

Contested Perspective from Undergraduate Students and Teachers on Formative Assessment: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: The concept of "assessment for learning" has been widely defined as a form of assessment that facilitates students' learning. In an undergraduate setting, the concept is mostly applied on formative assessment as a form of repeated measurement followed by direct feedback. This study aims to explore the student's and teacher's perspectives about undergraduate formative assessment.

Methods: We conducted a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach. Data collection saturated in six FGDs (N=44) from undergraduate students, two FGDs (N=15), followed by five in-depth interviews of teachers. The data transcripts were categorized and determined to the themes from teachers and students and a contested themes from teachers and students.

Results: The subthemes interpreted from students such as (1) high concern on final scores, (2) no impact for next learning activities, (3) negative feedback is accepted as a consequence, (4) instructive feedback and explanation of material are preferable. The subthemes interpreted from teachers namely: (1) difficulty in determining individual scores; (2) students always need guidance; (3) feedback delivered related to the mastery of content. Finally, we interpreted the contested themes from students and teachers, namely (1) A "summative perception" of formative assessment, 2) The hierarchical relationships in providing feedback, and 3) The "teacher-centered" feedback delivery.

Conclusion: We found that the contested perspective of students and teachers represents the score-based mindset as well as hierarchical and teacher-centered feedback in the Indonesian context of undergraduate formative assessment. Further research should be considered in the adaptation of a new paradigm in formative assessment.

Keywords: *assessment; formative; undergraduate; qualitative*



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INTRODUCTION

In past decades, the concept of student assessment in health profession education generally focuses on the achievement of learning outcomes. This concept has led to the perception that assessment results reflect the quality of students' learning or known as a phrase "assessment of learning".¹ Recently, the paradigm has been changed into the mechanism of assessment that has a positive impact on student learning, represents as the "assessment for learning" concept.^{2,3} However, the relationship between assessment and student learning still needs to explore, such as the alignment of assessment events and the operational terms of its learning effect.^{2,4} In the summative approach, the impact on student learning behaviors represents pre-assessment, post-assessment, and pure assessment effects.⁴ The problem

occurs when the results of the summative assessment are used as the indicator of successful learning resulting in the pre-assessment learning impact such as a hard study just before the assessment.⁵

Concerning better quality on learning impact, the formative approach can facilitate the "assessment for learning" concept with a continuous assessment followed by direct feedback. The form of formative assessment known as Test Enhanced-Learning (TEL) has a positive impact on students' learning through the repeated measurement followed by rationale feedback for the student.^{4,5} The feedback quality of formative assessment plays an important role in enhancing the learning impact.⁶

In terms of direct feedback from the medical teacher, many studies argue that there is a cultural influence that distinguishes the process of providing feedback.⁷⁻⁹ Suhoyo et al. differentiated Indonesian students tend to perceived feedback during clerkships as more instructive than Dutch students.¹⁰ This results in line with the national culture perspective from Hofstede, which classified Indonesia as a high power-distance country that represents in teacher-student relationship.^{10,11}

The formative assessment can improve the learning impact and initiate the "assessment for learning" paradigm during undergraduate health professional education. However, in the Indonesian context, the challenges found in the lecturers' and students' perspectives about formative assessment and their relationship based on national culture. This underlies the researchers to explore the perspective and experience of undergraduate students and teachers in the formative assessment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study design

The qualitative inquiry used in this research to explore the perspective of formative assessment from teachers and students at the undergraduate level. The phenomenological approach ^{12,13} was provided with guiding questions as follows : (1) How do students and teachers define a formative assessment? ; (2) How do students and teachers experience during the formative assessment?

Subjects and data collection

Students and teachers from the undergraduate level were recruited in a purposive approach with inclusion criteria such as minimum at the second academic year and three years teachers' experience. The data was collected using the semi-structural interview method through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for students and lecturers. We conducted six FGDs (N=44) for undergraduate students, two FGDs (N=15) for teachers. To increase the degree of trustworthiness, triangulation, such as in-depth interviews, is conducted from two lecturers and four students and member checking.

Ethical consideration

The study was submitted to and approved by Jenderal Achmad Yani University Institutional Review Board No.018/UM1.03/2020. Informed consent was obtained from all study participants.

Data analysis

We used the Qualitative data analysis with the Phenomenology approach to describe the students' and teachers' experience in formative assessment. The focused questions were about their experience and meaning on formative assessment. The data transcripts from FGD and in-depth interviews were coded and categorized to determine the themes from teachers and students. After that, we contested the teacher's and students' themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' perspective of formative assessment

In obtaining data about the meaning of formative assessment for students, researchers need to ensure that students have understood the definition of formative assessment. Based on the four FGDs, it was discovered that most students had not understood the definition of formative assessment.

"Formative assessment is possible .. hmm .. assessment is assessed structurally where there are already values that are existed and determined by the faculty .." KU_02_16

"Same ... I also don't know ... I've never heard about it, Doc" KU_04_17

The existence of a literal misunderstanding related to the definition of formative assessment made the researcher agree to probe the question to "Have students ever felt assessed during the learning process?". With this question, respondents were considered able to tell and interpret formative assessments accordingly to answer research questions.

Furthermore, in interpretive analysis, researchers resume four themes that form the meaning of formative assessment for students, namely (1) feel assessed in learning activities; (2) concerns influence final scores, (3) negative feedback is accepted as a consequence, (4) instructive feedback and explanation of material have more impact on learning.

Feel assessed in learning activities

We found that students perceived being assessed differently in each learning method. This finding follows one of the definitions of formative assessment, which is the assessment carried out in the learning process. However, students also experienced unstandardized behavior among teachers.

"Yes, I do feel I get marked by tutors during the learning process, but it seems like.. depends on the lecturer, sometimes I feel judged by the lecturers, sometimes not at all.."(KU_01_16)

Concerns in the Final Scores

Students further expressed their concern that this formative assessment process would influence the final grade. In addition to concerns about the final grade, students also conveyed several factors in the formative assessment, such as a discrepancy with the final grade and were unable to reflect their abilities.

"sometimes the grade doesn't synchronize, sometimes we are active and only got marked at 70... and I began to think where do actually the score comes from?" (KU-02-16)

"...So, I feel, the scores are not real." (KU-01-17)

"I often ask... why is my score smaller than him, so I actually feel confused" (KU-05-16)

".., this is valuable, even though only 15% but influential to add my final score.." (KG-04-18)

c. Negative feedback is accepted as a consequence

In this study, the theme was obtained that students experience feedback that tends to be in a negative form. Furthermore, we found that students let themselves accept this condition due to their high respect for their teachers.

“I once ever experienced .. my group, actually did .. the lecturer was angry and threw our book on medical skills ... after that .. well .. it means we have to apologize...” (KU-01-08)

“If I were ... like ... what should I do? Some lecturers seem happy if they embarrass us whenever we can't answer the question properly .. we know maybe we got a lot of mistakes.” (KU-02-09)

“.. so I'm confused, this lecturer wants to tell us or wants to give us grades, but the method through embarrassing us if it's wrong ... this is hmm ... like the embarrassment based learning ...” (KU-03-16)

The phenomenon that we found in this research is the impact of a hierarchical relationship between lecturers and students, which is seen in the expressions of “embarrassment-based learning.” The phrase illustrates that students have an awareness that the hierarchical relationship produces ineffectiveness in feedback during formative assessment. This hierarchical relationship also leads to the acceptance of a negative form of feedback.

Instructive feedback and explanation of material have more impact on learning.

The phenomenon found in this study is that students have the preference in the form of feedback that is instructive and detailed about the knowledge that must be known. This can illustrate that the concept of “student-centered” has not been optimally applied in the context of Indonesian culture.

“Getting feedback from the lecturer is fun if the lecturer explains everything ... and it doesn't complicate us ...” (KU-02-11)

“I can learn from lecturers who tell me clearly, and also learn about what I haven't known yet.” (KU-02-06)

Teacher's perspective of formative assessment

Lecturers are at the forefront of success in a curriculum. Nowadays, medical lecturers not only convey information or knowledge but are also demanded to be able to facilitate the learning process, be part of curriculum development and be a good assessor. In the formative assessment, lecturers have an important role in realizing the goal of improving the quality of learning through assessment or the concept of “assessment for learning” through the process of observation and giving feedback. Based on the data interpretation, the lecturer is considered to have a sufficient understanding of the definition of formative assessment so that data retrieval can be done without changing questions in the FGD. The results of the interpretation of the lecturer interview data found four themes, namely: (1) difficulty in determining individual scores; (2) feedback delivered related to the mastery of student material. (3) students always need to improve themselves.

Difficulty in determining individual scores

The phenomenon shows that lecturers are concerned more about the score of formative assessment rather than the "drives learning" value. This can be seen from several quotations that reflect the high consideration of lecturers in the scoring process in the formative assessment, such as how to determine the scoring and difficulty assessing individual students.

"It takes time to assess, score or analyze the ability of students" (DKU-01)

"Scoring formative assessment ... if it is made too detailed, it is difficult, because the time is divided. But on the other hand, being too subjective also confuses..." (DKU-03)

"So far I have assessed their activeness, but it is rather difficult if I have to assess individually, so sometimes the score is taken from the activeness of the group" (DKG-01)

Based on these findings, although formative assessment has been carried out, the function of formative assessment is still perceived as summative or determining the mark of the students.

Feedback given related to student's mastery of the material

As a formative assessor, lecturers need to implement providing ideal feedback for students. The importance of feedback in realizing the "assessment for learning" approach underlies research questions about the meaning of giving feedback to lecturers. In this study, we found the phenomenon that lecturers interpret feedback as a means to give mini-lectures in a tutorial group. These findings indicate the pattern of "teacher-centered" is still something that requires attention.

"For me, the meaning of feedback is the answer from the lecturer, as usually after the discussion the students ask "what is the feedback, Doc?" ... Then I explain the answer" (DKU-07)

Students always need to improve themselves.

Ideal feedback is an interaction between lecturer and student that will affect social relations between lecturer and student. In the context of hierarchical culture with high power distance, lecturers are in a higher position than students. The phenomenon found in this study shows the impression of students who need to improve themselves or, in other words, always make mistakes.

"Students were always shown an error in the discussion, for example, they are a bit off the mark, or even completely inactive .. there I sometimes irritated so see them.." (DKU-05)

"I told the students "why haven't they learned from their mistakes?".." (DKU-04)

The contested interpretation of students and teachers' perception

Based on the themes that have been interpreted, a linkage model can be made between the meaning of formative assessment of lecturers and students, namely (1) A "summative perception" of formative assessment, 2) The hierarchical relationships in providing feedback, and 3) The "teacher-centered" feedback delivery.

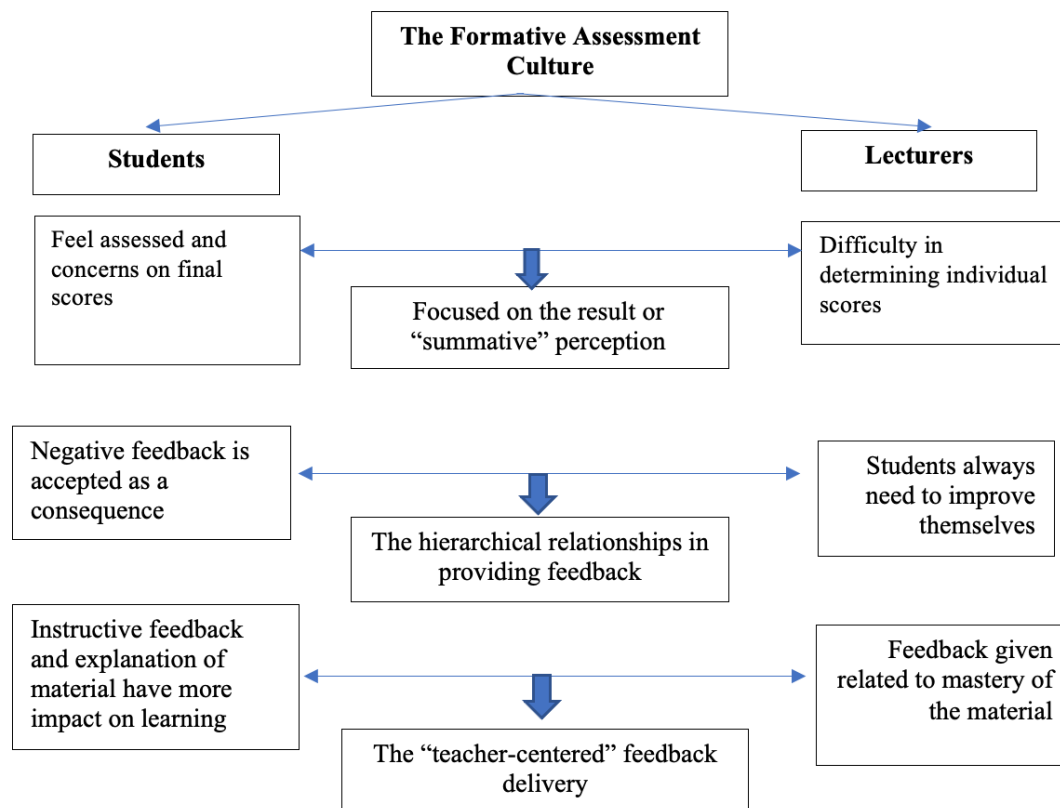


Figure 1. The contested themes from student and teacher perception in Formative Assessment

In this study, we combined the student perception with the teachers' point of view, which hopefully will deepen our understanding of the hidden phenomena in formative assessment. From the students' point of view, feeling assessed during learning is an indication that formative assessment has been carried out in our system. Harmoniously, teachers also have the same concern about the results, especially difficult to judge individual scores. Norcini et al. noted that the essential function of the formative assessment is to stimulate learning during the learning process.¹ In this study, we found the phenomena of a "summative perception" in the formative assessment. This perception naturally came from the teaching-learning culture concerning the traditional essence of student assessment, which is known simply as a judgment score for students' performance.

As a trigger in student learning, the formative assessment needs feedback as a powerful vehicle.^{5,8} Through constructive feedbacks, students can reflect on their current abilities and utilize the feedback to improve their learning quality. Recently, many studies related feedback as a form of "dialogue" rather than one-way communication. This new form of feedback not only prioritizes lecturers' skills in providing feedback and students' ability to receive feedback but is also dedicated to the quality of interaction as a form of a dialogue between teacher and student.¹⁵ Approaching the social interaction, many researchers come up with the strength of cultural factors influencing the feedback process.^{10,16,17,18}

We marked two phenomena in the feedback culture in the formative assessment, such as the hierarchical relationships between teacher and student; and the teacher-centered approach of feedback delivery. The hierarchical relationships describe as a condition

"While the teachers' perception that students always make mistakes and deserved a negative form of feedback, students tend to accept that reality seemed to be submissive and passive."

These phenomena are connected with the Indonesian context as proposed by Hofstede with a high power-distance and collectivist culture.¹¹ Suhoyo et al. also notice the different perceptions about feedback in Indonesian and Dutch students.¹⁰ The high power distance illustrates the distance created by one's strengths or can be analogous to a hierarchical approach. Furthermore, in the theory of communication, during the conversation or dialogue, a person will take a position during the interaction called a Positioning theory.¹⁹ This position will result in interactions that then recur and end up being patterns of social relations. In the context of hierarchy culture, interaction patterns produce student positions lower than the teacher.^{10,11,17,19}

The second phenomenon of a feedback culture, following the mechanism of feedback in the formative assessment that generates the learning enhancement. The credibility of formative assessment is situated in feedback quality which determines how the teachers provide, how students achieve, and how the interactions' happened.^{1,20} The "assessment for learning" concept brings a closer relationship between teaching-learning culture and the assessment process.^{2,4} In the Indonesian context, we found that teachers provide feedback by the instructive approach, and this also becomes the students' preference. The instructive approach on teachers as well as students represents the "teacher-centered" feedback. The Indonesian students' preference for instructive feedback was also founded by Suhoyo et al.¹⁰ In conjunction with the teaching-learning process, and this finding also describes the Asian culture during PBL adaptation, including the shift from teacher to student-centered.²¹

On the purpose of formative assessment, which is under the concept of "assessment for learning", it should be able to be a driving force from faculty and students to adopt this approach. However, the cultural and contextual issues described as a part of the hidden curriculum should be prioritized in consideration of the new concept application. The results of interpretations of the perceptions of students and teachers in this study are one of the portraits of institutional culture in applying the teaching approach in formative assessment.

CONCLUSION

These findings represent that the teaching approach (teacher-centered) and sociocultural aspects influenced the orientation of assessment that described as a score-minded in formative assessment. Hence, we conclude that the implementation of the "assessment for learning" concept in undergraduate education should be preceded in the transformation of the teaching approach from teacher to student-centered.

Further Research

We recommended this research as a basis to develop the formative assessment model for undergraduate medical education that is in line with the "assessment for learning" concept in the hierarchical culture.

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