

A Study on Formative Assessment of EFL in the Multimedia-based Environment in China

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Abstract

An effective assessment system is indispensable to the current reform of EFL teaching in China which emphasizes the importance of the Multimedia Computer-assisted Language Learning (MCALL). A tentative model of formative assessment for MCALL is designed and implemented in two classes attended by 58 students. Qualitative and quantitative data show that the introduced assessment system not only stimulates learner's motivation and interest to learn, but also makes it possible to monitor and facilitate learner's learning process as well as their autonomy in learning. More noticeably observed is the successfully cultivation of learner's autonomy, cooperative learning and communicative skills.

Keywords *multimedia-based learning, Formative Assessment, Learners' Autonomy, Cooperative Learning.*

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese Ministry of Education officially released the *English Curriculum Requirement* in 2007 following the trial and revised version. This *Requirement* points out that the evaluation of students' learning consists of a formative assessment and a summative assessment. Consequently the formative assessment has been accorded more importance than before in English teaching in China. A formative assessment is based on the evaluation of the basic knowledge mastered by the students as well as the level of the learning content, setting the curriculum objective as the unified standard and focusing on the teaching process, the students' development and their personal advancement. Since the use of information technology and multi-media approach is advocated in English teaching and learning in the curriculum, the traditional summative evaluation system which has dominated in China seems not in accordance with national curriculum reform in terms of evaluation. Therefore the multiple evaluation system focusing on formative evaluation is encouraged for use in English teaching in China (taken from the preface of *College English Curriculum Requirements for English Majors* Published by Higher Education Press in China, translated by the author). Under this reform background in China this research has been carried out. In order to make what it is discussed here clearer, the main tests popularly used in China as means of evaluation in EFL education must be mentioned.

Tests as evaluation in EFL Education at the tertiary level in China

In EFL education in China, the extended use of tests was witnessed between the late 1980s and the whole period of the 1990s, when three large-scale EFL tests, NMET (National Matriculation English Test or called college entrance exams), CET (College English Test for non English majors Band 4 and 6) and TEM (Test for English majors Band 4 and 8), were developed and used as tools to monitor EFL education in both basic and higher education.

CET was created with an original purpose to have a national test to ensure if the qualitative and quantitative requirements stipulated in the national syllabus had been met, and to provide an accurate and objective measurement of EFL ability of general college student (Yang & Weir, 1998). The test results in each administration were standardized so that the comparisons can be made across different administrations to see if the national standard of EFL education had been raised (Yang, 2002). The number of participants in CET had been increasing each year. CET was initially administrated to 100,000 learners in 1987. The figure increased to over 6,000,000 in 2002, 60 times the original number of examinees. Till 2005, the role of CET had been expanded from a measurement tool of college learners' English proficiency, to a tool to compare students' achievement across districts, schools and individual students, to a means to decide whether a learner can get a college diploma, and whether he can be offered a job.

A similar trend has been witnessed in TEM recently, also with an increasing number of participants and increasing stakes of the test at the same time. According to Yao (2003), TEM 4 and 8 were administered to 9582 and 4459 English majors respectively around the country in 1993. The number was quickly increased to 65,000 for TEM 4 in 2001, and 130,000 for TEM 8 in 2006. When TEM was constructed, it was intended as a means to ascertain whether the standards set in the syllabus were met (Yao 2003), and to set standards and criteria for teaching (Zhou, 2002). In early 1992 when the 1st Committee of the Higher Education Council for Teaching Foreign Language Majors was formed, a unanimous agreement was reached among the committee members that a national test would be an effective way to ascertain that standards in the syllabus were met (Yao, 2003). Now, the test results of TEM 4 are used in some universities as a means to evaluate teaching and learning. In these contexts, TEM has become more of a tool to control EFL teaching for English majors than ever.

IMPACT OF TESTS ON EFL TEACHING AND LEARNING IN CHINA

In China, backwash studies on EFL language tests are a more recent endeavor, beginning from a review study by Huang & Yang (2002) Concerning the three large-scale language tests, backwash studies of NMET were conducted by Li and Zeng (2002), and Qi (2004), those of CET-4 were by Huang (2002), Zhou (2002) and (Tang 2005b), and that of CET SET (Spoken English Test) by Jin (2000).

In the studies of NMET backwash, Li & Zeng (2002) and Qi (2004) revealed the original good intention of the test designers of using the test to correct bad teaching had turned out an illusion. The tail of the test had wagged the dog of teaching in the

wrong way. It was found that the teachers in the classroom were teaching the test items and test-taking strategies rather than the communicative skills aimed at by the testers. Qi concluded that the reason was that the different functions of the assessment were in conflict with each other and could not be fulfilled at the same time. The role of promoting changes in learning and teaching could hardly be achieved by a test, which is essentially used for making important decisions about test-takers.

As for CET, the study by Huang (2002) showed that the intensity of the impact of CET varied in different universities with different “pass rates” in the exam, indicating that high-achieving schools may be subject to less impact than those low-achieving ones. Tang (2005b) investigated students’ perceptions of the influence of the high-stakes language test in the aspects of learning attitude, content, method etc. The study revealed that while the students did not mind having an external test to know how well they themselves had done in learning, they were strongly against the use of the test as a control on their English learning.

Studying for test in this research was found common, and in-depth learning was inhibited by intense test preparation. Much time had been spent in memorizing words and doing simulated CET tests. While the person who had succeeded in the test felt more motivated to learn, those who failed were under great psychological pressure to re-take the test and suffer failure again. It was also noted that low-achieving students needed the useful advice for English learning. The spoken test for CET (CET-SET) began in 1995 and marked a shift in CET towards a more authentic and meaningful test. The investigation by Jin (2004) found out that the teachers welcomed the oral test as a supplement to the CET-written examination. But the claimed positive backwash on teaching was very small because little classroom time could be set aside for teaching spoken English (Huang, 2002), and because the CET-SET is administered to a limited number of top students and on a much smaller scale than the CET written examination. There has been no backwash study on TEM till now and it is unclear how TEM has influenced teaching EFL to English majors. But since some universities are now using TEM scores in decisions relating to conferment of degrees, the backwash of the test in such contexts can be potentially harmful to English learning.

New forms of assessment Introduced into Curriculum

As mentioned above, we may say that the very fact of policy makers’ overuse of testing as a tool to hold education accountable can bring about unintended negative backwash effects on teaching and learning.

The curriculum reform for *College English* beginning in 2004 and *English Curriculum Requirement* in 2007 have advocated using formative assessment along with summative assessment. Summative assessment is generally considered to be undertaken at the end of a course or programme of study in order to measure and communicate student performance for purposes of certification and (latterly) (their emphasis) accountability (English Curriculum Requirement, 2007). However, the purpose of English learning for the students is to obtain the certification determined by the final examination which accounts more than formative evaluation in the real situation though formative assessment generally takes place during a course with the

express purpose of improving students' learning. The official documents state the relationship between assessment and learning. And only by integrating assessment and instruction can assessment not disrupt teaching and learning, but promote them (English Curriculum Requirement, 2007). The essence of the relationship between teaching and formative assessment actually is a dialectical one. The notion is accepted that teaching evaluations are an important element in English teaching. A comprehensive, objective, scientific and accurate evaluation system is crucially important to achieve the curriculum objectives. Therefore, the new forms of assessment are a major part of the instruction and should be integrated with them, informing whether and how learning takes place and what factors may promote or inhibit it.

The assessment of EFL education at the tertiary level in China, so far, has not been studied systematically; in particular the empirical studies on this area are very few and limited. This current research is trying to propose a tentative model of formative assessment implemented in EFL class from an approach of multimedia-based English teaching and learning.

PROPOSED MODEL OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT BASED ON MULTIMEDIA

The introduction of the Internet into English teaching has led to a profound reform in teaching philosophies and teaching structures. The student-centered approach to teaching has been reinforced in this new teaching approach. Network technology creates a helpful environment and conditions for autonomous and personalized learning. Since the new model proposed intends to place the students at the center of the learning process, traditional summative assessments that only emphasize the final result have not been able to make objective and scientific evaluations on some learning factors in the multimedia-based teaching approach. For example, it is difficult to make a comprehensive assessment by a quantitative method because of various language acquisition factors including students' interest and attitude towards foreign language learning, autonomous learning and cooperative capacities, as well as the learning strategies and cross-cultural communication awareness. It will lead to a deviation in the reliability and validity concerning the evaluation, and it will also not produce a benign aftereffect on English multimedia-based teaching.

Characteristics of multimedia-based EFL

The use of multimedia technology is the most advanced teaching method adopted in education in China. It uses computers to combine various media together, such as computers, video recorders, tape recorders, episcopes, VCD teaching software and disk players, which allow the teachers to use the relevant media flexibly according to the specific requirements of the courses. In English teaching, the use of multimedia technology has become one of the teaching methods in the classroom, offering advantages that the traditional classroom teaching could not replicate. Teachers can easily store and use the various teaching resources, such as syllabuses, examination papers, examples, exercises, and lecture notes in the computer. It also offers a word

processing program that helps the teachers to organize their resources, complete teaching statistics, and carry out analysis and evaluation-related tasks. Currently there are some major educational publishers in China developing network-based language teaching platforms including information related to English teaching and multimedia-based education. On this platform, computer games are designed to help the students to memorize the words. A number of timed readings and listening exercises are designed and stored for students to practice. It also records the mock spoken English exercises, providing the students with a real environment to complete highly individualized exercises. In addition, it also contains a large number of original English audio and visual materials as well as clips from classical English movies, offering the students a rich and authentic range of materials to familiarize themselves with the local customs and practices of the English speaking countries. The theory that lies behind all multimedia-assisted teaching software and teaching materials currently adopted is that of constructivism. This theory is wide-ranging in its content, but the core concept could be summarized into a single sentence: it involves focusing on the students, emphasizing the students' self-motivated research and quest for knowledge and their own creative response to the acquired knowledge, rather than simply mechanically transferring the knowledge from the teachers' head to the students' notebook like the traditional teaching.

According to the researches on Multimedia Computer-assisted Language Learning and formative assessment in recent years in China (Cai & Wu, 2003; Cao & Zhang, 2004; Hu & Zhang, 2003; Jia, 2003; Guo, 2004; Li, 2005; Lu & Li, 2003; Zhu, 2004) the characteristics of the two could be summarized as follows.

Table 1 The Characteristics of multimedia-based teaching and formative assessment

Network-Based Teaching	Formative Assessment
Theoretical principle: student-centered pattern, constructivism	Student-centered pattern, constructivism, humanism, recently developed
Types of learning: autonomous learning, corporative learning, personalized learning, contextual learning, interactive learning	Autonomous learning, cooperative learning, personalized learning.
The function of the teacher: promote and organize corporative learning; monitor the learning process; adjust and help learning; understand individuals and instruct individually	The roles of the teacher are multi-functional: organizer and coordinator; the helper and promoter for the students; the information feedback provider.
The position of the students: student-centered	Predominant: the valuator of the learning effect

Some scholars (Cai & Wu, 2003; Cao & Zhang, 2004;) with the constructivism learning theory argue that the multimedia-based learners, on one hand, can autonomously select the content and method of learning and control the learning process, while on the other hand they can also assess the learning behavior by themselves. Constructive learning is a process of accumulation of knowledge during which the learner's learning object has a definite orientation. What to learn, how much to learn and how to learn. The

process of their learning is established on the basis of their existing knowledge with their new knowledge reconstructed. Learners are required to evaluate their constructive learning processes and results through self-diagnosis and self-examination. The key point of a constructive teaching evaluation is a process of acquiring knowledge, clarifying that the evaluation system of constructing knowledge is more important than the one that only emphasizes the result (Li, 2005). A formative assessment is people-oriented and based on constructivism. It accentuates the evaluation of students' learning processes, the development on emotions, attitude and strategies and so forth and provides feedbacks.

The design of the teaching evaluation model

This research not only applies the formative assessment model to the implementation of testing, self-reflection and the monitoring of teaching procedures, but also applies it to train students' autonomous and cooperative learning abilities. It also promotes and coordinates the development of students' learning abilities through regular feedback, ensuring that the evaluation process is an important part of the teaching process. As soon as the course starts, the teacher introduces the evaluation system (Diagram 1) and tells students to make a comprehensive assessment on their learning styles, learning attitude, learning strategies, learning effect and so on according to their performance in each learning activity. The evaluative documents include 1) students' study portfolio; 2) a teacher's observation record; 3) an evaluation on the learning effect. The primary basis used in the formative assessment in the multimedia-based teaching can be illustrated as follows.

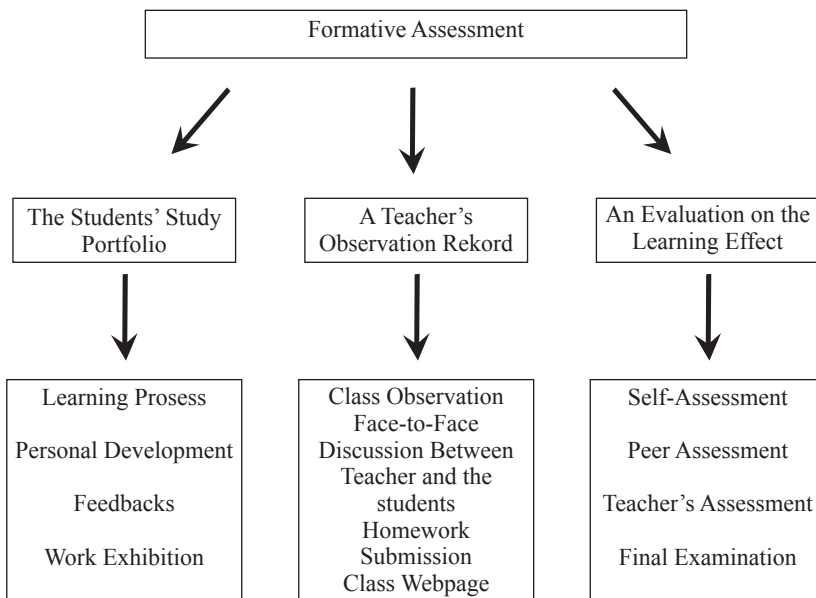


Diagram 1 Evaluation system

The students' study portfolio includes a personal development assessment, a learning process record, feedbacks from other teachers and classmates, examples of their work (drama performances, themed reports, role plays, etc.). The teacher's observation record mainly refers to the class observation, face-to-face discussions between students and the teacher, the submission of homework, and the class's webpage message (each class has its QQ Group, a free space to pose questions, discuss and talk whatever you like with teachers, and classmates, more like Facebook). The evaluation of students' learning effect comes from students' self-assessment, peer assessment, and incentive assessment (encouraging comments) conducted by teachers as well as the assessment whether the students have completed the meaningful construction of the learned knowledge and a final examination. According to the evaluation standards and factors above, a comprehensive evaluation can be made for the students' learning effects in order to guarantee the validity and feasibility.

Research participants

Two classes comprising 58 freshmen students in the year of 2010 participated in this experiment, majoring in English in the author's university. The textbook used was the new edition of *Contemporary College English* published in 2008 by Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press of China. This experiment lasted for one year. Based on the relevant collected data, the research analyzed the result of multimedia-based teaching and the aftereffect of the evaluation model on the students.

Data collection

In accordance with the evaluation model for this research, the author collected both qualitative and quantitative data during the course of the process, mainly including 1) student portfolios; 2) questionnaire surveys; 3) teacher's observation records; 4) self-assessments, peer assessments and teacher's assessments.

Student portfolio

The student portfolio refers to a record of a student's learning process in a particular period and a collection of his/her works (Genesee & Upshur 2001:99). The main purpose is to record the students' learning process and acknowledge their achievement and learning procedures in order to encourage them. The material collected in the portfolio is as follows:

1. Design a form concerning personal development assessment at the beginning of a new term (including listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, etc.). At the end of a term, students are asked to check and evaluate whether they have achieved the planned objectives;
2. A test or a record reflecting students' learning situations;
3. A collection of assessments from the student himself/herself, the peers and the teachers from different periods during the year;

4. Record the process of a particular learning task
5. Learning plan and allocated time for it.
6. Self-reflection of learning.

Questionnaire survey

A questionnaire survey was conducted at the end of a term, including the effectiveness of the evaluation model for the multimedia-based teaching on students' leaning motivation, interest, autonomous and cooperative learning ability, as well as the role of the teachers in this new evaluative system.

Teacher's observation record

The teacher's observation record was mainly based on the face-to-face discussions, the webpage message, the drama play, theme-based English demonstration, situational dialogue, thematic debate, group discussion and other learning activities. The face-to-face discussion played the most important role in the record. Among 72 teaching hours per term (4 hours/18 weeks) the teacher spent another two hours a week talking with the students from each group. It helped to know their learning procedures and whether they had finished their tasks, as well as any problems that may have arisen. At the same time, the teacher recorded the evaluation result for every unit and provided further advice for students.

Students' self-assessment and peer assessment

The data of the students' self-assessments and peer assessments were mainly based on the personal development assessment form and the compositions that had been assessed by themselves, their peers and their teacher. Personal development assessment was designed in accordance with the Self-Assessment/Peer Assessment Form for Students' English Competence in the newly released *English Curriculum Requirement*. Its central aim was for students and their peers to be able to evaluate their language learning by themselves. Through self-assessment and peer assessment, it helped the students to understand the requirements and the objectives of the English Curriculum, as well as the problems in their learning process. Thus, students were enabled to set their own goals, to clarify their learning problems and reset the objectives.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

It was discovered that the formative assessment model played a positive role in teaching following the data analysis.

It stimulates the students' language learning motivation and interest

Learning motivation and learning interest are the two most important factors to be a successful language learner, especially in the multimedia-based language teaching characterized by autonomous learning. Since the implementation of this evaluation

system, we have collected relevant data about the influence on their learning motivation and interest by means of questionnaire surveys. There were 58 students in class 1 and class 2 all together who answered the questionnaire. Each class had 29 students (*see the following Table 2*).

Table 2 The influence of the multimedia-based evaluation model on the students' learning motivation and interest

Factors	29 Stu.in Class 1	29 Stu.in Class 2	Average (%)
	No./%	No./%	
Release the study stress	22/70.5	24/84	77
Enhance self-confidence	18/62	17/60.5	61
Enjoy the learning process	24/83	23/80	81
Enjoy the feeling of success	15/51	19/67	59
Boost the learning initiative	18/62	17/57	60
Stimulate the learning interest	16/56	19/67	62

Table 2 illustrates that the evaluation model we designed had a positive aftereffect on the students' learning motivation and interest. According to the theory of Constructivism, there will be no successful result produced by the constructive activities without the agent. The evaluation model emphasized the students as the centre of the learning process. The students could make their own decisions about the learning pace, any difficulties that may arise and the quantity of work. Thus, the students enjoyed more learning autonomy. In fact, 77.0% of the students thought that this evaluation model released study stress since the final examination was no longer the only assessment method. 62% of the students believed that this model stimulated the students' learning interest to a large or at least some extent. Since formative assessment was conducted periodically and frequently based on the teaching objectives rather than on one summative final examination, it made the students less worried about the final examination. Therefore, they could enjoy and attach importance to the learning process. For example, the evaluation could be in the form of short play performances, presentations of various English topics, situational dialogues, debates, or group discussions. These activities not only provided the students with opportunities to practice their written and oral skills, but also boosted their self-confidence, especially when they received praise and applause from their peers. They enjoyed the feeling of success, which built their confidence and motivated them to work harder. The principle we followed in the evaluation was the criterion-referencing principle rather than the norm-referencing principle. In other words, when a teacher evaluates a student's learning behaviors, the criterion is the specific requirement of one task, particularly comparing with the previous performance of him, rather than comparing with those of other students. It helps the less able students to keep motivated, as it is still possible for them to make an A+. The fact that students repeatedly received positive evaluation enhanced their self-confidence, and these successes made them realize the pleasure of learning English and inspire their motivation.

The model facilitates the all-round monitoring of students’ autonomous learning and oversees the implementation of the teaching procedure

In the student-centered multi-media teaching approach, the function of a teacher is enhanced rather than weakened. The main responsibility of a teacher is to advocate and organize cooperative learning, monitor the learning process, adjust and help their study, know the individuals well and instruct individually (Zhu, 2004). In order to monitor students’ autonomous learning, we took various methods. For instance, the teachers could know about the student’s communicative skills, emotional factors, learning attitude, learning progress and their learning situation by collecting together their online learning information and information gathered from their face-to-face discussions. The data of the questionnaire survey showed that 86% of the students thought the discussion between the teacher and the students made them feel a greater sense of urgency and boosted their learning initiatives. 95% of the students thought the teacher had noticed their problems and offered personalized and constructive advice. 87% of them consider that it was necessary to have the teacher’s instructions, help and supervision in the autonomous learning system. It was beneficial for the teacher to know more about the students and conduct personalized teaching and instruction.

The model helps to cultivate the students’ autonomous learning ability, and boost the effectiveness of the learning strategy

According to Holec (1981), learners’ autonomous learning ability is divided into: 1) the ability to make study plans; 2) the ability to manage the learning process; 3) the ability to evaluate the study. We had studied the students’ autonomous learning ability and collected the data as follows (see Table 3).

Table 3 The influence of the multi-media approach evaluation model on the autonomous learning ability

Autonomous learning ability	29 Stu.in class 1/%	29 Stu. in class 2/(%)	Average (%)
	No./%	No./%	
The ability to make study plans	28/96	27/93	95
The ability to manage the learning process	19/67	21/73	70
The ability to evaluate the study	23/80	25/87	84

Statistics demonstrate that 95% of the students were able to carry out an assessment of their language learning and complete a personal development assessment form in accordance with the Self-Assessment/Peer Assessment Form for their English Competence in the newly released *College English Curriculum Requirement*. During the evaluation, we tried to diversify the evaluation. The students were not only the objects of the evaluation, but also the main body of evaluation. These two assessments comprised a self-reflection and a summary of their own and the peers’ learning process.

Through the self-reflection and peer assessment, students could learn more about the requirements of the English Curriculum and its objectives, and potential problems during the learning process. Thus students were stimulated to set goals. They could refer to this form to make a self-assessment, identify the problems, reset the goal, and improve their language ability consistently to approach the teaching requirement, especially when the midterm and final examinations came. 70% of the students thought they could follow their learning objective and oversee the implementation of their study plan, as well as the operation and development of their learning skills. 84% of them were convinced that they were able to make a judgment of their learning ability and learning effect based on the self-assessment Form. The face-to-face talk with students indicated that there were still some students not confident about the credibility of their judgment on their language ability, thus demanding additional objective testing methods to be more certain (such as the exams). Generally speaking, most of the students could confidently understand the purpose, the content and the process of learning with the influence of the teaching evaluation model. This model developed the students' metacognition ability and boosted the effectiveness of learning strategies.

The model enhances the awareness of cooperation and participation, and cultivates the cooperative and communicative abilities

Modern learning theory argues that the essence of the knowledge construction is social, and the collaborative interaction helps the learners to reach a new level that is slightly higher than their current one (Vygotsky, 1978:90). Language acquisition is a social process that requires interactive communication in the social situation (Wenseh, 1991). In the evaluation system, we adopted a flexible evaluation approach, such as the group discussion, debates, theme presentation, and drama or play performance, as well as the peer assessment. In the task-based activities assigned to each group, students with different learning abilities and levels were coordinated to interact. The less able students had the chance to learn from others and gain confidence from the group support. The shy students could also perform better and less nervously in the group activities. These language activities greatly stimulated the students' interest in collaborative learning, and also enhanced their language communication ability when they worked together to solve problems. It also built up their confidence and heightened their ability in managing their learning behaviors.

Table 4 The influence of multimedia-based teaching evaluation model on the students' cooperative ability

Factors	29 Stu.in class	29 Stu.in Class	Average(%)
	1/ %	2/ %	
	No./%	No./%	
Communicative ability	22/76	20/69	72.5
Cooperative ability	18/62	19/66	64
Awareness of participation	18/62	17/60	61
Interactive Learning	24/83	23/80%	81.5

The result of this investigation (*see* table 4) clarified that the awareness of cooperation and participation, the cooperative ability as well as the communicative ability had been enhanced. It is worthwhile to note that diversifying the participants in the education not only spurred the students to learn from others' strong points while overcoming their own weak points and appreciating each other but also helped to build up the awareness of cooperation and participation. According to the data taken from the teacher's observation record, it was discovered that 11% of the students from the two classes (altogether nine students) disliked the group activities. They often kept silent in the group activities in class. Even after the teacher's encouragement and persuasion, there were still six students who found it difficult to perform actively. The data taken from the interviews also demonstrated that these six students were introverted and poor at pronunciation and intonation, worrying that they may not make themselves understood. Besides, they were used to learning by themselves. Therefore, it is still a challenge to know how to motivate those students' awareness of participation and cooperation.

CONCLUSION

This preliminary study has put into operation the concept of formative assessment for learning in the multimedia-based context of EFL teaching in China, has and gained some initial understanding about the mechanism of formative assessment for learning. According to the formative assessment model proposed, the study illustrates that this model provides a curriculum assessment method that is relatively scientific and supported by the students. It stimulates the students' language learning motivation and interest to some extent. It also makes the all-round monitoring of students' autonomous learning possible. At the same time, it builds up the learners' autonomous learning ability as well as their capacity for collaboration and communication. This model encourages them to be self-motivated and self-supervised autonomous learners. Formative assessments benefit teaching and learning in that they provide more information about the progress of the learners and they provide more opportunity to learn. However, it is unknown if the implementation of the formative assessments can lead to obvious gains in their language proficiency. Also, in a more complex teaching context, where the assessment roles of the teacher are very much undermined and the concept of summative assessment more deeply-rooted, it remains uncertain whether the implementation is feasible and what the effect will be. There are specific questions. For example, can the techniques of formative assessments be transmitted to other teachers, to whom these assessments are less known? And if it is implemented in the teaching, what benefits will there be? And what problems will there be? And how should we arouse awareness of participation and cooperation in the introverted and less able students who are fond of studying by them? Answering these questions may become our major concerns for future study.

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