To What Extent Does the Use of Formative Assessment Foster Third Graders'

Meaningful Learning in an EFL Class?

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Abstract

This action research project was implemented to evaluate the effectiveness of using formative assessment to foster meaningful learning in third graders at Institución Educativa Francisco Miranda. The data were gathered through the teacher's journal, a focus group with some students, an interview to the cooperating teacher, and two assessment activities. An analysis of the collected data revealed that the quality of feedback is a key factor for formative assessment processes as well as authenticity and intentionality for learning to become meaningful. Some students used their feedback to improve their English performance; however, this performance is directly affected by the students' motivations and other factors such as the number of students per group, time constraints, and practicality.

Key words: Formative Assessment, rubric, meaningful learning, feedback

Degree requirement

This action research is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellín, Colombia.

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Preface

This paper describes my practice as an English teacher and the development of the action research at Institución Educativa Francisco Miranda with a group of third-grade students during the last semester of 2017 and the first semester of 2018. This research was intended to know whether the implementation of formative assessment could encourage meaningful learning in third graders, and was implemented in two stages.

During the first stage, I observed some classes, the students' interactions in the classroom, the activities and methodology that the cooperating teacher performed in her English classes. In one of these classes, I was struck by the way teacher assessed the students; she used drawings, crosswords, puzzles, and other similar activities. They were mainly summative assessment activities since they were carried out at the end of the period with the objective of collecting grades.

Afterwards, I noticed that these activities did not tell the teacher if students were learning or not. That is why I decided to implement formative assessment; first, because I believe in the importance of assessing students all the time, not only at the end of the semester, and also because it is important that teachers have clear criteria at the moment to assess the students, and that students know the criteria to study for the assessment activities. During the second stage I started teaching and implementing the proposed actions. All these elements allowed me to obtain information about the effectiveness of the formative assessment and the tools used as the rubric and the authentic and intentional activities.

Description of the Context

The Institución Educativa (I.E.) Francisco Miranda is a public institution that offers preschool, elementary school and secondary school. The preschool and elementary school's name is Julio Arboleda; this action research project is carried out with elementary school. The school has two floors with spacious and light living rooms, a library, a restaurant, and a patio where children can play during the break. The institution's philosophy considers the learner as an integral being with attitudes, aptitudes, abilities and skills. Therefore, it offers education based on a pedagogical model called "Humanistic social integrator"; the social component represents the school as a change agent, and the humanistic component is related to the education of the human being. Additionally, the students' manual of I.E. Francisco Miranda states that the humanistic-social pedagogical model favors several educational aspects such as learning, research, and the active role of students in constructing their own knowledge.

The institution's' goals are to prepare students to face the challenges of a globalized world. In relation to English language teaching and learning, they take into account the proposals of the Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN) aimed at having linguistically competent citizens, trained to effectively communicate in English. They believe that bilingual citizens may contribute to the construction of a more competitive and modern city and may understand other cultures better. To meet this purpose, the English syllabus proposes a two-hour English class per week. However, a normal class lasts about one hour and a half because of some class issues such as taking attendance, discipline, and interruptions coming from outside the classroom; sometimes they even miss classes because the teachers have meetings or for external factors.

The students of this institution come from neighborhoods with social problems such as poverty, insecurity, drug addiction, among others. However, they are very active and enthusiastic;

they enjoy learning and discovering new things and most of them show willingness to learn. The class where this action research was conducted is a third grade with thirty-seven students; they are boys and girls between seven and ten years old. The room has a television and it is spacious, but not enough to do activities that require moving chairs in the classroom. This is something we should consider because they are kids who like to move, play, socialize and do different activities all the time.

Regarding the teachers, they are professionals in elementary school who are in charge of teaching all the subjects, even English. It is important to highlight that they are not trained enough to teach English so the English classes are usually taught in Spanish and focused on vocabulary isolated from real contexts. Some classroom activities they do are crosswords, word searches and puzzles. In relation to assessment, it is usually implemented as a punishment to control discipline issues. Students get a grade but most of the time they do not know why they got it; they seem just to care about failing or passing, but not about learning.

Statement of Problem

In the specific case of the Julio Arboleda primary school, I could observe that factors such as the space, teachers' training in English, and assessment procedures directly affect students' learning outcomes. Specifically, I observed that the assessment activities seem not to be well planned; they do not have either purpose, clear criteria or feedback. This may be the reason why students do not know what the teachers expect from them, and as they do not receive feedback, they do not know what their errors are and how they can improve them.

Through observations done in this third grade classroom, I can assure that any teacher needs training in different aspects such as classroom management, adequate interactions with

kids, and instructional methods, but the problem I want to focus on is *assessment*. During my observations I was able to observe how students are assessed. First of all, the assessment activities are not considered as such from the beginning; sometimes, the test is written on the board and students have to write on their notebooks, draw, color or fill the gaps, and all these are graded, but with no clear criteria. These activities do not provide enough information about students' knowledge. For the institution, summative assessment is very important, because teachers need numbers to show to their superiors and students' parents. Formative assessment would be a way to foster students' meaningful learning as they would receive feedback about their learning processes. If knowledge is what should be assessed, it would not be appropriate to grade the aesthetic of a drawing or the students' behavior. Some teachers are not trained in assessment practices; thus it might be difficult for them to obtain students' information from these assessment activities.

I wanted to take into account the students' opinion in this respect, so I asked them three questions. The first question was if the grade was important for them; the second question was related to the way they like to be assessed, with numbers or in a personalized way; and the last question was related to the consistency between the grade they obtained and what they actually learned. At first, the students looked puzzled because they did not understand the questions, but after explaining them and giving them some examples of how they could answer, they did it more easily. Some of them expanded their answers and they gave an explanation of why the grade was important for them; others were briefer and just answered with a simple yes or no. I noticed that most of the students did not feel comfortable when talking about assessment; this might happen because it is a topic in which they have not had participation. For students it is very difficult to relate the word *assessment* with something that may be good or beneficial for them, so I inferred

that they have only been in contact with summative assessment. When the students refer to assessment, it is important because it represents numbers, which at the end of the period or the course are shown to their parents; if these numbers are good, their parents will be happy; otherwise, the kids will have problems with them.

I also interviewed my CT about her assessment practices. First, I asked her about the aspects she took into account when assessing the students; then I inquired about the kind of assessment activities she applied and finally, about what she did with the results obtained. Her answers were brief; in fact, she did not answer the first question. In relation to the second one, she said that she used activities of matching, puzzles, crosswords and drawings to paint related to the covered topic. As for the third question, she said that the information that is collected from the evaluations is used to give feedback.

Theoretical Background

The assessment practices currently carried out in our schools, might not be helping students to improve their learning processes. I firmly believe in the importance of applying formative assessment in the educational context of our country because it could be the perfect opportunity to foster meaningful learning. The teachers' most common assessment practices are collecting grades to be reported to coordination and parents, which is contrary to what formative assessment pursues. In the following lines, I will refer to the main concepts that are fundamental for my action research. First, I will refer to Formative Assessment for which I will use rubrics; consequently, I will develop the concept of Rubrics to finalize with the concept of Meaningful Learning.

Formative Assessment

In the educational field, it was commonly believed that assessment activities were only intended to collect grades for administrative purposes, but there was no relationship between the learning process and assessment; this kind of assessment is called summative assessment. *Formative assessment* on the other hand, can give a bunch of information about students' errors and with the help of effective feedback can guide them to do better; the teacher can use that information to modify and adjust the instructions given to the students. (Wiliam, 2011, p. 10)

Ausubel, 1968 (as cited in Wiliam, 2011, p. 1) states that an important factor that could affect learning is the student's previous knowledge; teachers should know about this to teach based on that. The author states that what often happens inside the classrooms is that teachers plan a class without taking into account the student's previous knowledge or lack of it. I think that students sometimes get distracted because they do not understand teachers' instructions and might feel overwhelmed; other students understand too fast and they start doing other things because they get bored.

Wiliam (2008, p. 3) asserts that the teacher should assess students in order to understand where they are and start planning the classes from that information. In this respect, the author states that formative assessment has three important characteristics: awareness of where the students are, where they are going, and how they can get there. Teachers are usually not aware of this, and as the author claims they only set an objective that should be achieved by every student, but they do not take into account that each student might be in a different level. I consider that setting an objective is important, but before that, teachers should develop activities that can provide accurate information about students' learning level; then set the goal, and with the evidence collected from the activities, finally help students achieve that goal.

In this respect, there are different types of formative assessment that are important to understand, those are described as feedback in Nyquist's work (as cited in William, 2011, p. 7). The first one is *Weaker feedback only,* in which the students only know the grades of their assessment activity; the second type is called *Feedback only,* here students are given a grade along with some information about the correct answers; another type is *Weak formative assessment,* in which students get their correct answers with some comments about their performance; one more type is *Moderate formative assessment* where students besides receiving the grades and information about the correct answers, they are given some suggestions about how to improve their errors; the last type mentioned is *Strong formative assessment* which I consider the most important because this kind of feedback will give more information to the students than the one they were receiving before; they will get suggestions of activities to improve their future performance.

Additionally, Ramaprasad (1983, p. 3) emphasizes that we cannot refer to *feedback* when the students do not do anything with the information about the gap between the level they are and the level they should be, so they do not improve their future performance. I consider that when teachers give feedback to the students, they usually give some basic information about their errors but they do not expand on specific aspects that the students should improve; much less, they follow the students' progress to assure that the feedback positively affects their future performance. In the same vein, Stiggins (2007, p. 4) states that students should understand what is success and then use the assessment feedback to improve their future performance. The authors highlight the importance of using assessment activities to get valuable information, but the most important is to understand that information and use it to improve.

In relation to assessment practices carried out by teachers in our context, Muñoz, Palacio and Escobar (2012) held a research in a language center of a private university in Colombia. The participants were sixty-two female and male teachers who worked in this institution. One of the objectives was to inquire about the teachers' beliefs on assessment and their classroom assessment practices (p. 144). Their beliefs about assessment were examined using Brown's (2002, 2003) concepts: *accountability of schools, improvement of teaching and learning, certification of students' learning, irrelevance to the work of teachers and students' learning.* All these concepts were ascertained through surveys, interviews and written reports of experiences (p. 147). The authors found that teachers recognize the importance of assessment, not only for administrative purposes but also for formative purposes. But even though they were aware of the benefits that formative assessment would bring for both students and teachers, they continued using summative assessment, which shows a contradiction between what they believe and what they do (p. 156). This finding is consistent with what I observed at the practice center, my CT is aware of the importance of formative assessment, but this is not reflected in her practices.

Rubrics

As mentioned above, teachers usually do not carry out formative assessment practices; they mainly focus on summative assessment, instead. This may happen because the system requires it and as a result, they do not know what to expect from the students, there is no clarity about what is expected, and the assessment process loses the power it has. In this respect, Mansoor and Grant 2002, (as cited in Picon 2010, p. 1) state that the rubric as an assessment tool can give us valuable information about the students' learning process and where they can go. I believe in the rubric as a useful tool to support our intention to set a clear goal for the students to achieve, and to promote formative assessment.

Picón (2010) refers to the importance of creating our own rubrics taking into account students' suggestions. When the students choose the criteria to be assessed, it might be easier for them to achieve the goals; they internalize the criteria and become more self-critical about their work. Some of the benefits observed on the students are that they get empowered with the assessment process, they understand the grades, develop argumentation skills and understand what the teacher expects from them (p. 2).

In this respect, the author emphasizes that the rubric as an assessment tool is much more than setting goals about what the teacher expects from the students; the rubric has an important characteristic: teachers can give feedback to the students. With the use of the rubrics, teachers will have a clear guide to know what exactly students are expected to do in the assessment activity. Having the guide with the criteria, it might be easier for the teachers to analyze and reflect more deeply about the students' performance. This information can be useful because the teachers could talk with each student about their performance and give them suggestions on what they should improve, and how they can do it. Another advantage that the rubric has is the possibility to diminish subjectivity since it establishes the criteria to assess (Moskal, 2000, p. 4).

After understanding the importance of using the rubric; we need to wisely choose the type of rubric that would better fit with our aim. There are two types of rubrics: analytic and holistic; the one that I am going to implement is the *analytic rubric*. This type of rubric is more specific and is intended to assess each component of the assessment activity; first, giving an individual grade to each item to get a final result (Moskal, 2000; Nitko, 2001, p. 1). Mertler (2001, p. 3) emphasizes that if we want to focus on formative assessment, we must choose the analytic rubric as this type of rubric gives us the possibility to provide feedback, which is very important to help students to improve their errors.

Meaningful Learning

It is clear that both, teaching and assessment activities, go hand in hand; consequently, to foster meaningful learning, it is necessary that these two processes take place. If we as teachers want to promote meaningful learning, we should be aware of its principles. Romero (2008, p. 2) states that meaningful learning should be *active;* this happens when we are the main actors in the learning process, when we can interact and observe firsthand the results of our actions; *constructive and reflective* because there should always be a process of reflection on the activities done to make learning meaningful; *authentic* because the activities carried out by the students must connect them with their reality so their learning process becomes easier; *intentional* because the students can connect more easily with what the teacher wants to teach them; here the teacher should show them that what they learn will be useful in the future, and *cooperative* because we are social people, who live and learn in society; teamwork is very important because students have the possibility to learn from each other's mistakes.

For the purpose of my project I will focus on two of these principles: authenticity and intentionality. For formative assessment and the use of rubrics to have a clear purpose, it is necessary to create activities that will be part of the assessment process. Here is where we have to consider that those activities should be, first of all, authentic. *Authenticity* is really important at the moment of teaching in a meaningful way as the activities can be connected with the students' real experiences. That way, it will be easier for them to assimilate the new knowledge (Romero, 2008, p. 2). In relation to this, Torres (2007, p. 61) states that "constantly we are having new learning experiences from reality that helps us increase our knowledge in order to uncover and transform it". Authentic learning is fundamental for the students if we consider that with

authentic tasks they will feel motivated, their performance will improve as they can solve these tasks as if they were situations given in the real world.

And the second important principle for my action research is *intentionality*. When the students understand the purpose of the activities they have to do, they think and learn better; this will help them also to be able to control their own progress in order to have a meaningful learning (Romero, 2008, p. 2). In order to foster meaningful learning, students and teachers should have an active interaction, through authentic and intended assessment activities.

Research Question

To what extent does the use of formative assessment foster third graders' meaningful learning in an EFL class?

General Objective

To evaluate the effectiveness of formative assessment that fosters meaningful learning of third graders in an EFL.

Specific Objectives.

To enhance transparency in assessment practices through the use of rubrics.

To evaluate the effectiveness of feedback with formative purposes.

To analyze students' performance after feedback.

Action Plan

As I mentioned above, one of my concerns is the assessment processes that the teachers implement in this specific context. I strongly believe that it is important for students to learn

meaningfully and the assessment practices should reflect what the student are learning; when students are assessed with crosswords, drawings, or matching pairs it is difficult to get this information. For this reason, one of the strategies that I wanted to implement was formative assessment practices that allowed me to develop both oral and written production. One of the topics presented in the curriculum for third grade is *family* and my activities were focused on this topic. It seemed to me that with this theme I could develop assessment practices that could last a month. During this month, the students would create a family tree with which they would perform several activities. Students would collect information about their family, photos of their grandparents, siblings, uncles, parents, and pets. With these photos, the students would create a family tree with a photo of their relative and the name in English under the picture. They would also write some physical characteristics that identify their relatives next to the name; for example, *Uncle Juan is tall and skinny*. After creating this tree, students would make an oral presentation of their family to the other students.

As I intended to work on formative assessment, I planned to design two rubrics to assess the activities, one for the oral production and one for the written production. Besides having the criteria specified and the percentages for each criteria, the rubrics would have a large blank box to write some feedback to the students. This space would be at the head of the explanation of each criteria, so that they knew exactly how they performed in each criteria and which aspects they needed to improve. The students would receive their grades in form of flowers with petals. The flowers would have 5 petals which would be marked according to their performance during the assessment activity. In each petal the student would find the criteria of what they had to do. If the student did well, they would get a check in the petal corresponding to this criterion and the petal would be painted; when the students did not do everything well but it was not completely

wrong, the student would have a zigzag in that petal, and the student would know that they still had to improve, and if there was nothing in the petal, it meant that the student's answer was completely wrong.

However, before starting to implement these actions, I had to share this information with my cooperating teacher, with the students and parents. It was important that they were aware of the strategies that I intended to apply. At the beginning of the school year I designed a time table in which I would include the subjects of the English syllabus corresponding to third grade, so I could follow it until the end of the semester.

Development of actions

One of the first steps to implement my action research was the socialization with parents, students and my cooperating teacher. I intended to let them know about my action research, the purpose, the objectives and action strategies. I explained them the rubric that was going to be one of the tools used to help both the students and the teacher at the moment of the assessment activities. I told them about the usefulness of the rubric because the students would have the information needed to study for the assessment activity. Additionally, I told them that I was not going to grade them with numbers; I was going to use flowers to grade them. Students liked this because they are used to getting grades in numbers. After parents clarified the doubts, I proceeded to ask for their consent to be able to use the information for my research.

The next step, after I got the approval of most of the parents, I started the classes. My intention with the classes was to teach in a meaningful way; that is why I implemented two of the five principles of meaningful learning. One is that the topic taught should be authentic and it should have an intention. After each class, I devoted some time to make reflections about what I

could observe during the classes. These observations were really important for my research, because every time I rebuilt what happened in the classes and I had more ideas to answer my research question.

The topics of the first four classes were the alphabet, greetings, numbers, personal information, likes and dislikes. The first assessment activity was in the fifth class. For this activity, I created a rubric and shared it with the students because I wanted them to know what I was expecting. The rubric had five petals with criteria for the assessment, so that the student could know what to accomplish in order to get that petal. I showed the rubric to the students the class before the assessment activity and I did an example of what the students had to do. The intention with this socialization was that the students could ask questions and they fully understood activity.   After the first assessment activity, I felt really bad because most of the students failed, maybe because they did not study or they were not used to this kind of assessment activities. After I assessed their exams, I gave feedback to each one explaining where they needed to study more in order to improve their errors. Later I assigned another activity where they could show that they finally understood. This activity was much better because most of them improved their performance a lot, but there were some students who did not do the activity at all.

The topics of the next three classes before the next assessment activity were family members, adjectives to describe people and pets. For these three classes, I connected all the topics. First I taught the members of the family, then the adjectives, and for this I used the members of students' family. They had to talk about their own family and describe them. And finally for the pets, after I presented the new vocabulary they started to talk about their own pets, their relatives or friends'. This way they learned to use these topics in the real world, they were

authentic and had an intention. As I did before, I showed the rubric to the students one class before the assessment activity, and as they had to create their family tree, I brought my family tree to the class with all the information that they had to use, so that they could understand what they had to do. I should admit that this second assessment activity was more complicated because of the time, the students needed time to create the tree and then to present it orally. At the end we did not have time to do the last part so I had to evaluate only the written part of the activity. At the end I was really surprised because the students were really engaged with the activity, they loved to create the tree and also the fact that they had to talk about their own family.

After I collected all the information related to the students' performance, I was ready to collect the last two data needed for my research: the focus group and my CT's interview. On May 10th, I selected 11 students for the focus group. These students were selected taking into account these factors: motivation, the students that participated frequently and the students that did not like to participate, the students that very often were missing classes, the students who showed that they had learned and the students that in the different assessment activities did not do anything. I wanted to know their opinion about the actions that I implemented during the semester and whether these actions affected in any way their performance and the way they perceived English. The focus group was developed in an organized way, except for two students who were misbehaving. I could collect really important information from the students. Finally, I did the interview to my CT, she was really supportive with me during this whole process, and in this interview she was really open and willing to give me relevant answers about her assessment beliefs and also her opinion about my strategies, in general.

Findings and interpretations

In order to analyze my data, I followed the stages proposed by Burns (1999): assembling, coding, and comparing the data, building interpretations and reporting the outcomes. In relation to coding the data, the intention was to start reading the data collected more conscientiously because at this point it is important to start selecting the nature of the information. For this purpose, I created codes and categories in order to classify this information and select what is relevant for my research question. Complementarily, I used Saldaña's (2008) method for coding and categorizing. In this respect, the author asserts that a code is a short word or a phrase that assigns meaning to language or images (p. 3). He also highlights the importance of categorizing which can be done by organizing the coded data into categories when they have common characteristics (p.8). This method will help us compare the information to finally get to the theoretical concepts.

After analyzing the data, several factors related to the assessment activities encouraging meaningful learning were identified. Taking into account the students and the cooperating teacher's perception about assessment, the assessment activities performed by the students in class, and my research journal, I found that the quality of feedback is a key factor for formative assessment processes, the rubric as an assessment tool can have a positive response from the students' perspective, and the principles of authenticity and intentionality play an essential role in meaningful learning. However, there are some factors that hinder the successful development of a formative assessment processes such as practicality and issues related to educational system.   Each of these findings is described below.

Importance of Qualitative Feedback for Formative Assessment

Qualitative feedback for assessment is paramount for assessment to become formative. In one of the assessment activities performed by the students in class I wrote comments such as "In this part you need to review what we saw in class, you do not remember how to write the personal information and how to use it. Remember: My name is Federica, My last name is Zapata, I'm from Medellín", "Here you had to write the numbers in letters and you did not do it, for example: My phone number is zero, five, six, eleven, twelve" (Assessment activity 1); "You talked about a pet that belongs to your family, but you used the same as in the example the teacher wrote on the board. Practice the vocabulary of pets, keep working hard", and I wrote to another student "you did not write the correct member of the family in your family tree"; "You wrote their names, but you should have written: This is my mother, My mother's name is Jacinta, My mother is beautiful, My mother has a hamster; and the same with the other members of your family like grandfather, grandmother, father, brother, sister. Here it is important to clarify that the feedback was given in Spanish, I translated it for this final paper (Assessment activity 2)".

This *strong formative assessment* is very important for the students because this kind of feedback will give more information to the students than just knowing the grade. With this feedback they will have more information to improve their errors, as stated in Nyquist's work (as cited in William, 2011). It is important to highlight the students' perspectives in this respect. One of the students stated that this information was really useful because it helped her to improve. Another student said after reading the feedback in the rubric she remembered what she had to do (Focus group, student 8). As it can be observed, the students mentioned the importance to understand their errors in order to improve them. However, some students did not read nor analyzed their feedback, for this reason, it cannot be considered as such. One of the students said

that he did not read the feedback because he did not have time and he had other things to do (Focus group, student 9). In relation to this, Ramaprasad (1983) emphasizes that we cannot refer to feedback when the students do not do anything with the information about the gap between the level they are and the level they should be, so they do not improve their future performance. This was corroborated by the cooperating teacher who stated that unfortunately, only some students used the feedback to improve their performance. She thinks this is more than just an academic issue, it is a question of social cultural type, it is a matter in which families influence, the way in which the family itself considers and values knowledge and education (Cooperating teacher's interview).   This was the cooperating teacher's answer when she was asked the same question about the usefulness of the feedback. With her statement, we can imply that regardless the quality of feedback, it can help students improve their performance and encourage meaningful learning or not; this depends on others factors such as commitment, motivation and parents' support. In one of my journal entries, I referred to this situation:

> At the beginning of this class, I checked students' recovery activity. Most of the students did the activity and they improved the errors that they made in the assessment activity; this because they paid attention to feedback that the teacher gave them. But I could also observe that some students did not do the recovery activity. I asked them why, but they did not have an answer (Journal 8).

Another fact that is important to understand is that formative assessment is characterized as an ongoing process. Assessment cannot be applied only at the end of the period, when the grades are required by the administration because they need to show numbers for the parents, and finally to the parents. Formative assessment is characterized by the fact that at all time students are being followed up by the teacher; therefore, they receive feedback all the time. Some students

also notice that they are being assessed during normal activities such as going to the board; one

student said that the teacher assesses her in many ways, one is in the board (Focus group, student

4). Another student also stated that when he did not understand the teacher explained again and

then she assessed them in the board to be sure that they really understood. (Focus group, student

7). These perceptions are really important because we can understand that the students know that

they are being assessed, but the most important part is that they know they are receiving

information that would help them to improve. The teacher said that she understands formative

assessment as a permanent process. She always keeps it in mind in the development of all the

activities and she always assesses in different ways in which children can show the competences

they are acquiring. (Cooperating teacher's interview). The teacher really understands how

powerful the use of formative assessment is in her class, but she is also aware that for the

institution the type of assessment that predominates is summative, as the administration requires

students' grades in a quantitative way and is not possible to give them in a qualitative way. The

assessment that she usually uses is formative, however, she takes into account the evaluation

guidelines of the Ministry of National Education. The institution I.E. Francisco Miranda has an

assessment system with numerical equivalence that is by law. Formative assessment must have

an equivalence numerical, but this does not necessarily mean that it is equal to summative

assessment. (Cooperating teacher's interview). And students can notice the differences between

the cooperating teacher and me, one student said that it is different because the cooperating

teacher grades them with numbers and the English teacher grades them with flowers (Focus

group, student 1). Teachers recognize the importance of formative assessment and that they have

to introduce more meaningful learning activities in their classrooms. However, the teachers show

a tendency to continue using summative procedures in the classroom. Therefore, there is

discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and their academic practices. (Muñoz, Palacio and

Escobar, 2012 p. 156)

Positive Response to the Rubric as an Assessment Tool

The socialization of the rubric before the assessment activities has proved to be a valuable

tool, both for the students and for the teacher; for the students because it serves as a guide to have

clear criteria of what will be assessed, and for the teacher to avoid grading the students for other

aspects than their performance in the assessment activity. The rubric is a wonderful tool, but it

was not easy the first time that students faced it. "At the beginning it was not so easy to start

implementing the rubric. The students seemed confused with the rubric and the instructions, and I

could notice that there were some students that did not study at all. First, I felt bad because I

thought it was my fault, but later, after I reflected on what happened; I understood that it was not

me or students' fault" (Journal 06). This happened in the first assessment activity, but in the

second one, the results were really different. "When I checked the assessments, I was greatly

surprised because this time students' performance was better than in the previous assessment

activity. From this I can assume that the rubric was useful for the students and they used that

information to get ready for this activity" (Journal 11). The students felt that the rubric guided

them, and they were clear about what the teacher expected from them. Some students answered

this about the rubric in the focus group; student 7 said that it was better with flowers because if

there is a check the answer is good, if there is a zigzag, it needs improvement, and if it does not

have anything it is because it is wrong. Another student said that with the little flower was better

because the teacher showed her what she did wrong and with the marks in the petals she knew

what she had to improve (Focus group, Student 1). The cooperating teacher also highlights the

importance of the rubric as an assessment tool. She said that the rubric is an important tool for

teachers to assess as long as it is implemented for students and parents to know the criteria to be assessed. In relation to the teachers, they have clear objectives to avoid rambling and losing direction of the objectives to assess (Cooperating teacher's interview).

Importance of Authenticity and Intentionality for Meaningful Learning

These two elements, both authenticity and intentionality, are fundamental to encourage meaningful learning. That is why one of my objectives was to teach the classes considering these two aspects. Here is an example in my journal: "I show the students pictures of my own family, my mother, father, brother, sisters" (Journal 09). I believe that when students are learning new things and these are related to their lives, this generates a special connection within themselves that motivates them to participate in class and therefore, they will learn in a meaningful way. Most of the students consider that the topics that were covered during the classes were related with their daily life (Focus group). Implementing authentic activities helps students to learn faster, and this learning is much deeper when the students know that what they are learning will be useful outside the classroom. From the cooperating teacher's perspective, English is not only considered but is practically imposed as a second language in this country. Then it becomes a very important component in the students' lives. Things that are close to them, such as video games, virtual objects in general, and technological development face children with this language every day; something that is really important for children's everyday life (cooperating teacher's interview). Here is an example of a student who had disruptive behaviors, did not like to participate actively in the classes, but after some classes he was really motivated and his improvement in the second assessment activity was evident. In the rubric I commented, "You did a beautiful family tree, you brought pictures of each member of your family what let you make a real connection with your personal life" (Assessment activity 2).

Aspects that Hinder Formative Assessment Processes

During all this time, wonderful things were done that make me really think that formative assessment can be used to foster meaningful learning. Nevertheless, there are other aspects that were not contemplated from the beginning and impeded this process somehow. These aspects are time constraints, students' negative attitude, and the number of students per classroom.

In relation with time constraints I only had two hours to teach the class but the real class time was less, and on some occasions the cooperating teacher asked me to do other activities which took me a big part of the class and I could not apply the lesson plan that I had prepared for the class. In the second assessment activity, I could not do everything I planned, as I expressed in my journal:

> As some students did not bring the paper, I had to look for other papers, in this case, I only found a smaller, therefore, these students had less space to work on their project, and the worst part is that I wasted a lot of time, because now these students had to start from zero and they took a lot of time drawing their tree. I tried to avoid this by asking the students to bring the tree ready from home, but unfortunately, some of the students were not motivated enough with the activity or genuinely forgot to bring the tree (Journal 10).

Another problem with the time constraints is that to provide feedback of good quality takes a lot of time; to write to each students what were their errors and then suggest them activities to improve these problems is very time consuming. I also wrote about this in my journal; "I devoted about one day and a half to create these personalized rubrics. Because of this, I consider the creation of these rubrics a limitation, because there are so many students, which takes a lot of time to give a good feedback to each student (Journal 07). Another fact that also

affects considerably the impact of feedback for formative assessment is the number of students per classrooms. The process of providing a *Strong formative assessment* to each student takes a lot of time and then to monitor students' performance individually to check if they really improve their errors is a very hard task taking into account that it is a public institution with no less than thirty-six students.

And the fact that I consider that affects the most all this process is the negative attitude of some students. Regardless the preparation and the quality of the feedback, a student with a negative attitude might not learn and improve their errors. I manifested in my journal that sometimes I felt frustrated because of these students, "I do not know what to do. I explained something, but they did not pay attention, then I tried to repeat again, but only the same students were paying attention and the same were not" (Journal 04), "Normally when I notice that one student is not paying attention, I try to ask them questions and then I tell them to pay attention. In this class, I did the same with one student. I asked him about the topic and he said he did not know, then I asked him if he was interested in the class, and he said "no" I asked if he liked English and again he said "no". (Journal 13). In the second assessment activity I had another experience with one student, "Student 8 did not present his family tree nor the description that was required talking about his family, adjectives and pets. I gave him another opportunity to present again the project but he did not do it" (Assessment activity 2).

Conclusion

From the implementation of the actions carried out in the school, and findings analyzed, it can be concluded that the use of formative assessment is an excellent tool to foster meaningful learning. The fact that the students are under constant assessment and getting feedback from their performance, increase the students' chances to understand what their errors are, and also increase

students' motivations to improve their mistakes with this type of follow-up by the teacher. Other factors that helped a lot to encourage meaningful learning, were the use of the rubric, and the authentic, intentional activities. At the beginning, the students were a bit lost with the rubric, however, in the second assessment activity the results were much better because they were more familiarized with the rubric. The authentic and intentional activities served to trigger the students' motivation, which is essential for students to pay attention in the classes and therefore, lead them to meaningful learning.

Despite all these positive things that entails the use of formative assessment; there are other factors that did not allow me to demonstrate that all the students learned in a meaningful way. Some of these factors are the number of students per classroom, the time granted to give English classes per week, and the students' negative attitude. The number of students directly affects the formative assessment process, since this prevents the teacher from monitoring what the students did with the feedback provided by the teacher, and the students' learning. Furthermore, at the moment of the creation of quality feedback to each student takes a lot of time and specially to follow up each student to know what are they going to do with that feedback; it is not practical for a teacher, who has many tasks apart from preparing everyday classes. Time is another aspect that affects, because to teach an English class only an hour and a half a week is granted; you cannot do many things and also in some occasions time is wasted doing other things that are not part of English class. And finally, some students' negative attitude, one thing is that the students are not motivated, and another thing is that the students' attitude is negative; for example, when the teacher asks them to do an activity, or when they damage the material given by the teacher. This kind of attitudes simply leave the teacher without knowing

how to react, due to the number of the students the teacher cannot dedicate to monitor these students.

Reflections

After finishing this year of action research as a teacher and researcher, there are many reflections that must be made. Having been in this bidirectional process was great for me because it allowed me to learn a lot every day. I had the opportunity to prepare the classes and teaching the students; something that was hard but amazing at the same time. Furthermore, the fact that I could make reflections after each class gave me the opportunity to analyze what happened in each of the classes, such as the students' attitudes, the situations that occurred in the class; for example, when the students started to fight, misbehave, or get bored. All this allowed me to grow in my process as a teacher, to learn to listen and understand the students a little more and try to look for strategies to improve my work as a teacher.

But I am really concerned about the public education in Colombia, it seems it will not change in a short time. We already know that formative assessment benefits of education are really great, but it is frustrating knowing that in public education it would be hard to apply it since the groups are not below thirty students and as we saw in the research action, this does not allow us to apply it. We as future teachers want to work with our students and try to be closer, take them into account, can help them to find their better selves. That we can change their reality, but this is not possible because of the number of students per classroom and either because teachers have a lot of work to do besides to prepare classes and give them, they have to work a lot during their free time. Besides, although, the government has policies to promote English as a second language in primary school in the country, the teachers are not trained to teach English.

But the government is not taking into account the most important thing that is to train teachers and also to designate trained English teachers to teach English classes in elementary school.

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Appendix

Assessment activity 1

Rubrica: Actividad escrita

La escuela quiere saber sobre los hábitos alimenticios los estudiantes con el fin de ingresarlos a la base de datos de la escuela. Para este propósito deben escribir una carta en la que incluyan la siguiente información:

- ✓ Saludo, dependiendo del momento del día (Greetings: good morning, good afternoon, good evening)
- ✓ Personal information: name, last name, age, telephone number
- ✓ Escribe 5 oraciones hablando acerca de la comida que te gusta y la que no. (food: likes and I don´t like)
- ✓ Cuántas frutas, verduras o platos come al día; números y letras; por ejemplo: 5 4 6: five, four, six.
- ✓ Despedida al final de la carta (Good bye, see you later)

Comments on the descriptors

1 Utilizo los saludos y despedidas.

Tengo en cuenta la escritura adecuada de cada palabra. **5**

2 Puedo dar información personal.

4

Utilizo los números del 1 al 20, para hablar de la frecuencia con la que consumo cierta comida durante la semana. .

3 Escribo sobre las comidas que me gustan y no me gusta.

Comentarios:

OL (COLOMBIA)

Assessment activity 2

Rubrica: Actividad oral

La escuela ha preparado una actividad por salones. Con esta actividad lo que se quiere lograr es saber un poco más sobre los estudiantes y sus familiares. Para esta actividad, los estudiantes van crear un árbol genealógico dando información sobre los integrantes del grupo familiar.

- ✓ Crear el árbol familiar.
- ✓ Presentar cada integrante de la familia. **(This is my mother, this is my father).**
- ✓ Decir los nombres de los familiares (**her name is Morelia**)
- ✓ Decir una cualidad sobre cada integrante de la familia. **(My father is thin, My grandmother is old)**
- ✓ Hablar sobre las mascotas que tenga algún familiar. **(My father has a rabbit, my cousin has a turtle)**

Comments on the descriptors

1 Crear mi árbol familiar.

Hablar sobre las mascotas que tiene algun familiar. **(My father has a rabbit, my cousin has a turtle)** **5**

2 Presentar cada integrante de la familia. (This is my mother, this is my father).

4 **3** Presentar cada integrante de la familia. (This is my mother, this is my father).

Decir una cualidad sobre cada integrante de la familia. **(My father is thin, My grandmother is old)**

Comentarios: