

# A Case Study of Transition from Summative to Formative Assessment in Chinese Context

Xuefeng Wang

**Abstract**—Examination-centred assessment has been embedded in education in China for thousands of years. Recently it has been questioned and formative assessment has been strongly strengthened in education curriculum in which attention has been given to teaching and learning as a meaning making interactive process rather than summative result of assessment. In the English teaching area, instead of using solely summative assessment, teachers are asked to give students formative assessment during the teaching process. This paper examines the positive aspects and potential problems in the discourse of transition from summative to formative assessment through a case study of classroom observation in a Chinese secondary school in regard to oral language development including contents, methods, and records and teachers' interview was also conducted to get the teachers' views.

**Key words** – *formative assessment, summative assessment, oral language development*

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the newly composed education system and aims of education, the new curriculum standards for both elementary schools and high schools were developed to meet the need not only of society, science, and technology, but also of students' lives in a changing world. And a new system of curriculum evaluation was established. The new evaluation system [7] is oriented towards:

- 1) a developmental evaluation system for assessing learning of learners to promote their universal/general development;
- 2) a developmental evaluation system for assessing teachers and teaching to improve the overall quality of teaching;
- 3) a developmental evaluation system for curriculum products to accelerate curriculum development.

The perspective of students' learning evaluation has been changing from what we call examination-oriented education to quality-oriented education, whose intention is to develop students' creativity and practical abilities. As to the English educational curriculum reform, the combination of formative and summative assessment in English teaching is strongly required as stated in The Chinese National Nine-year Compulsory Education of Full-time Secondary School English Syllabus [8].

English teaching curriculum reform challenges traditional views and practices on assessment, such as assessment concepts, content, assessment forms, participants'

components and the functions of the participants, as well as assessment tools. Teachers and students are deeply entrenched in an examination-orientated discourse, the current reform direction requires a change of their conceptions and beliefs about assessment in particular and teaching in general.

This paper examines the positive aspects and potential problems in the discourse of transition from summative to formative assessment through a case study of oral language development. The discussion includes Classroom observation of contents, methods, and records used for formative assessment during the teaching process. Teachers' interview was undertaken to get the views from teachers', students' and parents' perspectives.

## II. FORMATIVE AND SUMMATIVE VIEWS OF TEACHING ASSESSMENT

Effective assessment aims at improving teaching and learning. Black and William [2] define assessment broadly to include all activities that teachers and students undertake to get information that can be used diagnostically to alter teaching and learning. In this definition, assessment encompasses teacher observation, classroom discussion, and analysis of student work, including homework and tests. Assessment becomes functional and constructive when the information derived from assessment is used to adapt teaching and learning to meet student needs. Curriculum innovation can be undertaken systematically if there is a continual flow of evaluative information back to the teachers who plan and implement the curriculum.

Formative assessment is essential for providing feedback on a student's progress so that any errors or difficulties can be identified and corrected [5]. The results of such an assessment would be a series of scores for each task in the progression, enabling the teacher to pinpoint problems, to provide students with detailed feedback on their progress, and to make decisions relating to how instruction should best continue.

With formative assessment apparently helping low-achieving students, including students with disabilities, even more than it helped other students [2]. Black [1] concluded based on at least 20 studies that formative assessment helps the 'low attainers' in improving their learning whilst raising the overall level of achievement. He also found a number of common characteristics among the research reports. These include: the involvement of new modes of pedagogy that calls for significant changes in classroom practices; the active involvement of pupils in the assessment process; the results of the assessment practices have to be used in adjustment of teaching and learning strategies; formative assessment can affect the motivation and self-esteem pupils with obvious benefits in engaging pupils in self-assessment.

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X. F. Wang is with the Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Australia. She is an English teacher in the English Department, Taiyuan Normal University, Shanxi Province, China. She is now a PhD student in the University of Tasmania. 0011-61-3-63243792  
(e-mail: [xfwang@utas.edu.au](mailto:xfwang@utas.edu.au))

Bloom, Hastings and Madhaus [3] defined 'summative assessment' by including evaluation tests conducted at the end of units or course to judge the extent of students' learning. The purpose is to grade or certify students, evaluate their progress or to find out the effectiveness of a curriculum. Summative assessment is appropriate for measuring the extent to which the overall skill objectives of a unit or course have been realised and to provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate the skills they have learned in action [5]. Summative assessment is made when a problem is fully developed and implemented. Assessment addresses the overall effectiveness of the program. Summative assessment is often in the forms of school-leaving tests, final examinations, etc. [6].

Summative assessment usually follows a unit of learning and is carried out to summarise achievement at a given point in time and is often more structured than formative assessment. It provides teachers, students and parents with information on student progress and level of achievement. Summative assessment also provides feedback to teachers, syndicates, departments and schools on the effectiveness of class or school-wide programmes- i.e. it is used for programme evaluation.

According to the previous discussion, formative assessment is the most important assessment practice which has a powerful impact on students' learning and helps indicate how well a student has learned particular skills/knowledge. It also enables teachers to improve their instructions to enhance teaching. It occurs when teachers/peers provide information to students in ways that enable the student to improve learning through a self-evaluation. It helps low-achieving students or students with disabilities and helps support discouraged students. The aim of formative assessment is to help students learn to 'self assess' so they can move on in order to achieve.

Compared with formative assessment, summative assessment is used to grade students and summarise achievement to provide teachers, students and parents with information on students' levels which may have used for programme evaluation to find out the effectiveness of a curriculum or consequence on students' future. As a result, the combination of both formative and summative assessment should be the best way conducted in education curriculum in China.

Regarding the Chinese National Nine-year Compulsory Education of Full-time Secondary School English Syllabus, two major forms of assessments, formative and summative, have been strongly recommended to teachers of English in secondary schools. A case study was conducted to see the positive aspects and potential problems of the implementation of the newly developed forms of assessment.

### III. A CASE STUDY IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN CHINA

This study was undertaken in a Middle School of Taiyuan, Shanxi, China. Grade 8 (3 classes, 180 students) in this school was chosen on the grounds that an implementation of oral English language formative and summative assessment were conducted.

The study focused on oral language formative and summative assessment, the contents, methods, and records. Data was collected from observation of activities in class

with observation notes, different assessment forms, record forms, feedback forms from teachers, students themselves and parents to examine students' involvement in the classroom English oral activities which benefit their learning.

Three teachers who involved in the formative assessment experiment were interviewed to obtain views on both positive and potential problems from teachers, students and parents' perspectives. The interviews were informal with very relaxed and free atmosphere. The teachers' interviews were undertaken in the afternoon during their 'free' teaching hours in one of the teachers' office. The interviews were recorded using a Panasonic Walkman with a microphone extension, and were later transcribed and translated. In order to help teacher interviewees express themselves freely, both English and Chinese were applicable to make them feel comfortable with their expressions and ideas. The interviews were also noted down as much as possible by the researcher during the process of interviews. The notes not only recorded the contents of what each teacher interviewee talked about but who did the talk. In order to match the quotes with the recording later, the researcher coded each teacher interviewee as T1 (Teacher one), T2 and T3. The interviews generally lasted two hours but each individual had different duration of time depending on the degree of the information given.

#### A. Classroom observation of oral language formative assessment

Classroom observation of oral language formative assessment was lasted for a year, two semesters. The forms of formative assessment are summarised as follows:

- Classroom activities

Classroom activities are the core of the assessment. Assessment of the effectiveness of the classroom activities include:

- 1) question and answer;
- 2) reading aloud and reciting and role play;
- 3) poems reading and songs singing;
- 4) making dialogue and giving performances
- 5) participation in the games;
- 6) interviewing and reporting

These classroom assessment activities normally occur at the same time with teaching activities. Teachers undertake observation while giving lessons. They monitor students' learning attitude, their enthusiasm to participate in classroom activities and record/note taking. Finally teachers analyze students' learning behaviour in class and timely provide feedback the situation to parents and students to develop effective plans for the future learning.

- Oral testing

Oral testing takes place four to six times each semester. The test content will be decided according to the teaching content and the tests are given both in and after class. The oral tests are suitable for those targeted at low-scoring students and the students who have received unsatisfactory results in their classroom activities. Through these tests, they get opportunities to reflect on their own learning effectiveness thereby promoting students' performance improvement.

- Task-based project

Task-based project is designed to increase students' interest in learning and allows students to know that they

are able to achieve better results as long as they work hard. For example, Unit 8 *How was your school trip?* (Book I, Grade 8) Fill in the form by getting information from classmates. Using the pattern 'How was ...?' to describe the things happened in the past.

Name of the student	Name of the place
Eg: Lily	How was your school/museum/.../ trip? Did you see/go/buy...?

Figure 1: Task card

These tasks are relatively simple, easy to complete and interesting to students. Some tasks can be completed by student him/herself or fulfilled co-operatively with their classmates. While students are learning new knowledge and at the same time their oral language ability improves, they gain useful experience and practical application of language ability.

Oral language assessment can be divided into following kinds: students' self-assessment, teacher assessment, peer assessment, teacher and student assessment and parent assessment.

- Self-assessment

Self-assessment develops students' ability to be responsible for their own study, to participate in the assessment activities. It encourages them to develop such skills as reflecting on their own learning experiences, evaluating their own learning situation, seeing their own accomplishments and the things need to be improved. Self-assessment can also help students develop new learning objectives, and gradually become autonomous and self-reliant learners.

- Teacher assessment

Teacher assessment can ensure the accuracy of the assessment and make better recommendations to improve teaching and it can also develop teaching strategies for teachers to provide an effective basis for their teaching. For example, teacher let the students participate on oral communication on certain topics.

- Peer assessment

Peer assessment provides opportunities for students to learn from each other and to encourage active participation of the classroom activities, to promote self-expression, cooperation and mutual assistance. Peer assessment can be realized in group activities. For example, the teacher separates students in groups and each group has two students. The students will make conversation, discussion, debate, role play, story telling and picture description, etc. Then let students do assessment among them. Teachers can let students be aware of the objectives to be achieved. For instance, in the activity of making conversation, the teacher will tell students know first what are good conversations and students will do mutual assessment against objectives to find their weaknesses and to try to achieve better in the next assessment.

- Teacher and student joint assessment

Teacher and student joint assessment is usually popular with students because this assessment reflects a democratic interaction to promote teacher and students collaborative assessment activities.

- Parent-based assessment

Parent-based assessment provides opportunities for parents to know how their children learn at school and it promotes parental involvement in teaching and learning.

- The record form of formative assessment

Oral language formative assessment is based on the form of a file record and the file includes: Record form of daily learning situation and the record form of the terminal learning situation.

Record form		
Daily learning	Terminal learning	Teacher's job
(1) Participation of classroom activities (2) Different of steps of oral tests	A comprehensive assessment record of all the classroom activities that students participated during the semester.	A record of students' fulfilling their task-based project.
a. class representation b. learning after class c. activities outside schools d. record of oral and written texts e. red flag f. overall evaluation g. comments	A comprehensive assessment of students' terminal examination.	The part which reflects students learning abilities.

Figure 2: Records form of oral language formative assessment

### B. Classroom observation of oral language summative assessment

Summative assessment results in the assessment of students' learning, and it also draws conclusions and makes judgments for students and guides them directions to continue their future learning. Students' oral language summative assessment is realized through oral examinations at the end of the semester. It will comprehensively summarize the language ability of students to evaluate and promote the improvement of students' learning achievement. Forms of oral language summative assessment include:

- Oral language detached test
  - Imitation and reading aloud

Reading aloud materials can be divided into two types: The first type focuses on a tongue twister, short poem, sentence stresses, words joint, lost blasting or rhythm and etc.; the second type focuses on a short passage which can not really test students' real oral communicative abilities.

- Description

Pictures such as 'My school', 'My teacher', 'My family' are provided for the examinees to describe with well organized, reasonable and coherent words. Such testing method is used to test the examinees' abilities to organize the concepts and to express ideas.

- Oral report

Students have 5 to 10 minutes of topical verbal expressions with the help of slide show, blackboard, cards, and other means and then answer questions. Oral report expression involves different functional skills, such as explaining factual data, expressing their views and dealing with different issues and this is a real communicative test.

- Conversational test

- Role-play

Before attending the conversational test, two students prepare a dialogue which can be chosen from the textbooks or self generated. The tests are given in the form of performance and students should bring their own props.

- Dialogue

Teachers have a prior scene arrangement, the candidates/examinees play a role in this particular scenario and they are required to participate in a conversation with an examiner or their peer candidate in accordance with his/her role in this prior arranged scene.

- Question and answer

A teacher asks questions and a student answers.

- Team-work

- Short-play in class

The short-play materials are provided by teachers or students set the materials themselves. The students will prepare in advance, and then give performances in class. Five lines are required to each actor.

- Competition

The competition takes place in groups. It is divided into two parts: the required and additional grab questions. The additional grab questions include: reporting telephone number, reading something in English, naming the listed items, answering questions, reading verses, judging right or wrong, looking at the words given and telling stories and so on.

- Ways of records

- Score records

Items	Score				
Attitude	1	2	3	4	5
Pronunciation & Intonation	1	2	3	4	5
Fluency	1	2	3	4	5
Accuracy	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Total</b>					

Figure 3: In this figure, 5 is the highest score and 1 is the lowest score.

- Grade records

Name	Grade A Very good	Grade B Good	Grade C Qualified	Grade D Efforts needed

Figure 4: Form of grade records

- Passport

Every student will get a permit when he/she passes each test. When he/she obtains all permits, he/she completes the test mission.

#### IV. TEACHER'S VIEWS

In order to obtain the views of the teachers of English in the discourse of transition from summative to formative assessment, three teachers of English from Grade 8 who participated in the oral language assessment implementation phase were interviewed in regard to the positive aspects and possible problems of the reform of assessment in secondary English teaching.

Analysis of the interview focused upon the categories and the coding in accordance with the teachers' views on the positive aspects and possible problems of the transition from summative to formative assessment. Coding enables the researcher to interpret and make judgments against participants' articulated meaning in free-flowing texts [9]. The themes were then grouped according to the identified categories [4].

A. Views on positive aspects of formative oral language assessment:

- Basic concept of formative assessment

The concept 'formative assessment' is new to most Chinese educators. For them, assessment is primarily testing. The

idea that assessment is a continuing practice can be a challenge. This is indicated in the following selected responses.

**T1:** *From the experiment, I have been getting to know what formative assessment is, and who assess students, why assess, when assess, how assess and what should be assessed.*

**T2:** *Formative assessment concentrates on developing students' learning abilities rather than ranking or grading students.*

**T3:** *Through the implementation exercise, I have the idea that formative assessment is an assessment which motivates students to participant classroom activities and teachers get feedback from students themselves, their peer students, teachers and parents to promote their teaching.*

- Positive aspects from the teacher perspective

Learning is driven by what teachers and pupils do in classrooms. Teachers have to manage complicated and demanding situations, channelling the personal, emotional, and social pressures of a group of 60 students in order to help them learn well and become better learners in the future. Standards can be raised only if teachers can tackle this task more effectively. Formative assessment is one of the ways which benefits teachers' teaching. After a year of oral language formative assessment implementation exercise, teachers of English in Grade 8 who have participated the experiment have the following positive views on formative assessment.

**T1:** *... it encourages us to create new ways of assessment.*

**T2:** *... it is good for teachers to get feedback from students themselves or their peer students and also parents in order that the teachers adjust their teaching from time to time.*

**T3:** *It changed my concept of assessment and developed my awareness of formative assessment which benefits my teaching.*

**T2:** *I think formative assessment develops teachers' ability of creation.*

**T3:** *As to oral English assessment, we send parents monthly assessment form and let parents help check students oral work at home and meanwhile, give comments and feedback of students' oral work at school. They help monitor teaching.*

**T1:** *Formative assessment makes the relationship between teachers and students more closely.*

Black and William [2] discusses the classroom as a 'black box' which contains inputs from the outside, including students, teachers, other resources, management rules and requirements, parental anxieties, standards, tests with high stakes, and so on. Teachers are the persons who know very well what are happening inside the 'black box' and they are the persons who can control the classroom activities which help produce better outputs. It is interesting to note that the concept 'black box' is still lurking in the minds of some Chinese educators and could cause some confusion and conflict while dealing with formative assessment. From the views of some teachers, it is apparent that formative assessment can help teachers raise teaching standards.

- Positive aspects from the student perspective

Assessment is both targeted towards students and teachers, who play an important part in the teaching and learning discourse. In teachers' views, formative assessment is important in various aspects, which are expressed below.

**T1:** *Formative assessment helps students appear to have adopted more appropriate learning strategies. They have learnt how to self-assess their own learning and understand the importance of cooperative learning through peer assessment.*

**T2:** *Students have more chance to speak English because students have to work together and prepare and present their works before their classmates.*

**T3:** *It benefits low-achieving students. They have learned a lot compared to their own previous efforts even though they are still somewhat behind the others, but at least they can speak English to express themselves before others and they become more confident. In my class, each student is the centre of learning, and everybody can show the potential talent when he/she participating classroom oral language activities.*

**T1:** *Formative assessment can not only evaluate students' achievements and weaknesses in the process of their English learning, but also can arouse students' interest of learning English because there are a lot of various interesting activities in the assessment.*

**T2:** *The most positive aspect of formative assessment is that it helps students participate in classroom activities which help them improve their learning step by step and teachers can know about each student very well in his/her daily learning process, their strengths and their weaknesses.*

**T3:** *Formative assessment can change students from passive acceptance of the assessment to be the masters of learning. The multi-dimensional assessment activities help stimulate students' learning interest and increase students' self-confidence and adjust their learning strategies.*

**T1:** *In the oral language developmental process, students are asked to do morning report, to ask and answer questions in relation to the texts, to read aloud and recite the texts and to do role play, to make dialogue and to give performances and so on and these enhance students' capacity to interact with people and the sense of cooperation through self-assessment and cooperative assessment.*

**T2:** *Parent-assessment supports learning and at the same time, evaluates, reflects and encourages their children to learn.*

**T3:** *Formative assessment also provides feedback to students and helps students learn to 'self-assess' and it is useful to diagnose students' learning.*

- **Positive aspects from the parental perspective**

In China, teaching is traditionally confined to the classroom. Parents do not interfere with classroom teaching and learning. However, the introduction of formative assessment directly or indirectly involves parents in the educational process. This is what will happen according to the interviewed teachers.

**T3:** *Formative assessment helps parents know how well their children learn at school from the required feedback form from the school, which encourages parents to communicate both with children and teachers and also school authority to improve teachers' teaching and their children's learning.*

**T1:** *Parents are school's best friends and parents' participation in school assessment helps contribute to the growth of school teaching.*

**T2:** *Some parents can help to facilitate monitoring of children's learning and develop home learning program.*

**B. Potential problems of transition from summative to formative assessment of oral language development in secondary English teaching:**

In the process of the implementation exercise, teachers found that in the discourse of transition from summative to formative assessment, there might be some potential problems.

- **Potential problems in evaluation system**

When discussing the evaluation system, teachers tended to focus their views on the issues of examination-oriented education and lacking of effective policy and basic evaluation system.

**T1:** *Oral language formative assessment implementation exercise has been conducted in my class for a year. It has proved*

*that the implementation of formative assessment of developing secondary students' oral proficiency is necessary and effective; however, examination-oriented education has been still strongly dominant in educational assessment in China.*

**T3:** *Final examination stops the development of teaching and learning and stops the improvement of evaluation system. I think the main reason is that we have not set up basic curriculum evaluation system and effective evaluation mechanisms which support curriculum reform and development.*

**T2:** *The reforms of language evaluation have not added up to an effective policy.*

If there are ways in which policy makers and others can provide direct help and support to the everyday classroom task of achieving better learning, then surely these ways ought to be pursued vigorously [2]. Thus it is worth noting that the implementation of formative assessment needs good policy to support and it is also important to set up reasonable evaluation system.

- **Potential problems to teachers**

Formative assessment requires teachers to have the abilities of creation, organization and evaluation. Through formative assessment, teachers should arouse students' learning interest, be aware of their achievements and weaknesses to adjust their teaching which need to pay great effort.

**T1:** *To some extent, it is very hard for teachers of English to assess their students' oral English formatively because they lack comprehensive understanding of the role of assessment in basic education curriculum reform in China and they have used to the simple forms of summative assessment.*

**T2:** *With the oral language formative assessment experiment going on, my views to formative assessment has been changed gradually. At the beginning, I thought it was really a big burden for me to use formative assessment in oral language development in my teaching because I had to prepare a lot of forms to assess students' oral language proficiency and to create various activities and to do a lot of preparation for the assessment. These made me very busy and tired.*

**T3:** *I even doubted if I was qualified enough to involve in formative assessment experiment. I think the main reason is that I did not really know about the aims and the concept of the formative assessment at the beginning of the experiment because I really lacked the basic quality of assessment.*

When considering how to make the formative assessment successfully, training is needed to help teachers develop good command of English and linguistic awareness and improve the quality of language assessment.

- **Potential problems to students**

While teachers are the main concern in the implementation exercise, students are also an issue which need to be taken into consideration in implanting formative assessment.

**T1:** *Doing formative assessment may take up a lot of time in class and students may feel bored with too many complicated forms.*

**T2:** *Formative assessment is a continuous work which should keep going without stop in the process of students' learning or it not benefits students' learning.*

**T3:** *Formative assessment may also increase students' workload if the forms of assessment are too many and too complicated.*

**C. Views on oral language summative assessment**

- **Positive views**

Examination-orientated summative assessment has been conducted in China for thousands of years which should not be disregarded as it is still viewed as an important aspect of teaching by Chinese educators.

**T1:** *It is easy to do and we have been used to it.*

**T2:** *Summative assessment supply parents scores and grades of their children at the end of the semester.*

**T3:** *Summative assessment is more structured and it addresses the overall effectiveness of the teaching.*

- Negative views

In interviewees' view, the purpose of assessment is not to grade or rank students, but to help develop students' learning. However, summative assessment mainly deals with the final stage of teaching.

**T1:** *I think summative assessment is not good to develop students' oral language proficiency because it does not promote continuous development of students' learning and can't really measure students' oral English capacity comprehensively.*

**T2:** *Students do not enjoy such assessment because it does not create any motivation to learn. Students' result of oral summative assessment will certainly be very bad for not having enough practice during the learning process.*

**T3:** *Actually the traditional mode of English teaching summative assessment was likely to cut down students' interest in English learning. Teachers could not make right decision in their daily teaching because summative assessment can not necessarily give teachers right feedback of students' learning.*

## V. SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

### A. On formative assessment

Regarding the findings of the formative assessment through the classroom observation and teachers' interview, it can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Through formative assessment, teachers of English have changed their traditional ideas of language assessment. Teachers of English have become aware that it is important to make the language situations and language teaching as realistic as possible to provide students with suitable experiences that encourage them to ultimately use language in real-life communication.
- 2) With formative assessment, students have learnt to self-assess and to understand the importance of cooperative learning. They communicate with each other and have more chance to speak English.
- 3) The most important thing is that formative assessment helps low-achieving students become more confident, since they have more chance to express themselves to show their potential talents.
- 4) Students' learning are evaluated not only by teachers, but also by students themselves and their peer students concerning both their achievements and weaknesses.
- 5) Formative assessment arouses students' interest of learning English. Learning English is not just learning text by heart but with authentic language and its social contexts.
- 6) Formative assessment is good for teachers to get feedback from student himself/herself, peer students, parents and teachers themselves to help monitor teaching and learning and encourages children to learn.
- 7) Formative assessment helps students participate in classroom activities and changes students from passive acceptance of the assessment to be the masters of learning.
- 8) Formative assessment adjusts students learning strategies and enhances students' capacity to interact with people and helps stimulate their learning effectiveness.

### B. On potential problems

- 1) Teachers lack of comprehensive and profound understanding of the status and role of evaluation in basic education curriculum reform process;
- 2) Teachers of English are weak in basic research of curriculum evaluation, and they do not really know about the basic education curriculum evaluation system.
- 3) The Ministry of Education in China has not established effective evaluation mechanisms which support curriculum reform and development.
- 4) The evaluation still in the simple forms of assessment, paying more attention to test/ summative assessment whereas paying less attention to non-test/ formative assessment.
- 5) The examination- oriented education aggravated to very serious extent. However, teachers, students and parents have all accepted the situation.
- 6) With the education reform going on, some teachers' ideas or concept of assessment are still very traditional which failed to follow the rapid development of English teaching reform.
- 7) Most teachers have no research awareness and are not interested in the new forms of assessment.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Educational reform is taking place in China. There are many challenges as teaching and learning in China are traditionally deep rooted in the transmission model in which teachers are the primary source of knowledge and power and students are at the receiving end. Confucianism has deeply permeated various aspects of life in China and it is still an important factor in the educational discourse. While the introduction of formative assessment to education is a positive development, there are still issues and problems facing teachers, students and policy makers. It is hoped that this small study provides some insights to this aspect of reform in China.

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