

Teachers' Perception on the Feasibility of Formative Assessment in Bhutan

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Abstract

In Bhutan, there was a lot of misunderstanding about formative assessment. As a result, even when it came to practice in the form of Continuous Formative Assessment, many teachers found it difficult. Several years later, the Ministry of Education has again rolled out the Continuous Formative Assessment in primary schools. The present study was conducted to explore the perceptions of teachers on the feasibility of formative assessment in Bhutan, and the research questions focused on teachers' perceptions on the feasibility of formative assessment. Seven primary school teachers with at least a bachelor degree in education and relevant training in formative assessment were selected using snowballing sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed manually through a thematic analysis. Results showed that formative assessment is not feasible in Bhutanese schools because of teachers' heavy workloads and large class size. This study may provide some insights to the Ministry of Education, Royal Education Council and other relevant agencies to take a deeper look at the assessment policies and gradually, in the long run, uplift the quality of education in Bhutan.

Keywords: Formative Assessment; Feasibility; Semi-structured; Thematic, Teacher to student ratio.

Introduction

Background

Formative assessment is first defined by Black and William (1998) as all those activities undertaken by teachers and/or by students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged (Kenyon, 2019). It is one of the most powerful ways of improving students' achievement (William, 2013). Formative assessment is process oriented. It is an ongoing process taking place at every stage of learning that monitors the students' progress during the

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learning process. It is a vital part of blending teaching and assessment as it involves teacher and student providing feedback to organise the learning and teaching process to increase students' achievement.

For several years in Bhutan, Summative Assessment, referred to as the final assessment of learning done at the end of the year to advance students to the next grade, has been the norm. Bhutan Council for School Examination and Assessment (BCSEA) conducts and certifies the following national level examinations: Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Education (BCSE) for Class X and, from 2006, Bhutan Higher Secondary Education Certificate (BHSEC) for class XII (Luyten & Dolker, 2010). Bhutan Certificate of Secondary Education comprises a central examination and the school-based continuous assessment (CA) components in each subject. The mark awarded for performance in the central examination in each subject is scaled to 80%. Schools submit Continuous Assessment marks for each student over a total score of 20 which is aggregated with the marks obtained in BCSE examination. This aggregate mark is reflected as a single score for each subject in the results of the candidates. However, for Bhutan Higher Secondary Education Certificate, only marks from the central examination are considered (Luyten & Dolker, 2010).

Education is free and compulsory in Bhutan from pre-primary to class 10. Admission to all government owned higher education is granted to those students who qualify by meeting the cut-off point set by the Ministry of Education. The cut-off point is based on the availability of seats. BCSE examination also plays a filtering role as the student's overall performance and performance in different subjects determine the stream of study that a student is qualified to pursue in higher secondary education. Higher secondary education in government schools is free. Students who do not qualify for admission to the government higher secondary schools choose to pursue their higher education in private schools. However, since the government has done away with the class X cut-off point starting in 2019, all the students who passed class X get enrolled into Class XI. However, all the students from class IV to XII need to obtain a minimum of 40 percent in both Continuous Assessment (CA) and written examination to pass.

The Royal Education Council in consultation with the Ministry of Education has developed and implemented the Continuous Formative Assessment (CFA) in the country at the key stage 1 (Class PP –III) starting in 2020, replacing the examination system to facilitate the students' learning and develop competencies in the learning subject areas through rigorous continuous and formative assessment and feedback system. As a result, student achievement is no longer equated with grades. Instead, students are graded as Beginning, Approaching, Meeting, and Exceeding based on the

quantity and quality of their performances. A personal file/portfolio containing all records of student learning, including work samples, assessment records for all subjects, the intervention provided, remedial classes, and personal traits for each student for each subject is maintained in order to keep track of the students' performances. On request, parents are given access to their child's personal file which serves as the foundation for evaluating students' learning and progress (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Problem Statement

Formative assessment is an ongoing, process oriented continuous assessment used by teachers to study and monitor students' progress during the learning process (Utha, 2015). It has existed in Bhutan. However, when it came to practice in the form of Continuous Formative Assessment, it remained a challenge for many teachers as they were left to their own discretion and to make use of their own creativity and ingenuity in carrying it out despite having no training (Dorji, 2005). Further, the Continuous Formative Assessment 1998-2003 review taken by the then Bhutan Board of Examination Division (BBED)/Bhutan Council for School Examination and Assessment (BCSEA) revealed that the concept of Continuous Formative Assessment was not clear to implementers and implementers, therefore, had a negative perception about Continuous Formative Assessment (Utha, 2015).

Exam culture is prevalent in Bhutanese schools today and it is leading to competitions among students who prioritise gaining the highest grades over learning, placing a higher value on grades than gaining skills. The teaching and assessment, therefore, are centred on what is given in the textbooks. Hence, the emphasis on rote learning prevails, undermining the quality of education. This is because pupils are more concerned with memorising content than with comprehending concepts. Furthermore, in order to maintain the school's good reputation, schools encourage certain types of learning because students' grades affect the schools' and teachers' public standing.

To this end, the Ministry of Education has formally rolled out the "Continuous Formative Assessment" phasing out written examinations in classes PP to Three, as the current emphasis on quantity and wide learning rather than quality and depth is harming the quality of education (Reporter, 2020). However, because it has been ineffectual in the past and the teachers lack experience in conducting such assessments, the intervention's viability and influence on educational quality are obscure. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of teachers on the feasibility of formative assessment in Bhutan.

Literature Review

Conceptual Understanding

Assessment is vital to the education process. Summative assessment is the most visible form of assessment in many schools around the world. Summative assessments are used to measure what students have learnt at the end of a unit, to promote students, ensuring that they have met required standards on the way to earning certification for school completion or to enter certain occupations outcomes (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2008).

To many, Formative assessment is the most effective way to improve students' learning thereby closing the achievement gap (William, 2013). According to Kenyon (2019), it is first defined by Black and William (1998) as all activities undertaken by teachers and/or students providing information that assists in the modification of teaching and learning activities. Formative Assessment is the continuous process, which is a constant companion of the instructions process and which has, as its main aim, the development of learning by orienting and guiding it and by making it visible and explicit (Voinea, 2018). It is one of the most effective high leverage pedagogies to help students make the transition to undergraduate thinking (Dibbs et al., 2017). This is because formative assessment encompasses many of the best practices of teaching. For instance, the formative assessment allows instructors to teach at the developmental level of students by collecting data on students' current level of proficiency and clearly defining the goal structures for achieving success and avoiding failures in the questions asked in the assessment (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2008).

Today, formative assessment is viewed as a process in which teachers use a variety of tools and strategies to identify and understand achievement gaps among students, as well as plan strategies to close those gaps (Pinchok & Christopher, 2009). It is a method of gathering evidence about a student's learning progress by providing them with information through feedback. It also directs instruction so that it meets students' learning needs and empowers them to be self-regulators of their own learning (Voinea, 2018).

Implementation of Formative Assessment in the Classroom

It can be difficult to implement formative assessment strategies across schools and districts. Effective formative assessment should focus on changing the relationship between teachers and students and managing their magnitude. As a result, a professional development programme is needed to train, empower, and support teachers (Pinchok & Christopher, 2009). Students

should be active participants in formative assessment. Teachers, on the other hand, must improve their knowledge, pedagogical content, assessment knowledge, and prior learning knowledge, as mentioned by Heritage (2007). Teachers must also practice their questioning pace and skills on a regular basis in order to implement formative assessment effectively in the classroom.

The implementation and the success of formative assessments are determined by teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about it (Karim, 2015). However, Yan and Cheng (2015) found out that there is no link between teachers' perceptions about Formative Assessment and their implementation. Instead, they found out that instrumental attitude, subjective norm, and self-efficacy have a positive influence on the success of formative assessment implementation in the classroom. As a result, it is found that teachers do not conduct the formative assessment in the classroom as it increases the workloads for teachers. Recent research found out that a quarter of teachers in the world work more than 59 hours per week and these long hours have been blamed for high levels of work-related stress for teachers (Pacaol, 2021).

Teachers face a number of challenges when it comes to regulating students' work, especially when there are a large number of students (Gonzales, 2012). Many teachers have stated that formative assessment is rigid and infringes on their teaching hours. Gonzales (2012) also discovered that formative assessment does not sufficiently motivate students and causes them to be indolent when it comes to completing tasks. Similarly, Ozan & Kincal (2018) found that formative assessment has no positive effect on students. This, however, is due to the difficulty of implementation rather than the effectiveness.

Stiggins (2002) mentioned that the main issue in implementing formative assessment is a lack of assessment literacy among educators and teachers. As a result, it is critical that all teachers are assessment literate (Popham, 2011). Formative assessment can only be implemented if teachers enhance their knowledge. Many educators are also found to lack the necessary skills to make formative assessments of students. However, Heritage (2007) found that while teachers can use data and make inferences, they fall short when it comes to planning "the next instructional steps." Karim (2015) claims that teachers need to become more comfortable with formative assessment and incorporate it into their classroom practice.

Formative Assessment in Bhutan

Formative assessment in Bhutan exists but with lots of misconceptions. It is associated with the modern education system. Utha (2015) reflects that the emphasis on summative assessment began with the introduction of

continuous assessment to improve student's learning which has led to the conceptual misunderstanding of formative assessment. As a result, the misconception has prevented the practice of formative assessment. This can also be attributed to the teacher's poor working conditions and larger numbers of students in the class. Teachers, on the other hand, had a genuine interest in undertaking and learning about formative assessment (Utha, 2015).

Methodology

Research Design

The study was exploratory in nature and used qualitative methods. A semi-structured interview was deployed to collect the data and thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data.

Sampling Method and Size

The data was collected from 7 school teachers teaching in 7 different schools under Thimphu Thromde using a non-probability, linear snowball sampling technique. The participants were selected based on the referral until the data became redundant. The first respondent, who was one of the participants of Training of Trainers on Formative Assessment organised by the Ministry of Education for 201 teachers at Gelephu, was identified by the principal in one of the schools. The first respondent was then asked to nominate other respondents.

Data Collection and Procedure

The data were collected through a face-to-face semi-structured interview which was among several points recommended by Yin (2016) for qualitative research. In order to validate and make the data collection reliable, the questions were developed, adopted and modified from the past studies. The technique of peer checking has also been used by consulting supervisors and other experienced lecturers several times to add credibility. The questions included four parts; questions on values and implementation, feasibility and scope, conceptual understanding and preparedness to adopt.

The interview times with some of the participants were scheduled face to face while others were scheduled via phone calls. Most of the interviews were conducted in a convenient place of the participants' choice. The interviews were conducted in English, audio taped (with permission) and later transcribed. The one-time interview time was 45 minutes on average.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data. Data analysis followed an inductive process of simplifying the collected data into themes. The analysing process began while the data was still being collected. The audio recordings of the participants were transcribed. The transcribed data were then read several times. The data with the same information were then written into one particular coloured sticky pad. The categorization and identification of patterns using different collared sticky pads were followed for all the subsequent transcribed data after which the codes have been assigned. The similar patterns were then integrated to form three themes – Teachers’ demonstration of the conceptual understanding of the Formative Assessment, Teachers’ demonstration of the usage of Formative Assessment in daily classes and Teachers’ perception of the feasibility of Formative Assessment in the country.

Findings and Discussions

Results

Table 1

Description and demography of Participants

Participants	Grade Level Taught	Subject Taught	Teaching Experience (in years)
Jampel Dorji	Primary	Maths	16
Karma Drukpa	Primary	Dzongkha	12
Dechen Yangden	Lower	English	8
Kencho Wangmo	Primary	General	10
Sonam Wangmo Tamang	Lower	English	4
Dechen Choki	Primary	Dzongkha	10
Sangay Duba	Primary	General	15

Following are the themes and the categories generated from the respondents:

Theme 1. Teachers on the conceptual understanding of the Formative Assessment

a. Defining Formative Assessment

b. Differentiating Formative Assessment from Summative Assessment

Theme 2. Teachers’ demonstration on the usage of Formative Assessment in their daily classroom settings

Theme 3. Teachers' perception on the feasibility of the Formative Assessment in the country

a. Workload of a teacher

b. Class Size

Theme 1: Teachers' demonstration of the conceptual understanding of Formative Assessment

In this section, teachers' conceptual understanding of Formative Assessment has been assessed in terms of the definition and the differences of formative assessment from summative assessment.

a. Definition of formative assessment

While many educators are focused on Summative Assessment, the participants demonstrated that teachers can build in many opportunities to assess how students are learning over the course of a year and then use the information to make beneficial changes in instruction. Formative Assessment is defined by all respondents as the diagnostic use of continuous assessment/process in the form of feedback to assess students during the learning process rather than after the learning process.

Formative assessment as per me is a continuous assessment with format formed by the school system here in the school where they are supposed to improve their learning and are being assessed regularly, continuously.

Another respondent also had a similar view,

It is a continuous process where you can mould a child, make a child a good learner, and help a child become an effective learner. So, I feel that it is a moulding of a child throughout the year and it is usually where we hardly offer any grading, we provide them feedback and based on their improvement, we offer continuous assessment marks on the consistency level.

b. Differentiating formative assessment from summative assessment

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process to understand the progress of the students. It helps teachers to understand and give feedback to students on their learning while also enabling the teachers to plan curriculum, materials and activities. Respondents demonstrated a clear understanding of the difference between the two assessments – Summative Assessment and Formative Assessment. Summative Assessment is defined by the respondents as the assessment done at the end of the learning process and it determines what students have learned at the end of the term/unit. In the words of the respondents:

We use summative only at the end of the years/terms/semesters whereas we use formative assessment in our daily teaching. Formative assessment is the continuous assessment and uses it as soon as we start teaching until the end of the year whereas summative assessment is exam based and used only at the end of the year/term/semester.

Another respondent mentioned about the differences between the grading system between the Summative and Formative Assessment,

In formative assessment, we hardly offer any grading. We provide them feedback. But in summative assessment, students sit for two hours on paper and based on that they are graded. That is where the basic difference lies.

Yes, there is grading but the grading is not the same as in Summative assessment. In summative assessment, there is only first, but in formative assessment, there are many people in the first position because students are graded on different areas and they are graded in terms of beginning, approaching, meeting or exceeding and there can be many students in each category.

Even in Formative Assessment, according to respondents, there is a grading system. However, Formative Assessment does not equate students' achievement with grades. Instead, based on the quantity and quality of their performances, students are graded as Beginning, Approaching, Meeting, and Exceeding.

Theme 2: Teachers' demonstration of the usage of formative assessment in the classroom.

This section focused on how teachers use formative assessment to assess their students in the class.

While Summative Assessment continues to play a significant role in all of their evaluations, respondents revealed that they use Formative Assessment such as providing oral and written feedback and also keeping records of each students' progress in their daily classroom sessions. Respondents revealed that they enter the information about the students' daily activities in their personal file and write the summary of students' learning and competencies in cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains so that they can reflect it in their students' progress report at the end of the year. Respondents also revealed that if their students fail, they have to provide remedial classes until their students achieve the required competencies.

We are developing rubrics, checklists; at times we are providing written feedback, at times, we are providing oral feedback. We ask questions and rate them and keep the records. Sometimes, we also tell them orally what we liked and did not like about their answers and work. Also, they should know how to speak, they should know how to respect, if they use such derogatory language, their marks

will be deducted automatically, subtracted. Therefore, they can be developed holistically.

Another respondent also had a similar view,

We use formative to keep the record of each individual child's progress on a monthly basis so that it will help in the summative assessment later on. We combine both assessments to prepare a progress report at the end of the year.

Theme 3: Teachers' perceptions on the feasibility of Formative Assessment

In this subsequent theme of the study, it focuses on how teachers feel about the feasibility of formative assessment in the country.

While Formative Assessment will have a positive impact on students' learning if properly implemented, teachers' workload owing to the big class size and lack of time is often mentioned by respondents as the barrier in practising Formative Assessment in the classroom. Besides, a vast syllabus to cover within stipulated time hinders the practice of formative assessment. All these constraints tend to make the teaching and learning process teacher-centred and implementing Formative Assessment is a challenge. The overall challenge is briefly captured within the following categories:

a. Teachers' workload

Although Formative Assessment is associated with bringing improvement in students' learning, implementation in the daily classrooms is compromised most of the time due to teachers' heavy workload. In addition to classroom teaching, teachers also have to spend so much time planning the lessons or evaluating the students' work. This is clear from the respondent's answer:

Focusing on formative assessment would be a secondary option because we have to complete the syllabus. Secondly, the effectiveness of assessment is lost. Promptness of thirty notebooks on the teachers table and how far and how long you take to correct those notebooks and into five sections, probably 150 notebooks, even if you give a time period of two days you complete one section.

b. Large class size

In addition to the heavy workload, respondents mentioned time constraints due to a large number of students in the class as another barrier to implementing formative assessment.

In our education system, we have a huge class, a large number of students. I get three periods a day. So, I need to take seven sections, make it twenty-one periods, minimum, in one section there are thirty students, it becomes two hundred ten in total, and then to cater to their needs is very difficult.

A similar view is also cited by another respondent:

But then the ratio of pre-primary classes as my son was passing through, there was a ratio of 1:40 in the government on the minimum scale. So, 1:40, one teacher, forty feedbacks which has to be very prompt and immediate, that might be challenging for teachers.

Discussions

The study seeks to understand teachers' perceptions on the feasibility of formative assessment. The findings indicate that the proper implementation of formative assessment in Bhutan is not feasible as the education system in Bhutan is associated with disproportionate students to teacher ratio (average number of pupils per teacher at a specific level of education, in a given school-year), large class size and heavy workloads for teachers. The results also reveal that while teachers practice formative assessment in the classroom, summative assessment is still predominant in Bhutanese schools. Results reveal that formative assessment does not motivate students to do tasks that are not graded as they are accustomed to graded tasks.

Utha (2015) stated that formative assessment in Bhutan exists with a lot of misconceptions amongst Bhutanese teachers as the education system in Bhutan is oriented towards summative assessment. Utha (2015) reflected that examination culture is predominant in schools. However, the present results demonstrate that primary teachers in Thimphu have a clear conceptual understanding of formative assessment and how it differs from summative assessment. Results reveal that Primary teachers have been practising Formative Assessment in their daily classroom teachings. While Formative Assessment is not a new concept to the teachers, the results reveal that Training of Trainers on Formative Assessment and the implementation of Formative Assessment in classes Pre-Primary to III starting in 2020 has provided them more information about formative assessment.

However, the findings corroborate Utha's (2015) findings that formative assessment is not feasible in the country as schools in Bhutan have bigger class sizes than the optimal class size which according to Kleschnick (2018) is eighteen. This has not only led to poor classroom management, ineffective student control, poor planning and assessment and higher strains on teachers but also increases the workload of a teacher.

The non-feasibility of formative assessment in Bhutan is also attributed to higher Students to Teacher's Ratio. Student to Teacher Ratio measures the number of students per teacher and determines teacher's workload. The Annual Education Statistic (2020), shows that schools in urban areas have a slightly higher Student to Teacher Ratio than schools in rural areas, with a national average student to teacher ratio in Public Schools at 18 and in Private Schools at 15. However, the Student to Teacher Ratio ranges from 2

to 63 indicating that some schools have a ratio of 2 while others have a ratio of 63. In this context, a higher Student to Teacher Ratio means that the teachers have higher workloads, hence lower availability of teachers' service to students and vice versa. In general, Kaka (2017) reflects that Primary School teachers spend 43 percent of their time in contact teaching, 47 percent in planning the lessons, 33 percent in marking students' work, 28 percent of their time in meetings and conferences. In addition, most of the teachers also spend their time involved in non-academic activities. Since many schools in Thimphu have a higher student-to-teacher ratio, the findings show that the implementation of formative assessment in Bhutan is not feasible.

As a result, the findings contradict those of Pathak et al. (2012) and Karim (2015), who found that the teacher's knowledge and skills in implementing formative assessment have an impact on formative assessment implementation. Results reveal that formative assessment implementation in Bhutan is attributed to external factors such as student-to-teacher ratios, class sizes, and teachers' workloads, which make catering to each student's needs a challenge because it adds work to already heavy workloads. Furthermore, because the student-to-teacher ratio in Bhutan's urban schools is disproportionately high – as high as 1:63 – assisting and moulding each and every student, as well as providing support and feedback to each student, is not only difficult but also impossible. As a result, students become less motivated to study and complete tasks because they are not graded.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusion

Formative assessment refers to a wide variety of methods that teachers use to conduct in-process evaluation of student comprehension, learning needs and academic progress during a lesson. Teacher to student ratio, teachers' conceptual understanding and preparedness are imperative to implement formative assessment and determine its feasibility. Therefore, for formative assessment to be successfully implemented in Bhutanese schools, all stakeholders must collaborate, consolidate, and coordinate, as well as work to improve the factors that affect the implementation of formative assessment.

Recommendation

The current research has provided some insight about how formative assessment is being used in the classroom and whether it is feasible. These understandings guide me to make the following recommendations;

Since teachers perceive their workloads to be too heavy as a result of varying Student to Teacher Ratios in different schools and large classroom sizes, it is

critical that all relevant stakeholders come together and work to ensure that Student to Teacher Ratios and Class sizes are uniform in every school so that Formative Assessment can be implemented properly in all schools. Since Student to Teacher Ratio determines the workload of the teacher and the availability of teachers' services to students, making it uniform in all schools will have an impact on the implementation of Formative Assessment in the class.

Furthermore, since the rigid and vast school syllabus was repeatedly mentioned by respondents, it would be beneficial to conduct a study on the subject to determine whether any changes to the syllabus are required so that the implementation of Formative Assessment in schools is not hampered.

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