez-Monje, et al., 2022). However, this paper, specifically, concerns to the alignment between feedback practices and the learning conceptualizations captured from the teachers' reflections. It is intended to unpack the contradictions and conflicting evidence so to portray in which ways what teacher think about learning might hinder or promote the possibilities for formative assessment to be enacted. This involved a consideration of extant literature on formative feedback but also on learning theories in order to provide an interpretation of teachers approaches.

3. Results & discussion

Data analysis revealed insightful perspectives that allow to understand how teachers think their pupils should learn and how this permeated their decisions, on the ways feedback was implemented and hence how formative assessment is interpreted. In what follows, the main codes that emerged when contrasting practices and teacher's views are reported.

Modelling skewed towards instruction: teacher 1 wanted her students to have a sense of what quality looks like. She showed them some examples for discussion by inviting them to devise some templates together in order to trigger understanding. Notwithstanding, this purpose of getting the pupils to reflect on their work seemed difficult to enact fully as the interactions remained under her control in terms of rephrasing the students' answers into more appropriate forms; stating the main points for discussion; and summarizing the essential aspects of the intended quality in each activity. In her interview the teacher described two challenges or dilemmas encountered in translating this strategy into practice, namely, how much needs to be modelled, for children with different starting points in learning, and modelling cannot ascertain that pupils will identify next steps.

The teacher role is defined by identifying what is missing: this notion was also represented by *teacher 1* as her feedback practices within lessons focused on those elements that pupils were struggling to understand, in this way judgments were made on what needed to be repaired and the teacher assuming the main responsibility for what was hindering the students from learning.

Talk fosters pupils' learning: *teacher 2* developed the view that scaffolding of a writing task should involve talk. This implied activities to generate vocabulary, the oral rehearsal of sentences, discussion within group work, and collecting pupils' ideas which on some occasions comprised alterative propositions about how the task should be afforded. These findings support the view that criteria should not be completely fixed (Sadler, 1989, 2007, 2010; Torrance & Pryor, 1998, 2001; Black et al., 2003) and that their negotiation should be continuous throughout the learning task. By not exerting role of the final arbiter of quality (James, 2006), these teacher's practices and viewpoints have some resemblances with cognitive and constructivist theories of learning.

Shared learning: The notion of pupils generating ideas from each other, in preparing and devising pieces of writing, was explored more in depth by *Teacher 2* when describing his practice from a broader perspective. As the observation data illustrated that pupils' own initiative of posing questions or making suggestions was not unusual, the participant was asked to elaborate further on this matter. He described two intertwined ideas that shed light on his beliefs about his students' involvement in lessons. First, he highlighted the relevance of creating a learning environment that encouraged the pupils to engage in the learning task and to not be afraid to share their ideas. Second, whilst some children faced more difficulties with the learning task, he wanted all his students to have a go at completing it. This is why he saw it as important for all of them to engage in team work so as to be able to hear and learn from each other's contribution, which evoked Vygotsky's notion of zone of proximal development (1978).

Assessment as learning: a notion based on Torrance's (2007) ideas was used to portray how teacher 3, expected her pupils accomplished a number of features that were defined in a task, which in turn, were delineated within a success criteria list. For instance, when modelling the writing of a descriptive text, the feedback focused first on personification, then on effective verbs, alliterations and so on. This meant that each aspect of quality was discussed separately. Thus, in the view of James (2006) this can be interpreted as decomposing the whole complex aim of writing into different parts. Consequently, it could be argued that there were some points of connections with behaviourist theories of learning.

Questioning means learning: *teacher 4*, adopted the view of getting the pupils to think during the interaction by letting them to take part and devise a model for writing by using their peers' suggestions. The teacher pieces of advice were modified by some students' spontaneous ideas which opened the possibilities for the negotiation of quality. Feedback was exerted with the purpose of collecting evidence about how pupils were articulating the task, thereby, criteria had a provisional character, and they were not intended as an end (Marshall & Drummond, 2006). Within this teacher's account pupils were provided with evaluative experience thus they had an active role within learning and assessment.

4. Conclusions

A view of learning oriented towards getting pupils to accomplish a pre-determined sequence of goals or objectives involved that all the procedures undertaken within formative interaction emphasized the clarification of the criteria and instructions. Thus, it was not the practices that were important rather what was worth to be analysed was the intentions behind them.

The relevance of talk and collaborative learning enhance the opportunities for formative action. When pupils were encouraged to participate, they were able to make suggestions for improvement that were slightly different from the teacher original proposals.

Classroom interactions that allowed discussion and collaborative work, not only amongst peers but also between the teacher and the students by determining what counts as quality in a piece of work, offer more clearly a room for formative feedback to take place in accordance with its original tenets. All in all, this research documented how the teacher's underlying principles of learning might open up or close down the possibilities for formative assessment to be effective.

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