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THE ROLE OF PRIOR KNOWLEDGE IN FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT FOR LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Formative assessment holds a pivotal role as a fundamental methodological category for evaluating students' expertise levels before embarking on a new educational course. This monitoring approach revolves around the concept of prior knowledge, acting as the cornerstone for the development of new knowledge formats. The formative assessment procedure is designed to incorporate various methods, including tasks and surveys, with questionnaires being a key component. This study introduces a blended questionnaire tailored for first-year Master's degree students majoring in linguistics. The questionnaire consists of four logically structured parts, systematically evaluating learners' prior knowledge in the educational domains of General linguistics and Theory and Practice of the English language, with a specific focus on Modern English usage. Beyond theoretical inquiries, the blended questionnaire includes practical assignments, recognizing that linguistic knowledge is intricately linked to practical language skills. Thus, theoretical understanding is exemplified through actual linguistic representations. In addition to assessing prior knowledge, the questionnaire addresses students' opinions on the formative assessment procedure's educational utility. This extends to identifying their strengths and weaknesses in applying linguistic knowledge, aiding future curriculum planning and fostering a culture of overall assessment competency. Recognizing the significance of formative assessment for teachers' professional growth, the study explores its role in constantly refining testing methods and updating materials to gauge students' prior knowledge effectively. The obtained results underscore the need for further research in formative assessment, calling for the

development of new identification methods and innovative formats for knowledge acquisition based on manifestations of prior knowledge. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on formative assessment's multifaceted role in shaping effective educational practices and enhancing both student and teacher learning experiences.

Keywords: formative assessment, prior knowledge, blended questionnaire, linguistic knowledge, teacher's professional growth.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Formative assessment is considered to be one of the basic methodological categories in reference to monitoring students' learning used to improve the educational process. It is usually assumed that there exist four key attributes as far as formative assessment procedures are concerned: they are supposed to clarify the pivotal points of intended learning, to elicit and interpret the evidence within the educational process as well as to act on evidence. It should be noted in this connection that formative assessment should be clearly distinguished from summative assessment [Bennett, 2011; Birenbaum, 2003; Black, 2005; Looney, 2011; Cassady & Gridley, 2005; Marchand & Furrer, 2014; Tran et al., 2023; Wormeli, 2008] as the first one is supposed to help the learners identify their target areas that must be worked at and helps teachers and educational officials recognize the problematic areas and elaborate devices and methods to improve the situation. As for summative assessment, this can be discussed in terms of attaining learning goals that usually refer to the use of skills and knowledge acquired for their application during subsequent course activities. Otherwise stated, both types mentioned are closely connected with certain methods used to develop students' abilities at different educational stages concerning new knowledge creation and development based on the prior knowledge accumulated by the learners.

First and foremost, formative assessment concerns the individual progress of a learner and his or her level of educational development. Thus, the problem, which needs to be discussed within these lines, deals with certain ways and strategies of prior knowledge application in the course of learning by students of linguistics. Formative assessment serves as the instrument of the return feedback connection between a teacher and a student that helps to evaluate the present state of educational results at a certain period of time and elaborate a particular system of teaching and learning for the learner's future development, depending on certain goals and perspectives [Black et al., 2003; Dochy, 1992; Dochy et al., 1997; 1999; Harrison, 2005; Shepard, 2000; Yin et al., 2008]. Prior knowledge within this context can be regarded as the structure that refers to several stages of formation [Bellana et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2020], which means that it serves as the basis for new formats of knowledge acquisition and new knowledge development within the students. Otherwise stated, as they get more new information, organized in accordance with certain structuring and applying algorithms, which thus becomes new knowledge, their knowledge possession level and amount become more profound and extensive.

In the case of formative assessment teachers have to understand and identify the quality and the extent, to which prior knowledge impacts students' achievements while using the result of monitoring as academic course design structure and the tool of instruction in their future work

[Green et al., 2018; Higgins et al., 2010; Freeman & Lewis, 1998; Shute, 2008; Taras, 2007]. Thus, as has already been stated, the level of prior knowledge should be taken into special consideration in the course of formative assessment implementation.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

When discussing formative assessment issues, experts suggest several procedures and methods to be used to check the validity of the results achieved in the field of linguistic knowledge acquisition. As far as formative assessment is concerned, a variety of monitoring methods are usually offered to test and demonstrate the level of the learners' attainment [Bugg, 2013; Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009; Freeman & Lewis, 1998; Higgins et al., 2010; Yin et al., 2008], for example, summaries and students' reports, individual projects and prior courses inventories presentations, auditions, tests and pre-tests, questionnaires, previous academic courses and topics concept maps drawing, research proposals preparation for early feedback, essays and creative tasks, etc. [Higgins et al., 2010; Popham, 2008].

It should be emphasized in this connection that the issues under consideration are not only supposed to check the results of prior learning but also to discover the optimal ways and methods that would improve and optimize strategies of the learners' further immersing into the world of linguistic knowledge as well as to increase and strengthen feedback channel reliability. As has already been mentioned, the problem under analysis has a direct bearing on the individual approach to learning as well as other important educational issues. In the case of linguistic knowledge formation, we proceed from the premise that both theoretical and practical aspects of language are included in the educational area. Thus, it concerns both knowledge of the language and knowledge about language, provided these two aspects are closely interrelated.

Generally speaking, prior knowledge can be regarded as the indispensable foundation of the whole process of learning, which means that it deals with a number of reasons that may either contribute to the successful coverage of the learning material or make it complicated [Hailikari et al., 2008]. In learning languages professionally, in reference to professional linguists or philologists, one of the basic problems within these lines is the code system related to the process of linguistic knowledge acquisition and professional language code sharing, including its further development and target applicability [Leung & Williams, 2020; Trumbull & Gerzon, 2013]. Otherwise stated, this refers not only to the language itself, used as a tool of the human thought representation, including professional languages, e.g. LSP (language for specific purposes) but also the code system of linguistics as the science of language, professional terms and notions first and foremost. Experts in the field write that it is dramatically important to take into account both the shared knowledge parameter and the parameter of suitability and correspondence of the level of the students' assessment, with respect to their linguistic and cultural competence, to the complexity level of the material under study, with special consideration to the individual abilities of the learner. For example, Christine Nuttall highlights the significant impact of false assumptions regarding preliminary information and the learners' existing knowledge. Such misconceptions, held by both teachers and writers, can lead to considerable challenges for learners in comprehending and mastering the material, often resulting in difficulties or outright failure. In general, the process of understanding based on adequate interpretation of the ideas shared is extremely complicated as "the widely different backgrounds make more obvious a fact that we sometimes forget: that we can never understand

one another completely. <...> Fortunately, for most purposes, the understanding need not be complete; but the fact that we cannot get inside the writer's mind is no excuse for not doing our best to understand what he wants to say" [Nuttall, 2008, p.10].

It should be emphasized that linguistic knowledge proper refers to the knowledge of the world issues, or cultural knowledge, and the parameter of shared knowledge similarity is one of the main issues as far as prior knowledge formative assessment is concerned. Thus, in the course of the questionnaire development the level of assessment in terms of prior linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge should be taken into special consideration in their complexity [Vishnyakova, 2018; Vishnyakova et al., 2019; Warren & Dickey, 2021] because it is not at all an easy task to distinguish between cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge. For example, Teun van Dijk pays special attention to the fact that the borderline between world knowledge and linguistic knowledge is vague, which can be clearly seen while discussing lexical knowledge [van Dijk, 2014, p. 1]. The cognitive aspect tends to be one of the basics within these terms as this refers to "a composite of the cognitive systems more or less shared by members of a society" [Keesing, 1979, p. 14] and "the boundary between a speaker's knowledge of a language and his/her knowledge of the world poses deep and still unresolved analytical problems" [Op.cit.]. R. M. Keesing states that from the epistemological point of view, the essence of linguistic knowledge phenomenon itself is subject to discussion alongside cultural knowledge. The author pays special attention to the problem of differentiating linguistic and cultural knowledge from other issues corresponding to them: "My questions about the language/culture boundary are thus questions about the compartmentalization of one subsystem of knowledge, linguistic knowledge, from other subsystems" [Keesing, 1979, p. 15].

As has been stated above, linguistic knowledge deals with the problem of language representation both as the subject of learning and as the tool of learning, which refers to educational planning procedures and the routine educational process itself [Hudson, 2008, p. 53]. The conceptions concerned with the way language is used, including the theoretical-methodological basis of linguistic meaning, structure and function peculiarities studies, are being discussed within the domain of theoretical linguistics and refer to theoretical linguistic knowledge. At the same time, practical or descriptive linguistic knowledge formation refers to the way linguistic phenomena are arranged and realized at the level of actual speech, and refers to grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary concerning concrete language use manifestations. To elaborate a certain system of analysis within the formative assessment domain one should take into consideration the fact that the connection between the teacher and the student should be bilateral, with decent productive feedback, together with taking into account students' opinions and predilections.

It should be borne in mind that both students and teachers have to take an active part in this process to understand the necessity of and the reasons for its implementation, including its prospects for further education of the learners. For example, they should see the benefit from the assessment procedure even in the course of preparing for a certain kind of testing, and thus become aware of their strengths and weaknesses being identified as well as the assessment culture skills acquisition [Hailikari et al., 2007; Wylie & Heritage, 2010]. Moreover, it should be noted within these terms that formative assessment can produce a positive impact on both learners' and teachers' educational and professional development, which refers to various aspects of creative personality manifestations [Berry, 2008; Christoforidou & Kyriakides, 2021; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Trumbull & Gerzon, 2013; Wylie et al., 2008; 2009; Yoon et al., 2007]. We proceed from the premise that learners under consideration have to be acquainted with procedural parameters

and the purpose of formative prior-knowledge assessment testing in advance as they have to understand its significance for their future education, including autonomous learning specifications [Crome et al., 2009; Falchikov, 2005; Hay & Mathers, 2012].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As is declared in a number of scientific disquisitions, the conception of prior knowledge as one of the basic factors of successful learning and teaching refers to the idea of multidimensionality and manifests itself as a dynamic hierarchical entity connected with different types of knowledge and skills actualization [Hailikari et al., 2007; 2008]. Thus, reliable instructional design tools have to be applied to realize the way prior knowledge influences students' achievements and the way this can be used to adequately estimate its role in the course of formative assessment procedures implementation.

In order for valid results to be achieved and reliable information to be acquired, a testing system for the first-year Master's degree students of philology at Moscow State University was elaborated, within which a new type of questionnaire of blended character has been developed. The questionnaire included various types of questions and practical tasks to illustrate the point. It comprised four parts of 17 positions concerning both the material of previous courses studied and the learners' opinions about the formative assessment procedure perspectives presentation. As for the first part of the questionnaire, it consisted of five questions checking the learners' level of achievement in the field of General Linguistics (linguistic terms and notions, linguistic phenomena description, e.g. assimilation from Phonetics and Phonology, prefixation from Morphology, synonymy from Lexicology, complex sentences and their structure from Syntax, etc.). The second part of the questionnaire was devoted to the students' English language theoretical and practical expertise checking and included five questions that reflected the situation within the Modern English language in its theoretical and practical aspects, for example, grammatical rules within the system of the English verb, or the way plurals are formed in English, or some nuances from the sphere of idioms and Modern English usage peculiarities description.

In accordance with their prior knowledge and skills possession, learners had to present answers to all the questions from the theoretical point of view accompanying them by illustrative material given in the form of vivid examples and in some cases short tasks of descriptive character implementation. The third part consisted of five practical assignments that had to be performed to demonstrate the level of language knowledge possession and creative thinking ability development. The two questions of the fourth part of the questionnaire were aimed at clarifying the real attitude of respondents to the formative assessment procedure and the role of formative assessment testing in their future education perspective designing.

It is also important to mention that the analysis of the respondents' answers immediately shows that in the research under study, actual knowledge formats are taken into consideration, but not any kind of simple unorganized information presented by scattered facts [Difference Between Information and Knowledge, 2016]. This is due to the well-chosen and systematized linguistic material prepared by the compilers of the survey, which was fully consistent with the level of training of the students within the area of linguistics and languages. As is well known, knowledge in its essence differs from information according to its precision and ability to serve as the foundation for creating new knowledge based on preliminary knowledge. We proceed from the premise that while

developing such tests and questionnaires students' assumed acquired knowledge, gained from previous courses, is to be taken into consideration and the tasks offered should be quite feasible but at the same time thought-provoking.

The results of the survey under discussion can be illustrated by the following data presented in Tables 1 and 2, which demonstrate the output of prior knowledge application in the course of formative assessment testing, with special attention to the way prior knowledge is used in the course of students' performance (lack of the full amount of prior knowledge acquired, prior knowledge pure reproduction, the use of prior knowledge as the basis for new knowledge formats creating). It should be noted in this connection that as for the use of prior knowledge as the foundation for new knowledge formats shaping, the basic criteria concerned the ways students creatively transformed and extended theoretical and descriptive linguistic material presented in their answers, both in the domains of content meaning and linguistic expression. As for statistics, 26 students of linguistics took part in the formative assessment activity and were asked to comment on the suitability of the testing material as well as its output applicability for their future studies.

Table 1. Students' use of prior knowledge degrees in accord with the answers (Parts 1-3)

Questions of Parts 1-3	Lack of the full amount of prior knowledge acquired (number of students)	Prior knowledge pure reproduction (number of students)	Use of prior knowledge as the basis for new knowledge formats creating (number of students)
Part 1			
1	0	12	14
2	0	16	10
3	0	18	8
4	0	23	3
5	0	22	4
Part 2			
6	0	7	19
7	0	7	19
8	0	12	14
9	2	15	9
10	0	1	25
Part 3			
11	0	4	22
12	0	4	22
13	0	13	13
14	2	11	13
15	0	1	25

As for the feedback output applicable to the educational process (see Table 2), it should be mentioned that some of the comments were profound and extensive (14; 19), though some of them extremely brief, no more than two or three sentences (9; 7), and as for the others, they did not answer some of the questions of the fourth part of the questionnaire as they faced difficulties in explaining the real significance of assessment procedures for planning their educational process (3; 0), which shows that more profound research in the field is supposed to be done.

Table 2. Students' comments on the testing results applicability in accord with the answers (Part 4)

Questions of Part 4	Profound and extensive comments (number of students)	Extremely brief comments (number of students)	No answer (number of students)
1	14	9	3
2	19	7	0

Thus, the results of the blended questionnaire application in the formative assessment procedure show that still there is much to be done in the field of educational process development as referred to in previous knowledge application. At the same time, the statistics under consideration can be used to demonstrate obvious pragmatic output in terms of understanding the situation with prior knowledge use in the course of linguistic knowledge formation. It can be stated that the majority of students have observed and reported the positive impact of formative assessment work while answering the corresponding questions and fulfilling the tasks included in the blended questionnaire, as they realized what previous knowledge means for the educational process in general and their linguistic education extension and improvement in particular. They could reasonably approach what prior knowledge had given to them and appreciate its helpfulness in acquiring and creating new knowledge formats. The formative assessment procedure allowed both the learners and the teachers to identify gaps and shortcomings that require adjustment.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, in conclusion, it should be stated that the role of prior knowledge in the educational process is beyond doubt, and this is logically justified by the entire psychological and pedagogical procedures concerning the process of knowledge assimilation as well as its generation and regeneration in the human mind. At the same time, it is extremely important to comprehend this process as the basis for the most optimal systems for planning and designing further educational process development.

It should be added that identification of learning needs and new learning and teaching materials creation as well as new methods application and development require a deep understanding of psychological and cognitive foundations that determine increasing knowledge and creating new knowledge formats processes.

In the course of the investigation, it has become abundantly clear that the nuances of questionnaire preparation, particularly those of a blended nature, are crucially linked to the compilers' level of expertise, requiring special accuracy and meticulousness. This is because such question-

naires are designed to uncover the entire spectrum of preliminary knowledge acquired by learners after attending preliminary educational courses. In other words, determining the level of learners' knowledge in General and English linguistics, both theoretically and in practical application, necessitates consideration of the specific language skills acquired. This consideration is closely intertwined with the learners' theoretical language background.

As has already been stated, of particular importance is the student's ability not only to apply prior knowledge properly and entirely but also to acquire new knowledge on its basis, as well as to approach the educational process in question creatively so that new formats of knowledge could be produced. It is in this regard that the preliminary assessment procedure is by no means helpful and important.

In the case of assimilating and accumulating linguistic knowledge, it is essential to consider its close connection with knowledge of the world or cultural knowledge formats. The approach to the learning process in question will manifest itself in the expansion of students' cognitive horizons, their world-view, as well as the development of their creative abilities and spatial vision in terms of perceiving the world in a multidimensional way.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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