

【原著】

# Attitudes towards formative assessment: An exploratory study into grade transparency and ownership

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形成的評価に対する意識：評価の透明性と成績のオーナーシップに関する探索的研究

## Abstract

Recently, formative assessment approaches have gained traction in Western teaching contexts. However, whether such approaches are effective in a Japanese university context is not clear. With the introduction of a new textbook and transparent assessment approach for a compulsory third year English subject, teachers at Hiroshima Bunkyo University saw an opportunity to gain an initial insight into student attitudes to the introduction of elements of formative assessment. After one semester, students were overwhelmingly agreeable to this hybrid approach encouraging teachers to continue refining the approach and to seek more detailed feedback from students at the end of the course.

## 1. Introduction

In Western teaching contexts, summative assessment approaches, focusing heavily on traditional testing have fallen out of favour in recent years. While summative assessment has been seen as useful for testing acquired knowledge, it is perhaps less effective at correcting and improving student deficits in student skills (Kozato et al, 2023).

This paper will cover the introduction of formative assessment features combined with a summative approach, and student reactions to this gradual introduction of a new and open way of assessing their work and providing feedback. With the introduction of a new textbook and approach, the goal of updating the current course was not to introduce formative assessment and feedback in fully fledged form, but to introduce the ideology to the class and see if students responded positively. Given the difficulties in bringing in an entirely new textbook and course, the first semester of the academic year was seen as a chance to ‘test the water’.

First a brief overview of summative and formative assessments will be covered, along with providing some context for how assessments are utilised in the Japanese educational context. Next, I will outline the teaching context in which this new approach was implemented. Finally, student feedback and teacher reflection will provide insight into recommendations for addressing areas for improvement in second semester.

## 2. Summative and formative assessment

Students need to receive feedback on their progression, and styles of feedback can broadly be divided into two categories: summative and formative. Summative assessments are how we might traditionally understand student assessment, being testing where grades or scores are given based on showing understanding of prior learning. In contrast, formative assessments are usually more informal, with evidence of student knowledge being elicited through different in-class activities (Bacquet, 2020), such as:

- group discussions
- dialogues with teachers
- reflective questions and self-assessments
- monitoring of activities and interactions in the classroom

Broadly speaking, formative evaluations of students may assist with future teaching and learning, while summative assessments are useful for checking past learning (Kozato et al, 2023). Ideally formative assessment relies on non-evaluative observation and feedback to help students improve by helping them be aware of gaps in their knowledge (Boston, 2019). If formative feedback drifts too far into being summative in nature, students may become less receptive, as feedback may be seen as just another form of traditional grading (Sudarso et al, 2016). It should be noted that one style is not necessarily better than the other in a given context, and it may be that a combination of both would provide the best outcome for students (Talandis Jr., 2017).

### Summative and formative assessment in Japan

While formative assessment is quite prevalent in the Western education context, it is often not always seen as effective in many Asian contexts (Purdie et al, 1996). Learners in Confucianist based learning contexts, such as Japan, are more often exposed to, and thus more comfortable with, summative assessments. The Confucianist paradigm of education traditionally involves a teaching imparting knowledge to the student, and the student receiving a grade for reflecting that knowledge. Knowledge of facts are potentially rewarded more than practical understanding. Much of Japan's schooling and testing is based on such summative assessments, the most notable being High School and University entrance examinations, where significant emphasis is placed on both final grades and exam scores (Wicking, 2020).

However, care needs to be taken when looking at culture through a particular lens. Western teachers will naturally have a bias towards Western style teaching and learning methods, whereas the roles of teachers and learners, particularly hierarchical roles, may be vastly different in a Japanese context (Hofstede, 2001; Bacquet, 2020). Neither outlook is necessarily correct and attempting to force a perceived beneficial method into an environment where it does not fit may be pointless at best and may have negative outcomes for students at worst. Indeed, it may be beneficial to embrace the culture of testing to alleviate the stress of attempting introducing new or hybrid approaches (Talandis Jr., 2017).

One question that does need to be asked is if formative assessment is viewed in the same way by Japanese students as Western students. If formative assessment is not the norm in a student's life, how are they supposed to effectively utilise feedback presented in this way? It may be that students see formative feedback as essentially confirming that they were not doing the 'wrong' thing. That is, for Japanese students, feedback may be seen as external validation or judgement, rather than being used for internal scaffolding of knowledge (Kozato et al, 2023). In Kozato's study, Western students were more likely to see the feedback as suggestions for possible areas to improve, and not as the only correct way to do something. For formative assessments and feedback to reach its potential, it may be that teachers need to create an atmosphere of accessibility (Kikukawa et al, 2017) for students raised in a Confucianist context, who are hesitant to ask questions for either fear of implying the teacher's lack of knowledge, or their own perceived lack of ability (Bacquet, 2020).

### 3. Teaching context

I currently lecture in English at Hiroshima Bunkyo University's "Bunkyo English Communication Centre" (the BECC), in Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan. This paper will focus on a compulsory third year course for Global Communication Department (GCD) students, "International Communication Strategies" (ICS).

Third year GCD students have previously completed compulsory first and second year English Communication courses through the BECC (general English communication, reading, and writing) in addition to courses offered through the GCD. In their third year, GCD students can choose other elective English courses offered through the BECC, however ICS is the only compulsory third year BECC course. ICS is offered over the two academic semesters as ICS I and ICS II. Classes are scheduled for one face-to-face 90-minute class per week, over a total of fifteen weeks.

#### 3.1 Students

Student numbers vary by year, with the current cohort comprised of 32 students. Two concurrent classes of 16 students were run in first semester, with no changes expected for the second semester. Streaming of students was based on a combination of university academic results from students' first two years, TOEIC scores (if available), and consultation with a student advisor, who was privy to individual student needs.

#### 3.2 Course and Textbook

In 2022 a thorough review of the ICS course goals, textbook, and assessment style was undertaken. Prior to the current academic year, assessments were primarily summative, with each semester having two large formal tests accounting for the majority of a student's grade. The remainder of student grades were comprised of completion work. While students received scores for their tests as feedback, there was no capacity for them to be aware of their ongoing progress or projected grade. After this year-long review it was decided to adopt a

new textbook and assessment style. The textbook “ibunka” (Richmond & Vannieu, 2021) was chosen as for two reasons. First, it was developed specifically for Japanese students and with an understanding of their cultural background in terms of the education environment they had progressed through. Second, it employed a teaching approach referred to as the “Immediate Method”, a refinement of several different formative teaching approaches developed by the authors, two university lecturers in Japan, Stephen Richmond and Bruno Vannieuwenhuysse. The approach was developed as a targeted response to the biggest issue that many English teachers are faced with in Japan when teaching communication classes; a lack of student willingness to speak and communicate (Azra et al, 2005, Richmond & Vannieuwenhuysse, 2019). In keeping with its focus on real conversations, feedback, and transparency, among other things, the Immediate Method aims to:

- encourage students to actively and consistently engaging in spoken conversations.
- utilise regular “low-stakes” in-class conversation assessments and giving immediate results and feedback.
- use modular grammar patterns and meta-communication skills to remove barriers to students being able to communicate more quickly and smoothly.
- encourage students to be more active and self-directed learners.

This paper will focus on the first two points outlined above.

### 3.2.1 Focus on spoken communication

From the first week of classes, students were expected to communicate in English with their classmates and teachers. The ibunka textbook focuses on speaking above all else, and an environment was fostered where speaking in class was acceptable, as was asking questions. Teachers constantly circulated and if students got too far off-topic or use Japanese too much, would bring back their focus either using questions, checking their work and asking for clarification, or having them talk about their answers with their partners and giving reasons. Students were encouraged to use meta-language if they did not understand something, write difficult words or concepts down and ask teachers for advice and to generally create an environment where it was okay to ask a question rather than stay silent and not know how to do something.

### 3.2.2 Regular low-stakes assessments and immediate feedback

Students were made aware that the number of assessments they would undertake would be both extensive and consistent, however, these assessments would be low-pressure. To their surprise, students were faced with a speaking assessment in their second class. This was simply a two-minute conversation with their teacher, with some feedback and a score given immediately, utilising both formative and summative feedback. Once students realised that these “tests” were just regular conversations with either their teacher, a partner, or a partner and the teacher, they became much more relaxed.

As part of their ongoing classes, students undertook a larger project, comprising of three presentations spaced out through the semester. Students chose a cultural topic from either

the textbook or their own interests, with the goal being that they would refine and practice their presentation throughout the semester, incorporating ongoing feedback from their teacher and group members. The first presentation was an initial in-class presentation, with teacher feedback and a self-assessment. The second was a presentation to their small group, who gave feedback. The last presentation was to the class, having incorporated all the feedback they had received during the semester.

### 3.2.3 Student progress sheet

To aid with feedback, transparency, and ownership of their learning, students used a progress sheet which tracked their performance with formative and summative feedback every class (*Appendix 1, Figure 6*). The progress sheet has several important facets, namely it:

- is a physical object, not a digital object.
- is customised for each student (name, photo, feedback etc).
- is divided into clearly discerned sections outlining assessment grades and feedback.
- has information officially recorded by teachers, using personal seals or signatures.
- is held by the student. There is NO teacher copy. The student has the only copy of their results.

The final point was an important consideration. Students were responsible, literally, for their grades. If a student lost their progress sheet, that would be a significant problem. Students were encouraged to keep their sheets safe, bring them to class, and take photos of them as a backup in case they were lost.

## 4. Student Feedback

At the end of first semester, a short Google Forms feedback survey was given to students in both ICS 1 classes. The survey was voluntary and anonymous. Questions were provided in both English and Japanese to avoid any potential confusion. Students were encouraged to give honest feedback due to the anonymity and 25 of 32 student responded (78% response rate).

In addition to general questions about the textbook and classes, five questions were asked in relation to feedback and student progress sheets. These questions and the corresponding responses are shown in *Figures 1-5*.

### Question 1

*Did knowing your class performance positively or negatively motivate you?*

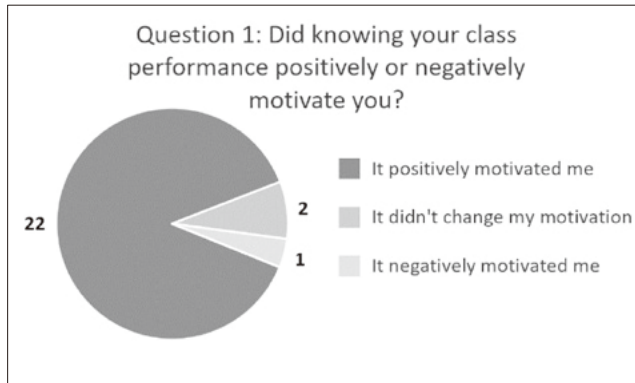


Figure 1

### Question 2

*Was it useful to know your assessment grades immediately?*

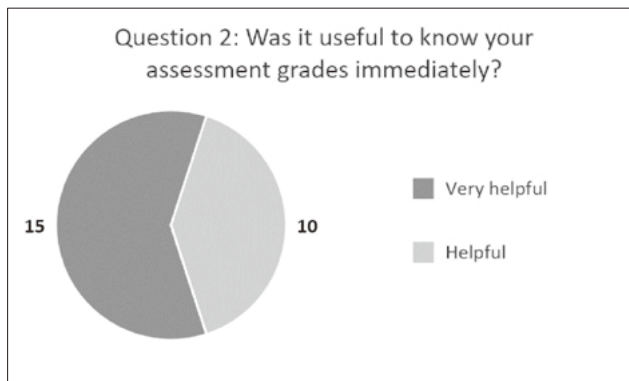


Figure 2

### Question 3

*Was your progress sheet easy to understand?*

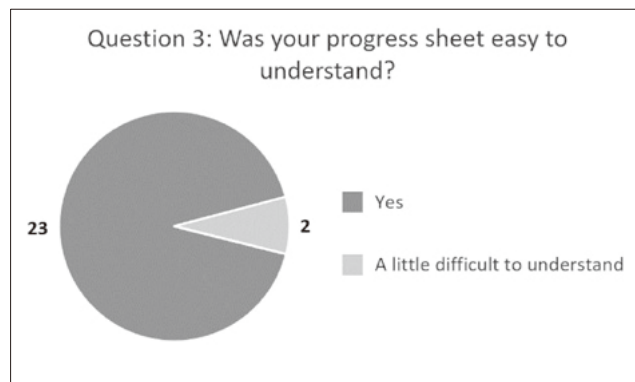


Figure 3

#### Question 4

*Did your progress sheet help you understand your ongoing class performance?*

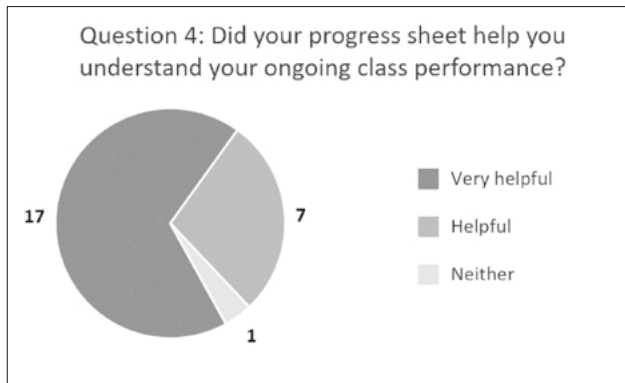


Figure 4

#### Question 5

*Did taking responsibility for your progress sheet change your attitude toward your assessments?*

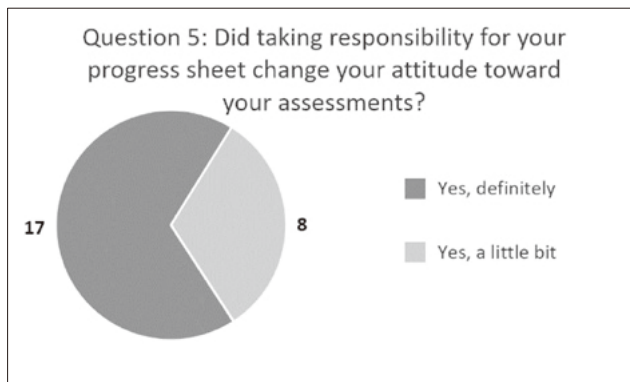


Figure 5

Overall students stated that they were positively motivated by having access to their class performance as they proceeded through the course (*Figure 1*). By having their progress sheets being updated every week (for attendance and participation), students were always fully informed of their progress. Following from this, all the students found that receiving immediate feedback was a positive thing, stating that the immediacy of feedback was either “helpful” or “very helpful” (*Figure 2*). Feedback was given verbally, on printed assessment feedback sheets, or on their progress sheets. Most students found that the information on their progress sheet was easy to parse, however a few noted that the information was not presented clearly (*Figure 3*). Regardless of any difficulties in the presentation of information, students felt that their progress sheets helped them understand how they were progressing (*Figure 4*). Taking responsibility for the safekeeping of their assessment records was mostly seen as a positive by students (*Figure 5*).

## 5. Teacher Reflection

### 5.1 Positive outcomes

One of the aims of the Immediate Method is to provide feedback and grades immediately. While this meant more preparation time and a juggling of in-class timing, this had a two-fold benefit. First and foremost, students knew how they performed immediately and could reflect on their feedback. This information could be digested while they were still “in the moment” and the feedback could be immediately connected to their recent efforts. Secondly, it meant significantly less administration at the end of semester for the teachers. Marks were quickly tallied and distributed, with only very minor adjustments needed and no students were surprised by their final grades.

Students quickly adapted to the low-risk assessments. At first students were hesitant about having so many assessments, however after the first interview, they quickly realised that the assessments were short, low pressure and fun. While there were three larger assessments, these were scaffolded to be connected and iterative, with students essentially refining their work over time, with their final presentation not given more importance than the previous two. This helped with students not feeling that their grades were dependant on one or two large tests. Even if a student missed one or two assessments, or performed “badly”, it would be clear how they were progressing and where they could potentially improve.

Finally, with a consistent focus on talking and conversation, classes were lively and students were highly involved in all the activities.

### 5.2 Areas for improvement

As this was the first semester involving a new teacher, a new textbook, and a new style of assessment, there was a significant amount of preparation work for myself and the other ICS teacher. However, over time, the amount of preparation time will be reduced as the classes and assessments are refined.

Time management of both textbook unit material and assessments was a constant issue, often with not enough time allocated for both. As with any new textbook, it is only when classes are actually taught that the timing of activities can be assessed. Similarly, conducting various assessments for the first time exposed teachers to areas that could be improved in future, from the logistics of how to run the assessment, to providing more streamlined feedback.

Lack of time also resulted in not enough constructive formative feedback being given, beyond grades and sometimes some basic rubric feedback. With a more relaxed timetable for covering the textbook material in second semester, we are hoping to provide more targeted feedback, and also organising at least one face to face session with students during the semester.

While students were directed, in English and Japanese, as to activities that can be undertaken in the down-time while teachers were conducting assessments, some students simply



default to chatting with classmates in Japanese. This was also noted by Marchand in their implementation of the Immediate Method (Marchand, 2006). This could be a result of students not having clear examples of expectations set for them, or could be a mismatch between Western teachers expectations for student maturity and self-directed learning vs Japanese student expectations. To this end, while it would be ideal for students to take responsibility for their own learning, the reality is that as teachers we may need to set specific tasks that need to be completed by the end of a given class.

Progress sheets were visually a little unclear, and with the course and assessment timing and composition changing on the fly, some elements were superfluous, leading to a visually cluttered look. The class schedule has been adjusted for second semester, and it is less likely that changes will need to be made to the progress sheets.

## 6. Recommendations

The following areas have been identified as areas for improvement for the ongoing assessment and feedback for ICS heading into second semester. At the end of semester 2, ICS teachers will have a fuller understanding of the application and interaction of the textbook and the assessment dynamic of the course:

- more consistent, non-evaluative formative feedback for assessments.
- more streamlined and informative rubric feedback.
- simplify and clarify the student progress sheet.
- ensuring at least one face-to-face feedback session with students before halfway through the semester.
- more detailed survey feedback from students on the second semester refinements.

## 7. Conclusion

Teachers are often seen as role models in Confusionist contexts, gurus who impart information and are those outside of the learning context (Kikuwa et al 2017) and while this may be the case for a lot of student's learning, the nature of their chosen area of study GCD students means that they may eventually be dealing with quite different global contexts, where more self-reflection and assertiveness are called for.

The past semester of ICS was seen as a chance to introduce a hybrid form of formative assessment with third year students, to essentially see if a stronger version would be accepted. Overall, students responded very positively to the approach. This is encouraging for ICS teachers, however given that each student has individual preferences for feedback, teachers may still need to create an atmosphere of accessibility for students who are hesitant to ask for feedback publicly. It may be that a blending of formative and summative testing is the optimal mix for a Japanese university environment. There is nothing inherently "wrong" with summative testing, and it may often be preferable in some contexts as students are

accustomed to it and it can relieve stress or the feeling of being singled out (Talandis Jr., 2017).


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### 9. Appendix 1

**Semester I, 2023 Progress Sheet** International Communication Strategies I  
Wednesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> Period

	日本語	English
Name		
Student ID		
Email Address		



	Date	Attendance	Participation - 15%	Comments
1	12/4		4	
2	19/4		4	
3	26/4		2	Remember your (+) sentence.
4	10/5		3	
5	17/5		3	
6	24/5		3	
7	31/5		2	
8	8/6		3	
9	14/6		4	
10	21/6		4	
11	28/6		4	
12	5/7		4	
13	12/7		4	
14	19/7		4	
15	26/7			

In-Class Assessments - 30%		
1 4.5	2 4.5	3 4
4 4.5	5	6

Presentations - 30%		
1 8.7	2 8.1	3 5
		4 4.4

Writing - 10%
7.8
<del> </del>

Vocabulary Study - 15%												
				Review					Review			

Figure 6 - Example Progress Sheet

—2023年 9 月25日 受理—